Occupational safety in multicultural teams and organizations: A research agenda

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\textbf{A B S T R A C T}

Safety is an important issue in the workplace, in particular at the lower end of the labor market where the workforce often consists of people with different cultural backgrounds. Studies have underlined the potential threats to occupational safety of this workforce. Surprisingly, however, very little research has been conducted on national culture and occupational safety. In this paper, we examine how national culture may play a role in important antecedents of safety behavior that have identified in the meta-analysis of Christian et al. (2009). We discuss safety knowledge, safety motivation, and safety climate. Based on this analysis, we make a number of suggestions for future research.

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\section{1. Introduction}

In the last years, the labor market has rapidly changed. Flexibilization and globalization have led to more self-employed workers, workers with flexible contracts, and, in particular, workers that enter the workforce in countries different from their own (European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, 2009; Starren et al., 2009). Especially at the lower end of the labor market, where workers are more frequently employed in unsafe working environments than workers in high-skilled jobs (Venema et al., 2009), these changes may have an impact on occupational safety. For instance, in a Dutch study among approximately 25,000 workers, Van den Bosche et al. (2006) show that non-Western migrants are significantly more involved in an accident with physical or mental injury. Moreover, migrant workers have less access to personal protective equipment than native workers. Finally, migrants in low-skilled jobs often have less job opportunities, which makes it difficult for them to quit a job with low occupational safety. This finding is not limited to the Dutch context. In fact, the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (2007) has published several country reports on migrant workers (e.g., concerning Austria, Italy, and Spain), underlining that they are more exposed to risky situations than local workers.

Why are migrant workers disproportionately more often affected by safety risks at work than local workers? Answers can be found in various directions: migrants’ characteristics and work characteristics. Van Hooff et al. (2009) conclude that the relatively high safety risks of migrants can be explained by the background of the migrants on the one hand (e.g., language comprehension, knowledge and understanding of local habits and risk perception), and their working environment on the other hand (temporary work, unskilled and risky work). When it comes to migrants’ characteristics, different characteristics are mentioned, such as obedience (e.g., more reluctant to address safety issues), eagerness to earn money quickly, risk perception (Guldenmund et al., 2010), language problems, understanding the importance of obeying safety regulations (De Vries et al., 2007), and unfamiliarity with local standards (Van Hooff et al., 2009).

Companies seem to realize that a workforce with different cultural backgrounds can lead to difficulties, but Bukman et al. (2010) conclude that these backgrounds are hardly considered when examining occupational safety policies (cf. Vickers et al., 2003). In their study on best practices, they found that only a few companies that work with migrants had specific safety measures, and that almost all measures were focused on language issues.

Whereas it is important to consider safety issues in the context of different cultural backgrounds, safety research has largely neglected this context: “constructs such as national culture [...] are given little attention in the safety literature (Burke et al., 2008, p. 134). Although national culture has been put more prominently on the safety research agenda in the last years (e.g., Bust et al., 2008; Manzey and Marold, 2009; Means and Yule, 2009), there is not yet a framework that may guide our current understanding of national culture and occupational safety, and that may identify promising areas for research that advance the field. In this paper, our aim is to present such a framework and a research agenda (Section 4). We base our framework on the integrative model of workplace safety of Christian et al. (2009). As this model does not account for national culture as a potential factor, we systematically analyze where it may play a role (Section 3). We first clarify
our approach to national culture and multicultural teams (Section 2.1), and present the integrative model of workplace safety (Section 2.2).

2. Theoretical background

2.1. National culture and multicultural teams

National culture is a complex phenomenon because it is related to a host of other factors, such as a nation’s economy, language, religion, and politics. A definition of national culture that has been widely acknowledged is the “collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another” (Hofstede, 2001, p. 9). This means that people with a given nationality share specific characteristics that are ‘programmed’ during the lifespan. Different tools have been developed in order to characterize national cultures. Fiske et al. (1998) provide an overview of such tools, of which the dimensional approach has been the most prominent. In this approach, cultures are classified according to differences and similarities in the importance of values that guide people’s attitudes and behavior.

