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Fast Food Workers and Varying Compliance with Different Safety Codes

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Fast Food Workers and Varying Compliance with Different Safety Codes

by

James Isaac Laws

An Honors Capstone

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the Honors Diploma

to

The Honors College

of

The University of Alabama in Huntsville

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Introduction

“Occasionally, people would become too comfortable with their own knowledge and experience and feel that they did not need to follow all safety procedures...”, an anonymous fast food employee wrote. “There are very rarely any consequences to violating safety procedures, unless upper management sees it in action. Even then, it is usually just a verbal warning. If a person is hurt while violating safety procedures however, it is cause for immediate termination.” This worker’s testimony illustrates a common experience of practicing safety in the fast food work environment. Talk of safety is common but following safety procedures is arguably more important. Injuries that can result from actions such as not unplugging a machine before cleaning can lead to lost income, medical bills, and, as expressed by this anonymous employee, even termination. A knowledge of the reasons why employees are noncompliant with certain safety rules could help lead to better ways of bringing more compliance with safety and, therefore, protecting employees from harm. This research project focuses on two specific types of safety violations, personal protective equipment violations and machine guarding violations. Through surveying fast food employees, we analyzed how often they occur between each other, and what potential different reasons prompt employees to violate one and not the other.

Literature Review

In Alabama, 36,500 injuries and illnesses were recorded within the private industry in just 2018, the overwhelming majority (34,800) being injuries (United States Department of Labor 2020). That is approximately 95 potentially preventable injuries every day across the state. This makes work health safety (WHS) an important element to everyone in the workplace. It’s also important to the employers’ bottom line, as businesses where both employees and

management regard safety as a top priority tend to have better financial performance (Hajmohammad and Vachon 2014). Labor laws defining and setting occupational safety standards emerged in the 20th century, which was vital in alleviating health inequities for both the worker and the population (Gaydos et al. 2011). Corporate policies regarding safety are informed and enforced by regulatory agencies like the Occupational Health and Safety Administration (OSHA) and state laws (Blair and Knight 2013). WHS is also influenced by non-state actors such as unions, insurance companies, WHS consultants, industry and professional associations, and providers of the education and training for employees and management (Bluff 2017).

Theories

In recent years, the responsibility for WHS has been falling more to individual workers than managers or supervisors (Gray 2009). Individual compliance with safety laws and regulations is emphasized under the new lens of employee responsibility for safety. Compliance can be defined in multiple ways, such as self-regulation, “the sense of willingness, capacity, and arrangements to sustain ongoing preventative action”, or as substantive compliance, where compliance is regulatory goals of minimizing or eliminating risk (Bluff 2017, p. 620). Noncompliance with safety standards is a health and safety violation framed as a worker’s failure to act and behave safely (Gray 2009). Since studies have shown that majority of workers are knowledgeable about occupational safety hazards or have been trained to act safely (Tucker and Turner 2013, Lewko, Tremblay, Staley, & Volpe 2010), much focus has been put on the reasons for following and not following safety procedure.

There have been several theories and explanations proposed to explain workplace compliance and noncompliance with safety rules (Hajmohammad & Vachon 2014, Hofmann,

Morgeson, & Gerras 2003, Parker, Axtell, & Turner 2001, Tucker, Chmiel, Turner, Hershcovis, & Stride 2008, Hofmann and Stetzer 1996, Clarke and Ward 2006, Blair and Knight 2013).

Organizational support theory posits that employees comply with safety, health, and other rules through an obligation to the organization itself because of the “profitable treatment” they receive; compliant employees care about the business’s success, so the employees care about safety (Hajmohammad & Vachon 2014). Inversely, employees who do not care about the company’s success would have no obligation to follow safety standards. Organizational support theory is based on the idea of organizational commitment. This is the degree an employee identifies with and is emotionally attached to the organization that employs them (Parker, Axtell, & Turner 2001).

