SAFETY REPRESENTATIVES' VIEWS ON THEIR INTERACTION WITH WORKERS IN A CONTEXT OF UNEQUAL POWER RELATIONS: AN EXPLORATORY QUALITATIVE STUDY IN BARCELONA (SPAIN).

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Abstract

Background: The interaction between workers and safety representatives (SRs), a factor that determines SRs' effectiveness, is an unexplored issue within occupational health research.

Methods: We undertook a qualitative exploratory interpretative-descriptive study by means of semi-structured interviews with SRs from Barcelona (Spain) to analyze the SRs' perspective on the interaction with workers and its determinants

Results: SRs' interaction with workers is mainly limited to information processes and to identifying occupational hazards. Prominent factors determining this interaction are associated with the way SRs understand and carry out their role, the firm sector and size, and workers' fear of dismissal, exacerbated by changes in the labor market and the current economic crisis.

Conclusions: Interaction with workers is influenced by a more prevalent technical-legal view of the SRs' role and by unequal power relations between workers and management. Poor interaction with workers might lead to decreasing SRs' effectiveness.

Keywords: Occupational health. Workers' participation. Unions. Safety representatives. Interaction. Workers. Spain. Qualitative study.

Introduction

Organized labor and workers' power, past and present

Over the decades, workers' collective action, mainly via trade unions, has been directed at modifying aspects of their health and safety at work. Campaigns by organized labor played a critical role in the enactment of health and safety laws and social insurance (such as workers compensation) – two central components of the welfare state that have had a positive impact on working conditions and workers health [Johansson and Partanen, 2002; Tucker, 1996; Walters, 2006]. Not only did the labor movement promote and strengthen the regulation of workplace health and safety, it also successfully campaigned for improvements in social security (unemployment, pensions, disability and health insurance) as well as the regulation of the labor market, most notably laws affording minimum labor standards and collective bargaining [Benach et al., 2010]. Unions' bargaining power has ensured health and safety at work in different ways: from detecting workplace risks and raising new occupational hazards, and providing information and training to workers and thus generating increased knowledge on occupational health, to enforcing health and safety provisions [Boix and Vogel, 1999; Fuller and Suruda, 2000; Nichols, 1997].

Since the 1970s however, employment relations have been progressively deregulated and welfare systems retrenched so that market risks have been increasingly transferred to workers and their power in the workplace has diminished in favor of management [Scott-Marshall, 2010]. Consequently, precarious employment conditions have spread, characterized by employment instability, restricted rights and benefits, low wages, and lack of workers' control over the labor process [Vives et al., 2011]. This changing shape of the economy, including ongoing job losses in traditional union sectors and increasing employment precariousness, has led to a weakening of the political and industrial influence of the union movement in general and threatened the right of workers to be represented collectively [Bryson et al., 2011].

Forms of workers' participation in occupational health

Workers' participation can be divided into direct and representative participation. Direct participation refers to those arrangements for the engagement of workers with supervisors, managers, or employers on occupational health issues that take place on an individual basis rather than through workers' collective representatives. Representative participation means the collective representation of workers' interests through formal arrangements by statutory or voluntary means. The origins of this participation are the representation of workers by unions linked to an historical process associated with the development of collective labor rights and the institutions of democratic welfare societies [Menéndez et al., 2009; Walters and Nichols, 2007].

In the European Union (EU), workers' participation and consultation rights in occupational health have been recognised in the Framework Directive 89/391/EEC since 1989. The most widespread form of workers' participation in occupational health in the EU is via safety representatives (SRs) - workers (usually trade union members) with the mandate to represent workers' interests on health and safety at work. In some EU countries, shop stewards, workers' representatives or Health and Safety Committees (HSCs) can fulfil the SRs' functions. Other countries, like Spain, have both SRs and HSCs [EUROFOUND, 2011]. It is estimated that 67.3% of workplaces across the EU-27 have a Health and Safety Committee and/or SRs [Walters et al., 2012], and that there are SRs in 43.4% of Spanish firms [INSHT, 2012]. However, not all workers are covered by safety representation, such as in small firms or in specific sectors of activity where precarious employment is high. In non-unionized firms workers' right to have health and safety representation organized by unions is particularly difficult [Menéndez et al., 2009]. Accordingly, there are more SRs, and union activities in general, in larger companies, in the public sector and in industry or tertiary qualified services [Pitxer and Sánchez, 2008; Walters et al., 2012].

The forms of representative participation in occupational health are shaped by industrial relations traditions and set up on the basis of law or collective agreements [Menéndez et al., 2009]. For instance, in Spain, the Act on Prevention of Occupational Risks establishes the right of workers to have SRs in firms of more than five workers and, to have HSCs in firms with at least fifty workers. Moreover, unlike in Anglo-Saxon countries which have a voluntaristic tradition of workplace representation, SRs in Spain fulfil their duties in an inclusive bargaining system where the entire workforce can enjoy bargaining outcomes achieved by their representatives, regardless of whether they are union members or not [Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman, 2006; Jódar et al., 2011]. Nevertheless, there is a great deal of variation across Europe regarding SRs' powers and functions, despite the existence of the Framework Directive 89/391 EEC. According to the Spanish Act on Prevention of Occupational Risks, SRs' functions include the representation of workers' voices in: collaborating with a firm's management to improve preventive actions, promoting and furthering workers' cooperation in the enforcement of the regulations on the prevention of occupational risks, being consulted by the employer, and performing surveillance and control over the fulfilment of the risk prevention legislation.

