



Urgency for safety in construction: narrative struggles of carpe diem, carpe pecunia and memento mori



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ABSTRACT

This study on safety culture focuses on the way people make sense of safety in urgency narratives in small–medium construction enterprises in the northeastern Netherlands, the so-called “earthquake region.” Three composite narratives are frequently revisited in the conversations among the employees, managers, and Vlink team. Employees turn to a carpe diem narrative, regarding safety as not a real problem, while appreciating the freedom of that comes with this type of work. In this practice, safety is predominantly the responsibility of the employee—incidents and unsafety are accepted as part of the job. Managers narrate a carpe pecunia narrative, supporting the carpe diem narrative through the logic that employees are responsible for safety while the project budget and satisfying the client carries much weight. Thereby, safety is negotiated on a constant basis and often outpaced by other concerns. These narratives create a cultural practice that demoralizes construction workers to work safely. The memento-narrative, developed by a team of consultants, is a narrated change attempting to influence this cultural practice and stresses the moral obligation of leaders to evaluate the risks of the work they assign to their (or external) employees. The logic of the narrative is that safety should be the main concern and not part of a negotiation. This study shows how the memento-narrative cannot always gain a foothold when narrators adopt certain narrative techniques, like blocking and reframing. Only in small remarks and specific moments during conversations are there opportunities for further conversation on and sharing of the memento-narrative.

1. Introduction

This study on safety culture focuses on the way people make sense of safety in urgency narratives in the field of Dutch construction. Although concepts of safety are constantly studied and theorized, safety should not be treated as “a separate object of knowledge” (Gherardi et al., 1998, p. 202) but as a socially constructed and cultural phenomena. Construction is historically a high risk field with frequent injuries, sickness, absences, and disability-retirement (Ozmec et al., 2015; Kines et al., 2010). In the Netherlands in 2016, for every 100,000 workers there were 158 with a reported incident, and there were sixteen fatalities in the construction field (Inspectie Sociale Zaken en Werkgelegenheid, 2016). The Dutch supervisory body for safety investigated 62 work-related fatalities from the last three years and concluded that most of these fatalities were caused by ways of thinking that invite unsafe behaviors. For example, there were employees arguing that safety rules and procedures don’t apply to them or are obstacle for a smooth day at work (Inspectie Sociale Zaken en

Werkgelegenheid, 2016).

Whether a working situation is interpreted as safe or risky, and morally acceptable for oneself or the other, is a matter of sensemaking (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014; Sonenshein, 2007). Sensemaking and narrative approaches have gained popularity in the studies on organizational management and change (Vaara et al., 2016). Several scholars have stressed the importance of adopting a narrative approach to cultural change to reveal hidden taken-for-granted ideas and believes that guide behaviors (Grant and Marshak, 2011; Brown and Humphreys, 2003). Although there are several ontological starting points of a narrative approach, for instance realism, interpretivism and post-structuralism, this research adopts a, what Vaara et al. (2016) call, poststructuralist approach. This means taking a radical form of social constructionism in which the focus is not only on sensemaking and the interpretation of narratives, but also on criticizing dominant narratives and the discovery of new kinds of narrative. Initiatives to change the work situation or trying to maintain things the way they are, relates to editors that attempt to influence sensemaking by purposeful

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sensegiving. It implies the desire to alter sensemaking processes of others in a certain way (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991; Kraft et al., 2015). Necessary are papers that provide insight into the way various change logics diverge or converge in processes of change and the way change agents' rhetoric contribute to theory on storytelling in promoting or discouraging change (Vaara et al., 2016). Moreover, the way temporality features in these narrations, while influencing the temporal unfolding of change, deserves attention (Vaara et al., 2016). To emphasize time and temporality, a framework for change urgency was developed for this research, which is grounded in the works of Ricoeur (1984) and Gabriel (1993) on temporality (Cunliffe et al., 2004).

Information about what people interpret as safe or dangerous is observed in specific practices within a community and its related communities (Gherardi et al., 1998); thus, it varies by context. Although small construction companies are the majority (Statistical Office of the European Communities, 2011; U.S. Census Bureau, 2011), safety research often focuses on large construction enterprises (Robson et al., 2007) in which safety is formalized in procedures and delegated to safety departments (Ozmec et al., 2015). Within these small–medium enterprises, safety is often delegated from manager to the employee (Hasle and Limborg, 2006; Ozmec et al., 2015). Therefore, the manner in which safety is negotiated by construction workers and their managers in small–medium enterprises is considered in this paper.

