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The Social Psychology of Safety: Leadership, Compliance and Behavior in High-Risk Workplaces

*[1]Kimberly Long Holt

About Article

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About Author

[1] Health and Safety Concepts, Environmental Safety & Health, California, USA

ABSTRACT

High-risk workplaces, such as oil rigs, construction sites, chemical processing facilities, and mines, require rigorous controls to avoid serious injury and loss of life. However, compliance with safety protocols is not just about training or regulation; it is greatly influenced by psychological and social factors. This article will discuss the social psychology of safety and how leadership style, organizational culture, and group behavior contribute to safety. Effective leaders are able to establish safety norms, clearly model expected behaviors, and build trust, which can prompt adherence to safety resources. Moreover, group dynamics contribute to safety matters; factors such as conformity, peer pressure, or shared perceptions of risks can influence how workers will act when facing pressures or ambiguity. As we explore the notion that compliance can be both social and psychological (that is, influenced by authority, motivation, perceptions of control, and the weighing of competing priorities regarding productivity demands and safety), it is possible to see that in high-risk work environments, the outcomes of one or more lapses in behavior can be life altering. Hence, it is critical to understand the psychological and social antecedents of safety-related decision-making. In the end, we hope to demonstrate that integrating insights from social psychology into safety management will improve the organization's safety culture; this can foster the proactive creation of situations where widespread conformity with safety norms occurs, bounded by responsibility (that is, being accountable for one's actions) and the support of leaders.

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Contact @ Kimberly Long Holt
longholt@slac.stanford.edu

1. INTRODUCTION

Poverty environment in high-risk workplaces like in oil and gas installations, chemical manufacturing plants, mining operations and large-scale construction sites safety is not simply rules, procedures and engineering control. While technology and procedures are vital, they are insufficient in preventing accidents and achieving long-term safety outcomes. Over the years, empirical research in social psychology has demonstrated that human behavior, which is driven by organizational and social factors has emerged as a key driver in understanding safety performance (Geller, 2001).

The high-risk environments are complicated and dynamic, but also uniquely vulnerable to catastrophic occurrences. In these environments, the margin for error is virtually non-existent with the consequences of the weakest behavioral lapse possibly being catastrophic. Therefore, understanding the distinction and relationship between how risks are viewed, the actions individuals may take in response to their notions of authority and the interactions they have with fellow employees will be critical to improving safety outcomes. The simple acceptance of an organization's safety framework has the added potential to serve as a basis for internalizing organizational "norms" of safety In particular, leadership emerges as an influential factor in the development of safety culture. Transformational leaders who advocate for safety and proactively engage in identifying hazards (communicating with clarity), and modeling adherence to safety practices are,

Moreover, compliance to safety behaviors are not necessarily always a simple choice, also they can be shaped by the competitions for attention that shape your productivity obstacles or for that matter your colleagues' scenarios In regards to yet another type of automobile as defined by this; when the individual unsafe behavior becomes routine over time by way of lack of any immediate negative effect or consequence, and with group behavior undermining even the best laid safety structures Employees will make a decision to abandon a standard procedure not because they are ignorant of the procedure, but because they have observed other employees do so with no consequences, or perceived organizational signals that make them feel the productivity emphasis is going to overshadow superior safety behavior

In this text, a social psychology perspective is used to examine this complex relationship between leadership, conformity, and behavior in safety-critical working environments. Drawing on empirical research and theoretical lenses, this article attempts to open up the behavioral underpinnings of safety culture and present some transferable findings that organizations can use as they try to go beyond compliance, and develop self-directed safety behaviors. By illuminating the human, and relational dynamics of safety in the workplace, this discussion highlights the persuasive authority, value and unifying potential of leadership practices and organization policies that foster and sustain

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Safety in hazardous environments. When understanding these environments, which are less safe, technical approaches are inadequate and a multidisciplinary approach is required, one which is based in social psychology. It is now viewed as acceptable by researchers that safety behaviors are influenced by leadership styles, organizational culture and societal norms as well individual perceptions of risk. This section reviews literature on these topics and organizes it into three distinct areas: leader impact; compliance behavior, and group dynamics in high-risk industries.