Organizational support theory is similar to leader-member exchange, where employees wish to return the favor to their leaders with certain behaviors that benefit the supervisors and others at the work setting (Hofmann, Morgeson, & Gerras 2003). This is based in social exchange theory, where subordinates have a perceived obligation to reciprocate to maintain the high-quality relationship (Tucker, Chmiel, Turner, Hershcovis, & Stride 2008). Instead of organizational commitment, the compliance to safety rules and standards comes from a wish to support the individual co-workers and leaders. Having a high-quality relationship with the leader prompts the employee to broaden his or her role beyond the job description and to actively engage in workplace safety (Hofmann, Morgeson, & Gerras 2003). Those with low quality relationships with leaders then would not necessarily broaden their role towards caring about safety.

The employees’ role could also be negatively affected by inadequate time, training, or resources in the workplace, which is associated with engaging in more unsafe actions (Hofmann

and Stetzer 1996). If leaders in the workplace do not provide enough of these to their employees, employees will not have the ability or knowhow to follow WHS regulation. One study suggests that logical arguments and factual evidence used by leaders to persuade employees to perform work safety has a direct influence on safety participation from employees, alongside allowing employees to take part in the decision-making processes of the job indirectly improves participation in safety (Clarke and Ward 2006). Workplaces with less safety violations, then, may be due to the use of certain leadership tactics. These theories and studies suggest leaders in organizations have a great deal of influence on the safety behavior of their employees, but they do not take into account the agency individual workers have when making decisions.

As workers are continually being positioned as the ones responsible for workplace safety, it is important to recognize the everyday decisions they make regarding WHS. Blair and Knight consider this by taking a cost-benefit analysis approach, writing, “The employee must weigh the personal benefits of noncompliance against the expected costs to select a course of action” (2013, pg. 532). Costs may include potential sanctions, hurting the high-quality relationship between the employee and leader, or potentially hurting the business’s success. If the employee has no organizational commitment or relationship quality with the leader is low, then the costs may not weigh as heavily. The decision to comply would rely on the potential benefits for breaking the safety code against whatever sanctions are in place to punish violating safety procedures. Such benefits might include accomplishing work more quickly or more comfortably (Hofmann and Stetzer 1996). The perceived costs will be influenced by how often the enforcers of safety behavior step in. However, unless an accident that results in injury takes place, enforcers often do not take action (Gray 2006). Since such safety violations may not result in frequent accidents, there may be little consequence for most who violate safety procedure

(Hofmann and Stetzer 1996). What current research lacks is a study of how employees comply with specific safety procedures differently.

Research Question and Hypothesis

One of the largest private-sector employers in the United States is the restaurant industry, with over 9.3 million workers nationwide (Gaydos et al. 2011). This abundance of workers makes it preferable to study safety behavior. While Alabama or the United States does not track the specific types of violations in the fast food or restaurant industry, Canada employs a ticketing system for health and safety violations, distinguishing between different types of violations (Gray 2009). This data demonstrates that certain types of violations are more ticketed than others, either through frequency of the act, frequency of write-ups for certain noncompliant behavior, or a combination of the two. The two most ticketed violations are for failure to properly utilize personal protective equipment (PPE) or failure to comply with machine guarding procedures; these comprise 23.3% and 20% of ticketed violations respectively (Gray 2009). It is worth noting that this totals only 13 tickets, so exact rates of occurrence are unknown. OSHA defines PPE as worn equipment used to minimize exposure to workplace hazards and machine guarding as safeguarding any part, function, or process of a machine that may cause injury (United States Department of Labor n.d. a, b). In a restaurant or fast food context, PPE and machine guarding violations may include not using guards on slicing, grinding, and food processing machines or forgoing wearing oven mitts and long-sleeved shirts in order to avoid hazards such as burns, slips, cuts, and more (Gaydos et al., 2011). Data obtained from over five hundred workers in Ontario shows that over 90% of workers have had some training regarding safety (Lewko, Tremblay, Staley, & Volpe 2010). The data would indicate that the safety violations recorded are not due to employees being ignorant of the law. Looking to Blair and

