Adapting 'The Normal' – Examining Relations between Youth, Risk and Accidents at Work

■ **Mette Lykke Nielsen**
Ph.D. cand. mag. postdoc., The Danish Centre for Youth Research, Danish School of Education, Aarhus University, Denmark

ABSTRACT

People between 18 and 24 years of age are more exposed to accidents at work than anyone else. This article examines how safety is experienced and practiced among young employees. The aim of the article is to examine relations among youth, risk, and occupational safety. The article offers an insight into young employees' narratives of risk situations at work. It examines the ways young employees in different organizational contexts talk about – and relate to – dangerous situations at work that they have experienced themselves. Safety is according to Silvia Gherardi considered as a product of situated 'activity of everyday practices' in organizations. Parallel to this, the article draws on Diane Vaughan's theorizing about organizational production of 'acceptable risk' and organizational deviances in socially organized settings. The article shows how young employees position themselves – and are positioned – in organizations within different discourses of risk and safety because they are young and as a part of practicing youth.

KEY WORDS

Acceptable risk / Constructions of youth / Positioning / Risk / Safety / Young employees / Organizational deviances[1].

Introduction

Across Europe, 18 to 24-year-olds are at least 50% more likely to be injured in the workplace than more experienced workers (Eurostat 2007). According to the Danish Working Environment Authority, 5,000 Danes between the ages of 18 and 24 are involved in work-related accidents every year. In 2009, five young people lost their lives as a result of working accidents. People between 18 and 24 years are more exposed to accidents at work than anyone else (Arbejdsmedicinsk Klinik i Herning 2009; Breslin et al. 2007a; Mitchell et al. 2001; Rasmussen et al. 2011; Salminen 2004).[1] That is why this article focuses on the safety of young employees.

Serious work accidents are among the most horrible incidents that can happen in any organization. That seems to be the general opinion among both the young employees and the managers that I recently interviewed for a research project about young people and work accidents. Serious accidents at work are typically referred to as problematic events in the organization, something that violates the social order: as a form of

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[1] Ph.D. cand. mag Mette Lykke Nielsen, Post.doc., The Danish Centre for Youth Research, Aarhus University, Emdrupvej 54-2400 København NV, Denmark. E-mail: MLN@dpu.dk

collapse of normality and routine in the organization or as a totally unexpected incident or a disastrous consequence of either lack of experience or fearlessness or carelessness of the individual employee, particularly if the employee in question is young, which statistically speaking is often the case.

The primary aim of the article is to describe the relation among youth, risk, and safety at work. First of all, the article offers an insight into narratives of risk situations at work, as told by five different young employees in different organizations.

When analyzing these narratives, I show how discursive and social practices of 'youth' are used to explain and ascribe meaning to risk and accidents of work. I relate to 'youth' as an organizational phenomenon within two different but interrelated analytical frameworks. First, 'youth' is analyzed as an essential organizational resource central to the positioning of the employees in an organizational hierarchy. In relation to the construction of youth and organizational hierarchy, I follow Tannock (2003) when he writes

> "*Occupational hierarchies in society are constructed not just along lines of race, gender and class, but also of age.*" (Tannock 2003, p. 288)

Second, I relate to 'youth' as a discursive category used to explain, justify, etc., accidents and risks at the workplace in different organizational settings. These two analytical perspectives are inspired by the work of Silvia Gherardi (2006); here I draw inspiration from her writings about the ways different communities of practitioners in an organization constitute an organizational phenomenon, as accidents, 'accountable' to oneself and to others. Gherardi writes:

> "*… the diversity of interpretations among communities of practitioners stems not only from their positioning within the organizational hierarchy but also from the different logics and conceptual frames that they use to handle problems.*" (Gherardi 2007, p. 137)

The focal point is the causal accounts that explain and justify accidents seen in relation to the category 'youth.' The article shows how young employees 'position' themselves – and are 'positioned' – in organizations because they are young and as a part of practicing youth (Davies and Harré 1990; Gherardi 2006). Parallel to this, the article shows how dominating discourses of youth and risk-taking can be linked to the construction of '*acceptable risk*' and '*organizational deviances*' (Vaughan 1999, 2004) in socially organized settings. My argument is that dominating discourses about youth and risk can be closely related to organizational processes of individualizing, psychologizing, and normalizing '*organizational devices*.'