2.1. Leadership and safety culture

Leadership is critical to changing the culture of safety behaviors and habits. Transformational leadership - leaders who are motivationally and inspirationally stimulating and intellectually stimulating and consideration for the individual - have been shown to be positively correlated with safety performance in the form of employee safety behavior (Mullen *et al.*, 2024). Safe leadership, leaders who intentionally value safety, is often associated with substantive safety climate, defined by Beus *et al.* (2016) as employee shared perceptions of the organizational priority for safety.

Clarke (2013) further asserts that transformational leaders can improve safety performance, beyond following rules by having discussions with employees concerning risks and getting employees engaged in the safety processes. Conversely, transactional leadership, instead, focuses solely on contingent reward and management by exception; would create compliance but limited personal internalization of the value of safety (Beus *et al.*, 2016).

2.2. Compliance and risk perception

Adhering to safety procedures is not just about knowledge and ability; it is also determined by individual perceptions of risk and social influences. The "Swiss Cheese Model," introduced by demonstrates how organizational failures occur, both from latent conditions and active failures, typically associated with human error or non-compliance. Workers' willingness to follow procedures is often dependent on whether they consider the rules to be legitimate, enforceable and backed by management

Normalization of deviance, a term made popular by after the Challenger disaster, speaks to how continuous exposure to risk with no apparent adverse consequences can develop into individual acceptability to enact and perpetuate unsafe acts. In addition, internal shortcuts are easily accepted behaviors in high-risk industries with apparent organizational priorities promoting productivity or cost over safety.

2.3. Group dynamics and behavioural safety

The social context of teams also plays an important role in how individuals engage in behaviors. Evidence has uncovered that peer group influences, group dynamics, and informal norms can positively or negatively affect formal safety processes. When employees see their peers exhibit safe behaviours, they are more likely to do the same. Simultaneously they may be inclined to seek out unsafe behaviours that have become normalized among their peers.

However, critics have argued that BBS sometimes places excessive focus on individual responsibility and insufficient on systemic or cultural influences. Thus, BBS should always be integrated with other cultural and psychological strategies to sustain improvements.

Table 1. Summary of key literature on social psychology of safety

Author(s)	Focus Area	Key Findings	Implications
Lyubykh *et al.* (2022)	Safety Climate	Leadership shapes shared perceptions of safety; strong climate reduces accidents	Emphasize leader training and visible safety commitment
Hofmann *et al.* (2017)	Transformational Leadership	Inspires proactive safety behavior and engagement	Leadership style influences depth of safety commitment
Griffin & Li (2006)	Normalization of Deviance	Unsafe behavior becomes normalized over time	Monitor and disrupt risky behavioral norms
Passmore (2013)	Human Error and Compliance	Swiss Cheese Model shows multi-layered causes of failure	Strengthen organizational defenses and address latent conditions
Geller (2016)	Behavior-Based Safety (BBS)	Behavior observation and feedback improve safety performance	Reinforce positive behaviors, but integrate with system-level interventions
Clarke (2013)	Safety Leadership	Transformational leadership linked to improved safety outcomes	Invest in relational and motivational leadership development

2.4. Conclusion of the literature review

The current literature suggests that safety in high-risk workplaces is much more than legislation and regulation. Safety is a social process that is shaped by leadership, the norms of the group, and organizational values. Thus, effective safety management needs to go beyond mere compliance with procedures and look to develop leaders, understand group behavioral processes, and reinforce intrinsic motivation toward safety. This demonstrates a need for further thinking around ways in which safety behaviors can be sustainably influenced through socially and psychologically aware interventions.

3. METHODOLOGY

The present study takes a mixed-methodology approach to examine the relationship between leadership, compliance, and behavioral norms in high-risk work environments. Both qualitative interviews and quantitative survey instruments were used to measure patterns of social and behavioral influences and capture the underlying social constructions that shape workplace behaviors related to safety and compliance. This design will allow for triangulation of the data and qualitative insight, which will result in a richer and deeper understanding of the social psychological processes that take place to ultimately form safety performance.

