Chapter 1

Safety: A Matter for ‘Professionals’?

An Introduction

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Abstract This opening chapter questions the links between safety and ‘professionalization’ according to the following dialectics. ‘Ordinary safety’, means safety embedded in everyday industrial practices where the more professional one is in one’s dedicated duties, the safer one works. Yet ‘extraordinary safety’, namely safety isolated from other working dimensions, is a matter of exception and safety training requires specific actions from specialized departments and professionals. The author then elaborated on safety to meet internal objectives or safety to comply with external stakeholders’ expectations, more as a justification requirement.

Keywords Safety training • Safety performance • Professional • External justification

FonCSI’s industrial partners made the following observation: training programmes in the field of industrial safety no longer seem to be yielding the results expected of them, despite the attention and funding they receive.

This initial statement merits further discussion. The field of industrial safety is not strictly delimited and clarifying its boundaries would be quite a task in itself. Similarly, the notion of training can be understood in multiple ways. Furthermore, criteria for assessing the true impact of activities described as ‘safety training’ are lacking. There are no large-scale audits available that would make it possible to determine the role played by these training activities in maintaining or increasing safety and, conversely, what effects might result from their reconsideration. This, in itself, is a difficulty that probably contributes to the unease of industrial companies. Although the latter are convinced that they have identified a problem (insufficient safety training) and a possible solution (make safety training more ‘professional’), they wished to explore the matter further.

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Researchers are well aware that if there are problems in search of solutions there are also solutions in search of problems (Cohen et al. 1972) and this can introduce analysis biases. Consequently, during a series of meetings, the academic and industrial experts mandated to explore the links between professionalization and safety endeavoured to reconsider the questions posed by the industrial companies, by mainly focusing their analysis on three points:

- Where do professionalization and safety training meet?
- Should safety training be incorporated into everyday practices and activities or should it be the subject of specific actions within companies?
- Does safety training primarily meet internal requirements dictated by the specific problems companies encounter? Or external requirements dictated by external entities such as regulating authorities, the public, the media, etc.?

1.1 Professionalization and Safety

The debates held within the group identified two different ways of conceiving the link between professionalization and safety (bearing in mind that neither ‘professionalization’ nor ‘safety’ are obvious or univocal notions, as explained in the preface):

- the attention given to safety would seem to be closely linked to the skills and know-how that actors engaged in industrial activities learn through the occupations or duties for which they were initially trained;
- the attention given to safety would seem to result primarily from specific actions and training courses which are distinct from the initial training received.

In the first scenario, no particular actions are required in order for safety to be taken into account, as it forms part of the skill-set of the various categories of agents working in industrial companies. It could be said that safety is ‘absorbed’ into all training (in the broad sense of the term) delivered within and outside companies, so that agents may effectively and safely participate in industrial activities that are essentially risky. From this perspective, maintaining and increasing safety primarily results from the capacity of these agents to be ‘good professionals’ when carrying out the duties assigned to them, with reference also to the profession to which they belong. In short, safety is ‘part of the job’ and there is no need to stress that it is a priority because, in a way, it is self-evident for all professionals. One difficulty, however, stems from the fact that this approach to safety seems to apply more to operators and first line supervisors than to middle managers and senior managers.

In the second scenario, taking into account safety relies, as a priority, on specific actions undertaken by individuals and departments specialised in the field of so-called ‘safety’. This refers to the continually expanding area of expertise that developed as safety was emerging as an absolute imperative in contemporary societies which, in France and elsewhere, are now identified as risk societies (Beck 1992).

A market has even developed at the crossroads of academic research and consulting, with an increasingly diversified offering based on various safety models. In this context, increased safety is primarily expected to be achieved by increasing the ‘professionalization’ of these specialists who influence industrial activities by distinguishing themselves from the agents directly involved in the flow of operations. Professionalization goes hand in hand with the identification of a profession or of a group of specific professions, both internally (specialised departments and services, etc.) and externally (training bodies, experts, consultants, etc.). As has been observed in various ways, this can lead to them becoming cut off from the reality in the field.