Safety as organizational practice

As noticed, the article draws on Silvia Gherardi's work on safety and work environment. In the work of Gherardi, safety is considered a product of situated '*activity of everyday practices*' in organizations: employees in organizations are constantly learning safe work practices while they participate in practice. Safety is defined as a '*body of practical knowledge,*' as a social product of interactions between heterogeneous human,

nonhuman, technical, and social factors developed within a specific organizational context, and as a part of ongoing processes of becoming an organization; of '*organizing.*' Gherardi focuses not only on how social relations and cultures within the work organizations produce different forms of safety and risk but also on how technologies and objects, like forklifts, slicers, and scaffolding, are coproducing practices of safety and risk in organizations.

In this account, organizations are not considered as static entities, but a product of dynamic social, organizational practices and discourses. The organization is constantly developing; constantly changing. The current article is based on the assumption that discourses about organizational practices are part of this ongoing 'organizing': discourses constitute rather than reflect organizations. Silvia Gherardi writes,

> "*The causal accounts that explain, justify or criticize accidents are an important source of information on the belief systems and models of organizational behaviour underlying the safety culture of a particular work setting. The mutual accounts of different communities of practitioners, in explanation, justification or criticism of accidents, are a discursive practice which makes the organizational phenomena 'accountable' to oneself and to others.*"
> (Gherardi 2006, p. 137)

When analyzing processes of making an organizational phenomenon '*accountable,*' an analytical keyword is '*positioning.*' Within social psychological gender studies (Davies and Harré 1990), the concept is used to examine the production of subjectivity. Gherardi uses the concept to analyze the '*politics of identity*' (2006, p. 154). The politics of identity is understood as a choice from a plurality of selves and as a positionality in a social context. Like Gherardi, I use the concept to analyze how subjects (managers and young employees) position themselves while telling about practice. As an example, one manager is positioning himself as a central participant in a community of practice, a person with mastery over the practice he is telling about. While telling about practice, he is constructing himself as a person centrally positioned in practice. In the telling, the subject is also '*doing*' the positioning, a positioning that is enacted – and '*situated*' in practice (ibid. p. 155).

Normalizing organizational deviance

This article also makes use of the American sociologist Diane Vaughan's theorizing about organizational 'production' of 'acceptable risk' and organizational 'deviances.' Vaughan examines how things go wrong in socially organized settings, in particular high-risk settings such as NASA's (The National Aeronautics and Space Administration) space shuttle programs. In the article '*Theorizing disaster: Analogy, historical ethnography, and the Challenger accident*' (2004), Vaughan analyzes the cultural construction of risk in NASA, which eventually led to the loss of seven astronauts in 1986, when an O-ring failed shortly after lift-off.

In particular, I make use of Vaughan's analysis of how organizational '*deviances*' in NASA could become so accepted, or 'normalized,' in the organization that actions and decisions that appeared to be 'deviant' to someone outside the organization could be considered 'normal' for actors inside the organization.

Vaughan writes,

"I now suspected that NASA actions that outsiders – the Commission, the press, the public, me – identified as rule violations and therefore deviant after the accident were defined as non-deviant and in fact fully conforming by NASA personnel taking those actions at the time (...) Controversial decisions were not calculated deviance and wrongdoing, but normative to NASA insiders." (Vaughan 2004, p. 320)

After thorough analyses of the organizational processes before and after the Challenger accident, Vaughan discovered that actions she first thought of as 'rule violations' in NASA actually happened in complete accordance with NASA's inside rules and risk culture. What outsiders identified as rule violation and therefore deviant were defined as non-deviant and fully conforming to regulations and normative to NASA insiders.

