

The Health and Safety of Vulnerable Workers: Comparing Analytical Frameworks and Perspectives

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Session Description

This session addresses a wide swath of issues related to the study of occupational health and safety (OHS) of vulnerable workers. The papers discuss different analytical models for measuring the extent to which vulnerable (often migrant) workers face OHS problems, and compare related issues across several institutional boundaries and perspectives. Though all papers are connected in that they address frameworks and perspectives on OHS of vulnerable workers, each paper has a unique focus. Topics range from studying the role of equal treatment for vulnerable workers to assessing appropriate methodologies for understanding vulnerability to researching sector-specific issues within different countries.

Session Abstract

The occupational safety and health (OHS) of vulnerable workers is an issue that has taken on considerable importance within both scholarly and policy-oriented communities. With the increasingly international movement of people, often into marginalized and tenuous labor markets, there is considerable need to understand not only the prevalence with which vulnerable workers are facing health and safety challenges at work, but also the appropriate methods by which the scholarly community can analytically measure these problems. The following papers look explicitly at a variety of frameworks that might be used to better understand OHS of vulnerable workers, and do so in a way that considers a number of unique institutional, sectoral, and related perspectives. Each paper includes its own conceptual framework; the first three papers are explicit in their research questions related to these frameworks, while the final two serve to compare or apply these frameworks in divergent settings and sectors.

The first paper examines the changes taking place in work organization models, considering new working time patterns, the outsourcing of labor, and greater recourse to atypical and temporary forms of employment contracts. The purpose of this paper is to provide a comparative analysis of the application of preventative norms on health and safety at work concerning workers not hired on traditional salaried employment contracts. The growth of these new organizational models, especially with respect to young people, women and immigrants, is giving rise to new sources of risks and occupational hazards that must be addressed not only through the recognition of equal treatment between standard and non standard workers, but also through innovative management. In concluding the analysis, it is argued that the principle of equal treatment must be supported by new approaches that enterprises should use in identifying, analyzing and correcting organizational vulnerability, in order to identify good practices in relation to health and safety at work, with respect to the particular risks to which these vulnerable groups are exposed.

The second paper further develops an appropriate framework with which researchers can analyze OHS issues amongst vulnerable workers. In particular, the goal of this paper is to develop the idea of vulnerable workers and layers of vulnerability with regard to work. This will be done with particular reference to the diversity of workers, taking into account issues such as ethnicity, gender, age, sexual orientation and disability. The concept of “diversity” is complex and value-laden and as a result there is a tendency to sidestep the issues around diversity and instead focus on other factors of vulnerable workers, such as the individual behavior of the worker. Moreover, there is evidence that contributory factors such as ethnicity, age, experience, and migratory experiences impact on the health and safety experiences of vulnerable workers. The objective of the paper is to show that it is too simplistic to consider vulnerability in precarious work without taking this diversity into account.

The third paper interweaves concerns over conceptual and institutional aspects to studying OHS amongst a specific group of vulnerable workers: Samoan migrants. This paper reports on a collaborative study located in Samoa and New Zealand aimed at investigating the OHS experiences of Samoan temporary migrant workers. The paper argues that orthodox, single-method, survey-based research designs are inadequate when eliciting information about the work experiences of temporary, migrant workers in precarious employment located frequently in small, rural businesses. Instead a more appropriate set of research principles has been developed that can be used to illuminate often inaccessible populations located in changing working and living environments. Finally, preliminary results are presented which highlight the complex issues that surround this topic, such as the sometimes competing interests of the different parties and the state’s role in seasonal employment schemes.

The fourth paper continues to focus on conceptual frameworks related to vulnerability and OHS concerns, looking at another unique institutional and circumstantial setting: the Kuwaiti construction industry. Over half of all construction businesses in Kuwait are small firms, in which most of the employees are contingent, migrant workers. There is anecdotal evidence that the practice of employing illegal migrant labor in the Kuwaiti construction industry, particularly amongst sub-contracting firms, is rife. There are disturbing indications that the injury and illness rates amongst construction workers are extremely high. However, there are only a few studies on the OHS of migrant construction workers in Kuwait and most have been from a singular perspective, such as medicine or engineering. This paper argues that a multidisciplinary approach is needed in order to capture the multifaceted nature of Kuwaiti OHS policy and practice and to better understand why and how migrant workers are employed and what can be done to improve the situation.

The final paper shifts perspectives once more, specifically studying migrant-run businesses in Auckland, New Zealand. The growth of these businesses is indicative of the trend for more ethnically and culturally diverse workplaces in New Zealand. However, the paper argues that in these workplaces, unique health and safety concerns manifest. This paper examines horticultural employment involving international students and presents evidence to show that many of these workers experience exploitative and illegal working conditions. While extant discourse centres on the importance of these students from an economic perspective, largely ignored is protection of their basic labour and human rights.

The paper argues that worker vulnerability itself leads to access and information-gathering difficulties, even though this area of research has far reaching implications in a small business environment like New Zealand's. It questions whether "diversity" is benefiting either the workers themselves or the economy, and asks what the longer term outcomes might look like for these migrant employees.

In all, the papers in this session consider both conceptual and analytical frameworks, and apply these frameworks to a variety of settings, all of which serve as interesting comparators. We hope that the session will help to raise questions and challenges around the notion that one can apply a particular methodology to understanding OHS of vulnerable workers, and that the papers will engender lively debate. We also hope that the session will provide comparisons that should be of interest to the wider academic community.

1. Danaë Anderson, Krish Naidu & Suzanne Jamieson: Managed Migration? The Health and Safety and Human Rights Implications for Student Migrant Labourers in the Horticulture Sector
2. F. Lamm, D. Anderson, J. Hayman, S. Jamieson, R. Lamare, T.M. Laurenson, N. McDonnell, P. Schweder & B. Shulruf, Michael Wasser: OHS of migrant Samoan workers on Seasonal Employment Schemes
3. Cathy Robertson: Migrant worker perceptions of life, work and health in Kuwait - Ethical considerations
4. Malcolm Sargeant: Layers of vulnerability
5. Michele Tiraboschi and Maria Giovannone: Work organisation and new forms of employment in relation to health and safety at work: a conceptual framework