3.1. Participants

Participants were recruited from four high-risk industries: oil and gas, construction, chemical processing, and mining. We sampled site-level employees, supervisors, and safety managers to achieve representation through multiple levels of hierarchy. In total, 320 participants completed the quantitative survey, and 25 participants completed qualitative in-depth interviews. Participants were included based on purposive sampling to make sure all participants had direct experience in safety-critical roles.

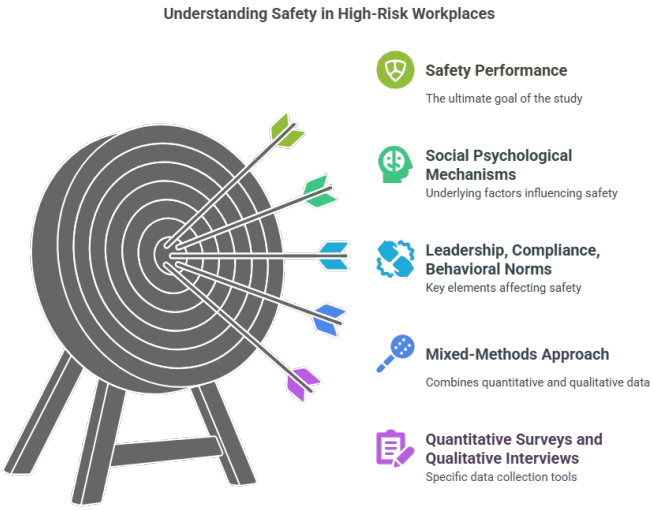

Figure 1. Safety in High-Risk Workplaces

3.2. Data collection methods

3.2.1. Quantitative data collection

A structured questionnaire was administered to measure key constructs, including:

- Perceived leadership style (using the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire.
- Safety climate perceptions
- Compliance behavior
- Risk perception and safety motivation

Responses were recorded using a 5-point Likert scale, and statistical analysis was conducted using SPSS to assess correlations and predictive relationships.

3.2.2. Qualitative data collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore:

- Workers' subjective experiences with safety leadership
- Perceptions of peer behavior and informal safety norms
- Instances of non-compliance and rationalizations
- Tensions between safety and productivity demands

Each interview lasted approximately **45–60 minutes**, was recorded with consent, and transcribed for thematic analysis. The framework method was used to code and categorize themes (Geller *et al.*, 2016).

3.3. Data analysis

- *Quantitative analysis:* Descriptive statistics, Pearson correlations, and multiple regression analyses were used to explore relationships between leadership, safety climate, and compliance behavior.
- *Qualitative analysis:* Thematic analysis followed Clarke et al.'s (2015) six-phase process, enabling the identification of recurring patterns and context-specific factors that influence safety behavior.

3.4. Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional review board. All participants provided informed consent, and data were anonymized to ensure confidentiality. Participation was voluntary, and individuals could withdraw at any stage without consequence. To avoid power dynamics influencing responses, interviews were conducted in neutral, non-managerial settings.

3.5. Limitations

Although the mixed-methods design strengthens the validity of the findings, limitations include potential response bias in self-reported data and the limited generalizability due to purposive sampling. However, efforts were made to minimize these effects through instrument validation, interviewer neutrality, and the inclusion of diverse industrial contexts.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The data collected from a mixed-methods approach—quantitative survey responses (N = 320) and qualitative interviews (n = 25)—provided a wealth of data to inform the understanding of leadership styles, safety climate, peer influence, and safety compliance in high-risk workplaces. The data provides strong evidence that safety-related behavior relates to formal organizational mechanisms and social psychological variables such as trust, motivation, communication, and group norms.