Vaughan acknowledged that a key concept in understanding what went wrong had to do with the normalization of deviance inside the NASA organization. She began to trace the processes of normalization of deviance over time. In the course of this tracking, she uncovered cultural meanings connected to the cultural and organizational construction of risk at NASA, and especially what was constructed as *'acceptable risk'* (p. 223).

It was the construction of *'acceptable risk'* among the engineers in NASA that led to the fatal consequences when the engineers decided to launch, in spite of a defect on a part called the 'O-ring,' the Space Shuttle. Vaughan writes,

"I discovered a five-step decision sequence in which technical deviations – anomalies found in the booster joint O-rings after a mission – first was identified as signals of potential danger, then, after engineering analysis, were redefined as an 'acceptable risk'. This decision sequence repeated launch after launch. (…) The repeating patterns were an indicator of culture in this instance, the production of a cultural belief in risk acceptability." (Vaughan 2004, p. 328)

My point is that episodes and actions, which actors outside an organization readily denote as deviant, are often considered completely normal episodes; this can be denoted as an *'organizational process of normalization.'* Such process can have more or less grave consequences if deviance is not anticipated in time.

In this article, I discuss how *'youth'* as a discursive category can contribute to the normalizing of events in the organization that, seen from the outside, is understood as deviant or problematic.

Young people pursue risks (?)

Some researchers will argue that when some adolescents tempt disaster, such as when they risk their lives in extreme sport or by extreme drinking, they turn risk into something positive (Illeris et al. 2009). That young people pursue risk will always be a part of life. When young people put their life at stake, it is not only because they feel forced to live on the edge to feel alive. It is also because they, through risk behavior, demonstrate they can master the most basic condition of their surrounding society, namely risk.

This view of risk behavior draws on Ulrich Beck's (1997) *'The Risk Society*,' and the assumption that it is possible to identify an overall pattern in the ways adolescents respond to a broad set of societal conditions. In this framework, the adolescents' risk behavior is a distilled version of the conditions the *'Risk Society'* offers them. In this context, risk behavior is to be thought of as a societal imbedded phenomenon, specifically connected to youth.

Risk: A product of youth?

In other research traditions, youth is often analyzed as a potential risk 'factor,' as, for example, in some surveys. Here the increased risk of work injuries among young people is often associated with young employees' individual characteristics (Chau et al. 2004, 2007). In this research, young peoples' experience and cognitive abilities are often referred to as less developed and as characterized by a perception of invulnerability (Barker et al. 1996; Hargreaves and Davies 2006).

On the other hand, a Canadian retrospective study (Breslin et al. 2007a) has challenged this assumption. The authors state that following the arguments above, it is to be expected that adolescents' rate of accidents would be reduced when they became more mature, but the study showed that this was not the case. The authors concluded that young peoples' accidents at work are consistent with the type of work that young people are assigned to do, specifically, that correlation between the physical requirements of work and injuries is crucial.

Another study (Breslin et al. 2007b) also examined which factors were important in regard to young peoples' increased risk of injuries. In contrast to the general assumption, there was no basis for believing that individual factors were crucial for young employees' risk of injuries at work. These studies showed that it was the type of work that young people were assigned to that led to an increased risk of injuries.

Data

The narratives in this article stem from qualitative focus group interviews with 23 employees and apprentices between 15 and 24 years of age, carried out by the author of this article. The interviews were part of a research report on youth and work accidents written for The Danish Working Environment Authorities [Arbejdsmiljørådet og Arbejdstilsynet] (Nielsen & Sørensen 2009).

The author carried out five focus group interviews with employees and apprentices employed in retail, industrial work, hotel and restaurant, building, construction, or personal care. The interviews typically lasted 1.5 hours. In each of them, four to five young employees participated, all of them employed at different workplaces.