Different frameworks of dimensions have been proposed (e.g., Trompenaars, 1993; Schwartz, 1994; for an overview, see Soares et al., 2007), of which the cultural dimensions of Hofstede (2001) are probably the most familiar. In this study, we focus on Hofstede’s model for analyzing national culture. Hofstede’s (2001) distinguishes between five value dimensions: individualism–collectivism (how individuals relate to groups), uncertainty avoidance (the degree to which certainty is tolerated), power distance (how power inequality is accepted), masculinity–femininity (how gender roles are distributed), and long-term versus short-term orientation (how these term orientations are valued). Each dimension hosts a number of different values, and each national culture has specific value hierarchies ranging from values that they are considered relatively unimportant to values that are considered relatively important.

Value dimensions can be used as a framework to analyze national cultures’ differences and similarities in attitudes and behavior of individuals. Central to the framework of value dimensions is that values are at the core of attitudes and behavior. For safety attitudes and behavior, relevant values are those that belong to the dimensions of uncertainty avoidance, and power distance (cf. Mearns and Yule, 2009; Schubert and Dijkstra, 2009).

In this paper, we do not specifically focus on the comparison between national cultures. The interest is more on organizations or – on a smaller scale – work teams, in which team members have different cultural backgrounds. For these multicultural teams, it is important to understand which role variation in cultural background plays with respect to occupational safety.

2.2. The integrative model of occupational safety

Christian et al. (2009) have reviewed the empirical research literature on occupational safety. On the basis of a meta-analysis of 90 studies, they were able to test a path model of potential antecedents of safety outcomes. Together, these 90 studies have examined a large number of factors that may affect occupational safety, but not all of these factors were found to be significant determinants in the meta-analysis. Fig. 1 shows the model that is the result of the statistical analyses. The numbers range between –1 and 1, and indicate the strength that a predictor (e.g., safety climate) has on another variable (e.g., safety knowledge). Positive numbers express positive relationships (e.g., more safety knowledge predicts safety performance), and negative numbers express negative relationships (e.g., better safety performance predicts less accidents and injuries).

This model shows that the number of accidents and injuries on the right-hand side of Fig. 1 can be predicted by safety performance (safety compliance and safety participation); in other words, better safety performance (e.g., following procedures) predicts a lower number of accidents and injuries. Safety performance itself was predicted by workers’ knowledge of safe behavior and by their motivation to behave accordingly. It should be noted that motivation plays a direct role, and an indirect role through safety knowledge. On the left-hand side of the model, Christian et al. (2009) introduced situation-related factors (safety climate), and person-related factors (general personality characteristics). When it comes to workers’ personality, only their conscientiousness (a combination of achievement and responsibility) plays a role; it predicts workers’ motivation. Situation-related factors were found to be more important distal variables than those related to workers’ personality. In fact, safety climate predicts both safety knowledge and safety motivation.

In the model of Christian et al. (2009), national culture was not included – simply because studies on national culture and occupational safety were not retrieved in their literature review. However, if national culture affects people’s values, attitudes, and behavior, it follows that – potentially – national culture will also affect people’s safety knowledge and motivation. Additionally, it can be expected that a work team in which a diversity of national cultures exist, safety climate will be affected. In the remainder of the paper, we therefore examine if and how national culture may affect safety knowledge (Section 3.1), safety motivation (Section 3.2), and safety climate (Section 3.3).

In some cases, our examination draws on safety science research, but in a number of cases research and findings result from related disciplines. For safety knowledge, we examine how risk perception may differ among national cultures, and how communication and training may change workers’ risk perception to the accurate level. For safety motivation, we analyze how national culture’s important values on risk may play a role in safety motivation. Lastly, for safety climate, we examine how it is affected by diversity in national cultures within the work team. We will outline how national culture’s important values inhibit a shared vision on safety in the team, and how leadership and intercultural effectiveness may positively affect safety climate.

3. National culture and safety behavior

3.1. Safety knowledge

Safety performance is strongly predicted by the knowledge that workers have of risky behavior and procedures to prevent such behavior (Christian et al., 2009). Workers need to be aware of risky behavior. An underlying premise seems to be that – if people know what the actual risks are and which procedures help to perform safely – their knowledge about safety increases. We argue that people’s knowledge is partly dependent on risk perception, namely the degree to which behavior indicated as risky is also perceived to be risky by the individual worker. Risk perception can be seen as an individual assessment of the likelihood of an undesired consequence (cf. Rohrmann and Renm, 2000). Risk perception should be distinguished from attitude towards risk (Rohrmann, 2000). The attitude towards risk is related to a person’s level of sensation seeking, such as in the domains of drug and alcohol abuse, and unprotected sex (see Zuckerman, 1979).

