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## Investigating the “blues” of safety professionals

Jean-Christophe Le Coze

*Institut National de l'Environnement industriel et des RISques, France. E-mail: [jean-christophe.lecoze@ineris.fr](mailto:jean-christophe.lecoze@ineris.fr)*

Didier Delaitre

Mines Paris, PSL University, Centre for research on risks and crises (CRC), 06904 Sophia Antipolis, France.  
*E-mail: [didier.delaitre@minesparis.psl.eu](mailto:didier.delaitre@minesparis.psl.eu)*

Justin Larouzeé

Mines Paris, PSL University, Centre for research on risks and crises (CRC), 06904 Sophia Antipolis, France.  
*E-mail: [justin.larouzee@minesparis.psl.eu](mailto:justin.larouzee@minesparis.psl.eu)*

Aurélien Portelli

Mines Paris, PSL University, Centre for research on risks and crises (CRC), 06904 Sophia Antipolis, France.  
*E-mail: [aurelien.portelli@minesparis.psl.eu](mailto:aurelien.portelli@minesparis.psl.eu)*

Eric Rigaud

Mines Paris, PSL University, Centre for research on risks and crises (CRC), 06904 Sophia Antipolis, France.  
*E-mail: [eric.rigaud@minesparis.psl.eu](mailto:eric.rigaud@minesparis.psl.eu)*

### Abstract

The aim of this article is twofold. First, it introduces a phenomenon of discontent among safety professionals, termed the “*blues*,” expressed through several recent critical publications about their profession. Although different in tone and geographical origin, these publications share similar analyses about the profession's dysfunctions. The main criticisms focus on excessive bureaucratisation, simplistic approaches to safety, disconnection from field reality, and lack of professional recognition. The authors of these books particularly denounce the excessive time spent on reports and indicators at the expense of more concrete prevention actions. Second, the article outlines a research project to understand better the representativeness of this “*blues*” and its implications for the profession, particularly by exploring links with the quest for meaningful work and mechanisms of dissonance between professional ideals and field reality.

*Keywords:* safety professionals, “*blues*”, profession, education, globalisation, digital society.

### 1. Introduction

The safety profession is increasingly studied by researchers who are more and more interested in the activity of these employees, whose role is to ensure that organisations incorporate into their activities their impact on the environment, health (e.g., mental, physiological) and the safety of their members and their clients or products' consumers (e.g., Provan et al, 2018; Hale, Booth, 2019; Guennoc et al, 2019; Walters, 2024). This study is a contribution to this growing interest. Its aim is twofold. First, it introduces what is described as

a “*blues*” phenomenon among the safety profession, a “*blues*” expressed in books published in the past decade by safety professionals. It insists on its spontaneous expression, by several professionals, who have found, in the context of the digital society, a possibility of doing so. Second, it described how a group of researchers, from two different institutions (INERIS, CRC Mines de Paris), found a common interest exploring this phenomenon, and how, through several brainstorming sessions, they developed a way to broaden, frame and situate this topic, then built a methodological path

to investigate it further, through interviews. Due to the space constraints of this communication but also time constraints for the exploitation of data following the interviews, this paper leaves this next phase of interpretation for another publication. The authors believe that paying attention to the expression of the “blues” by safety professionals is not a simple intellectual exercise but may well be anticipating a crisis of the profession in terms of attractiveness, and ability to meet the needs of organisations in the future.

## 2. Identifying a phenomenon: the “blues”

Over the past decade, a series of books have been published, by safety professionals, books with explicit titles expressing a sort of discontent with the role, identity and practice of their profession. These professionals have in common one or two decades of practical experiences in different industries, roles and functions in different organisations, but share a common analysis. They range from provocative titles like, “*Safety Sucks! The bullshit in the profession they don’t tell you about*” (Goodman, 2021) or “*I know my shoes are untied. Mind your own business! An iconoclast’s view of workers’ safety*” (La Duke, 2019), to ones like “*Challenging the Safety Quo*” (Marriott, 2018), “*The fearless world of professional safety in the 21st century*” (Gesinger, 2018) or “*Safety Myth 101*” (Busch, 2016) which are more neutral and less provocative, yet also sharing critical tone.