The interviews with the young apprentices from industrial work, building, and care were carried out at the Vocational Colleges, where they were undergoing training for a short period of time. The interviews were carried out in their school hours. Contact to the Vocational Colleges was made through the management at the schools.

The sample of interview participants was determined on the basis of observations at the schools, through dialogue with the apprentices, and, in a few cases, in collaboration

with their teachers. The main criteria for participation in the focus interviews were work experience, often in the form of internships, and willingness to talk about their experiences and attitudes. When it was possible, we strove to have variations on age, size of workplace, ethical background, and gender.

The six narratives in this article were chosen because they offer an opportunity to analyze how 'youth' is used to explain and ascribe meaning to risk and accidents of work and to show that depending on the position in various and often conflicting discourses of youth in the organizations, risk and accidents at work are ascribed different meanings. The six narratives are not to be seen as representative for all young employees from all sorts of workplaces. They are chosen because they represent a particular quality in showing how discursive and social practices of 'youth' are used to explain and ascribe meaning to risk and accidents of work within specific contexts.

Analyzing discourses of youth – theoretical remarks

Following the theoretical perspectives outlined above (Gherardi 2006; Vaughan 2004), I am skeptical about theoretical work that assumes that all kinds of adolescents in all kinds of settings share identical kinds of societal conditions. I will question the tendency to consider risk as a product of being young and as something that all adolescents pursue.

Youth is a powerful social category. Within different discursive practices of 'youth,' young people are *"offered different opportunities of 'positioning' themselves and their community of practice within power/knowledge relations, and different opportunities to legitimize that positioning"* (Gherardi 2006, p. 154).

Following this perspective, different discourses of 'youth' offer different opportunities to both individuals and to communities in the organization to produce individual and organizational identities within power/knowledge relations.

Young employees' narratives about risk situations

The first risk narrative is from an interview with a group of young apprentice cooks. Janne, one of the young cooks, has just started her education as an apprentice in a catering kitchen. She is 19 years old and is in the process of learning about the workplace and the profession. She explains:

> *"When I started in the kitchen they showed me how to use the slicer. Then she [the kitchen manager, ed.] said: this is how you are allowed to do it, and this is how you are not allowed to do it, but the way you shouldn't do it, is the way we do it here.*
> *Int.:*   *Well, ok.*
> *Janne:*   *Anyway, sometimes I use it [the built-in precaution, ed.] and sometimes I don't.*
> *Int.:*   *Because it is too difficult to use?*
> *Janne:*   *It is tiresome to use, and then it is just a little more easy. It has been close some times, but I think that it will first dawn on me how dangerous it is the day I am badly hurt. That's the way it is."*

In the interview Janne explained how she was introduced to a practice where it was both legitimate and expected that she did not use any precautions. While explaining about how she is operating the slicer, Janne positions herself within the same risk discourse that she was introduced to as a newcomer in the organization.

The story above illustrates some central issues concerning youth and risk in an organizational perspective. Many of the young employees that I interviewed are in similar positions to Janne. The young employees I interviewed are typically positioned in and narrating about a set of particular organizational positions. A young employee is often not only the youngest in the organization. He or she is often also the least experienced and positioned in the bottom of the hierarchy (Tannock 2001, 2003).

The young employees are often narrating from peripheral positions in the organization and from positions related to processes of learning. From those positions, young employees are often in the process of 'making sense of' what you are supposed to do and not to do in the organization. They are narrating about processes of learning specifically related to the position of being young and/or being a newcomer in the different organizations.

