Research Article

Collective Sensemaking: A Cultural-Sociological and Psychological Study of Occupational Risk

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About Article

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ABSTRACT

This work explores how individuals in risks groups use multiple approaches to understand their risks, integrating cultural-sociological and psychological views. Workers' interpretations, actions and reactions to unpredictable risks are just as important in defining occupational risk as the hazards they encounter. To understand the effect of collective meanings on risk perception and decisions, this study makes use of case studies, insights from anthropology and psychological theory. It shows how different cultural norms, workplace rules, emotions and identity are involved in defining what risks mean and in how they are coped with in various careers, including both hazardous occupations and desk jobs. It concludes that, to be successful, risk management should take into account these kinds of interpretations, rather than stop at specialist assessments of risks. Such an approach helps us see how workplace risks are shaped, managed and sometimes modified by groups of people.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Because our workplaces are now more uncertain and diverse, researchers are now looking into how we and others respond to new types of risks. In the past, occupational risk was mostly measured by indicators like injury rates, safety violations and exposure levels, but now it is seen as something influenced by society and culture. Not only do they use logic; they rely on what is taught in their culture, personal feelings and the behaviour of their colleagues and managers to recognize risk, Azevedo and Anagnostopoulos & Rutledge explain.

By having groups understand and interpret unclear or dangerous situations, the way risks are handled in various workplaces can be shaped. Rather than dealing with specific, common risks, workers make sense of risk together based on their own culture and workplaces, as found by Luhtakallio and Eranti and by Boehner *et al.* (2007). Using a multidisciplinary method, this article looks at how people from various workplaces experience, talk about and address occupational risk by combining information from cultural sociology, psychology and organizational studies. According to Harambam and Voyer & Barker's research, culture helps form ideas of risk, shapes the strategies used and can influence or alter power structures in companies. Approaches to dealing with emotions, forming identity and looking for meaning help guide how people process and understand risk information, according to Boehner *et al.* (2007) and Shadnam (2015). In dangerous jobs like emergency services and construction, people often deal with risks by group habits, special language and working closely as a team. They give society ways to accept and handle risk and maintain stability as explored by Cloutier and Langley (2013) and others. It doesn't make us stop thinking about danger—it helps us view it in a less alarming way so we can feel a part of the profession and the group.

This article seeks to explain the different ways in which an individual's thinking, a group's identity and the work environment affect how risks in a job are comprehended and taken care of. Concentrating on meaning and symbols, instead of just referring to rules or people's decisions, sheds light on social aspects of risk perception. The article demonstrates, through examples from healthcare, construction, emergency services and knowledge work, that people develop organized responses, methods to resist and ways to deal with emotions, largely through having a sense of common purpose.

As a result, research helps us recognize that occupational risk is part of a person's social life and is negotiated over time, not only an issue of danger.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Understanding occupational risk means looking into how people notice and act on hazards they come across at work. Researchers in sociology, psychology, organizational behavior and anthropology have produced studies about collective sensemaking and people's perceptions of risk. It documents how workers' idea of risk is affected and formed by their cultural background, feelings, ways of thinking and established procedures.

2.1. Explanations of how people and organizations give meaning to things

Collective sensemaking refers to the way people create similar understandings of confusing issues by talking and interacting with each other. According to organizational studies, in rough work environments employees fall back on common frameworks, behaviors based on culture and social suggestions to understand risks.

In the views of Anagnostopoulos and Rutledge, being at work means employees interpret their surroundings in relation to their job role and who they are as employees. Those in power or leading organizations often influence how other people see and define various risks by giving a framework for interpretation. Because of this, construction, emergency response and mining are areas where team members rely a lot on stories and guidance from managers to stay safe.

Azevedo argues that, despite doubts or even absurdity, the usual patterns and stories of a company are often kept which shows that a sense of continuity and a bit of humor is important when understanding risks in organizations.

2.2. The importance of cultural sociology and looking at risk as a product of society

In their views, risk is interpreted differently by different groups because of cultural factors. Risk is not only based on facts and statistics; it also arises from what people believe, what has happened in the past and how institutions usually act. They explain that how people participate in culture changes the ways they judge and respond to problems in the workplace. Usually, these beliefs get turned into standard procedures and customs to guide workers in unsafe conditions. Voyer and Barker (2025) show that not all people are treated equally by institutions during crises like COVID-19 which affects the way risks are perceived. They illustrate that worker's level of confidence or anxiety is closely connected to how society or groups see them. Besides, Boehner *et al.* (2007) and Harambam (2020) explain that trusting in knowledge is related to emotions, our sense of self and psychological factors. Feelings play a major role in the way workers handle, accept or reject information about risks they face at work. Cloutier and Langley then discuss that institutional logics help determine what forms of action are supported as valid in hazardous situations. They state that various logics—like safety, being efficient or being loyal—fight for influence in the management and justification of risks at work.