Workers' participation in occupational health: effects and determinants

Research shows that unless workers count on unions' support and a strong bargaining position within the firm, results of non-representative participation have not been always positive for workers' occupational health [Gazzane 2006; Walters and Nichols 2006]. Representative participation, on the other hand, has been associated with direct and indirect positive effects on workers' occupational health. These include reduction of

work-related injuries and illnesses [Mygind et al., 2005; Reilly et al., 1995], or better enforcement of the rules [Coutrot, 2009; Walters and Nichols, 2006].

However, SRs' effectiveness is determined by a different set of factors. According to a recent review on factors affecting SRs' effectiveness conducted by the EPSARE project [Menéndez et al., 2009], they can be categorized by: social and political conditions, conditions within firms; and conditions of safety representatives. On the one hand, social, labor market and health and safety policies and regulations are influential on the sharing of power between capital and labor and affect the extent to which workers can participate [Quinlan and Johnstone, 2009; Walters and Nichols, 2006]. SRs' effectiveness is enhanced when having the backing of management, unions and administration [Eaton and Nocerino, 2000; Hovden et al., 2008; Milgate et al., 2002; Shannon et al., 1997; Walters et al., 2012; Yassi et al., 2012]. Other factors related to firms include aspects such as their size or economic sector, their traditions and intensity of trade-union action [Frick and Walters, 1998; Walters and Nichols, 2007]. Among the great number of SRs' conditions influencing their effectiveness, are of particular relevance their resources to carry out their functions, degree of experience, level of training, and capacity of influence and power [Biggins et al., 1991; García et al., 2007; Walters and Nichols, 2007]. Power and influence are linked to the rights and powers established by regulations but also to SRs' capacity to mobilize workers and obtain their support [Hall et al., 2006; Menéndez et al., 2009].

Workers' support is tied to their judgement of the ability of their representatives in occupational health to incorporate and resolve workers' demands, and to communicate the activities developed [Carpentier-Roy et al., 1998; Simard et al., 1999]. Results from different studies suggest that many workers have limited relationship with SRs. In Canada, France and Catalonia (Spain) workers tend to address complaints about their working conditions to their managers rather than to their representatives [Jacod, 2007; Martínez, 2008; Walters and Haines, 1988], and 13.8% of Spanish workers do not even know whether there are SRs in their workplace or not [INSHT, 2012]. However, previous research has not analyzed whether workers' support would also be shaped by how SRs understand and establish their relationship with workers, that is, how SRs interact with workers in a wide range of processes from information to collective action in carrying out their duties.

Interaction between workers and safety representatives

Existing studies on SRs have mainly focused attention on the SRs' relationship with the firm [Hovden et al., 2008; Shannon et al., 1997; Walters et al., 2012] but scarcely on the SRs' relationship with workers [Simard et al., 1999; Walters and Haines, 1988]. Some studies have shown that higher interaction with workers, in terms of communication, improves the attitudes, levels of training, information and knowledge of workers [Canaleta and Gadea, 2010; Moncada et al., 2007], and strengthens SRs' ability to address occupational health problems [Granaux,

2012; Martínez, 2008: 88], and to bargain and negotiate better health and safety conditions for workers [Menéndez et al., 2009].

According to a Spanish study [García et al., 2004], 72% of SRs consider that "workers facilitate their function" but also expressed a feeling that they lacked workers' support. Little is known, however, about the type of actions SRs carry out to obtain their support and hence, how they interact with workers. The aim of this study is to shed light on how SRs perceive and establish their interaction with workers in their activities and its influencing factors in Barcelona (Spain) in 2011.

Methods

Study design

We carried out a qualitative, exploratory, descriptive-interpretative study [Vázquez et al., 2006]. The study population were safety representatives (SRs) from the province of Barcelona (Spain), with three or more years experience as a SR and belonging to one of the four main trade union confederations, which had the highest number of representatives in the latest unions elections at workplaces in Catalonia before the fieldwork started. They are the Unión General de Trabajadores (UGT), Comisiones Obreras (CCOO), Confederación General de Trabajadores (CGT) and (Unió Sindical Obrera de Catalunya) USOC [Observatori del Treball and Generalitat de Catalunya, 2010].

Sample of informants

A theoretical (or criterion) sample was designed, that is a theoretical framework guided the selection of the participant according to pre-determined criteria. We sought maximum variation [Patton, 1990] with regard to criteria affecting union activities at workplaces [Pitxer and Sánchez, 2008] and interaction with workers [García et al., 2004] (Table I). These criteria were: sex (women / men), branch of economic activity (agricultural sector / industry / services / construction), firm size (less than 50 employees / 50 or more workers) and sector (public / private). The final sample size (n=10) was determined by saturation of discourses relating to SRs' activities including interaction with workers.

[Table I]

We selected the informants from a list of SRs provided by the occupational health department at selected trade unions and assembled them according to the previously defined criteria. We chose and contacted those SRs who better fit the criteria and provided the widest range of profiles to ensure a variety of discourses. No SR refused to participate in the study.

During the fieldwork, the inclusion criterion of experience (length of time in the role) was changed from three to two years or more, since it became restrictive to identify potential informants, as there are very few long-serving SRs.

Data collection

We conducted individual semi-structured interviews using a topic guide that was successively modified and refined in light of emerging issues [Patton, 1990]. Interview topics included SRs' perception of their relationship with workers, the activities they perform concerning workers, such as communication with workers, decision-making and support seeking, and elements influencing interaction with workers. All themes were addressed as they arose during the interview. In addition, all emerging themes relevant to the study objectives were followed up during the interview. During the fieldwork, SRs' understanding of their roles was included in the topic guide as it emerged as a relevant subject to the study objectives.