Hence, Janne's narrative concerns making sense of the risk culture in the organization. In relation to this, Gherardi et al. (1998) write,

> *"Absorbing a culture means appropriating its instrumental, aesthetic and ethical codes."*
> (Gherardi et al. 1998, p. 204)

To make sense of, learn, and position oneself within different organizational cultures is an essential part of young employees' learning processes and is central to young peoples' identity formations (Illeris et al. 2009; Katznelson and Pless 2006; Nielsen and Sørensen 2010). In addition, Janne's narrative is exemplary in the sense that young employees often try to do things that they decode as 'the right way,' 'the way we do things here.' In that way, they contribute to the process of reproducing the risk culture in the organization, they are a part of 'the processes of organizing,' which is also a process of the ongoing construction of what is acknowledged as an '*acceptable risk*' in the kitchen. For an outsider, this kind of risk could be defined as deviant, but in Janne's kitchen not using the precaution seems to be normative to the everyday practice of the other employees, and that is what Janne is reproducing. She is simply telling about her adapting to '*the normal.*'

Some young employees explain that they experience a special risk associated with failure to adapt to the culture in the organization. Some talk about a risk of losing their apprenticeship or the risk of being marginalized in the organization, something many young employees worry about. Research has shown that being part of a community at work plays an important role for how young people relate to their work (Katznelson and Pless 2006; Nielsen and Sørensen 2010). Young employees will often try to master the practices of risks that are valued as positive in communities they participate in.

"I could have dropped down"

The next narrative of a risk situation at work is from an interview with a 17-year-old named Carl, who is an apprentice electrician. I have chosen this specific narrative, because it is representative for the narratives of risk told by many young employees in my material. He tells,

"I was asked to move some wiring in for the building. It was 7 in the morning and it was raining. It was damn slippery. And it was my job to get up on the container, where the cable was. I had to climb out on the scaffolding and it was really slippery. And I wasn't strapped in or anything. And it was 4 meters off the ground. There wasn't anything around me, I could have fallen down. Really.

Int.:   *But why weren't there any safety precautions for you there?*

Carl: *The job just had to be done as fast as possible. We were behind schedule, and I was the only one who wasn't busy. So I just had to do it as fast as possible.*

Int.:   *Was it a coincident that you were the only one not busy?*

Carl: *No, because I was the youngest apprentice at that time. And it is typically the youngest of the apprentices who have to do the rotten jobs. You are exposed to quite a number of things, which is not very nice, rotten jobs that you don't care about. I didn't want to stand on that container while it was fucking raining, and it was damn slippery.*

Int.:   *What would have happened if you had refused to do it?*

Carl: *Then I think I would have been sent away from the site."*

The young electrician explains that it typically is the youngest of the apprentices that have to do '*the rotten jobs.*'

Carl talks about a risk situation that he did not enjoy at all. He positions himself as lowest in the organizational hierarchy and in a position where it is difficult for him to refuse to do the task. He explains that he is afraid of losing his apprenticeship. Carl considers risk situations as an inherent part of being an apprentice. He adapts to '*the normal*' practice of being an apprentice by accepting the risk, and thereby becomes a part of the process of normalizing risk situations. Carl is positioning himself as willing to adapt to 'the normal.'

Tannock (2003) writes about the connection between routine jobs and young employees:

"Prejudicial stereotypes of youth as being immature, ignorant, incapable, unstable and unreliable have long been invoked to argue that youth are fit for little more than the most mundane, unskilled forms of entry-level service work. Condemning youth to tedious and routine service sector jobs has further been justified by popular beliefs in the 'school of hard knocks' and the value and necessity of 'paying one's dues'. Even the most unpleasant and intolerable forms of child and youth work have been constructed as being 'character-building' and valuable for the socialization and education of younger generations." (Tannock 2003, p. 289)

Carl was not the only young employee who talked about risk situations where safety was ignored because it was considered to be difficult being too time-consuming. Sometimes, young employees legitimize that they ignore safety measures for those reasons.