4.1. Quantitative results

The focus of the statistical analysis was to see the effect of leadership style (specifically transformational and transactional leadership) on employees' perceptions of safety climate, risk awareness, motivation, and compliance behaviours. The data was analysed using Pearson correlation and multiple regression in SPSS to examine relationships among the variables.

4.1.1. Leadership styles and safety outcomes

The data indicate the existence of a robust, significant positive correlation ($r = 0.68$, $p < .001$) between transformational leadership and employees' perception of a positive safety climate. Employees that perceived their leaders as transformational, that is those who were inspiring, supportive and were personally invested in the organizations safety initiatives, were more likely to acknowledge that their organization valued safety and proactively supported the pursuit of safe work practices. As also depicted in the data, transformational leadership had a strong positive correlation to safety compliance behavior ($r = 0.55$, $p < .001$) further suggesting that this type of leadership style embodies compliance in all senses of the word - perception and action.

On the contrary, transactional leadership, primarily envisioned through rule enforcement, monitoring and consequent rewards or punishment, was identified as an underwhelming correlation to safety compliance ($r = 0.32$, $p < .01$) and a non-existent and not-significant correlation to safety climate ($r = 0.11$ ns). This indicates that transactional leadership may be able to foster compliance in the short-term, however it does not allow for the deeper conversation necessary to ensure that employees truly believe in the organizations commitment to instinctual safety behaviour and value in the authentic safety practice.

4.1.2. Safety climate as a mediator

Regression analysis ascertained for safety climate to serve as a mediating construct between transformational leadership and the compliance behaviour. When safety climate was solicited into the model, the standardized beta coefficient for safety climate ($\beta = 0.61$, $p < 0.001$) surpassed that of transformational leadership to validate that safety climate was an important mode of agency to which leadership germaine.

4.1.3. Risk perception and motivation

Additionally, risk perception—the degree to which individuals believed their tasks were hazardous—was significantly correlated with safety motivation ($r = 0.47$, $p < .01$). Employees who perceived higher levels of risk tended to report greater internal motivation to adhere to safety protocols. Safety motivation was, in turn, strongly correlated with compliance behavior ($r = 0.51$, $p < .001$), indicating that internal drive is an essential factor in predicting whether safety practices are followed.

Table 2. Correlation matrix of key variables (N = 320)

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6
	Transformational L.	Transactional L.	Safety Climate	Risk Perception	Safety Motivation	Compliance Behavior
Transformational L.	—					
Transactional L.	0.42**	—				
Safety Climate	0.68**	0.11	—			
Risk Perception	0.31*	0.08	0.34*	—		
Safety Motivation	0.44**	0.19	0.57**	0.47**	—	
Compliance Behavior	0.55**	0.32*	0.61**	0.39**	0.51**	—

4.2. Qualitative results

The qualitative component of the study, based on semi-structured interviews with 25 workers and supervisors, served to contextualize and deepen the understanding of the quantitative patterns. Several key themes emerged through thematic analysis, providing insight into the social processes underlying safety behavior.

4.2.1. Leadership visibility and credibility

Interviewees consistently noted that safety was taken more seriously when leaders were physically present, engaged in safety walkthroughs, and personally adhered to protocols. As one participant stated, "When our manager wears the helmet and follows lockout procedures himself, it sends a strong message." This theme supports the idea that visible leadership behavior reinforces the credibility of safety expectations.

4.2.2. Peer influence and group norms

A major theme was the influence of peers. Workers suggested their behavior followed group norms rather than formal policies. In some instances, unsafe practices became routine, for example, skipping checklists or failing to use personal protective equipment (PPE) became normalized and permitted through peers or when people felt that the shortcut was required to meet production targets. One respondent offered: "If you are the only person in the group that is slowing everyone down to follow every rule, you're the one that looks like a problem, not the hero." This highlights the potential for informal norms to undermine formal compliance systems.

4.2.3. Safety vs. Productivity conflict

Several participants mentioned that safety was often traded away for demands of production. Several respondents suggested that they felt indirect pressure to skip safety steps in time of high demand. The contrast between production pressures and work safety values highlights our need to think about supporting modalities that are aligned with organizational incentives and values around safety.