The first author conducted fieldwork from 1 April to 13 May 2011. Interviews lasted between 60 and 160 minutes, with the exception of one that lasted 40 minutes. We conducted them in the SRs' workplace (n = 5), the SRs' union (n = 3), the research group premises (n = 1) and a public park (n = 1).

Data analysis and quality of information

We carried out a manual thematic analysis [Vázquez et al., 2006]. Interviews were literally transcribed and textual data were coded and categorised. The process of generating categories was mainly inductive deriving from the topic guide and those emerging from the data. Data were segmented by informant and themes. Themes were identified, coded, re-coded and classified identifying common patterns by looking at regularities, convergences and divergences in data, through a process of constant comparisons. Final categories of analysis included: SRs' opinion of their roles (an emergent topic), SRs' perceptions of their interaction with workers, and interaction with workers in the problem-solving cycle which evolved from the questions on activities performed by SRs that might include interaction with workers and influencing factors. (Table II).

[Table II]

To ensure the quality of the data, interview transcriptions and their preliminary analysis were conducted by the first three authors and audited by the last author, who regularly discussed the data interpretation. Researchers involved in the analysis had different backgrounds and in-depth knowledge of qualitative methods and the research topic and its context. In addition, the

results were fed back to the SRs in three different stages of the analysis for verification: the first time sending them the preliminary results, the second time, discussing the results in a group with those who agreed to participate and the third, providing the final results after the meeting. Each time their feedback was included in the following analysis.

Ethical considerations

Trade unions informed SRs about the study before the research team contacted them. Participants were informed of the objective of the study and that they were free to participate and to leave at any point. SRs gave signed informed consent to participate and to record their interviews. Interview contents were anonymized to ensure data confidentiality. No financial or material compensation was offered to informants. This study obtained ethical approval from the Clinical Research Ethical Committee of the medical center, Parc de Salut Mar, Barcelona (Spain) (2011/4208/1).

Results

From the SR's discourses, two types of visions of their roles emerged: a role of control and surveillance of norms and a representation role. Even if the interaction with workers was generally perceived as useful and their relationship to be good, SRs perceiving themselves as workers' representatives were mostly the ones who undertook action to facilitate more interaction with workers in the problem-solving cycle. Apart from those elements related to SRs, themselves, other factors that influence interaction with workers emerged referring to workers, SRs' firms and contextual factors.

Opinions about the safety representative role

All the SRs describe as their main task the surveillance of workplace hazards and control of compliance with the norms, either addressed to the management or to workers: *"…being safety representative is to be aware of anything wrong around you, for example, a light that…is uncomfortable to one colleague at her table, to a slippery floor…"* (*Woman Services, ≥50 workers, Public sector*). Some SRs also consider themselves as the workers' representatives for the active defense of workers' interests in occupational health in front of management: "... *it is true that we speak up for them because we have these guarantees [not being fired unlawfully]. But it has to be standing up for them*" (*Man Construction, ≥50 workers, Private sector*).

All (but one) SRs think that their function is hindered by management attitudes in their firms as there is no will to invest in occupational health when legal obligations are either absent or not sufficiently specified (Table III quotes a, b1). Moreover, a few SRs described experiences of

victimization when undertaking measures to protect safety, hygiene and health at work in the form of layoffs or economic sanctions (not being entitled to a bonus pay) (Table III quote b2).

SRs' perception of their interaction with workers

SRs think that interacting with workers is useful to identify any work-related health problems that exists in the workplace and to have workers' support in case the need to negotiate with the firm arises (Table IV quotes a,b). Their relationship with workers is generally perceived as good, but it varies from close to limited support. Only some SRs describe it as non-existent.

Nearly half of the SRs consider their interaction with workers to be good and perceive it as having a close relationship with them, as colleagues or friends: *"... I think the [relationship] is good, it is what I say, it is very familiar, very ... they are my friends."* (*Woman* Services, <50 workers, Private sector). One SR holding a post of responsibility in the prevention management branch of the firm also considers the relationship as being good but perceives workers rather as an audience following instructions: *"... if they [workers] were behind, or did not want help, or... I would have it very clear: I couldn't work! They are the ones who, well, understand that it is, that is a good thing for them too, and eventually, well, they give in, I guess, and help you"* (*Woman* Construction, ≥50 workers, Private sector).

The second half of the SRs qualify their interaction with workers as good based on trust or closeness, yet mostly SRs from firms with 50 workers or more, bemoan the lack of workers' involvement or support when trying to mobilize them, especially under the threat of management retaliations: *"My colleagues know what is it and ... I guess they support me. Then, at the moment of truth, maybe when it comes to money, they don't support me anymore, right?"* (*Woman* Services, <50 workers, Private sector).

Finally, some SRs working at big firms with multiple work centers consider that they have a non-existent relationship with most of the staff (although they perceive a good relationship with those workers they had contact with): *"I think [the relationship] is non-existent, non-existent. And I can say that with some [workers] it has been very close."* (*Woman* Services, ≥50 workers, Public sector)

Identified factors that influence overall interaction between workers and SRs are the workers representatives' type of action (formal channels for participation in occupational health-oriented action or mobilization-oriented action), unions' image and workers' employment conditions. The description of the relationship with workers as non-existent is attributed by only one of the SRs to one type of action that SRs perform –being more focused on raising issues with management rather than seeking workers' mobilization and involvement (Table IV quote c). Most SRs relate the lack of interaction to an extensive negative view of unions among workers that they ascribe to a widespread negative social image of trade unions, and also to the perception that in firms,

unionized workers are more likely to be subject to reprisals. As a result, to avoid problems with management, workers avoid contact with trade unions and, by extension, SRs (Table IV quote d). Lastly, many SRs also highlight the employment conditions in firms as a factor that hinders contact with workers, especially with workers employed in precarious conditions (e.g. temporary, self-employed or outsourced work) and those employed in higher occupational categories, due to their senior position in the firms hierarchy (Table IV quotes e1, e2).