Bending metal plates – risking arms

Martin is 17 years old; he is an apprentice blacksmith in a small metal workshop. In a group interview with five blacksmith apprentices, he relates to a situation working

with a machine called *'The Bender.'* *'The Bender'* is used to bend giant metal plates. It is Martin's task to place the heavy metal plates within the bender. *'The Bender'* has a *'delay timer,'* so Martin can control how many seconds he has to place each plate in the machine, but Martin does not use the timer. Instead, he reaches inside the machine and pushes a 'backstop' within the machine to make enough space for the plate. This means that Martin has his hand inside the bender, which will crush his hand if he is too slow. He says,

> *"I have often felt it [he machine, ed.] snatch at my glove, and I have gone 'oh-ohh' [nervous laugh]. And then you think: 'Ok, that was close.'"*

But why does Martin not set the delay timer? He says that it is because of his manager. According to Martin, two seconds more is two seconds too much for his manager:

> *"If he [the manager, ed.] is breathing down your neck, you find your own solutions, or you just wait. It depends how busy you are.*
> *Int.:*   *But if the manager is standing there. I am thinking it ought to be the opposite way.*
> *Martin:* *Yes I know, but sometimes the manager has his small…*
> *Emil:*   *It is the bottom line, of course.*
> *Martin:* *But he is never asking us to do something deeply insane."*

The '*bottom line*' is talked about as an obvious factor in connection to these black-smiths' risk management. The other three participants in the interview are not objecting to the narrative. Timesaving and numbers at bottom line seem to be an organizational condition that is not questioned – and a condition they more or less all share.

When these young employees talk about dangerous situations, working fast and effective is often a part of the story, and a way to position oneself and to be recognized as a good apprentice is to show mastery over these conditions. As an apprentice electrician said in an interview, *"In this world, time is money, you know"* (Nielsen and Sørensen 2009, p. 29).[2]

Awesome and scary

Some of the young employees also talk about work situations where risk behavior holds a special kind of excitement. It is spoken of as both *awesome and scary*. Here two young electricians tell about working with high voltage:

> *"Int.:*   *Those stories [about dangerous situations, ed.], you also laugh a little, right?*
> *Thomas:* *These are forces that you can't control [about high voltage, red.]. You just touch it and you are jolted back. In a way it is exiting, right? And then on the other hand, you know that it is dangerous. You think about it, and if you don't there is something wrong. But it is exiting.*
> *Jacob:*   *That it is.*
> *Thomas:* *And the bigger the stuff gets, the more exiting it is.*
> *Jacob:*   *Huge cables (…)."*

These two electricians stress that they know that work with high voltage can be dangerous, and that they think about handling the work with care. Hence risk is something they choose; they are not forced to take a risk. The risk is told about as connected to excitement. In this case, risk means dealing with forces much stronger than them.

Thus, it is not only 'the rotten jobs' that are connected to risk and danger at work. Sometimes the young employees choose risks, the challenging tasks, the giant cables. Some young employees say that taking on challenging and sometimes dangerous tasks can be an opportunity to demonstrate professional expertise and a way to demonstrate that you master the conditions at the workplace. However, the excitement is also thrilling. These two young employees are positioning themselves both within a discourse of risk as excitement and within a discourse of risk as dangerous. The two discourses are coexisting and conflicting and draw the two young men in two directions: both toward risk behavior, but also toward safe practice and forethought.

The masters of the trade

Jan is 19 years old and is an apprentice electrician. He talks about the old electricians:

> *"When you listen to the old hands, it's completely unbelievable all the illegal stuff they have done. They should have died many times. Damn, I have heard so many stories about how they have just went down on their knees after an electric chock, and still they just stood up and got back to work. And they just didn't care about it [he laughs a little bit]. It is far out. They knew that it shouldn't have gone much more wrong, or they would have kicked the bucket. It is a little bit funny because it's so dangerous, and then they were also a bit scared of it, right?"*

Jan explains how experienced people in the trade pass on stories about how they manage dangers at work. Stories, which in many cases glorify an exaggerated, hard-boiled, risk-oriented, traditional masculine coded set of values. Stories in which certain kinds of risk management are spoken of as a form of a *'good thrill.'* Jan considers this 'far out.' He is positioning himself as different from the old hands in relation to risk management. Still, such stories provide a cultural and historical background for how young men in some trades are expected to manage risks. In some narratives of risk situations, taking risks at work becomes a test of manhood.