Whereas it is difficult to alter a person’s level of sensation seeking, people’s perception of risks can be changed. Moreover, research shows that national culture may affect risk perception.
Rohrmann and Renn (2000) argue that risk perception is based on information about the risk, on the confidence in the person or institution that supplies the risk information, and on the cultural background of the receiver of the information. Kouabenan (2009) also argues that people’s cultural background affects their risk perception. There are a few studies that compared risk perceptions in different national cultures. With respect to financial risk assessment, for instance, Weber and Hsee (1998) showed differences in risk perception of financial investments among students from the US, China, Germany and Poland. The Chinese students were most optimistic about possible risks, followed by the German students. A study of Slovic et al. (2000) showed that French people estimated the likelihood of being involved in a traffic accident or food poisoning higher than Americans did. On the basis of these kinds of studies, Renn and Rohrmann (2000) conclude that it appears that there are sometimes cultural differences in risk perception. However, they also add that, when differences were found, it is hard to interpret and explain them. This is one of the larger problems of research comparing national cultures, in particular when large differences are observed. Van de Vijver and Leung (2000, p. 36), in their overview of methodological issues in cross-cultural psychology, call this the “interpretation paradox”: the larger the cross-cultural differences are, the more difficult it is to interpret them.

As risk perception is based on information about risks, providing new information can help changing people’s perceptions. Two kinds of information are needed: information on the likelihood that an incident will occur, and information on the undesirability of the consequences. Communication studies have demonstrated that the perceived likelihood of events can be affected by providing evidence in the form of cases, statistics, experts, and explanations (Allen and Preiss, 1997; Hornikx, 2005; Reinard, 1988). The impact of these types of evidence on the acceptability of claims has been shown to differ between national cultures (Hornikx and Hoeken, 2007), and sometimes to be relatively similar (Hornikx and De Best, 2011).

When providing information about incidents and the negative consequences that may occur, the premise is that people understand that information. On the most basic level, namely the language, it seems that this starting point cannot be automatically taken for granted. Language barriers are easily underestimated. According to Lindhout (2009), having more than ten languages spoken in one company is becoming daily practice in the Netherlands. From a practical point of view translations of procedures in all languages are often unlikely. In this respect, Bust et al. (2008) advise the use of pictograms for safety procedures. They argue that pictograms are more practical and more effective than language. For instance, stumbling, or the risk of falling can easily be visualized (see Fig. 2).

Adams et al. (2010) argue that a pictogram may focus on two facets: the desired, safe circumstance, and the undesired, unsafe circumstance. They provide evidence that these two-part signs can be more effective than single-part signs (such as in Fig. 2). Still, we believe that two main limitations are related to the use of pictograms. First, although simple pictograms may be understood by people from different national cultures (Foster et al., 2010), people have been shown to differ in the way they perceive images (Nisbett and Miyamoto, 2005). This means that pictograms should, ideally, be pretested with all the intended national cultures present in the team members. Second, the information that a pictogram communicates is limited. The pictogram provides a warning for a certain risk (see Fig. 2), but often does not give information on how to prevent it. Whereas pictograms have a limited capacity for explaining safety procedures, training programs seem more fruitful. With respect to training methods for enhancing safety and health behaviors, Burke et al. (2006) have reviewed 95 studies that focused on types of training methods for multicultural teams. Results of their study show that intensive training (e.g., participative activities, role playing, demonstrations) is more effective than flyers, posters or short instructions. It should be noted that training programs for people with different national background may be particularly challenging.

In sum, safety knowledge is related to risk perception, which may be altered with evidence, pictograms, and training. Research illustrates that the effects of these instruments may be different depending on the cultural backgrounds of the receivers of the instruments.