perceptions depend on individual beliefs and the influence of social structures. Both individuals and groups respond to risk based on their culture which helps hold the group together and strengthens their sense of who they are. In the workplace, culture is present through the set customs, practices and language common to particular jobs.

demonstrates how things that should seem unusual or dangerous in an organization such as the Challenger disaster, can become regular procedures because of the organization's culture. Her idea explains that following certain customs in an organization can make serious errors more likely, even when
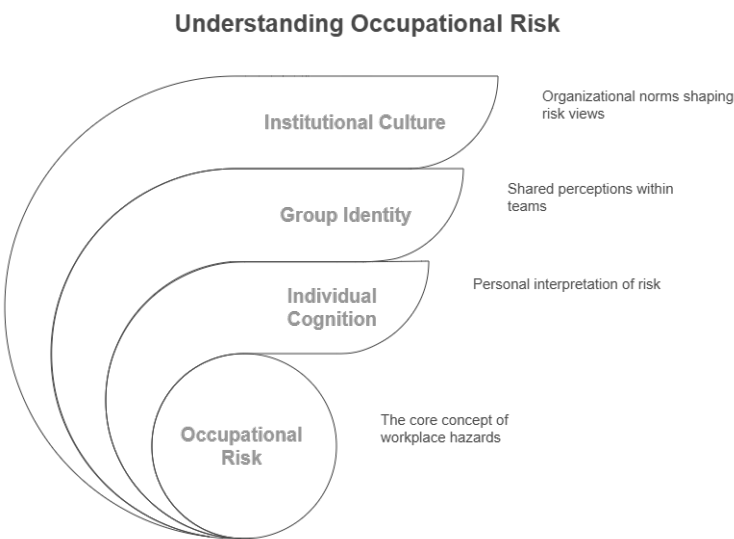
Understanding Occupational Risk

Figure 1. Occupational Risk Analysis

the proper knowledge is on hand. Similar to other researchers find that individuals working in jobs considered "dirty" rely on group culture and support to transform their job into something considered respectable and valued by society.

2.3. Impacts of perspectives and strategies on how people view and manage risks

Research on occupational risk shows the mental and emotional pathways involved in noticing and responding to dangers at work. proposes that people's views of risk are greatly influenced by how they feel and what they have experienced. Most workers tend to use how they feel such as being afraid or anxious, rather than the probability of risk, to determine when risk is more severe or imminent. In dangerous professions including firefighting, healthcare and policing, quick choices are frequently needed when stress levels increase.

Theory of stress and coping helps us see how individuals handle the stress from exposure to risk. This model reveals that problem-focused coping such as trying to solve the problem and emotion-focused coping, for example, separating from a worry, can both be seen in similar career environments. Furthermore, research

suggests that engaged in by a group, including jokes, sharing stories and peer encouragement, benefits workers' strength and eases psychological issues related to their work activities.

2.4. Using culture, psychology and the organizational environment

Increasingly, researchers are suggesting that all three areas—culture, psychology and structure—must be included in approaches to studying occupational risk. risk strategies should be aware of the different ways the same risks are understood by different stakeholders. Studies on high-pressure sensemaking note how a person's emotions, work procedures and background norms influence how they handle risk in real time.

Empirical work has also shown that organizational structures and who has power affect the way risk is divided and which views are recognized as valid. Risk, according to is made real by the way people repeat routines, acquire practical knowledge and learn from others. Following Bourdieu's thoughts on habitus, this approach argues that our jobs, education and experiences with others make risk judgment routine in what we do daily.

Table 1. Case study summary – development of a smart radiation monitoring system for occupational safety in healthcare facilities

Component	Details
Topic	Development of a Smart Radiation Monitoring System for Occupational Safety in Healthcare Facilities
Research Focus	This study focuses on the design, deployment, and evaluation of an IoT-enabled radiation detection system intended to enhance real-time monitoring and minimize occupational exposure to ionizing radiation.
Key Concepts	- Sensor networks and data analytics for hazard detection - Wireless communication infrastructure - Integration with safety protocols and alert mechanisms
Theoretical Support	Drawing from Zhang's (2024) work on stimulus-organism-response theory, the system models worker interaction with environmental stimuli (radiation levels) to support adaptive safety responses. Baier Wideman (2024) emphasizes the importance of applied, reform-based technology integration in health and science environments.