Their authors openly formulate their discontent, dissatisfaction described as the expression of a form of “blues” (Le Coze, 2024). To get an idea of this discontent, several quotes are now selected, and then briefly commented on. In “*Safety sucks!*”, Goodman writes that “*the safety profession has been stagnant for far too long. Safety folks are abused and misused, they’ve often underpaid and overworked, they are undervalued and not appreciated, they find themselves being blamed and shamed when accidents occur, they are torn between the frontline and management, they have been forced to knowingly promote flawed, ineffective and disproven safety management systems, they have been told to preach from a bible in which they do not believe, and it’s time for all that to change*” (Goodman, 2021, p11).

In “*I know my shoes are untied. Mind your own business! An iconoclast view of workers’ safety*”, La Duke writes “*I have always felt like an outsider in safety (...) I met safety professionals who literally cared more about whether or not I tied my shoes and used the handrail than ensuring that no one died (which I least three did) on the job. These puffed up and sanctimonious boobs spent most of their time in their offices doing ... well, God knows what*” (La Duke, 2019, p3).

“*The fearless world of professional safety in the 21st century*”, by Gesinger, starts in the first pages with the following statement “*It is time for the safety profession to shift to new ways of thinking for the 21st century. This became clear to me while attending a recent professional development conference (...) the presenters talked about the value of safety, but few of them itemized the skills, abilities, or specific practices that are part of that value (...) Safety philosophy had, we concluded, grown stale.*” (Gesinger, 2018, p10).

Busch also elaborates along similar lines in “*Safety myth 101*”. In the introductory chapter, titled “*Houston, we have a problem*”, he develops the following idea. “*One regularly sees a lack of up-to-date professional knowledge or skill among safety professionals. (...) There is a reluctance to take up a critical attitude with regard to established truth and practices, to develop professionally, to follow up on relevant literature or to look across borders. This is a serious problem because these things cause safety professionals to be less effective and sometimes even counter-effective*”. (Busch, 2016, 2, p15).

Finally, the last excerpt for this paper is Marriott’s formulation of a ‘middle-life crisis’ in the profession. In his book, “*Challenging the safety quo*”, he reckons that “*In online forums, at conferences, seminars and in safety publications, people are beginning to question some of the most well-established principles of safety management. Safety as a profession is going through a middle-life crisis (...) We have made significant progress since the days major projects budgeted for a certain number of fatalities, but by and large, the safety profession is frowned upon (...) There is a general rolling of the eyes and resigned shrugging of shoulders, if not outright hostility*” (Marriott, 2018, p13).

The choices in this book illustrate the perspectives of five safety professionals writing five different books based on five different

experiences, in different countries (Norway, New Zealand, US) in different geographies (North America, Europe, Oceania), while sharing a common view, expressed with a different tone (radical, provocative, critical), about their profession. In their eyes, something is going wrong. They target what they consider to be widely established but inadequate practices. Each of this selected quote adds a different angle. Overall, they concern several aspects of the profession.

One is their status and position in organisation. Goodman says that they are underpaid and overworked, undervalued, shamed and blamed after an event, torn between frontline and management. Another is about their approach, which is for La Duke, to sit in their office, write rules, focus on the wrong kind of problems. Gesinger criticises professional conferences, and their lack of credible description of their practices. Finally, two other aspects include the safety professionals' lack of interest for the literature and the explicit questioning of well-established principles of safety management.