### 3.2. Safety motivation

The model of Christian et al. (2009) shows that motivation plays an important role in safety behavior: it directly affects safety performance, and also indirectly through safety knowledge. In this section, we examine motivation for safety through the importance that national cultures attach to values related to uncertainty avoidance and to power distance. As indicated earlier, uncertainty avoidance, the tolerance for uncertain situations, and power distance, the degree to which people accept that power is distributed unequally in society, are relevant in the context of occupational safety (cf. Mearns and Yule, 2009; Schubert and Dijkstra, 2009). It could be argued that employees from national cultures with higher uncertainty avoidance are, for example, more focused on the compliance of rules and procedures than employees from a national
culture with lower uncertainty avoidance. Similarly, employees from a national culture with a larger power distance may more easily accept (safety) instructions from their supervisors than employees from a national culture with smaller power distance. Although these predictions seem straightforward, empirical evidence is less convincing. For instance, Burke et al. (2008) have found that training sessions, which help to decrease uncertainty, were–surprisingly–less effective for people from a national culture with high uncertainty avoidance compared to low uncertainty avoidance. Burke et al. (2008) explain that although people in high uncertainty avoidance cultures appreciate standardized, structured training sessions, they lack the flexibility to react accurately in actual situations.

Cultural value dimensions have proven to be important in explaining attitudes and behavior in different national cultures (see, e.g., Hofstede, 2001), but its impact should not be overstated. A meta-analysis of experimental studies has shown that people are more persuaded by messages that express values that are important in their own national culture, as opposed to unimportant (Hornikx and O'Keefe, 2009). However, effects turned out to be relatively small. Therefore, the impact of cultural values may be even smaller if one moves from relatively simple messages that strongly express values to more complicated messages, instructions, or training sessions tailored to the important cultural values. Similarly, cultural dimensions are not the only tool that one can use to explain cultural differences in attitudes and behavior. One example is a study that investigated accident rates during the construction of a 16-km bridge between Denmark and Sweden, which was built between 1993 and 2000 (Spangenberg et al., 2003). Analysis of accidents revealed a distinction between accident rates of the Danish and the Swedish workers: Danish workers were four times more often involved in accidents than Swedish workers. At the same time, both countries have very similar scores on Hofstede's (2001) cultural dimensions. Spangenberg et al. (2003) explained this difference by outlining that Swedish employees, and not the Danish, have to pay the first day of sick leave themselves. As a result, Danish people would call in sick more easily. In addition, in Sweden a lot of attention is paid to safety during workers education, which may cause them to work more safely. This study nicely illustrates that cultural value dimensions should not be taken as the only framework to analyze cultural differences and similarities in safety behavior. A tool to analyze the potential effects of national culture may be counterproductive. More helpful in this respect may be the sensibility that differences in attitudes and behavior of team members may result from differences in cultural backgrounds. Awareness of cultural differences in work teams may be promoted by an effective safety climate.

3.3. Safety climate

So far, national culture of individuals has been the focus of direct effects on safety knowledge, motivation and performance. However, safety is not only an individual matter. On an organizational and/or work team level, work groups provide an enhancing or inhibiting climate for safety knowledge, motivation, as well as performance. In work groups, this climate determines the perceptions of work group members of a team's safety-related policies, practices, and procedures pertaining to safety matters in the workplace (Christian et al., 2009). Safety climate is defined as the shared perceptions of workers regarding safety in their working environment (Christian et al., 2009; Neal and Griffin 2004; Zohar and Luria 2005; Guldenmund, 2000). Safety climate has important implications for safety participation as well as safety compliance (Christian et al., 2009). According to Christian et al. (2009, p. 1106) a safety performance enhancing safety climate has the following characteristics:

- it is shared, in the sense that it leads to a pattern of behavior and practices, rather than isolated events or environmental circumstances;
- it encourages safe action through reward or principles of social exchange;
- safety information is communicated formally through training and meetings, and informally through on-the-job discussions, both among employees as well as by supervisors.

How is a safety climate affected by diversity of national cultures within the work team? Literature has extensively shown that diversity leads to more conflicts and less cohesion in work teams, and is associated with patterns of exclusion and sometimes even with discrimination (see for overviews of consequences of diversity for instance Kochan et al., 2003; Mannix and Neale, 2005; Williams and O'Reilly, 1998). Much research shows that differences between people can be problematic: it causes misunderstanding and disagreement and may cause a decrease in commitment with the organization and coworkers. Harrison and Klein (2007) mention in this respect the separation that can occur between people that differ from each other: within organizations people feel attracted to similar others and interact less with coworkers that they perceive as different. As a result, we can easily conclude that in diverse work groups, it is more difficult to attain a shared team climate. Schubert and Dijkstra (2009) mention in this respect that in their study on foreign contractors in the Netherlands that "cultural differences lead to an approach deviating from the Dutch safety norms and conduct" among the foreign contractors. In addition, separation between employees with different national cultures implies that less social exchange occurs between those employees. Moreover, on-the-job discussions, which also characterizes an effective safety climate, may be limited to subgroups of similar people, or induce conflicts.