Depending on the option chosen, ‘professionalization and safety’ can thus be understood in very different or even opposing ways. Besides the issues with terminology, this can largely explain the ambiguity that often exists in the way these matters are approached. Even more so because, within companies, greater safety can be sought simultaneously on both these levels with varying degrees of visibility.

1.2 Ordinary Safety or Extraordinary Safety

The group also considered how to include the issue of safety in company activities. There again, two main conceptions emerged:

- one which considers that safety is an ‘everyday concern’ and thus cannot be dissociated from all of the practices, processes and organizational systems on which a company’s activity relies. In this context, maintaining a long-lasting safe state in a high-risk activity seems indissociable from the existence of ‘routines’ or, in other words, without the integration and implementation, within everyday operations, of a set of rules, procedures, but also experiences and non-formalised know-how [constantly and dynamically correcting mistakes and problem areas—cf. (Amalberti 2001)] that limit the human cost of actions for agents and organizations. In short, routine, which is often described as a potential source of deviations and problems, can be a necessary evil within organizations, an essential ingredient for safety that is more managed than regulated (Daniellou et al. 2010; de Terssac and Mignard 2011).
- and another, which considers that safety (just like risks and crises) is a matter of exception and that it can only be achieved through deliberate and repeated actions, located outside of everyday operations, so as to keep attention focused on it at all levels. Safety awareness and information campaigns are emblematic of this approach, serving as constant reminders to stay alert because vigilance can wane. The implication is that we must remain keenly aware of risks at all times in order to avoid them. In this context, the ‘routinisation’ of practices and procedures is usually perceived as a danger.

The first approach is the one that most corresponds to the reality of the situation within companies. But, quite paradoxically, it is the least known and the one that is not always the focus of investigations in the academic field. Consequently, despite research in the field of ergonomics, in the sociology of work and the sociology of organizations, only a partial analysis has yet been carried out of the way safety is ordinarily guaranteed in high-risk companies. Similarly, the issue of safety is broached more from the perspective of its ‘extraordinary failures’ than its ‘ordinary successes’, and this contributes to diminishing interest in the complex processes through which socio-technical systems are usually maintained in a satisfactory or, at least, an ‘adequate’ state. This explains in part why ordinary safety is increasingly akin to a black box that fewer and fewer researchers are attempting to open (Gilbert 2016).

The second approach is more in line with common sense and with the way safety actions are spontaneously considered in companies. Indeed, it seems obvious that safety cannot be achieved without specialised agents and departments intervening in multiple ways to maintain a state of vigilance or—and this is the reason for quality assurance measures—without the actual processes being strictly backed by administrative procedures. Whether the actions are deliberate and made particularly visible or whether they stem from bureaucratic obligations, the goal is to present the risks by showing them in a way that ‘speaks to the conscience’. In fact, any outside observer attending industrial facilities or oil rigs, or observing how transport activities are carried out, is spontaneously led to consider that, actually, safety efforts are mainly the result of repeating instructions. But, despite the visibility and publicity given to these actions, it isn’t always easy to determine what impact they really have on everyday operations.

Although they are very different, these two approaches both ask what the effective drivers of ordinary safety are in high-risk activities (knowing that they vary depending on the sector of activity and the company). More particularly, they lead us to wonder what really underpins safety: practices or processes that are part of routines and refer explicitly or implicitly to various safety models. Orders supported by communication campaigns, training courses, certifications aimed at prompting vigilance, at introducing and maintaining a safety culture that is widely shared? They also lead to questioning ourselves about what could enable us to get to grips with the reality of high-risk activities (problematic in the first approach, given the numerous factors to take into account; seemingly easier in the second approach, but there is no guarantee then that they will enable in-depth action on what constitutes the hidden face of these activities). This is a considerable challenge for researchers but also for the actors, because it essentially involves determining how it is possible to achieve a good grasp of high-risk activities in order to improve their safety. And also how it is possible to show that we have a good grasp of these activities—a recurring problem with which all those implementing safety-related actions and policies are now confronted.