Knight's theory, the reason for the differing compliance with PPE and machine guarding compared to other forms of safety procedure may be due to employees believing the benefits of not wearing protective equipment or safeguarding machinery, (e.g., time saved), outweigh costs of potential injury or punishment. Leaders' influences on time, training, and resources may lead to differences between complying with PPE and machine guarding rules. For instance, if a leader mandates a task be done in a certain amount of time, the employee may decide to take shortcuts. Inadequate safety training could lead to employees making uninformed safety decisions that lead to differing compliance between the two. The lack of study into the reasons for failing to comply with certain safety laws over others and limited information about safety violations in Alabama's fast food industry gives way to a research opportunity. In Alabama's fast food industry, I will investigate if violations of PPE policies and machine guarding rules occur at different rates by surveying a number of fast food employees. I also wish to explore the reasons for why employees think others deviate from safety behavior. Specifically, I will investigate which reasons are the most prominent and influential regarding PPE and machine guarding violations. If the reported violations of PPE and machine guarding rules occur at different frequencies, then the reasons for violating these procedures will differ between PPE and machine guarding violations.

Methods

Research Method

Data was collected via a short cross-sectional survey with participants providing information about observed workplace safety deviance in their most recent fast food job. Surveying was deemed to be the most suitable methodology due to the ill fit of other methods. A content analysis of number of PPE and machine guarding violations across the United States

would be possible through examining OSHA datasets. Content analysis would provide exact numbers between PPE and machine guarding in various occupations, including the restaurant industry. However, it would only be data regarding citations for failure to comply with OSHA and federal safety law. The number of citations would not necessarily be reflective of the actual amount of times employees were noncompliant with health and safety code, only indicating what method of noncompliance is more easily caught and cited as a violation. Another data collection method considered was interviewing current and previous fast food employees about what they have observed in the workplace. Interviews would allow for more specific data to be collected, such as types of PPE safety noncompliance that occur more or less frequently. Interviewing could also let the interviewees speculate the reasons why certain noncompliance is more frequent than others, based on their own opinions or based on what they have heard from other coworkers and employees. However, interviewing has two major drawbacks. Due to the nature of being face to face conversations, some may be less willing to provide information about the safety patterns they have observed, possibly due to perceptions it may be reflective of their own patterns. While social desirability bias is mitigated through talking about observations, it may crop up more in interviews. Survey methodology provides more anonymity to the responses, asking for no names, ages, genders, or other readily identifiable information. The second issue with interviews is the larger time commitment required for the participants, meaning less would be willing to come. This would result in a lower sample size and therefore a fewer amount of perspectives. The fast food industry is vast, so to get a more accurate view of the rates of violation between machine guarding and PPE would require a larger sample size.

Procedure and Sample

A total of $n=35$ men and women over the age of 18 completed the survey. Recruitment began with Dr. Berbrier's online Intro to Sociology course for the Spring 2020 semester at the University of Alabama in Huntsville. Every student in the class was sent an email by the professor briefly describing the survey, followed by a link to the online survey. To meet the minimum required sample size of $n=30$, I implemented snowball sampling methods. The email encouraged the student to forward the link to other students, friends, or coworkers. At the completion of the survey, another message asked the participant to give the survey link to others who have had fast food work experience. One week after, another email was sent to Dr. Steidl's introductory sociology class, also at the University of Alabama in Huntsville, in order to reach a large enough sample to perform statistical analysis. Data collection concluded on March 18, 2020, two weeks after the second email was sent. Based on University statistics, students from these classes are likely aged 18-21 and majority white males. The statistics of these snowballed responses may be much more varied across race, gender, and age, but all participants are required to be 18 to take part in the survey. These other participants may not be students at the University of Alabama in Huntsville either. A few individuals were recruited personally or were asked to give the survey to a friend to help meet the target sample. Convenient sampling and snowballing methodology are biased, and random sampling would be ideal. However, due to a lack of resources, the researcher was unable to obtain random student information within the university or random employee contact information for workers in the fast food industry. There were no incentives given for the completion of the survey.