What to make of these books, and their messages? These texts are written by professionals for professionals, and some of them are self-published. Interviews with some of their authors reveal that they wrote them, sometimes, with consulting ambition. These books are therefore also positioned on a safety market (Le Coze, 2019). But some were not meant to support or help with a career change, from employee status (safety professional in a company) to self-employed status, such as consultant for instance. These are contributions to the profession. Motivation for publishing these books, while an important dimension, do not fundamentally and necessarily matter when it comes to the value of studying these books. Their existence constitutes a research material, manifesting something worth investigating.

One position is indeed to consider these books as interesting texts bringing valuable insights to safety research. Rather than drawing a line between academia and practice, with on the one side, books written by academics of what would constitute the core of what defines relevant, established and valid knowledge, and on the other side, books written by professionals which would only be written with a view to

practice (without research validation), why not see in these texts interesting and valuable content for a reflection for safety research about the profession? In one way or the other, these professionals, when writing these books, are also some sort of researchers, or reflective practitioners. They are not socialised and used to publish in an academic manner, but provide, when decoded, highly valuable insights. Their discontent is a case of critique from within the profession rather than from outside, such as from academia (as for instance found in Walters, 2024). And, critiques from practice and academia can be mutually reinforcing.

In doing so, that is, carefully reading the contents of these books and analysing them, deciphering them, comparing them, one of the outcomes is their similarities about context and reasons of their discontent, despite their idiosyncrasies. They target what is described in the study as a flawed, deep-seated, safety mindset that influences the profession. This mindset affects several core categories related to the practice of these professionals. They consider that a simplistic, legalist and bureaucratic approach of safety prevails.

This mindset applies to the six following categories: (1) causality (critiques regarding cause and effect in safety, e.g., accident investigation, risk assessment, statistics, models); (2) safety (vs risk), meaning of safety as a concept very often in contrast to the notion of risk, (3) people at work, perspective on workers' practices, contexts, and behaviours, (4) bureaucracy, compliance, issues associated with (safety) rules at work, including standards, (5) organisation, topics linked to leadership, culture, relations, and 'soft skills' (e.g., communication) and (6) safety indicators & measurement, questions regarding keeping track of safety levels through metrics.

In the study of these books, the contexts and reasons for these publications, their similarities, are investigated. One element of answer is the digital context of their production. We live in a digital society which has completely reshaped the way knowledge is produced and shared (Cardon, 2019, Rieffel, 2019). These books are produced in this new context. Many of the authors started with blogs, and social media in the 2010s. Seeing the response to their ideas exposed online, through readers' reactions and comments, they moved

from bits of texts (e.g., LinkedIn posts, or blogs' page, podcasts) to a full text transformed into a book, sometimes self-published. They have not all proceed this way, but the context of the digital society is therefore key in their expression.

The digital realm now offers unprecedented communication possibilities. It can connect people and amplify networks across the world by circulating ideas for all to see and to comment on, one tool of the intensification of globalisation in the recent decades. LinkedIn is a prime example of this phenomenon but there are many other cases. In this respect, seen from the lens of globalisation, another outcome is that the content of these books shares similarities despite their different tones, and the different origins of their authors. Of course, as one can imagine, these are very idiosyncratic books, and each author approach the topic with different angles, writing style, background/education, cases and stories, countries of origin and of working experience, industries but also concepts used. Yet, they have something in common.

This commonality, it is argued, is globalisation, affecting the work of safety professionals and practices as shown in empirical studies in different industries like maritime transport or the chemical industry for instance, exhibiting similar trends (Le Coze, Dupré, 2022, Flécher, 2022, Haavik et al, 2022). These trends, felt across industries are digitalisation, externalisation, standardisation, financialisation and self-regulation (Le Coze, 2020). They reshape the context of work. They have led, over the past two to three decades, to an inflation of what constitutes paperwork, reporting, indicators and centralised control through digitalisation. The implications of these trends, widely felt, have been translated in health and safety too, with an increase of what is described in the past decade as a sort of bureaucratisation of safety (Almklov et al, 2014, Dekker, 2014, Le Coze, 2017, Størkersen et al, 2020).