1.3 Safety for Whose Benefit? The Inside or the Outside?

It also emerged that the difficulties encountered in defining safety actions and implementing them in high-risk activities were not only due to the ‘approaches’ used, which refer back to different conceptions or even different ‘philosophies’ in this area, but also to the existence of a double bind which carries a strong contradiction. On the one hand, these actions must solve specific realities and problems that are characteristic of a company or a sector of activity. On the other hand, they must meet a set of external expectations which are increasingly numerous and codified in societies that are conscious of collective risks.

- When it comes to safety in companies, the primary aim is effectiveness, irrespective of the means used (comprehensive actions through professionalization; ad hoc actions through training). Indeed, whatever the difficulties, the goal is always to try to ensure that these actions are as compatible as possible with actual situations (with a wide range of methods available to achieve this, and actually this explains the variety of training options available).
- But, at the same time, companies must provide evidence (to regulating authorities, various associations, the media and, more broadly speaking, the public) that they are making safety their priority. Yet the administration of this evidence must fulfil the criteria that prevail in debates about collective risks (and more particularly industrial risks) according to the rules that apply in the public arena (Gilbert and Henry 2012). So essentially, such evidence can be given publicly by highlighting the efforts made to fund safety measures, ensure standards, rules and procedures are followed, develop a safety culture, etc. Thus, even though quality approaches can be considered an ‘internal’ justification method, they are also largely in place to meet ‘external’ justification requirements (particularly those stemming from supervisory authorities or the evolution of jurisprudence).

Safety actions thus find themselves caught in a contradictory injunction, because they must meet both internal requirements (in terms of effectiveness) and external requirements (in terms of justification). Rather paradoxically, the consequence is that the most in-depth actions—those that have the greatest influence on practices and processes and those that take into account the diversity of the factors that effectively guarantee safety—are those that are least likely to be of use as evidence for ‘the outside’. Conversely, those that are the most aligned with public views regarding risk management (by highlighting formal aspects, respect for values, a sense of responsibility, ethics, etc.) are the most immediately useful for company communication (in the very broad sense of the term). Indeed, they are the ones that most fulfil the requirements for accountability (Ayache 2008), which large organizations and companies that must justify their actions and policies in the public arena have now accepted as an obligation. This explains the difficulties

people within the company can encounter when they must elaborate a safety training policy, as is the case for HR managers. The training offered is indeed based in large part on what 'the outside' expects from companies when it comes to safety. Consequently, meeting the actual needs in the field can prove problematic.

The analysis undertaken within the group therefore led to meeting the demands of industrial companies by considerably shifting the questioning about 'professionalization and safety'. Indeed, it asks all involved to note the fact that specific safety training courses are at odds in many ways.

Firstly, without it being said clearly, these training courses can find themselves in competition with the pursuit of safety as it is effectively carried out by the different occupations, the practices, and process activation (in other words, anything that can be qualified as 'professional'). Insistence on the professionalization of safety, or indeed the professionalization of safety-related occupations, only contributes to masking the discreet, yet broad, implementation of the ordinary safety processes that are part of high-risk activities (but do not necessarily dictate how they are carried out). Thus it is difficult to tackle head-on the link that must be established between initial training, the skills upgrades required by the different occupations, and the training focused on safety. Similarly, the limitations of many professional development courses that aim to train employees in designated 'theoretical' situations without sufficiently preparing them for the range of situations they are likely to encounter in real life or teaching them the knowledge they need to develop a pertinent response are overlooked.

Secondly, and this is linked to the first point, training activities most often lead to thinking about safety from the perspective of the exceptional, the extraordinary, as if they were barely conceivable outside of specific activities, separate from everyday operations and, above all, carried out most deliberately by specialists (whether those recognised as such within the company or external trainers). Once again, the consequence of this is to render the return to reality difficult and to make the views introduced from 'the outside' seem out of touch or indeed ineffective (irrespective of how close the trainers are to the agents involved in the activities, and despite the middle road taken by proponents of the quality approach).