Measures

The test was hosted electronically online on Qualtrics and takes approximately five minutes to complete. Before taking the survey, the participant must read the informed consent form and agree or disagree to take part in the study. The study does not collect any names, email addresses, IP addresses, or usernames, and no identifiable information is collected in the survey. The initial section of questions asks about the participant's fast food work experience. These questions ask about amount of time spent in their most recent fast food job, how long they've been in the industry, if they are currently working in the fast food industry, and if they were in a managerial role. If an individual was currently employed, they may have a different perspective than those who are reminiscing past work experience. They may also be able to more accurately recall workplace violations that have occurred. Additionally, those employed longer would give a fuller picture of the workplace. The next questions' purposes are to inform the participants what PPE and machine guarding refer to with examples, asking if the workplace requires such safety measures. Nearly all restaurants would require this due to US law, so answers other than "Yes" may indicate poor training, uncertainty of the definition, or poor enforcement of WHS code. The next set of questions ask how frequently the participants have observed a coworker or coworkers not utilizing PPE, how frequently they have seen machine guarding violations, and how frequently their employers encourage or enforce proper procedures for PPE and machine guarding. The frequency is measured using a 5-point Likert scale with each frequency relating to the number of times a violation happens on average every week. Those who answer "do not recall" are not included in the analysis. These responses will be used to determine which violation is more frequent among the sample. The questions about the supervisors tie into the leader-member exchange theory. Two questions asked the participant to speculate what they

think causes employees to violate both machine guarding procedures and utilizing PPE, with the ability to specify a cause. The survey ends with an open-ended question where the participant describes the most recent workplace violation they can recall in their own words. This adds a qualitative element to the survey to allow for a more accurate understanding of the frequency and causes for PPE and machine guarding violations.

Analysis

Survey data from Qualtrics was analyzed using SPSS and QDA Miner. One sample and two sample t-tests with significance at .05 levels were conducted on quantitative data gathered from the survey using SPSS. Frequencies of data were also compared. Qualitative data from the last question was coded with QDA Miner. The answers provided by the participants were openly coded as the type of violations mentioned, who was responsible for the violation, any consequences mentioned, and the reasons why the violation occurred. These coded violations are not limited to just PPE and machine guarding violations so as to obtain a fuller picture of workplace safety violation patterns. The qualitative data is used to provide richer context to the quantitative data and to gain new insights.

Results

Quantitative Data

Table 1

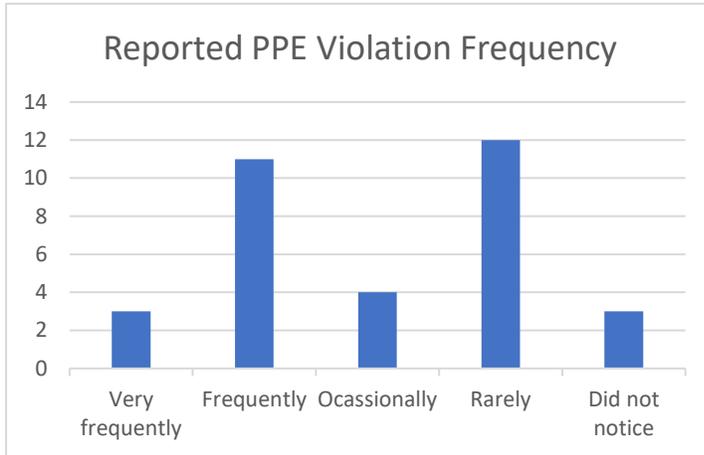
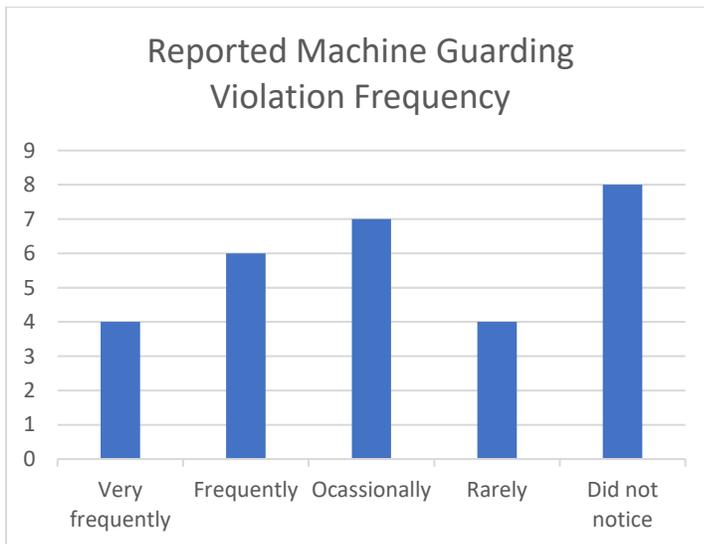


Table 2



The participants asked to report frequency of PPE violations (N=33) on a 5-point Likert scale saw a frequency of $M=2.9697$ ($SD=1.21153$). When asked to report the frequency of machine guarding violations, the participants (N=29) had a frequency of $M=2.7931$ ($SD=1.42376$). A single sample t-test was conducted to determine if a statistically significant difference existed between the frequency of PPE violations and machine guarding violations.