Experience of SRs' interaction with workers in the problem-solving cycle

Within the problem-solving cycle, interaction with workers occurs mostly in the phase of work-related health problem identification, while this interaction is limited in the phase of problem solving and almost absent in the decision-making phase.

S R s '   i n t e r a c t i o n   w i t h   w o r k e r s   i n   p r o b l e m   i d e n t i f i c a t i o n

In the problem identification phase, SRs generally initiate interaction by seeking information about health and safety problems, yet most SRs do not consult the workers on a regular basis, and some do not contact the workers at all: *"... I have to say that I don't seek it [workers' opinion]. We have not made any systematic collection of opinion."* (*Woman* Services, ≥50 workers, Public sector). SRs who understand themselves as the workers' representatives have undertaken participatory occupational health interventions, such as specific meetings with workers in preventive circles, to identify psychosocial risks and to develop potential interventions to ameliorate them, or try to encourage active workers' participation in regular meetings as a way to inform and allow workers to speak up: *"Every week there is some pause, we hold an informational assembly (...) one day at each workshop, no? (...) Our intention is that people start getting used to it and begin seeing that an assembly is useful because, apart from receiving information, you can participate ... "* (*Man* Industry, ≥50 workers, Private sector).

According to some SRs, there are occasions when an individual worker will take the initiative to contact SRs to communicate suggestions or problems, through personal contact, e-mails or calls. A few SRs consider that workers turn to them, if at all, when health problems are already severe.

From SRs' discourses, a number of factors, related to workers and the production sector, emerged hindering interaction in the problem identification phase. On the one hand, SRs pointed out workers' resistance to speak out against the firm due to fear of reprisals (Table V quote a), as well as workers' behavior (Table V quote b) attributed to a lack of an occupational preventive culture, and being unaware of the risks they are exposed to. Also, in sectors where job security is threatened by layoffs due to the current economic crisis, workers put the productivity interests of the firm before their safety. Gender discrimination emerged as a barrier

in the discourse of a female SR, who attributed the workers attitude of not taking occupational health seriously to the SR being a woman in a typically male workplace (Table V quote c).

As a factor related to the firm, one SR working in the public sector expressed that frequent staff rotations hinder the ability of workers to get to know their SRs and to become familiar with them (Table V quote d). There were also obstacles to interaction relating to legal factors that also emerged in the interviews (Table V quotes e1, e2). SRs consider that the low ratio of SRs to workers in large firms or in firms with multiple work centers makes it difficult to interact with all workers. Additionally, mostly SRs employed in the private sector identified the lack of legal coverage for workers to participate in meetings and assemblies during their working hours.

The only factor facilitating the interaction in the problem identification phase, mainly expressed by SRs employed in the public sector, is the SRs' availability of resources, that is, paid time off or the release from duty of SRs working exclusively for a union within firms for the occupational health and safety activities (Table V quote f).

SRs' interaction with workers in decision-making

There are two aspects where SRs could interact with workers in the decision-making phase that have been analyzed: whether they address workers' demands to the management, and how SRs decide which actions they develop to solve health and safety problems.

All SRs consider that they take on board the demands and concerns expressed by workers and communicate them at meetings in the HSC (where this exists) or directly with the management (Table VI quote a). Nonetheless, one example emerged where a SR dismissed a specific worker's demand as being unimportant (Table VI quote b). However, most of the SRs decide independently which actions to carry out to solve problems without consulting workers' opinions. In firms where there are SRs from different unions, decisions could be taken jointly either by all union members of the HSC: "*... The four safety representatives and I meet up, not systematically but at least once per quarter, all, of course, in order to see the issues*"(*Woman Services, ≥50 workers, Public sector*); or just in discussion with other representatives from the same union: "...*We usually used to join before these [HSC] meetings just in case that someone can't come or that something has happened, so that we all know a bit of the problem and, whoever is at the meeting, can develop the problems.*" (*Man Services, ≥50 workers, Private sector*). SRs make decisions alone when they are the only SR in the firm (in firms with less than 50 workers). Also, in one case, a SR holding a position of responsibility within the prevention management branch system of the firm takes decisions without consulting the other safety representatives of the firm. Yet, in the latter two cases other workers' representatives or their union may assist the SRs: "...*normally, as I can't count on the workers I don't involve them, for what? (…) It's that many times I don't*

even bother to consult them directly as the only thing I have is (...) that fellow's support, the shop steward, and well, I do ask him…. (Man ^Services, <50workers, Private sector^).

The factors influencing the decision-making process emerging from the SRs' discourses are only related to them (Table VI quote c), or to unions (Table VI quote d). These factors, although not directly related to their interaction with workers, have an effect on their overall capacity to act and weaken SRs' visibility. For instance, some SRs identify divisions within the HSC that are caused by political differences between unions and hinder the decision-making process by dividing the SRs' actions. These divisions weaken SRs' position when negotiating with the management and prevent actions from being taken, thus limiting their visibility (Table VI quote c). However, in juxtaposition to these concerns, all SRs consider their trade unions as an external actor that facilitates the decision-making process by providing legal advice and training (Table VI quote d).