4.2.4. Psychological safety and communication

Finally, the presence or absence of psychological safety – defined as the confidence to raise concerns related to safety without punishment – came to the forefront as a major consideration for whether employees reported hazards or near misses. open communication and willingness of a team make teams to participate in proactive safety behaviours much more likely.

4.3. Discussion

The results of this study will add to the accumulated literature focused on the social-psychological aspects of safety in high-risk work contexts. Because both quantitative and qualitative data sources were used, the findings highlight the importance of leadership, safety climate, and social behavior as contributors to compliance and risk management. We will discuss the findings in relation to previous research, identify theoretical implications, and suggest practical applications.

4.3.1. Leadership as a determinant of safety behavior

The most consistent finding across the two data sources was the role of transformational leadership as an influential variable on safety outcomes. The quantitative data demonstrated that transformational leadership was strongly correlated to positive perceptions of safety climate and compliance behavior. This extends the work who argue that transformational leaders help improve safety performance by building trust, the skills to articulate a vision, and a sense of shared purpose. Transformational leaders were seen to model that safety is not simply something done procedurally; rather, safety is a core organizational value.

Qualitative data work also confirmed this, participants shared examples of leaders who "walked the talk" and embodied the safety values they expressed in other forms of communication . These findings are consistent in their argument that supervisory behaviour is a primary vector of organizational climate. It would be remiss to bypass the less evident, albeit not negligible, effect of transactional leadership. This is consistent with earlier studies that suggested rule-based tenets of management could engender conformity in the short-term but ultimately fail to change the culture in a more robust way (Clarke *et al.*, 2015).

4.3.2. Safety climate as a mediating factor

The importance of safety climate emerged as one of the strongest findings in the study, and was without a doubt, a primary precursor of compliance behavior. This supports definition of safety climate as employees' shared view of the importance of safety in the organization. Strong safety climate was also found to act as a mediator between leadership and

safety behavior, which reaffirms findings of Neal and Griffin (2006), that climate perceptions are one of the most consistent predictors of safety performance.

The mediating effect observed here also underscores the importance of a consistency between management rhetoric and practice for example, if employees perceive a disconnect between what leaders say and what they do, it decreases trust in the system and informal norms may replace formal policies. In the interviews when leaders seemed to be ignoring safety rules their own practices become a dramatic counter message to formal compliance systems.

4.3.3. Social influence and the normalization of risk

The qualitative findings also showed that peer behavior and group dynamic can have a significant influence on individuals' choices in terms of safety. As per, co-workers can significantly influence each other's risk perceptions and behaviors, especially within closely knit teams. The concept of risk normalization was evident in stories in which unsafe shortcuts became a normalized aspect of culture of the work team, often due in this case to pressures to be productive.

In many instances, participants noted that voicing safety-related concerns could come at the expense of being labelled as disruptive and/or weak in the group (demonstrating the relevance of psychological safety—a feeling or belief that one can speak up without being punished or humiliated. In groups that actively encouraged open communication, compliance was appreciably higher, as was reporting on near misses. Each of the above implies that safety programs cannot just take on formal and inconsistent training addressing safety, and must also consider group norms and interpersonal dynamics.

4.3.4. Theoretical and practical implications

Theoretically, the relations found throughout this study provided overall support for a social-cognitive model for understanding safety behavior, whereby individual behavior is performed not only from internal factors (motivation, risk perceptions etc.), but external factors (cues from leadership to group member expectations). This provides further empirical legitimacy to the theory of planned behavior

Practically, our findings indicate that organizations within high-risk industries should create leadership development programs that provide developmental feedback and encourage transformational behaviors. They should also formalize safety leadership development into their performance evaluations and promotion criteria to reinforce its importance. Further, interventions should also consider implementing peer-based interventions such as safety champions or group accountability modes of social influence.