One message of these books, to put it simply, is that an inflated bureaucratic, disproportionate (relatively to risks), and overly quantitative approach to safety misses the mark, and damages the image of safety professionals (i.e., the deep seated, flawed, mindset). Spending time reporting indicators (LTI, lost time injury) back to the headquarters of organisations (e.g., multinationals), writing safety rules from one's

desk expecting behavioural discipline for certification purposes and checking compliance with the rules during audits have strong limitations when it comes to the role, identity and practice of safety professionals.

Yet, the amplification of such trends due to globalised tendencies is precisely one aspect which contributes to a reaction from safety professionals. This reaction is expressed across the world, precisely because it is triggered by globalised trends. Whether one works in New Zealand, the US, in France or in UK, these trends (digitalisation, externalisation, self-regulation, financialisation, standardisation) are being experienced. It is a product of a global capitalism.

Finally, a third reason worth commenting here when studying these books is their degree of connection with a literature that they discover by themselves, with relevance for their profession yet not incorporated in the education of safety professionals. Education in safety is strongly oriented by legal and engineering perspectives, at the expense of other disciplines, although they are highly relevant. This point is perfectly expressed by most of these authors.

For instance, La Duke remarks, *"too often safety professionals typically don't know all that much about organizational development, transformational change or organizational psychology"* (La Duke, 2019, p46), or Busch, who asserts, *"the majority of them safely (no pun intended) and comfortably stick to safety literature, instead of expanding into fields like psychology, management literature, statistics, law, language, general science or even philosophy"* (Busch, 2016, p17, 70)

This realisation of the importance of such disciplines also includes safety science as a developing domain, a domain engaging with their practices. Although these authors do not necessarily refer to, or are not necessarily directly influenced by popular authors in safety, many of these books do incorporate notions produced by more academically oriented authors (in particular, academic writing for professionals, rather than only academics). One example is the popularity of Hollnagel's discourse on Safety I and Safety II (Hollnagel, 2012), or Dekker's on Safety Differently (Dekker, 2002, 2015), or the Anarchist thesis (Dekker, 2018).

Linked to the development of research on human error, since the work of Reason and

Rasmussen in the 1980s (Reason, 1990, Rasmussen, 1990), these popular writings bring alternative discourse to rules, compliance and behaviours (e.g., and the often-contested behaviourist-based approach), by substituting it with the notion of expertise, cognition and variability when people deal with complexities<sup>a</sup>. In this respect, they bring a different perspective to the popular discourse in behaviourism in safety for several decades.

Yet, these safety professional authors are careful when mentioning these ideas. If they reject a simplistic view of rules, of bureaucracy, they also recognise their value, trying to find a balance, and they do not apply suggestions from the literature without appraisal of their practical value, *“I have included some aspects that I am not entirely convinced by personally, but which are views held by others whom I respect”* (Marriott, 2018, p15).

So, while these books are critical, expressing a form of frustration, and discontent, they also discuss alternatives, and come with constructive suggestions. Together, these elements of analysis on contexts, and reasons offer a potential explanation for these publications: (1) education in safety, (2) globalisation and its consequences and (3) the digital society (and safety market), as represented in figure 1 below. Now, several questions follow from this first analysis of the *“blues”*.



Figure 1. Context of the *“blues”*

As formulated in the study *“there are concerns regarding the authors and their books, prompting questions about their representativeness within the safety profession. How accurately do these authors depict the*

*profession? Additionally, how do safety professional associations incorporate and acknowledge this 'blues' in their activities, debates, and written materials? How representative of organisations and industries is the picture that they paint?”* (Le Coze, 2024). The next section introduces a project designed to start answering some of these questions.