SRs' interaction with workers in problem solving

The interaction that takes place tends to be lateral and is composed of the processing of information relating to actions taken and their outcomes when negotiating with the firm or turning to administrative or legal authorities. By contrast, interaction is intensified when SRs appeal for workers' support and mobilization, such as calling for assemblies and collective action. In these appeals, individual occupational health problems are presented as collective problems so that all workers feel involved and workers' negotiating power is increased.

Those factors that influence interaction in the problem-solving phase are related to SRs, and workers and indeed, management and contextual factors. One key aspect is the way SRs' conceive their role since it seems to influence their type of action, and hence, if and how they interact with workers. All SRs start raising issues with management to solve problems: "*I ask for a meeting [with the management], I tell them what is happening with this situation. If they want to assess it to clear it up, fine, if not then you have the next meeting...*" (Woman ^Services, <50 workers, Private sector^). If negotiations are unsuccessful, some turn to administrative authorities (such as the Labor and Social Security Inspectorate) or resort to the Courts: "*I first try to solve it (...) with the occupational risks prevention service technician and if this good man doesn't bring me any solution, I only have the Labor Inspectorate, that's all there is, and if the Labor Inspectorate doesn't give a damn, then that's that and that's when I say: "well, I resign myself to go on like this and this is it".*" (Man ^Services, <50workers, Private sector^). Only those SRs who see themselves as workers' representatives, turn to workers' mobilization after completing the negotiation and formal complaints options: "*We, for example, after exhausting the legal channels, the Labor Inspectorate and so on, we believe the alternative we have is that of a certain mobilization*" (Man ^Construction, ≥50 workers, Private sector^).

As regards the factors related to workers, trust in SRs has been pointed out as a factor facilitating workers' support in mobilizations. SRs ascribed this trust to achieving improvements in the workplace or having attempted this through visible demonstrations (Table VII quote d). On the other hand, workers' fear of management reprisals hinders mobilization of workers (Table VII quote e). This fear is fostered by previous firm reprisals against mobilized workers and by the perception of corporate power and its impunity. Moreover, the current crisis has emerged as a relevant contextual factor in preventing workers' mobilization because they are even more scared of losing their jobs (Table VII quote f).

In addition, there is another difficulty related to the firm, where the management does not provide meeting spaces or communication channels with workers and their SRs, especially in the private sector (Table VII quote g). This constrains the possibilities for meetings, most of all during work hours, and the possibilities to inform workers about actions undertaken.

Discussion

Our findings suggest that SRs' interaction with workers is limited and is mostly based around information provision and to a lesser extent, on consultation. Workers and SRs interact more when identifying problems than they do with actual decision-making and problem solving. SRs incorporate workers' demands but workers do not participate in the prioritisation or discussion of problems. The main avenue for workers to solve problems is by raising issues with management directly. It is only those SRs who perceive themselves as workers' representatives that promote mobilization to solve problems in which interaction is enhanced (Figure I).

Those factors related to SRs, workers and firms as well as contextual factors are identified as factors shaping SRs' interaction with workers. The most prevalent of which are the way SRs conceive of and carry out their role, the workers' fear of dismissal and external factors such as the economic crisis and labor market restructuring (Figure I). The interplay between these different factors determines not only their interaction, but also illustrates the power imbalance that workers and their representatives are subjected to, thus affecting the SRs' capacity of action and their interaction with workers.

[Figure I]

SRs' interaction with workers

If participation involves "almost any situation where some minimal amount of interaction takes place" [Pateman, 1970: 68], our findings show that interaction and incorporation of workers' participation are pretty limited. In terms of *breadth* of workers' participation in SRs' activities, i.e. how workers can take part in SRs´ decisions, our results highlight how workers have generally

restricted options of participation [Collom, 2003 citing Bernstein, 1976]. Regarding the *depth* of workers' participation in SRs' activities, SRs tend to interact with workers only at information and consultation levels [Arnstein, 1969; Wilkinson et al., 2010], allowing to a lesser extent, more democratized forms that imply major control from the workers, such as incorporating their views and active participation in decision-making and problem solving.

The weak interaction with workers, together with limited integration of their participation in SRs' activities, may have implications for SRs' effectiveness, including effects on lack of resort to SRs as already observed in different studies [Jacod, 2007; Martínez, 2008] or lower workers' support. As noted in the studies by Carpentier-Roy et al. [1998] and Simard et al. [1999], trust is a result of the visibility of health and safety committees' action and affects workers' perception of credibility and efficacy of these joint bodies, triggering workers' support. In line with these authors, trust in SRs in our study has been considered a facilitating factor for interaction, and has been attributed to maintaining contact with workers and achieving improvements.

Despite our study being exploratory, some practices have emerged in our results that may provide examples of how to strengthen the interaction with workers, such as preventive circles o r weekly assemblies that provide a periodical contact point for participation and information exchange between SRs and workers. In our study, the example of preventive circles exposed by a SR is built on a highly participative method of psychosocial risk assessment that provides a key opportunity for SRs to be widely known by workers within their firms and to identify and seek solutions concerning psychosocial risks with and for the workers [Moncada et al., 2011].

Factors influencing SRs' interaction with workers

The factors that influence SRs' interaction with workers cannot be understood in an isolated manner, but rather in a broader context of changes in the world of work. The increasingly unequal power relations affect how SRs' function and alter their capacity to act as evidenced by Johnstone et al. [2005] and Walters and Nichols [2007: 143-144].