The fast food employees sampled saw machine guarding violations happen at a significantly different frequency than personal protective equipment violations, $t(28)= 10.565$, $p= .000$. This would indicate that PPE violations occur slightly more often than machine guarding violations. Looking at the responses of Table 1, most often the participants saw PPE violations occur frequently (multiple times a week) and rarely (less than once a week). Table 2 has a vastly different pattern of responses, with a more even distribution of responses. Unlike the responses in Table 1, over a quarter of participants (27.59%) did not notice any machine guarding violations occur at all. Taken together, the results suggest that PPE violations occur more frequently overall across numerous different fast food organizations, with certain organizations having little to no machine guarding violations.

Participants whose supervisors generally encouraged machine guarding ($N=19$) had a violation frequency of $M=2.1053$ ($SD=1.19697$), or about less than once a week. Participants whose supervisors did not encourage machine guarding ($N=10$) had a violation frequency of $M=4.1000$ ($SD=0.73786$), or about multiple times a week. A two-sample t-test was conducted to determine if there was a statistically significant difference between participants whose supervisors encouraged machine guarding and those who did not in regard to the frequency of machine guarding violations. Participants whose supervisors did not tend to encourage the use of machine guarding reported more frequent machine guarding violations, $t(27)= -4.789$, $p= .000$. However, an accurate assessment for the association of PPE violations and supervisor encouragement was unable to be determined due to only four indicating their supervisors did not encourage the use of PPE. This one-sidedness in response, though, may suggest that PPE is encouraged more than machine guarding.

Table 3

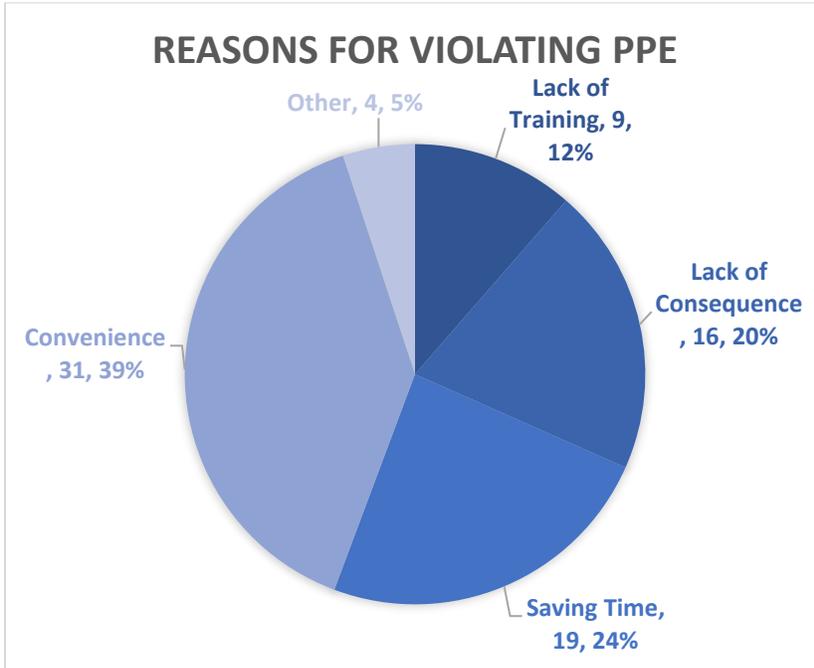
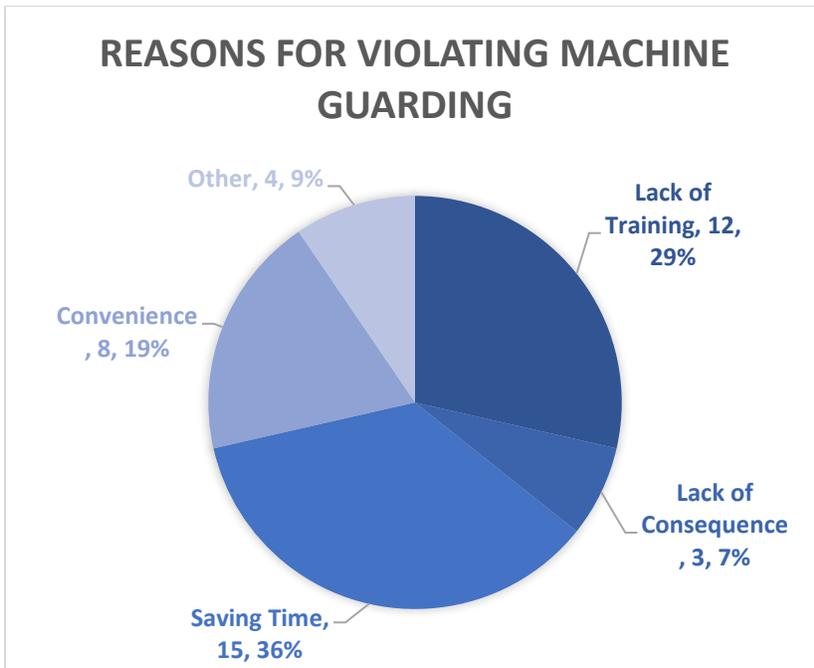