### 3. Investigating the « blues »

Looking for ways to collaborate on their common interests in safety beyond regular interactions during conferences, meetings or teaching, researchers from Ineris and CRC - Mines de Paris, met in late 2023. After discussing different opportunities, the topic of the *“blues”* was picked as a relevant one to investigate during the year 2024. For Ineris, the study of safety professionals is one aspect of the reliability, safety and performance of safety-critical systems, for CRC, the study of professionals is highly relevant to their environment, health and safety master program, teaching future managers. In this section, two dimensions of this collaboration are distinguished, first the intellectual exploration of the topic based on the first study, second, the methodological problem of investigating this phenomenon further.

#### 3.1. Intellectual investigations

The next phase consisted in a series of working sessions in the spirit of brainstorming sessions, to discuss the possibility of investigating further the significance of the *“blues”*, based on the input of the first study. Several working sessions were organised, to freely explore, collectively, what the topic suggested to researchers, and how to methodologically investigate it. The sessions were very productive ones, leading to very rich discussions, that can be summarised in five main themes, for this communication (1) the link of the *“blues”* to the topic and wider problem of meaningful work; (2) the level of discontent whether at the individual, organisational, institutional (e.g., profession) or societal one; (3) the role of social media in helping express the *“blues”*, which have been unperceived, so far, by academia, (4) the

<sup>a</sup> The article by Besnard and Hollnagel on *“safety myths”* is a good case (Besnard, Hollnagel, 2014).

mechanism of the “*blues*” as a product of a dissonance (i.e., ideal vs reality) and finally, (5) the metaphors, imaginaries and narratives of the “*blues*”.

Let’s briefly comment these themes. First, meaning at work is a huge topic, with a considerable literature which could be linked to the “*blues*”. For instance, a popular thesis, in the contemporary society, is the one of Graeber and his concept of “*bullshit jobs*” (Graeber, 2020), an expression used by researchers in safety to criticise the audit trend in safety (Størkersen, 2023), but beyond this visible thesis, a wide scholarship exists on meaning at work (e.g., Coutrot, Perez, 2022). For Coutrot, meaningful work combines a sense of utility to society, of quality of work and of learning.

Applied to safety, these three categories offer interesting analytic purchase when applied to the “*blues*” as expressed in the books. Questioning the value of their contribution, challenging the relevance of their practice and considering the stagnant background of the profession, the authors of these books fit well in the lack of meaningful work. This safety professionals’ discourse would therefore be the explicit exposition of the lack of meaning of their work. But, at that is the second point, are these authors rather isolated or the voices of a wider community?

One question is indeed the level of analysis regarding this discontent. Is this a discussion about certain individuals, of certain type of personalities? Or do we, instead, need to think this phenomenon at the scale of organisations, or perhaps even industries, which would be more likely to trigger this sort of discontent. Are these authors reflecting on their idiosyncrasies represent their organisations or industry more than the profession? Is there an homogeneous or heterogeneous view of the profession? Do they contribute to the identification of a side of the mainstream in the profession that was not so far addressed?

This is a transition to the third point, that is, the absence of knowledge and coverage by academia of this phenomenon, which is therefore left in the dark, unsurfaced, unspoken until some authors start formulating it, for researchers to notice. This would be an interesting illustration of the use of social media to formulate a problem which then becomes more visible for researchers

and academics so they can pay more attention to it. It also amplifies the existence of the reflective dimension of practitioners and the value of establishing bridges, characterising a new perspective on the problem of the research-practice gap (Shorrock, 2019).