For instance, taking the way SRs conceive their role and the type of action they develop, as Hall et al.'s [2006] study shows, our results distinguish two types of safety representatives with different conceptions of their role, namely technical-legal or politically active. The forms of interaction of the SRs vary according to these conceptions, with the politically active ones being those who seek more interaction with workers. However, we found a majority of SRs with a more technical-legal conception of their role. The type of SRs' perception of role and action has implications for the kind of relationships that are established with workers. Having an overly technical view as a SR has been associated with focusing on concrete aspects of occupational health, often distant from workers' concerns [García et al., 2004; Tucker, 1996], whereas SRs with a politically active vision conceive occupational health problems on a larger scale [Hall et

al., 2006]. This broad conception brings them to a more critical stance towards the management, seeking alternative sources of information, defending workers' points of view, and mobilizing them.

The pre-eminence of a technical-legal conception and action could be understood, at least partly, as an adaptation strategy to deal with SRs' limited capacity of action [Hovden, 2008], leading them to a greater tendency to solve problems, raise health and safety issues before management or resorting to the Labor Inspectorate instead of promoting workers' mobilization and participation [Gunningham, 2008]. The adoption of a less conflictive view could also be considered as a SRs' strategy to prevent victimization, which was reportedly experienced by some SRs in our study and also in other studies [Hovden et al., 2008; Spaven et al., 1993; Trädgårdh, 2008: 6]. Also, SRs could be reproducing a mainstream technical approach to occupational health put forward by professionals and management and followed by some trade unions [Menéndez et al., 2009; Navarro, 1980; Walters et al., 2012], as Hall et al. [2006] observed in their study.

Other implications for the interaction between SRs and workers, flowing from the power imbalance at work, fall particularly on workers. In our results, some groups of workers were considered especially difficult to interact with (self-employed, leased or temporary workers) and these results have been mirrored in other studies [García et al., 2004; Johnstone et al., 2005: 97]. There were difficulties related to workers' employment conditions and to contextual factors such as the economic crisis, which has exacerbated workers' fear of dismissal. New measures adopted in the wake of the financial crisis may be promoting obstacles to worker interaction. For instance, job insecurity has been growing as a result of different legislative reforms aimed not only at reforming labor markets, but also at dismantling the pillars of European welfare systems [Leschke and Jepsen, 2012]. In addition, in the majority of European countries, there has been a concerted effort to restructure labor markets. The latest labor market reforms in Spain, for example, (passed in 2010, 2011 and 2012) have deregulated employment relations in order to flexibilize its labor market [Clauwaert and Schömann, 2012; ILO, 2012]. These reforms may have consequences for the relationship between SRs and workers because firstly, changes in redundancy rules make it easier for employers to lay off or sack staff, (which feeds into the workers' fear of job losses), secondly, because labor market segmentation is being reinforced by establishing more atypical forms of employment with poorer working conditions and protection standards (including not being covered by rights to collective representation). And finally, not only do these laws weaken trade unions, and in turn, SRs' capacity to act, since they introduce collective bargaining and decentralization, but they also increase management power to unilaterally decide changes in working conditions [Baylos, 2012; Clauwaert and Schömann, 2012].

Study limitations

The study is not without its limitations, especially the small sample size, and the fact that selected SRs work in segments where union activity is a common practice, such as in the qualified tertiary sector [Pitxer and Sánchez, 2008]. This would lead to not covering sectors mainly represented by craft unions or those with low union action, such as the agriculture sector. However, the distribution of the interviewed SRs, according to economic activity, is similar to that of the employed Catalan population [IDESCAT, 2011]. Discursive saturation is achieved in the analysis of the SRs´ perception of their relationship with workers and in the ways of interaction but discourse may have not been saturated on issues related to determining conditions of interaction, such as the industrial relations within firms - something that could be linked in part to the aforementioned limitation.

However, the findings of our study help to propose new avenues for future studies. Issues that deserve further attention a r e the factors influencing the way SRs understand workers´ participation, such as the distribution of workplace power, the force of industrial action in the workplace, union strategies on occupational health or the political ideology of the SRs. At the same time, a thorough analysis of the interaction between SRs and workers should also include the perspective of workers, a task that will be undertaken at a later stage. Finally, the effects of interaction and the different levels of workers' participation on working conditions and occupational health knowledge should also be analyzed.

Conclusions

The paper highlights the limited SRs' interaction with workers and explores the multiple sets of factors influencing it. Links between SRs' perception of their role, type of action and intensity of their interaction with workers have been observed. The more prevailing technical-legal view of the SRs tends to restrict workers' participation to the level of information and consultation and it is conditioned by a mainstream technocratic approach to risk prevention and a limited capacity of action, as well as by a fear of victimization. As a consequence, interaction with workers is not reinforced, which threatens to diminish SRs' effectiveness in different ways.

Our results provide new knowledge pertaining to the broader context affecting occupational health at work and inequalities in occupational health [Krieger, 2010]. By focusing on how SRs interact with workers, this study demonstrates how the increasing imbalance of power in employment relations hinders SRs' capacity to act and hampers their interaction with workers, coupled with the increasing vulnerability of workers. Although the paper addresses some examples in Spain, similar signs of a lack of interaction have been detected in other countries [Jacod, 2007; Walters and Haines, 1988]. In a context of increasing challenges for industrial action in occupational health [Quinlan and Johnstone, 2009], ensuring effective workers' representation has come to be, more than ever, an essential duty in order to protect health and