Table 4



Participants were asked to choose the reasons they believed contributed to why employees committed PPE and machine guarding violations (N=35). The results of these two questions are displayed in Tables 3 and 4. Participants were able to choose multiple reasons, but an error with the Qualtrics website led to a majority of respondents unable to choose multiple responses for the reasons behind machine guarding violations. Differences in responses between PPE and machine guarding violation reasons may be due to this error. Regardless, there were a number of differences between the two. More attributed a lack of training to machine guarding violations than PPE violations. Convenience was cited far more often for PPE violations, with a majority of participants (31) believing it to be a factor. Roughly half cited lack of consequence for PPE, while only three did the same for machine guarding violations. Saving time was seen an important factor in both PPE violations and machine guarding violations. This provides some support to the hypothesis that the reasons for violating PPE and machine guarding procedures differ.

Qualitative Data

19 of the participants responded to the final open-ended question, the rest of the participants left the space blank or indicated they did not recall. The violation mentioned most often was PPE violations, specified by 9 of the 19 responses. This supports the quantitative data from the survey that indicates PPE violations are statistically more prevalent than machine guarding violations. Several other violations mentioned, such as food safety violations, tool safety violations, and sanitation violations occurred just as frequently (3 each) as machine guarding violations in the responses. The responses also revealed a few reasons for violations not mentioned in the multiple-choice responses. Three participants noted instances of management approving or ordering them to deviate from safety procedure, in one case sacrificing quality

control to work as fast as possible. One participant found that PPE violations tended to happen often because of the length of time it takes to put on gloves. Another was financial limitations, specifically regarding PPE violations. Employees may be told by their work to source certain PPE themselves, such as non-slip shoes, but being unable to afford it themselves. One participant described this as a “Catch 22” where they cannot work without the uniform, but also cannot afford the uniform unless they work.

When consequences were mentioned, they were typically minor such as verbal warnings. One wrote that a person had been threatened with termination numerous times for violating safety procedure yet continues to work at the establishment. Termination was only mentioned once, where a participant described how only when a person is injured due to a safety violation will be grounds for immediate termination. A lack of consequences is what was mentioned most whenever consequences were discussed.

Discussion

The results indicate that PPE violations and machine guarding violations occur at different frequencies, addressing the research question. PPE violations were reported more frequently in both quantitative and qualitative survey data than machine guarding violations, which suggests PPE violations are more prevalent in the fast food industry than machine guarding violations. This difference in frequencies may indicate that different underlying reasons for violations occur. This hypothesis is supported by the different explanations provided by the participants, such as convenience being cited far more often for PPE violations than machine guarding violations. Explanations of time and training fall in line with previous research that suggested unsafe behaviors were significantly associated with inadequate time, training, and

resources (Hofmann and Stetzer 1996). The survey data clarifies, though, that these explanations tend to account for different types of violations.