Thurnell-Read and Parker (2008) write,

> *"It is well established within sociological literature that images of maleness have historically dominated the structures, practices and routines of working class operational settings. Likewise, ideals surrounding notions of physicality, danger, aggression and competence have often been cited as prime factors in the construction of working class, masculine occupational identity."* (Thurnell-Read and Parker 2008, p. 128).

A manager's narrative of youth and accidents at work

According to the young employees above, accidents at work are not interpreted as a product of fearlessness or carelessness connected to youth. The narratives paint a picture

of a group of young employees who do not position themselves as more risk-orientated and irresponsible than the older colleagues. Common among them is that the narratives about risk situations often concern mastery and fitting in; to master the conditions in the work organizations and to meet the expectations they think that colleagues and managers hold.

As written in the beginning, serious accidents at work are typically spoken of as a disastrous consequence of lack of experience, fearlessness, or carelessness of the individual employee, particularly if the involved employee is a young person. This seemed to be the general opinion among many of the managers I interviewed.

Morten is a former manager of a medium-sized metal workshop. Now he is head of the administration. The company manufactures and installs all kinds of steel constructions. In the beginning of the interview, Morten found a folder with all of the company's damage reports. Morten scrolled through the folder with the damage reports and talked about the episodes he remembered where young employees have been injured:

> *"Well, one of the apprentices he stepped on a ladder lying on the floor. He stepped on one of the steps and sprained his foot. It was yesterday. He thought that he could balance on it and he couldn't. (…). He wasn't cautious. Now let us see, he also had something else another time [he is scrolling through the folder, red.]. Yes, it was the same person; he cut his finger, an open wound."*

When the interviewer asks why this particular apprentice was hurt repeatedly, Morten responded:

> *"They don't think twice, and they run too fast. They are just more curious. It is like children who get hurt while biking. They are not thinking, they fool around. They can walk on water – like I could at that age."*

The manager points to the risk management of the individual apprentice as the reason that the apprentice sprained his foot and cut his hand. The manager does not discuss whether the ladder was supposed to be on the floor or if there could have been a problem with the grinder that the apprentice used when he got hurt. He connects the accidents to the thoughtlessness of the apprentice. "*He didn't think twice,*" he says.

When Morten is explaining about the apprentice's injuries, he points to youth as the explanation of the accident. This way of connecting risk to youth enables Morten to free himself from the responsibility of the accidents and to position himself as essentially different to the young employees – because of his age. When he was at 'that age,' he thought that he could walk on water, he says, but now he is different. This way to explain young peoples' accidents at work seems to be a widely prevalent discursive practice among many of the interviewed managers, especially among the blacksmiths, but also in other lines of business.[3] While young employees often suggest that work accidents of young employees have to do with work conditions such as time pressure, it is rare that managers give the same kind of explanations. According to most of the managers interviewed, work accidents of young employees are related to the fact that they are young: because of thoughtlessness or lack of experience.

Within the theoretical framework of this article, it is not surprising that accidents and risk situations at work are valorized and given meaning within different discourses

of youth, from different organizational positions. Within this framework, it is not an analytical question that gives 'the right explanation' of how or why an accident 're-ally' happened. In this perspective, all of the different explanations serve as important sources of information about the organizational framework that risk and accidents are produced within.

Conclusion

This article suggests that working risk orientation has to be seen as a way to adapt and to master the positions and conditions in organizations, which are specifically related to the practices of youth in organizations.

The article gives examples of how young employees are positioned and position themselves within discourses of youth and risk. Young employees are expected to take part in practices at work in special ways from specific hierarchical positions at the workplace, because they are young.