safety at work and hence, the greater the need to analyze further how the interaction between workers and SRs can be improved.
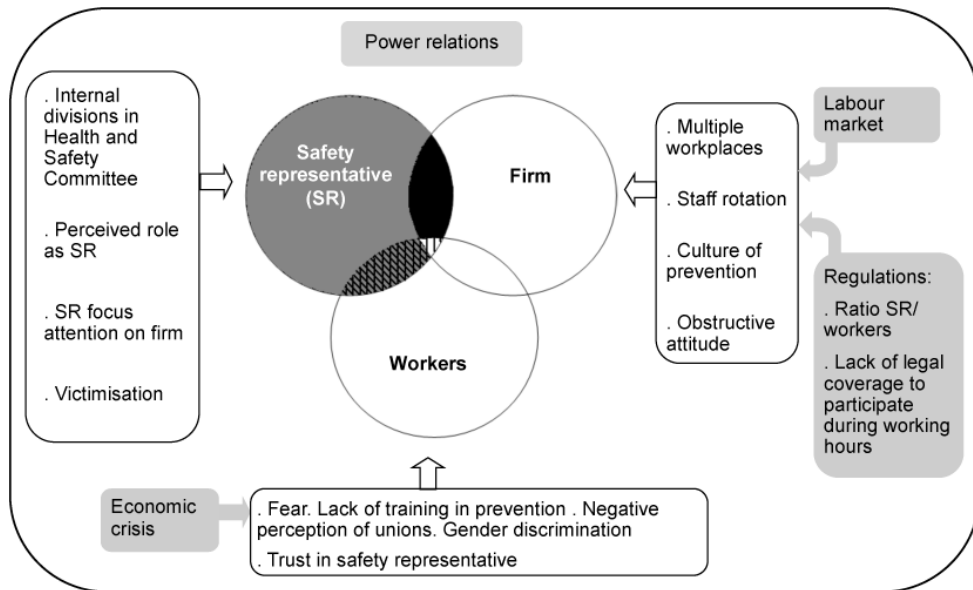
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FIGURE I. Interaction between workers and safety representatives in the problem solving cycle: phases and influencing factors from safety representatives' perspective

List of FIGURE I legends

INTERACTION PHASES IN THE PROBLEM SOLVING CYCLE

Problem identification

Decision-making

Raise issues with firm

Workers' mobilization

Problem solving
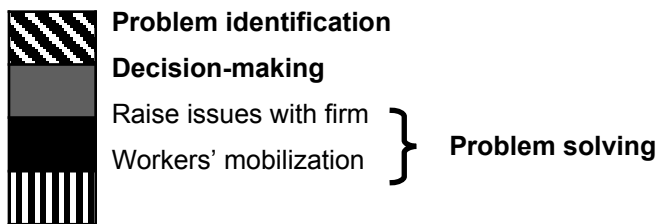
FACTORS INFLUENCING INTERACTION

Safety representative / Firm / Workers

Contextual factors

Tables

TABLE I. Final composition of the sample.

	Branch of economic activity			Nº workers		Sector		TOTAL
	Industry	Construction	Services	<50	≥50	Public	Private	
Men	1	1	3	1	4	1	4	5
Women		1	4	2	3	2	3	5
TOTAL	1	2	7	3	7	3	7	10

TABLE II. Categories and sub-categories of analysis.

Categories	Sub-categories	
Safety representatives' opinions on their functions	*Perceived role as safety representative*	
	Factors influencing SRs functions	
Safety representatives' opinions on their interaction with workers	*Usefulness of interaction*	
	Perception of the interaction with workers	
	Factors influencing the overall interaction	
Interaction with workers in the problem-solving cycle	*Interaction in problem identification*	- Workers' consultation
		- Influencing factors in problem identification
	Interaction in decision-making	- Inclusion of workers' demands
		- Forms of decision-making
		- Influencing factors in decision-making
	Interaction in problem-solving	- Safety representatives' type of action
		- Influencing factors in problem-solving

TABLE III. Examples of management factors influencing safety representatives' function.

Category	Example
Management attitudes	
a) Enabling	"(Q: ... how is the relationship with the firm?) Very good, I mean, no problem. They have never posed obstacles to us. Provided that, of course, you tell things as they are." (*Woman$^{c,\ \geq 50w,\ Pr}$*)
b) Constraining	b1) "The firm checks numbers and says: "as long as there is no one forcing me, no, don't count on me spending a penny"." (*Man$^{s,\ <50w,\ pr}$*)
	b2) "…when we achieved it [not to have to clean working clothes at home] (…) what did the management do? (…) They went and came up with an extra pay for those who considered to have behaved well. The ones who misbehaved happened to be the three representatives." (*Woman$^{s,<50w,pr}$*)

Legend:

Branch of economic activity: ^{i} Industry, ^{c} Construction, ^{s} Services

Number of workers: $^{<50w}$ Less than 50 workers, $^{\geq 50w}$ 50 or more workers

Sector: ^{pb} Public sector, ^{pr} Private sector

TABLE IV. Examples of the perception of interactions' usefulness and overall influencing factors.

Category	Example
Usefulness of interaction	
a) To know problems	"[Having contact with workers] is precisely what makes it easier for me to have knowledge, information to provide to the Committee or not." (*Woman*[s, ≥50w,pb])
b) To have strength	"... above all, if there was involvement on behalf of the workers, it would be ideal, particularly at the time of raising claims before the management ..." (*Man*[s, <50w,pr])
Factors influencing the overall interaction	
c) Safety representatives' type of action	"The problem is how to make those who can decide to change them [the things], to do so. So often we end up spending a lot of energy in what is this change from the top. We try putting things forward, turning to the labor authority, and maybe from now on we will try by increasing people's awareness to mobilise..." (*Man*[c, ≥50w,pr])
d) Unions negative image	"…nowadays, with the current labor market situation, people say "oh, I don't want to go near unions in case that management…!" Because they see you and know, and then, I tell you, the union section is the one which is being fired, no? What a coincidence!." (*Man*[s, <50w,pr])
e) Employment conditions	e1) "If they [self-employed workers] have an accident, well, they do not even communicate it to us or tell us anything... If I find something out, I learn about it by... word of mouth, but (…) they do not make us know nothing... which is what the management wants, always make the task as difficult as possible " (*Man*[s, <50w,pr]) e2)"...people who don't have responsibility in the firm come more to us… very fast (...) People in positions of responsibility (…) close the office to be out of sight..." (*Man*[s, ≥50w,pb])

Legend:

Branch of economic activity: [i] Industry, [c] Construction, [s] Services

Number of workers: [<50w] Less than 50 workers, [≥50w] 50 or more workers

Sector: [pb] Public sector, [pr] Private sector

TABLE V. Examples of influencing factors in problem identification.

