



# Small enterprise owners' accident causation attribution and prevention

Peter Hasle<sup>a</sup>, Pete Kines<sup>a,\*</sup>, Lars Peter Andersen<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> National Research Centre for the Working Environment, Lersø Parkallé 105, 2100 Copenhagen, Denmark

<sup>b</sup> Herning Regional Hospital, Department of Occupational Medicine, Gl. Landevej 61, Herning, Denmark

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## Abstract

Small enterprises have difficulty in the systematic prevention of accidents. This study explores how owners of small enterprises attribute accident causation and what they learn about accident prevention after an accident. Interviews were carried out with owners of 22 small (1–19 employees) construction and metal industry enterprises that recently had reported an accident with an expected injury absence of over two weeks. Data were analysed using thematic analysis. The results reveal that after a relatively serious accident the owners predominantly attribute the incident to unforeseeable circumstances, and secondarily to worker faults. A possible explanation is both self- and group-defensive attributions in order to avoid responsibility and blame. The reciprocal and close social relations between owners and workers make it difficult for the owners to be solely responsible for the accident. The study presents a paradox: learning from the accidents seems to be negative as the owners need to abstain from accident prevention in order to maintain that accidents are unforeseeable, and the injured worker returns to work under the same unsafe conditions as before the accident. The study indicates that efforts to improve accident prevention in small enterprises need to find ways to avoid defensive attribution in order to attain successful outcomes.

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Owners of small enterprises

In most countries small enterprises constitute a large majority of all enterprises and account for a considerable share of all employees. At the same time it has become clear that small enterprises have a higher injury risk than larger enterprises (Fabiano et al., 2004; Mendeloff and Kagey, 1990; Stevens, 1999; Suruda, 1992, 1996), and it is difficult and expensive for preventive efforts to reach all small enterprises (Walters, 2001).

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\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +45 39165200; fax: +45 39165201.

E-mail address: [pki@nrcwe.dk](mailto:pki@nrcwe.dk) (P. Kines).

A growing number of studies have focused on the ability of small enterprises to assess and control risks (For reviews see Champoux and Brun, 2003; Hasle and Limborg, 2006). In comparison to larger enterprises, small enterprises are usually characterised by limited resources – both financially and on the management side. This characteristic has been a focus point in the business research literature for many years (Beaver, 2003; Goffee, 1996; Martin and Staines, 1994; Scase and Goffee, 1980). The owner is often also the manager and has to deal with a number of different administrative and management issues such as sales, planning, human resources, finance, accounting and billing. On top of this, many owners in the smallest enterprises are involved in practical work as well. Due to their many different tasks the owner/managers tend to carry out on-the-spot problem solving with little consideration for the long term affects of their decisions. It is evident that these limited resources make it difficult to apply more systematic approaches to health and safety, as is found in larger enterprises. Health and safety legislation requirements are generally not followed, particularly regarding risk assessment and control, safety meetings are rarely held, problems are dealt with on an ad hoc basis, and little is written down (Walters, 2001). The owner is the key to understanding both risk control and the operation of the small enterprise, and is the dominant actor in relation to any changes made. The personal values and priorities of the owner are determinants of the culture, social relations and the attitude of the enterprise regarding the work environment (Antonsson et al., 2002; Eakin, 1992; Hasle, 2000; Stephens et al., 2004). It is, therefore, important to explore the owner's understanding and approach to risk and risk control. This has been discussed in the literature in relatively broad terms, but with limited empirical support (Antonsson et al., 2002; Barbeau et al., 2004; Mayhew, 1997).

### *1.2. Accidents and defensive attribution in small enterprises*

The owners' approach to risk control likely develops from practical experience in the daily operations of the enterprise, as well as prior work experience and experience shared with colleagues in the sector. Yet it is well known that written information about safety plays a minor role in small enterprises (Hasle and Limborg, 2006). The actual occurrence of an accident is likely to play an important role in the development of risk perception and the importance of risk control. The study of owners' interpretation of the causes of an accident in their enterprise, and their subsequent behaviour after the accident is a possible way to explore the owners' attitude towards risk. The process of investigating an accident involves not only the identification of internal (e.g. behaviour) and external (e.g. technical, environment and culture) rational elements, but also elements of responsibility, fault, and possible blame (DeJoy, 1994; Shannon et al., 1997). Analyses of accident causal attribution, the importance of which in the safety and psychosocial literature is well documented, are relevant analytical approach for explorative and descriptive studies of the work environment (DeJoy, 1990; Gyekye and Salminen, 2006). Self- or group-defensive attribution biases are common in occupational accidents, whereby people have a tendency to want to protect themselves or their group from blame or prejudice though the externalisation of causality. These causal attributions, rather than the actual causes, often determine if and what accident preventive measures are implemented (DeJoy, 1994; Woodcock et al., 2005). There has been focus on the role of hierarchical and group level effects on self- and group-defensive attributions, but only in respects to fairly large sized enterprises with formal structures (Gyekye and Salminen, 2006; Kouabenan et al., 2001; Lehane and Stubbs, 2001; Salminen, 1992). To date there are no studies that have looked at defensive attribution in small enterprises where formal structures and hierarchies are quite different from larger enterprises. Employers and employees tend to have closer social relations (Hasle and Limborg, 2006) which could strengthen self- and group-defensive attributions.

The metal and construction industries are two industries with a high risk of serious injury (Flanagan et al., 1998; Kines, 2001), and subsequent lengthy work absence (Kines et al., 2007). Preliminary analyses to this study showed that in the period 1999–2003 30% and 36% of all the reported accidents by small enterprises in the Danish metal and construction industries, respectively, involved an expected injury absence of over 14 days. The data are unfortunately strongly biased by underreporting, but they do provide some indication as to the need for accident and injury absence reduction in the two sectors.

Enterprise size itself will also play a role for owners' risk perception and approach to risk control, as accidents occur relatively infrequently, in comparison to larger enterprises, e.g. small enterprises may never experience a serious accident or there may be several years between them. In the preliminary analyses to this study

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