Innovation Context	Kerr *et al.* (2013) underscore the importance of strategic technology management in designing systems relevant to industrial and healthcare needs. This smart monitoring solution reflects those principles through scalable, field-adaptable architecture.
Sociocultural Implications	Referencing Dromi's exploration of everyday moral decision-making, the system indirectly supports ethical workplace practices by promoting transparency in exposure and reinforcing institutional duty of care. Migowski's insights on mnemonic practices also inform the interface's design, helping workers retain and interpret exposure patterns over time.

This literature review underscores the importance of moving beyond reductionist views of occupational risk to consider the full spectrum of social, cultural, and psychological dimensions that influence how risk is made sense of and managed. The integration of collective sensemaking with occupational risk frameworks provides a promising path toward more holistic and human-centered approaches to workplace safety and well-being.

3. METHODOLOGY

The study uses a qualitative, interpretive approach to understand how occupational risk is understood and managed by the group using cultural-sociological and psychological processes. Positivist quantification is not preferred; rather, the point is to explore how employment settings shape people's personal and collective views of risk. As A result, researchers can examine in detail how people make sense of things when uncertainty, risk and lack of clarity are part of their work.

3.1. Research design

This research uses a multiple case study design in order to gain contrasting insights across different kinds of occupations. With this design, one can identify similarities and differences in the way people handle, understand and pass along risks in different professional circles. The research looks at how four different jobs vary in their exposures to risk.

- Firefighting is a branch of Emergency Services.
- Healthcare (Emergency Nursing)
- Construction Work
- Experts in Knowledge Work (Cybersecurity Experts)

The research selected these occupations based on how their cultures, ways of working and kinds of risks differ; this helped draw common findings about collective sensemaking among workers.

3.2. Data collection

In this paper, we used a variety of qualitative approaches such as:

For semi-structured interviews, 32 participants were collected, each of whom represented one of eight different occupations. Open-ended questions helped guide interviews which lasted from 45 minutes to 90 minutes, so we could learn about participants' experiences and risk views. Using this approach enabled the author to cover each case in detail and ensure that the studies remained linked by their main points.

In the construction and emergency services occupation sites, the researcher performed ethnographic fieldwork, observing everyday activities, safety talks, casual exchanges and routines to avoid risks. We used field notes to record different languages, gestures and other factors affecting the development of risk

sensemaking.

I reviewed internal safety manuals, official news from the company and training materials to find out what the organization says and requires about occupational risk. These materials revealed the different formal systems for understanding work and how they might come into disagreement with what workers believe.

3.3. Data analysis

Thematic analysiswas done on the data and I used NVivo to handle the coding process. I started with data and ended up with general statements.

During the first phase, I started to code data by simply looking at what stood out such as the way people manage risks, deal with emotions, perform rituals and share stories of resistance. The dataset was analyzed further by including the theoretical ideas

Themes were looked at from one case to the next to spot both similarities and the unique context in each one. Special care was taken to examine how each individual's behaviors and feelings depended on the group's culture, the typical work role and rules within the organization.

3.4. Thinking about yourself and being ethical

Since the research was comparatively interpretive, acting self-awarely was at the heart of the process. As part of their work, the researcher wrote a reflective journal to check their assumptions, biases and emotions during studying and processing data. Showing where the findings came from made everything more reliable and open.

The research was approved by the University's ethics board. All participants were informed in detail and gave written permission to take part. Their confidentiality was maintained by data encryption and individuals could withdraw at any time without any consequences. Additional ways to keep settings and roles anonymous were used where the risks were high and speaking up might negatively impact an organization.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The examination of interviews, observations and documents from institutions showed that workers in all four occupations employed several different interpretive and coping strategies. I identified four main themes that describe how people in the research collective make sense of risk: (1) Accepting Risk as Part of Culture, (2) Coping with the Emotional Aspects, (3) Practicing Rituals and Symbols and (4) Noticing Differences in Official Risk Messaging and Their Own Experiences. While these themes existed everywhere, they took different forms depending on each partner's job.

Figure 2. Understanding risk assessment approaches from individual to organizational level

4.1. Increasingly accepting risk

People in all types of work tended to regard risk as something that simply comes with the job. Participants in such dangerous occupations expressed feeling proud of dealing with danger at work. Building site personnel and firefighters say risk is an expected part of their work that they are equipped to handle. The process was also supported by friends, laughter and group memories that lowered fear and raised strength.

It's just something you become accustomed to. If you're not ready to take risks, you shouldn't be in construction."

Instead, knowledge workers in cybersecurity tended to view risk by referring to risks to a company's reputation and the protection of information. With so many security incidents, workers started to mentally step back and act by following remembered routines.