A lack of consequences was cited far more often for PPE violations than machine guarding violations, and participants indicated that usually there are verbal warnings or no consequences at all for violating safety protocol. This lack of consequences was also noted by Hofmann and Stetzer (1996). The managers hardly provide any costs to the employee's violating behavior, leading to benefits of violating safety procedures outweighing any costs. Just as Gray (2006) noted, one participant wrote that only if one got injured violating safety rules would severe disciplinary action be taken. Having real consequences for violations is one way managers and leaders can have employees take compliance more seriously. However, some violations are due to circumstance, such as being unable to afford non-slip shoes. Workplaces should take special consideration for noncompliance in this context.

The data also brought to light the role of some managers directly approving of violations, such as to get work done faster. Theories generally come from the perspective that employees are the violators of safety procedure, that they may be noncompliant because of their relationship with the workplace, the management, and work conditions (Hajmohammad & Vachon 2014, Parker, Axtell, & Turner 2001, Tucker, Chmiel, Turner, Hershcovis, & Stride 2008, Hofmann, Morgeson, & Gerras 2003, Hofmann and Stetzer 1996). The theories and writings acknowledge the indirect role leaders can have in the workplace, but often do not touch upon managers directly approving or being noncompliant themselves in certain safety rules. With current trends of placing more responsibility onto the employees instead of management for following safety procedure (Gray 2009), this information suggests future theories need to consider this direct role alongside their indirect influence.

Conclusion

The results indicated that noncompliance with PPE and machine guarding rules occur at different frequencies, with PPE being much more prevalent. The hypothesis that there were different reasons for violating safety procedure between PPE and machine guarding violations was also supported by the data, with lack of consequence and convenience more prevalent with PPE violations and lack of training more prevalent for machine guarding violations. Saving time was cited as an important reason for both, and some noted that financial limitations affected the ability to comply with PPE rules. The lack of consequences was clarified by qualitative data, revealing that in most cases, employees received a verbal warning or no consequences at all for violations unless someone was injured. A few participants noted incidents where managers directly approved of or engaged in noncompliance with safety procedures, which was hardly touched upon in prior research.

There are some limitations to this study. Participants were largely pulled from the University of Alabama in Huntsville with a small sample size, making it difficult to generalize to the entirety of Alabama or the US. Several analyses were unable to be included due to the small sample, such as comparing the differences between employee and manager responses. Any future studies should gather a larger pool of participants and broader geographical recruitment in order to obtain more accurate data on violation frequency and the reasons behind them. An error in the survey design when transferred to the website left participants unable to select multiple answers for reasons behind machine guarding violations, so the differences between the reasons may be explained by the restriction of selecting only one response. Another avenue studies can explore is the impact of financial limitations on purchasing certain PPE such as non-slip shoes and the double bind employees may find themselves in. This study also brought to attention the

role of managers directly approving of or engaging in violations, which could be taken into consideration in future research. This study looked only at two types of violations, PPE and machine guarding violations, when there are numerous others such as tool safety and sanitation violations that can bring harm to the employees. Future research should factor in a variety of different violations in a restaurant environment. Knowledge of why specific violations occur could help develop better ways of preventing fast food workplace safety violations and the injuries that may occur.

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Honors Capstone Approval (Laws, Spring 2020)

Jenn Sims <jennifer.sims@uah.edu>

Sat, Apr 25, 2020 at 5:50 PM

To: James Laws <jil0002@uah.edu>

Cc: Kyle Knight <kyle.knight@uah.edu>, William Wilkerson <wilkerw@uah.edu>, David Cook <dac0010@uah.edu>

Dear Isaac Laws,

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Best,

Dr. Sims

CC: Kyle Knight, Bill Wilkerson, David Cook

Jennifer Patrice Sims, PhD
Assistant Professor of Sociology
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"If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor."
- Desmond Tutu



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