

Researcher Hazel Hollingdale takes an in-depth look at risk-taking in typically male-dominated work environments.

Gender and risky workplace behaviour

By Gail Johnson

When she began her studies in sociology, graduate student Hazel Hollingdale focused on the relationship between gender and work culture. Gender is a term that describes the cultural and social meanings attached to men's and women's roles, and how people understand, manage, and project their masculine and feminine characteristics.

There has been a great deal of research on gender as it relates to risk-taking behaviour. However, few studies have looked more closely at the way gender operates in risk-taking behaviour at work, or what employers can do to enhance workplace health and safety as it intersects with gender.

Hollingdale found herself intrigued when she heard friends in male-dominated, “macho-type” jobs talking about taking serious risks at work. Wanting to learn more, her curiosity led her further into the topic when she began her master's research. In 2011, in support of her work, she received a Research Training Award from WorkSafeBC.

Specifically, Hollingdale examined why risk-taking happens in typically male-dominated, high-hazard work environments. Stemming from that exploration, she developed recommendations aimed at helping employers boost occupational safety.

“I had lots of friends who worked in ironwork or as electricians, and would constantly hear these stories about the risks they'd take during work that were totally unsafe,” she says. “I'd ask, ‘Why are you doing this? Why aren't you wearing your insulated gloves?’”

The responses surprised her, and included, “‘You look like you're not competent enough to do a job. If you're putting on safety equipment, you don't know what you're doing.’ It was all guys saying that.”

Digging deeper into “macho” tendencies

Hollingdale wasn't satisfied with trite assumptions, such as, “men have testosterone; they just take more risks.”

To get a better understanding of why men might not follow safe practices on the job, she partnered with a large B.C. firm employing a variety of tradespeople.

“Policy around safety needs to be collaborative. Individuals in an organization who really know what it’s like to be up on that ladder 40 feet in the air, and whether it’s realistic to be carrying 80 pounds of equipment, must be involved in policy development.”

—Hazel Hollingdale, UBC graduate student and WorkSafeBC Research Training Award recipient

The company had a primarily unionized workforce and an apparently strong corporate dedication to safety, with regular departmental health and safety meetings, routine safety training, a culture that encouraged workers to report “near misses,” and other safety-related policies and procedures. Yet, its occupational health and safety efforts were less successful than anticipated, averaging 169 reported health and safety incidents every year — and one serious safety incident or death every six months.

Hollingdale analyzed 10 years of the firm’s accident reports, focusing on nearly 800 cases involving power line technicians, cable splicers, and electricians — inherently dangerous occupations often perceived as “male” work.

She discovered the company recognized those occupational groups had what they called a “cowboy culture,” marked by solo work, displays of courage, and disregard for authority — all hallmarks, she says, of stereotypical “masculine” roles. Yet, those circumstances were not factored into the conclusions or recommendations of the company’s internal investigations of severe work-related injuries or deaths.

“When doing analysis of accidents or coming up with policy, you must take social interaction into account,” says Hollingdale. “You need to have an understanding of how people behave. There are interventions you can put into place to change how people behave for safety, including men.”

Hollingdale, currently working on her Ph.D. at the University of British Columbia (UBC), believes people behave in relation to one another. So, when workplaces are male-dominated and involve high-risk work, they often have an organizational culture that leads workers to take more risks. Interventions, she contends, should focus on changing the organizational culture in

thoughtful and intentional ways.

So how do employers do that?

She says understanding a workplace’s culture is an essential place to start.

“Organizational culture is a living, breathing thing,” Hollingdale says. “It’s made up of you and your priorities, and all the individuals and their priorities within your organization. Ideally you want those priorities to align so they’re not competing. You want everybody on the same page. If that’s the case, then you have a really successful base from which to implement any policy.”

3D approach to OHS

There are three concrete ways employers can shift their organizational culture — even a “cowboy” culture — to encourage safety and discourage risk-taking:

- **Create collectivist goals** — “In male-dominated, male-type workplaces, you need to reorient individuals so the goals in mind are collectivist, not individual,” says Hollingdale. It’s not everybody out for themselves and their own safety; you need respect between workers, and to invest in instilling that respect toward your workers. Then, you can have mutual respect and a collectivist culture that provides the base for safe behaviour. To foster that, it’s important to provide opportunities for people to socialize during work time. “People start looking out, not just for their own safety but for their friends’ safety,” she explains. “Whoever’s with you is not just your co-worker, but someone you care about.”
- **Redefine competency** — Competency is often rewarded in the workplace, but creating a successful safety-oriented workplace is more effective when employers provide incentives for workers who make an effort to improve. “Focus on rewarding willingness

to learn,” she says. “Cultivate a focus on improving rather than proving competency, so you’re always looking to learn and improve competency around safety and safe behaviour.” Leaders can play a role by demonstrating how to improve safety. Mentoring can also be effective, matching up new workers with someone more senior who models safe behaviour right from the start. “It will be a normal thing for that new individual,” Hollingdale says. She suggests strategically appointing or promoting workers who have modelled a dedication to safe behaviour to leadership roles. That can further reinforce safer behaviour throughout the organization.

- **Get workers involved in policy-making** — “Policy around safety needs to be collaborative,” Hollingdale says. “Individuals in an organization who really know what it’s like to be up on that ladder 40 feet in the air, and whether it’s realistic to be carrying 80 pounds of

equipment, must be involved in policy development. Otherwise, you’re not going to create the best policy, nor have buy-in on individual level.”

To date, Hollingdale has presented her findings at several conferences. She hopes her work can act as a bridge between academic research and workplace reality.

WorkSafeBC supports the translation of knowledge into practice.

“Our Research Training Awards funding stream was designed to foster development of occupational health and safety research expertise in B.C.,” says WorkSafeBC director of Research Services Lori Guiton. “Hazel’s work is a great example of research that has direct applicability in the workplace. Her efforts to share her research with employers are a key step in translating knowledge into practice. By supporting the training of students like Hazel, we are contributing to the future of occupational health and safety research.”



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