4.2. Controlling and handling your emotions

Lots of healthcare and emergency personnel relied on strategies that helped them feel better. Nurses said they relied on dividing things in their minds to cope with what their patients had experienced. Humor with other crew members was our main way to deal with the challenges.

Making jokes about our work keeps us from falling apart after every shift.

Being grouped together from the start, workers and firefighters learnt to support and debrief each other as a team. In comparison, cybersecurity experts pushed for tools like mindfulness or strict rules for remote work to manage cognitive overload.

4.3. Certain things people do such as singing or lighting a candle, are symbolic practices and rituals.

Everywhere, symbolic actions played a role in how employees looked at and handled risk. There were morning safety talks (construction), changing of personnel using stories (healthcare) and quick rituals before big demonstrations or disasters (firefighting). They shared knowledge with everyone while also reinforcing the group's identity.

"It's become a routine for us to have our 'pre-burn' meeting before stepping into any fire—it's a bit like huddling before a sporting event."

Respondents in the field said that cyber preparedness included conducting incident response exercises and examining source code which they considered "cyber drills."

4.4. Mismatches between the way risks are described by institutions and people's lived experiences

In every branch of the study, it became clear that risk protocols in industries did not always match what workers faced in reality. Most of the time, people thought that safety guidelines at the hospital were idealistic or overly official.

The guidelines look great on paper, but you just use whatever you find effective. You need to act quickly." (Emergency nurse)

When things were rushed, employees would depend on unspoken practices and talk with others—not always using written instructions. As a result, some individuals created their own methods that differed from or fitted with the school's rules.

Table 2. Summary of key themes across occupational settings

Theme	Construction	Firefighting	Healthcare (Nursing)	Cybersecurity
Cultural Normalization of Risk	Physical danger as trade identity	Risk viewed as noble and heroic	Emotional risk framed as caregiving duty	Abstract risk seen as routine
Emotional Management & Coping	Humor, peer banter, desensitization	Group debriefing, stoicism	Compartmentalization, peer support	Individual strategies (e.g., mindfulness)
Symbolic Practices & Rituals	Morning safety talks, tool checks	Pre-fire huddles, helmet rituals	Shift handovers, storytelling	Incident simulations, peer code review
Discrepancy with Institutional Risk	Formal rules seen as impractical on-site	Manuals often bypassed in emergencies	Time-pressure overrides ideal protocols	Policies often perceived as abstract

The findings show that people in risky jobs keep sharing and negotiating their understanding of occupational risks continuously through the course of their lives. It is clear from the results that how workers respond to risk in their jobs depends very much on their culture and personal psychology.

4.5. Discussion
It is clear from the research that occupational risk means different things to individuals and to society as a whole. Everyone in each group turned to sensemaking to find, manage and address risks as a group. What we have studied provides strong evidence for theories about understanding risks, organizational cultures and emotional labor written earlier

4.6. Taking on and handling risk in several domains
Various reports and analyses show that people's views on risks depend heavily on their culture. The type of job a person holds and the group they are connected to both put them in contact with different risks. The expression "risk comes with the job" is an example of the bias present in construction worker cultures. They also point out that Ashforth and discuss "dirty work" and claim those dealing in it can adapt their stories and become accepted in social circles.

Facing the dangers during firefighting develops who we are and helps explain what is going on, according to Weick. In addition to hearing about how the workers behave, the ceremonies, gatherings and activities in Mauss's research work to strengthen a sense of danger in the workers. Since many cybersecurity dangers can't be held accountable in the same way, learning about them depends on cultural views just as much as traditional threats do. Organizing cyber training exercises often is like training for dangerous occupations.

4.7. The majority of employees find it hard to control their feelings at work.
Emotional labor techniques used by healthcare and emergency teams to remain safe at the workplace were identified by the study. My data is consistent with) findings that nurses cope with their daily emotions by using distance and separating their feelings. Dealing with emotions by ourselves becomes important as society tries to ensure support remains available when tough obstacles come up.

Many firefighters and construction workers found they could not do their jobs properly if they were not supported by regular laughter, friendship and a solid team. Using certain strategies, groups may prevent staff from burning out, just as joking and storytelling helped the 911 dispatchers talked about it. Those experts in cybersecurity mentioned they were emotionally worn out and anxious by the thought of system breaches, pointing out that mental and emotional factors can risk digital work similar to the physical side.

They point out that Lazarus and Folkman believe that employees manage risks by using practical methods and controlling their emotions. An important part of the study is that facing loss often happens when we are together with others. Identity and customs among these occupations grew from and were supported by the specific practices, duties and habits of each career.

