

Multiple rationalities in OHS practices of SB actors and intervention experts in Québec SBs

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Québec context

- 242 161 establishments, 96% SB <50
3 079 400 insured workers 35% lf in SB , Québec 2006
- No OHS statistics tied to workplace size
- Enduring stereotypes about low level of risk in SB (unions, employers associations, CSST management and publications)
- 1979 legislation (LSST): primary prevention and workers participation; gradual shift towards self-regulation, some prescription for specific risks, ex: machine safety;
- Local prevention : prevention program, consultory OHS committee , but restricted application : high risk sectors including metal products, > 20 workers; restricted OHS services;
- Union estimates: 85% of labor forced excluded in 2009, because of transformation of economic structure

Institutional resources

- CSST administers both prevention-inspection and compensation
- CSST safety inspectors have double role command –control and counsel;
- Advisory associations in 12 sectors/25 , voluntary funding from sector;
- Occupational health inspectors, risk and health assessment, no coercitive power, responsibility of Ministry of Health

Methods

Fieldwork: metal products fabrication, priority sector

- 6 SBs <50; plant visit (1hr);
semi-directed interviews : employer (E) and/or
representative, safety manager if present; N= 8
semi-directed interviews with 9 workers (W)s; N= 5

- semi-directed interviews with institutional OHS
practitioners (I):

5 CSST safety inspectors, 2 OH nurse/ technician,
3 sector association OHS experts; N=10

- Total 23 interviews, 27 hours

Research objectives

In the absence of statistics, use interviews to achieve qualitative picture of SBs;

SBs employers (E) and employees (W):

- OHS dispositions, capacities and practices (rationalities)
- Employee participation, primary prevention and compliance in machine safety
- Relations with institutional representatives

Institutional inspectors and preventors (P):

- Risk level, OHS dispositions, capacities and practices in SBs
- Institutional approaches for SBs

Results: Risk level

- Majority of employers and employees think risk level is low; subjective conception of risk (P);
- All institutional practitioners observe OHS risk is high, not adequately managed, and employees are significantly more exposed than in LB
- All institutional practitioners say high risk level in SB is common knowledge among field people but not formally recognized by institutions, not a priority for prevention
- Information on risk level concords with international research, but is unusual in Québec

Results: Employee participation

- Formal participation OHS committee: rare, mostly obligation from inspectors, rarely or irregularly active; contrary to institutional statistics or survey data (E W P);
- Informal participation: hindered by lack of communication between workers and culture of autonomy; old habits, (E W P)
- Employers: + selection and implementation of safety measures, credibility, efficiency; - conflict with production
- Employees: + talk about real things (W); - insufficient information, conflict with production, prefer direct communication, autonomy, disillusioned about unions, personal cost (piece-rate work)

Results: Employee participation

OHS practitioners:

- Employees have no independent access info risks and prevention; incapacity to exercise rights;
- Limited participation, little significant or lasting effect on prevention;
- **Positive dispositions, conflicting rationalities: conflict with production, unstable production and LF turnover, prefer informal management and communication**
- Effect on OHS interventions: employees will not participate in inspections, report risks or irregular practices, do not file complaints; majority of actions target employer;

Results: Primary prevention

- Prevention programm (risk evaluation) ; beyond capacities, single risk approach better results (EWP)
- Awareness of regulations for specific risks (ex: machine safety), of imperfect compliance, hope don't get caught (EWP); improvise guards;
- Denial, blame incompetence (EWP), training in technical school has nothing to do with reality (W)
- Informal practices: rotate operations, limit hrs welding or during summer (W), small contracts;
- Costs of prevention measures vs irregular production, benefits, and production delays (E W)

Results: Primary prevention

OHS practitioners:

- Practices: machine safety is big problem, compromise between prevention and production
- Effect on intervention: 'Zero tolerance' machine safety campaign has limited success in SBs, no sustainable prevention; employees side with employers against compliance, remove guards;
- **Dispositions towards compliance : less positive, reluctance & frustration; Conflicting rationalities linked to production constraints (short series, subcontracting); reliance on individual competence; costs of prevention are real issue;**

Results: Institutional interventions

- Isolation, insufficient services, bureaucratic and inefficient structure, 5-10 yrs without visit, no follow ups (E W); prefer single risk programs (E)
- Ambivalence towards institutions: control/counsel
« *the CSST, they work against us* » (E W)
- Expectations : business startup support, info, RE and audits, technical support, control of machinery market (E); « *If they really wanted to reduce accidents, they would help us* »

Results: Institutional interventions

OHS practitioners:

- Practitioners wait a least one year before visiting new SB because of low survival rate; periodic inspections abandoned;
- Planned interventions and programs 3X more frequent 30 years ago, now interventions based on external demands; much less efficient (for objectives of prevention, risk identification), perception of unfairness;
- SB underrepresented in interventions: invisible, rare complaints, efficiency criteria

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Results: Institutional interventions

OHS practitioners:

- Formal rule: same approach for LB and SB,
- Intervention mandate: precise object, set time
- Informal adaptations to SB capacities:
« *there is no clear rule about how far we are supposed to go with them* »
- Time consuming interventions in SBs to support OHS management, identification of technical solutions, suppliers
- Accept temporary solutions and give longer delays for conformity, even if risk not fully controlled

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Discussion

Portion of results confirms international research:

- Dispositions, capacities, distinctive rationalities
- Trend towards AR, less resources and services, has major effects on institutional interventions and on prevention capacity of SBs ;

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Specifics of SBs situation in Quebec:

- Invisibility of SBs: no statistical description of risk;
- OHS risks are high, not formally recognized but recognized by OHS practitioners; not a priority
- 1981-2006 60% increase N establishments, N insured employees; N inspectors 250 since 1980;

Discussion

Conflicting rationalities for OHS practitioners:

- Formal rules: uniform application of regulations
- Informal rules: caution not to irk businesses, take into account limited capacities of SBs; application of notion of acceptable risk despite no public debate;
- Double role of inspectors puts them in difficult situation when it is time to use constraint ; feel additional and specific resources should attend to SBs;
- Discomfort and cognitive dissonance in relation to personal and institutional responsibility

Conclusion

- Lasting invisibility and disadvantage of SBs confirm they are low in «social hierarchy of credibility » (Becker)
- In the absence of statistics, qualitative information on risk should be used
- Informal practices described by informants reveal crucial issues within OHS institutions which should be brought to public debate