

THE EFFECTS OF AGREEMENT AND DISCREPANCY BETWEEN ESPOUSED AND ENACTED SAFETY NORMS ON SAFETY OUTCOMES

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Like children, employees know when authority figures are just saying something but have little intention of backing up their statements. In regards to safety, this concept may be described as a discrepancy between espoused (or injunctive) safety norms and enacted (or descriptive) safety norms (Fugas, Melia, & Silva, 2011). Our research is designed to examine the effects of agreement and discrepancy between espoused and enacted safety norms on a variety of safety-related outcomes.

Data were collected as part of a larger, online survey on workplace safety, gender ideology/identification, and general health. Participants were recruited through snowball sampling: undergraduate students at three US universities were given extra credit towards their grade for recruiting participants to complete the anonymous survey. The total number of respondents was 657. Of those who disclosed gender, 44.5% were male and 55.5% were female. The average age was 42 (SD= 12.19). Participants were asked to self-report employment status. Sixty-one percent of participants were full-time employees, while 39% worked part-time. The respondents represented a broad range of industries.

We used polynomial regression and response surface methodology (Shanock, Baran, Gentry, Pattison, & Heggstad, 2010) to evaluate the effects of agreement and disagreement between the two safety norm types (espoused and enacted) on different safety-related constructs. We analyzed a total of nine possible outcomes, covering a broad range of constructs from Christian and colleagues' integrated workplace safety model (2009): perceived supervisor support, safety motivation, safety compliance, safety knowledge, management commitment to safety, safety participation, supervisor support for safety, work safety tension, and job stress.

Analyses indicated a significant main effect of espoused norms on supervisor support for safety, perceived supervisor support, and management commitment to safety. That is, espoused norms were more closely related to evaluations of supervisors and management, and enacted norms essentially had no relation with these constructs. Results also indicated that enacted norms had a significant main effect on work safety tension. Work safety tension is a measure of the conflict that employees may feel when safety and productivity are viewed as competing demands (e.g., McGonagle & Kath, 2010; McGonagle, Walsh, Kath, & Morrow, 2014). Furthermore, we found that when there was a discrepancy between espoused and enacted norms such that espoused norms are high and enacted norms are low, job stress and work safety tension was at its highest.

Safety researchers are just beginning to examine the effects of safety norms in the workplace. When companies don't "walk the talk," a discrepancy may exist between espoused and enacted safety norms. This research indicates that this discrepancy can lead to greater stress for employees, which can increase fatigue and possibly lead to more injuries.

This study is the first of its kind to examine the effects of agreement and discrepancy of enacted and espoused safety norms using polynomial regression and response surface modeling methodology. Our results will help researchers understand where these two safety norm types fit in the nomological net of safety constructs and underscores for practitioners that talking about safety without following through can make the workplace more stressful for employees.

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