4.8. Outcomes of the action vs what was required
The pattern of how official bodies viewed risk differed from occupational sectors' views. According to participants, official simulations are formal, but lack important specific risks. believed that ongoing stresses at work sometimes make people less respectful of safety and this study backs that view.

How workers feel at work might be different from what managers assume, so their efforts to build agreement may not succeed. Should the guidelines be too difficult to put into practice, people take the techniques they normally use from personal experience.

It further leads to many bad outcomes, both in terms of ethics and in practice. If staff at any level does not find the risk scenarios meaningful, the organization's standing might slip and the staff at the front lines might not comply with the required steps. That's the reason why staff who handle risks each day should have a say and influence our risk management discussions.

4.9. Integration done at one level and at a higher level
The research shows that studying several disciplines alongside each other improves our understanding of occupational risk. Cultural sociology makes it clear how certain groups recognize what endangers them. From psychology, we learn about the ways we react and feel during key or tough times. Depending on organizational theory, how power functions within a company decides when and how information is acknowledged by its members.

Standpoint which is adopted here, describes that people

regularly and actively take risks in their daily and social lives. Our work as shown that individuals do not just accept risk information as presented; they use it based on their experiences and their place of work.

It examines ideas, emotions, and body gestures. In fact, people working in construction, nursing and cybersecurity change the way risks are viewed and taken care of—this helps them handle them more skillfully.

The overall lesson is that, in occupational risk, focusing only on rules misses the connection to the work environment and people. Group interpretations of risk help us find new approaches and design safer and more useful places to work. It suggests that we take a look at how we often deal with risks to help us take emotion and engagement into account.

5. CONCLUSION

This work gives detailed insight into how workplace risk is understood together using culture, individual psychology and workplace communication. By going beyond models that treat risk as an exact number, this research found that risk is influenced by social factors, affects feelings and is different in each situation. No matter if people are working in construction, fighting fires, emergency healthcare or cybersecurity, it is clear from the findings that risk is not controlled using regular rules alone, but also through the sharing of experiences and feelings within a group's activities.

This study highlights that workers rely on how the group makes sense of risk to help them handle dangerous situations at work. People do not experience risk on their own. Culture ensures that things like the need for bravery in firefighting are expected and that emotional pressure at work is common for nurses. Such understanding allows workers to maintain their cooperative behavior and mental stability during endless uncertainty, risk or those times they feel exhausted. Using ideas from cultural sociology and psychology, this study has revealed that practices such as using humor, sharing stories, participating in ceremonies and creating some emotional distance are essential in how workers experience, understand and handle occupational risk.

In addition, the study points out that how risks are perceived depends on organizational dissonance. In all work areas, safety policies don't always match the experiences people have at work. As a result, many frontline staff question or doubt official orders and tend to use tips passed around by colleagues instead. This information can greatly benefit those trying to enhance occupational health and safety. It proposes that managing risks should be a conversation, not just giving directions—based on real ways people understand risk, instead of theoretical principles.

Critically, the results add to what was previously known in significant ways. In addition to research on individual risk perception, emotional labor and the sociology of safety, this study unites those themes and looks at how groups create meaning about risks. It explains how cultural scripts and emotions are used by different groups at work to understand difficult situations and lower uncertainty. Taking this approach expands academic theory and teaches us how to design interventions to match the culture, psychology and

collaboration of those involved.

Importantly, this study points out that things like reputational damage, mental overwork and emotional problems are often missed in regular models of workplace health and safety. For example, those working in cybersecurity experience great psychological difficulty as they protect against intangible hazards that can bring disaster. Thinking about nursing, the emotional challenges of dealing with patient difficulties occur often but are rarely displayed due to expectations for nurses to be calm. Exploring these complex experiences calls for a way to catch how people feel inside and sense the culture on the outside. This study looked for this by using quality interviews. In addition, this research creates several new opportunities for further exploration. Researchers could use such studies to see how how ideas about risk are formed and adjusted over time, for example, because of new innovations and major organizational shifts, pandemic diseases or natural disasters. Researchers might explore how a variety of cultural contexts, ethnic backgrounds and work settings interact to produce multiple risk understanding models. Also, by implementing intervention studies, we can evaluate whether participation in risk communication can help workers relate formal safety instructions to their real experiences, possibly raising both compliance and safety.

In conclusion, this work attests that assessing occupational risk should be guided not only by technical know-how or regulatory control, but by such attention paid to the cultural, emotional, and social dimensions that shape how workers think, feel, and act in uncertain circumstances. By situating workers' voices and experiences across multiple work forms, this research adds to a more nuanced, more human, understanding of occupational risk, and presents a basis for more effective, inclusive and responsive approaches to work safety in the future.

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