Category	Example
a) Workers' fear	"The fear of retaliation by the management, this is very, very much, right? They [workers] come and say : "but if I do that, then the management...".." (*Man*[s, ≥50w,pr])
b) Workers' lack of preventive culture	"...[workers] have worked many years with no security. And then, now they don't see all the obstacles you place on them. I mean, they don't, don't see where the danger is sometimes." (*Woman*[c, ≥50w,pr])
c) Gender discrimination	"…I was in a street and they ran away! [laughs] It was horrible. No... and besides you said something and, well, "what does she understand". (*Woman*[c, ≥50w,pr])
d) Staff rotation in the firm	"... it is also true that there is a lot of staff rotation (...) and when you have a staff, people in a workplace who are used to your presence there as a representative or as a visit, an internal competition of transfer arises and the 40% of the workforce changes, and then start over again..." (*Man*[s, ≥50w,pb])
e) Factors related to regulations	e1) "…we are many people and few safety representatives..." (*Woman*[c, ≥50w,pr]) e2) "...to recognise the right to (...) within their working hours they trimestrally had some time, in a given moment, to communicate with their representatives to discuss prevention issues..." (*Man*[c, ≥50w,pr])
f) Resources	"...I am *liberada*, so I have all my working hours…" (*Woman*[s, <50w,pr])

Legend:

Branch of economic activity: [i] Industry, [c] Construction, [s] Services

Number of workers: [<50w] Less than 50 workers, [≥50w] 50 or more workers

Sector: [pb] Public sector, [pr] Private sector

TABLE VI. Examples of decision-making and related factors.

Category	Example
Inclusion of workers' demands	
a) Through mechanisms of workers' participation in occupational health	"To begin, [I include workers' demands] in a request and question in a [HSC] meeting, but normally, before the following meeting, I already send a petition to include this point, if it seems to be an important point..." (*Woman*$^{s,\ \geq 50w,pb}$)
b) No inclusion (occasional)	"[Regarding a complaint presented by workers] …it's what I see that no. Maybe if I asked, uh, I don't know, maybe if I asked I would get it. I didn't do it…" (*Woman*$^{s,\ <50w,pr}$)
Influencing factors in decision-making	
c) Internal divisions in HSC	"... If instead of thinking about these partisan ideas so much, we would look after the worker more, I think that unity makes us stronger and we would win much more, ok? Maybe we would stop making the firm dizzy, we would focus on four or five things per Committee [meeting], and those four or five things today, another four or five tomorrow, like this, at the end of the year, every Committee would achieve twenty things." (*Man*$^{s,\ \geq 50w,pr}$)
d) Trade unions support	"I'm not upset with the union because it gets pretty involved (…). The truth: answers for everything and assistance for everything" (*Woman*$^{s,\ <50w,pr}$)

Legend:

Branch of economic activity: ^{i} Industry, ^{c} Construction, ^{s} Services

Number of workers: $^{<50w}$ Less than 50 workers, $^{\geq 50w}$ 50 or more workers

Sector: ^{pb} Public sector, ^{pr} Private sector

TABLE VII. Examples of influencing factors in problem solving.

Category	Example
Safety representatives' type of action	
a) Negotiation with firm	"I ask for a meeting [with the firm], I tell them what is happening with this situation. If they want to assess it to clear it up, fine, if not then you have the next meeting..." (*Woman*[s, <50w,pr])
b) Report	"I first try to solve it (...) with the occupational risks prevention service technician and if this good man doesn't bring me any solution, I only have the Labor Inspectorate, that's all there is, and if the Labor Inspectorate doesn't give a damn, then enough, that's when I say: "well, I resign myself to go on like this and this is it"." (*Man*[s, <50w,pr])
c) Workers' mobilisation	"We, for example, after exhausting the legal channels, the Labor Inspectorate and so on, we believe the alternative we have is that of a certain mobilization." (*Man*[c, ≥50w,pr])
Workers, contextual and firm's factors	
d) Trust in SR	"[They trust you] when you start solving problems" (*Man*[s, ≥50w, pb])
e) Workers' fear	"...people are afraid of being fired, the thing isn't... because of course, he says, the boss always says: "well, it should be that there is no one waiting on the streets"." (*Woman*[s, <50w,pr])
f) Contextual factors (economic crisis)	"...People, with the crisis and also because of information that comes out on the fact that there is a surplus of public officials and all that, it makes people rethink acting out a lot to avoid being pointed out by the firm." (*Man*[s, ≥50w,pb])
g) Management attitudes	"Sometimes there are supervisors to whom you suggest that you want to make an assembly (…) and they facilitate it for you. But, of course, this is the exception…" (*Man*[c, ≥50w,pr])

Legend:

Branch of economic activity: [i] Industry, [c] Construction, [s] Services

Number of workers: [<50w] Less than 50 workers, [≥50w] 50 or more workers

Sector: [pb] Public sector, [pr] Private sector