The analyses in this article suggest that young employees' risk behavior does not stem from a desire for risk-orientated work. Risk-taking is rather a way to fit in, to adapt to, and to master the conditions in a trade. Young employees are expected to behave in certain ways and are offered certain positions in organizations.

On the other hand, this article includes one example of how risk at work can be associated with a form of fascination. This is seen in the narrative where two young employees position themselves within two conflicting discourses of risk: within a discourse of risk as excitement and within a discourse of risk as dangerous. The two discourses of risk coexist and could potentially draw the two young men toward risk behavior and toward safe practice and forethought.

The article outlines some central discursive practices concerning youth and risk in an organizational perspective. The first analysis concerns the process of learning 'the proper' way to practice risk and danger in a specific organization, a process which, it is argued, is specifically related to being young and/or a newcomer in an organization. The article suggests that when young people engage in risk behavior at work, they often adapt to the risk and safety cultures in the organizations. In that way, they contribute to the process of reproducing the risk culture in the organization, they become a part of the ongoing construction of what is acknowledged in the organization as an *'acceptable risk.'*

This article shows how young employees position themselves – and are being positioned in specific ways – because they are young and as a part of practicing youth. When youth explain about risk situations, they often talk about being in positions in organizations more exposed to danger than other employees. They talked about being positioned at the bottom of the workplace hierarchy and about being eager to prove mastery within dominating practices of safety and risk.

The two following analyses in the article are examples of how young employees associate risk with being an apprentice. The young employees speak from the lowest positions in the organization's hierarchy and from positions where they are unable to refuse to do the risky tasks that they are given. In these narratives of risk, the pressure to work fast and efficiently is central in the narratives. Working fast and efficiently is a way to be recognized as a good apprentice, even though it implies taking risks.

This article illustrates that serious accidents at work are given meaning and value within discourses of youth and risk and from different positions in work organizations. At the same time, the last analyses show how constructions of youth and risk can be related to processes of individualizing, psychologizing, and normalizing.

The article shows how dominating discourses of youth and risk-taking can be linked to the construction of 'acceptable risk' and 'organizational deviances' (Vaughan 1999, 2004) in socially organized settings. It is argued that dominating discourses about youth and risk can be closely related to organizational processes of the individualizing, psychologizing, and normalizing 'organizational devices.'

Vaughan's conclusion about the Challenger accident was that it was a result of a mistake, which was socially organized in the NASA culture and systematically reproduced over time. The catastrophe had systematic causes that transcended individuals and time (p. 342). That was why Vaughan predicted that history would repeat itself. It was not enough to fire personnel or transfer the engineers who were held responsible for the accident. As Vaughan writes, "New people in the same positions would be subject to identical forces" (p. 342).[4]

'The workplace is the patient' is stated in a slogan used in the 1970s in Scandinavian OSH (occupational safety and health) (Kamp 2009, p. 85). My point is that it can be risky to appoint 'youth' or individual young employees as actors of socially constructed organizational problems: at worst it may imply that serious work-related accidents are not anticipated or prevented.

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End notes

[1] Rasmussen et al. (2011) found that most Danish adolescents in this study (*n*=3,687) had decent working conditions, although nearly half reported that their work was heavy,

monotonous, or psychologically demanding and that heavy work, high psychological demands, and low social support increase the risk of experiencing work injuries.

[2] Dyreborg (2011) explores the institutional changes in governance of the Nordic Working Environment model. He shows that market-oriented logics have been influencing the governance of the Nordic Working Environment model in the Nordic countries from 2001 to 2007. For a short introduction to the Nordic Working Environment model, see Dyreborg (2011, p. 139).

[3] In the report referred to in the article, we outline three different ways of referring to youth and risk among the managers (Nielsen and Sørensen 2009, p. 116).

[4] In 2003, the Space Shuttle Columbia disintegrated during re-entry into the earth's atmosphere. All seven crew members were killed.