Although diversity literature has outlined many effects for organizations, research has, as far as we know, not focused specifically on the effects for occupational safety. However, research has been conducted on intercultural effectiveness. Interestingly, although Big Five personality traits (Costa and McCrae, 1985) are inconsistently linked with safety performance (Christian et al., 2009), some research suggests that intercultural traits, derived from the Big Five contribute to intercultural effectiveness in intercultural interactions. Van der Zee and Van Oudenhoven (2000, 2001) discuss five intercultural traits that contribute to intercultural effectiveness. These traits relate to effective coping with intercultural situations and to success in intercultural contexts. Cultural empathy is defined as the ability to emphasize with the feelings, thoughts, and behaviors of members of different groups. Open-mindedness refers to an open and unprejudiced attitude towards different cultural norms and values. Social initiative is defined as a tendency to approach social situations in an active way and to initiate them. Emotional stability refers to the tendency to remain calm in stressful situations. Finally, flexibility is characterized as the tendency to consider new and unknown situations as challenging and the ability to adjust one's behavior to the demands of new and unknown situations. Those five traits are expected to enhance intercultural communication among team members. Thereby, we expect intercultural effectiveness traits of group members to contribute to a safety climate in national diverse work groups.

However, specific attention should be paid to the role of management. O'Dea and Flin (2001) stress the importance of management at different levels and the relation between leaders and team members for occupational safety. In this respect, Christian et al. (2009) mention the importance of leader–member exchange. High quality leader–member relations are generally associated with more open and egalitarian communication with respect to non-routine problems (cf. Christian et al., 2009). In a diverse work
group setting, where open communication may be problematic due to cultural differences, leader–member exchange may profit from effective intercultural communication skills.

Moving from a team to an organizational level, there are interesting parallels between research on safety performance and diversity management. Management perspectives affect the effects that diversity has on performance. In this respect, research by Schubert and Dijkstra (2009; safety performance) and Ely and Thomas (1999; diversity management) show a remarkable similarity. Schubert and Dijkstra (2009) describe a common pitfall of management when working with foreign contractors. They argue in their discussion that “there appears to be a tendency among safety managers to deny cultural differences, to treat everyone equal and not to discriminate, which is a Dutch social ideal” (p. 792). Moreover, they argue that cultural differences that are ignored, “do, in fact, exist and deserve special attention with respect to safety issues” (p. 792).

This example shows that a moral imperative of equal treatment may backfire with respect to occupational safety: problems with respect to safety are not faced, when it conflicts with the norms held in the organization. Interestingly, their observation reflects what American diversity research calls a ‘Discrimination and Fairness perspective’ (Ely and Thomas, 2001). In line with the tendency that Schubert and Dijkstra (2009) observed, this perspective indeed appears to be dominant in Dutch organizations (Luijters, 2008). Central to this perspective is the assumption that everybody is similar, and therefore deserves equal treatment. Such a perspective is “characterized by a belief in a culturally diverse workforce as a moral imperative to ensure justice and the fair treatment of all members of society” (Ely and Thomas, 2001, p. 245). As a result, problems are often not addressed, and managers deny a link between diversity and the central goals of a work team, such as performance, or in this case, ensuring occupational safety.

According to Ely and Thomas (2001) an integration and learning perspective yields better effects organizational effects. Central to the integration and learning perspective is the belief that diversity is a resource for learning, change and renewal. Managers value and stimulate different approaches to work, as well as different opinions and insight.

Although more research on the relation between those diversity perspectives and leadership literature is needed, the stimulation of employees to follow and express their opinions and insights seems in line with the connotation of transformational leadership. Transformational leadership is a leadership style that challenges employees to think about old problems in new ways and that gets the group together to work on shared goals (Podsakoff et al., 1990). As such, transformational leadership has shown to be very effective in increasing cohesion of a diverse team (De Poel, 2011; Dionne et al., 2004; Kearney and Gerbert, 2009). Interestingly, transformational leadership has also been found to enhance safety performance, safety compliance and safety participation (Inness et al., 2010).