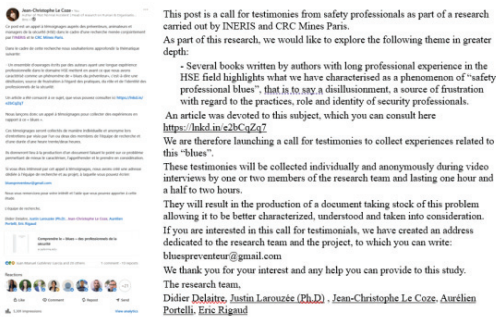
This third point leads to the two last because researchers turning to the study of this topic can start problematising the phenomenon with different complementary angles, opening new avenues for understanding it, exploring for instance the socio-psychological mechanism behind the “*blues*”, such as what is known as cognitive dissonance, to take one famous notion (Festinger, 1956). The metaphors, images and narrative used could also reveal interesting dimensions of the “*blues*” linked to the imaginaries associated with the profession, the identity of the safety professionals.

### 3.2. Methodological investigation

The next aspect of the group reflection concerned the methodology to apply to this subject, with an initial idea of organising a workshop with safety professionals interested and ready to openly share collectively their views on the subject. The possibility of using a “*life narrative*” approach, already experienced by one of the researchers of the group was discussed. This approach consists, for the participants, in writing about their professional experience, revealing several facets of this experience, ranging from personal, psychological to more organisational, sociological and institutional dimensions.

However, given time constraints, the complexity of finding participants and finding dates to bring together enough of them, the option of individual interviews was ultimately chosen instead, while reaching out only French people. It was agreed that a message on social media would serve as a strategy to open the contribution to any safety professional interested, without restriction (table 1). We discussed the strategy to follow for job interviews, hesitating between two options. The first, which was to use the study as a guide to conduct the interview, or the other option, which would let the safety professionals to lead the conversation by elaborating on the “*blues*” theme.

Table 1. LinkedIn Post (translation)



We were not able to conclude regarding the best option to follow, the two had their advantages and inconvenient and we prepared an interview guide, with open and semi-oriented questions based on the study. We also did decide whether the reading of the article by the interviewees was necessary. Yet, the article was translated in French then made available online on the website Academia to give the opportunity to do so if they felt like it. We also discussed the ethical dimension of discussing a theme which might trigger negative emotions, or to amplify a fragile psychological, existing, condition on the "blues".

So, the post got 5301 views, and we had ... 3 responses! Considering this very small amount of feedbacks, we talked to some people when possible about the project, in contexts with safety professionals to try to increase the number of participants. Another possibility which was discussed was also the use of the database of CRC Mines de Paris which contains thousands of safety managers contacts. Yet, we thought that we would try the Post then through our contacts to find additional participants. We managed to enrol three more, for a total of six interviews, between June and November 2024. The next step of our research is to exploit the content of these interviews.

#### 4. Conclusion

This paper which has two main purposes introduces the concept of the "blues" among safety professionals, expressed through various publications. The study reveals a complex phenomenon beyond individual expressions of discontent to reflect broader systemic challenges in the safety profession.

The initial analysis of published works highlights how globalisation trends, educational limitations, and the digital transformation of work have contributed to a growing sense of professional dissatisfaction. This research opens several important avenues for future investigation.

First, the representativeness of these findings across different industrial sectors and geographical contexts needs to be examined. Second, the relationship between the "blues" and broader questions of meaningful work deserves further exploration, from an individual, organisational, institutional (e.g., the profession) or societal angle. Finally, understanding how professional associations and educational institutions might address these challenges could provide practical insights for the evolution of the safety profession.

Indeed, the emergence of the "blues" as a documented phenomenon may signal a critical moment for the safety profession, calling for a reassessment of current practices and developing new approaches that better align with organisational realities and professional aspirations.

Suffice to say, at this stage, that the diversity of perspectives expressed by the participants is quite remarkable. They did not need to be much probing to express quite clearly different yet complementary, not exclusive, facets of the "blues". The initial study did not address these facets directly and this series of interviews connected well with the collective discussion and preparation that the research team had before the interviews

To conclude, this study suggests that addressing these challenges will require attention not only to practical aspects of safety work but also to the profession's broader social and psychological dimensions. The ambition may be to sustain in the years to come a motivated workforce embracing the ambition and challenges associated with the safety profession.

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