4.3.5. Limitations and directions for future research

While this study provides important insights, it is not without limitations. The reliance on self-reported data in the quantitative phase may have introduced social desirability bias. Although interviews helped contextualize these responses, future studies could include observational or longitudinal designs to strengthen causal claims. Additionally, while the study included multiple industries, generalizability is still limited by the non-random, purposive sampling strategy.

Future research could explore the role of cultural differences in shaping safety perceptions, especially in multinational workforces. Another valuable direction would be to examine how digital safety technologies—such as real-time monitoring or AI-driven alerts—interact with human behavior and social norms in the workplace.

5. CONCLUSION

The present research offers a thorough and in-depth investigation into the social psychological components contributing to safety behavior in high-risk work settings. Utilizing a mixed-methods approach, it explores the interplay between leadership, compliance, organizational climate, and social group behavior, which contribute to understanding the individual and collective influences of safety performance.

A key finding and contribution of this research is the role that transformational leadership has on shaping the safety culture. Leaders who effectively communicate safety vision, role model safety behaviour and inspire trust have considerable influence on how safety is defined and acted upon, at all levels of the organization. Transformational leadership does not simply produce compliant followers; they also nurture intrinsic motivation and accountability. The recurrent finding of a positive association between transformational leadership and the safety climate in the quantitative data adds evidence for the central importance of leadership behaviour as a base for an organization's safety systems.

Just as importantly, safety climate serves as both a result and precursor to safe behavior. When employees view their organization as valuing safety over productivity pressures, they are more likely to follow rules, report hazards, and join in team safety. The press made by employees represents a significant mediating effect between leadership actions and behavior. Safety climate is not just a passive representation of culture, but an active instigator of behavior at work.Furthermore, the current research illuminates the social aspect of safety, which tends to be neglected in conventional safety management systems. Peer pressure, team norms and informal workplace cultures can play a key role in supporting or negating formal safety processes. When unsafe behaviors are normalized, or celebreated within work groups (which the qualitative data certainly suggested), individuals could feel pressure to conform, even when they recognize the individual risk. This clearly advocates for interventions designed to address individual knowledge and compliance with procedures, but also an intervention which can impact the collective behaviors teams and departments develop.

The notion of psychological safety became apparent as an important enabler of open communication and continuous improvement. Workplaces when people feel safe to speak up about concerns, disgreement about unsafe practices and/or reporting near misses (that do not lead to negative consequences) as more likely to display proactive safety behaviours and innovation in risk management. Organisations that embed this culture are not only developing better safety outcomes they are also fostering the learning capability of the organisations and resilience of workers.

From an organizational perspective, these results suggest compliance is inadequate in supporting sustained safety performance. Compliance is typically motivated by external regulation and fear of punishment, which may produce short-term behavioral changes, but rarely builds long-term commitment. In order to achieve actual safety excellence, organizations must shift to safety values that are internalized,shared responsibility, and an environment that supports learning from errors rather than punishing them.

From a practical perspective, the research suggests the need to integrate leadership development and safety training with cultural change programs. Safety leadership training needs to be more than enforcer skills based training - it needs to be about people skills and EQ and creating, nurturing inclusive team dynamics. Similarly, safety interventions should be crafted to take advantage of peer influence, utilizing favorable social norms to promote protective action.

The point is that the safety at risky sites cannot be defined by technical and procedural questions alone; it contains a social and psychological nature. Leadership, compliance and behavior are not silos but are an inter-dependant system that influences how people think about and act on risk. Those organizations that understand and do something about social complexity put themselves in a position of being able to develop resilient safety cultures where compliance begins to emerge from shared values, mutual trust and collective responsibility.

For the future, the research still needs to delve into the subtle interplay of leadership styles, group dynamics and organizational systems on safety outcomes. The human and social dimensions of safety response will be more important than ever, as industries wax and wane and new technologies are introduced. Indeed, by only adopting a 'big picture' perspective that compels a focus on human behaviour as a vital determinant of organisational safety, can companies genuinely aspire to ensure the safety and wellbeing of their workers in today's complex work environment.

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