Integration, differentiation and ambiguity in safety cultures

This article discusses safety cultures, drawing on the differentiation, integration and ambiguity-scheme introduced by scholars of organizational culture. An ethnographic approach has been applied in the study of meaning and symbols relating to work, hazards, occupational accidents and prevention. The application of this approach is demonstrated through a multifaceted analysis of safety cultures. Case studies in Danish manufacturing show that it usually is necessary to differentiate between several safety cultures dispersed throughout the shop floor and other parts of the manufacturing organization. Although some common elements are present across cultures, they are indeed a multiple configuration of cultures. The article illustrates this by providing one case showing a configuration of three cultures, metaphorically labelled Production, Welfare and Master. For example, the former views risk as acceptable, whereas the other two view it as unacceptable. The former contends that skilful workers are not at risk, the second is proactively oriented, and the third contains a reactive approach. Although integrative elements across the three cultures exist, differentiation is relatively strong, albeit tainted by ambiguity. (C) 2004 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.