4. A research agenda on national culture and occupational safety

Very little research has been conducted on national culture and occupational safety. In this paper, we have stressed the potential of national culture in better understanding safety performance in multicultural teams and organizations by discussing relevant research from the safety science discipline and beyond. In this final section, we make a number of suggestions for future research on national culture and occupational safety.

4.1. Safety knowledge

As workers’ knowledge of risks is an important antecedent of safety performance (Christian et al., 2009), and workers from different cultural backgrounds may differ in this knowledge, it is important to provide more insight into what they perceive to be risky situations. Renn and Rohrmann (2000) underline that cultural differences in risk perception may exist, but there are hardly studies on national culture and risk perception in the domain of occupational safety. It is therefore essential to study workers’ risk perceptions. Which situations are seen is risky or not? Why do some workers perceive situations as risky, whereas other workers do not? We believe experiments or focus groups may be useful methodology tools to investigate these questions.

Providing information about risky situations may be a successful strategy in altering workers’ perceptions of risks. Although pictograms that provide this information have limitations, it is useful to examine how pictograms may contribute to modify risk perceptions of workers with different cultural backgrounds. It is essential here to employ qualitative research methods first (e.g., focus groups) in order to investigate how pictograms are perceived from these workers. Based on such qualitative research, guidelines may be developed that can be used in large-scale surveys examining possible national cultural differences in perception.

4.2. Safety motivation

Cultural value dimensions, such as power distance and uncertainty avoidance, have proven to be an important tool in explaining attitudes and behavior in different national cultures. These value dimensions may indeed be helpful in explaining team members’ motivation to behave safely. However, cultural dimensions should not be taken as the only framework to analyze cultural differences and similarities in safety motivation. We believe that these dimensions can be useful to unravel the origins of such differences, but it has been shown particularly hard to attribute cross-cultural differences to these dimensions (e.g., Hofstede, 2001; Hornikx and O’Keefe, 2009). We therefore believe that safety research should focus on developing tools to measure national culture on the level of the individual. On the other hand, interactions with members should be stimulated, so that organizations start to better understand why members behave differently.

4.3. Safety climate

Research should be careful while taking individual scores of safety climate as proxy for team climate. When assessing its relation with individual safety measures such as safety motivation and safety performance, it may well reflect individual attitudes rather than a team’s safety climate (Guldenmund, 2007). Whereas a shared safety climate is an important determinant of safety knowledge and motivation (Christian et al., 2009), it is hard to achieve in multicultural teams.

Research should therefore focus on finding tools for increasing a shared team climate. One such tool is leadership. Earlier studies indicate that leaders sometimes feel reluctant to address cultural differences and we propose in line with Ely and Thomas (2001) that it is therefore important to study effective leadership styles in diverse work teams. We expect that transformational leadership plays an important role in increasing shared safety climate levels in diverse teams. However, as far as we know, this relationship has not been tested. We expect that studies addressing this question provide important knowledge for managers dealing with cultural diverse work context and safety matters.

Finally, we connected the concept of leader–member exchange to intercultural effectiveness. As cultural differences, combined with individual differences and regulations are inexhaustible, it is important to train competences that increase leaders’ as well as team members’ intercultural effectiveness.
4.4. Final remarks

The aim of the present paper was to draw attention to the potential role that national culture may play in occupational safety. Although national culture has certainly been a more prominent research topic (e.g., Bust et al., 2008; Manzey and Marold, 2009; Mears and Yule, 2009), we observe that there is no framework that may guide the understanding of national culture and occupational safety. Based on the integrative model of workplace safety of Christian et al. (2009), we have examined how national culture may affect safety knowledge, safety motivation, and safety climate. Although the research we presented is certainly not exhaustive, we believe that our research agenda constitutes a first step at better understanding the determinants of national culture in safety behavior of multicultural teams and organizations. We certainly do not intend to say that national culture is the most important factor that explains migrant workers’ disproportionately higher safety risks, but it deserves more research attention than it has previously received – especially in times of globalization.

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