Thirdly, as the training activities are also used to demonstrate the willingness of high-risk companies to make safety an (absolute) priority, this can in fact shift their core purpose away from the reality of the company's activities. The goal then is less about achieving effectiveness in terms of the management of these activities and more about achieving effectiveness in terms of justifying the efforts made by a company or a sector of activity. And this all the more so as it is not always possible to be publicly accountable for the conditions in which the effectiveness was achieved, given the many constraints and obligations facing the actors undertaking the risky activities. Thus it is always difficult to acknowledge that although safety is an important requirement it is one requirement among many for companies conducting high-risk activities, and that in 'real life' the managed safety that takes into account the various constraints and compromises to which all activities are subjected overrides regulated safety.

Based on these observations, what are the avenues that might be followed and explored by colleagues and foreign experts invited to an international seminar¹?

First, it seems reasonable to recommend that every effort be made to ‘return to reality’ by aligning safety training courses with safety as it is actually practised in high-risk companies. Indeed, if high-risk situations are to be handled with professionalism, it is important to encourage debate (or even controversy) between different professionals with regards to the situations they encounter, the way they interpret them, the risks they see in them, the solutions that seem pertinent to them, and the feedback received on the implementation of these solutions. Taking stock and discussing the handling (technical, organizational, pedagogical) of categories of high-risk situations must therefore be a permanent part of each occupation’s duties. Similarly, the very wide range of practices, of situations and of networks and groups of individuals actually involved in carrying out and managing tasks, often external to the companies themselves, must be taken into account. This seems obvious, but as previously indicated, there are many obstacles to aligning the goals of safety training programmes with safety as it is handled in the field (ensuring actual practices are ‘hidden’ if they appear to be scarcely or not at all compatible with the image of safety held in the public arena).

Next, while encouraging training courses to be based on real conditions, it seems necessary to favour a pragmatic approach by acknowledging the fact that although the current situation in terms of safety training is far from ideal, it corresponds to a ‘state of the world’ and a ‘state of relations’ in our society which it is still difficult to change. Hence, however effective safety training programmes are, and however well aligned they are with industrial realities, they participate in the justification work that companies and high-risk activities must engage in. It is therefore illusory to think that they could, or even that they should, have as their only objective the pursuit of effectiveness based on the analysis of actual practices and work methods in high-risk activity sectors. In fact, they have another social function whose importance can only grow, given the requirements in terms of accountability. Furthermore, we cannot completely forget that, in France, continuing professional development, of which safety training is a part, is an element in the compromise reached between management and unions. This is another type of constraint that must be taken into account, because it has an influence on the training available. Consequently, it should probably be acknowledged that safety-related training also acquires meaning when, regardless of the explicit or implicit safety model to which it refers, it achieves a goal that has become essential: showing the importance given to the matter of safety.

This situation can be a source of dissatisfaction, as it leads both researchers and actors to ‘make allowances’, or in other words to admit that the difficulties encountered in the field of safety training have deep-rooted causes. Shifting practices and work methods back to reality in order to build better training activities,

¹The two-day international workshop mentioned in the preface, organized by FonCSI in November 2015 and highlight of the project that led to this book (editors’ note).

whether by greater incorporation into occupations, work groups, or by specific interventions, represents a real challenge given that our societies have distanced themselves so much from ‘reality’. Similarly, it is not easy to give up training activities that are deemed out of touch or even inadequate when these prove to play an essential social role. Nevertheless, avenues for progress do exist if, instead of focusing on these limitations, we consider that it should be possible, dialectically, to work with these different aspects to improve industrial safety. Going ‘back to reality’ and getting as close as possible to ordinary activities could make it possible to question the pertinence of safety training programmes. Conversely, the elaboration of safety training programmes can be an ideal opportunity to encourage those in charge of ordinary activities to report on their actual practices and the compromises they make between various demands; on how they relate to standards, rules and procedures; on the way they shoulder their responsibilities and conceive their code of ethics. In other words, the gap that has appeared between the reality of practices, which are less and less visible from a social point of view, and also less and less ‘viewable’, and the image of it that is given via various safety recommendations, could provide the opportunity to question the currently accepted approach to safety. The main challenge probably lies in making it possible once again to discuss—including in public—the conditions under which safety is actually guaranteed in high-risk activities.

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