The study focuses on small–medium construction enterprises in the northeastern Netherlands, the so-called “earthquake region,” mainly in the province of Groningen. Since 1964, the Nederlandse Aardolie Maatschappij (a joint venture of Royal Dutch Shell and Exxon Mobil) has been producing gas in Groningen. Recently, the intensity of the earthquakes increased in this area. The earthquakes have resulted in almost 80.000 reports of damage to houses by local citizens (Nam.nl, 2018). A center was set up to organize the process of damage declarations and contract construction companies for preventive and curative construction, called Centrum voor Veilig Wonen (a consortium of insurance, engineering and construction companies). A team of consultants has the assignment from Nederlandse Aardolie Maatschappij to stimulate construction companies to improve the safety of building sites through a safety platform for construction enterprises, called Vlink.

Platform Vlink has developed an urgency narrative on safety, aiming at influencing the field of construction-related governmental and private actors within the earthquake region. However, in this organizational field, several urgency narratives struggle for survival. The aim of this paper is to critically reflect on the way safety is negotiated between construction workers and their managers in small–medium enterprises, and second, the way Vlink's urgency narrative dynamically interacts with these narratives. Here, the narratives are “temporal, discursive construction that provide a means for individual, social, and organizational sensemaking and sensegiving” (Vaara et al., 2016; p. 2). Therefore, the fragments of narratives that may or may not develop into coherent narratives are also valued (Boje, 2008).

The research questions for this paper are: What urgency narratives can be conceptualized in the negotiation process of safety between managers and employees? And How does Vlink's urgency narrative on safety develop and dynamically interact with the urgency narratives of construction workers and managers? In Section 2, theory on safety culture and power is explained. Section 3 introduces the research method. Section 4 is the result section, in which the three composite narratives are explicated. In Section 5, those narratives are analyzed. Section 6 is the discussion, followed by the conclusion.

2. Safety culture and narratives

The first time the concept of safety culture was introduced was in the report on the Chernobyl disaster. The conclusion of the report asserts that if greater attention had been paid to human and organizational factors, instead of only technology, the disaster could have been

avoided (Reiman and Rollenhagen, 2014; Haghghi et al., 2017). This report and its conclusions were the starting point for a new stream of safety research focusing on organizational factors and safety culture (Reiman and Rollenhagen, 2014). Here, safety culture is interpreted as a fragmented and local phenomenon (Gherardi et al., 1998; Parker et al., 2006) in which assumptions result in taken-for-granted ideas and beliefs (Haghghi et al., 2017; Reiman and Rollenhagen, 2014; Schein, 1985). Narratives are carriers of these taken-for-granted ideas and beliefs on the urgency of safety (Vaara et al., 2016).

As this paper focuses on small–medium enterprises, the insights of Ozmec et al. (2015) on safety culture is a starting point for this research and illustrates how managers and workers in small–medium construction enterprises make sense of safety. When studying the cultural practice of these workers, it becomes clear that safety is not part of the dominant story while personal experiences, estimations and emotions are the fundament for working safe (and not rules). The manager is not around much and does not have much influence on these workers. In the working situation, employees must balance safety with other concerns like satisfying the client, planning, and budget. Building on the work of Ozmec et al. (2015), the concept of “negotiated order” (Strauss, 1978; Ozmec et al., 2015) is adopted in this study to reveal how safety is negotiated in social processes and the way power is exercised (Gherardi et al., 1998). The concept of negotiated order helps to reveal how people in the field of construction emphasize or discount safety in social interaction by referring to certain narratives to legitimize their point of view. Power holders use their narrative power to sustain certain narratives, while pushing oppositional narratives away (Grant and Marshak, 2011; Clegg et al., 2006). The paper of Ozmec et al. (2015) showed how the concept of negotiated order benefits safety studies in directing research and change approaches into the awareness of the negotiation process between managers and employees and the importance of satisfying the client in small-medium construction enterprises.

Because safety and unsafety frequently results in injuries, illness, and even death, urgency narratives reflect the moral standard and business ethics. Rationalist approaches presuppose deliberate reasoning for moral behavior; however, in this study, the assumption is that people do not always make rational choices but rather emotional ones, and use post hoc reasoning and narratives to explain their choices (Sonenshein, 2007). In turn, these narratives influence future sensemaking processes and the work environment.

Urgency narrations often contain temporal notions. People narrate the past, present, and future—recounting past events, paying attention to current moments that turn into the past, and developing expectations of the future (Ricoeur, 1984; Gabriel, 1993). For instance, whether (past) safety incidents are interpreted as a problem to act upon can be deduced from the stories people tell and relate to normalized behavior within organizations or organizational fields (Dekker, 2016). These interpretations of the past or expectations of the future are contrasted with the present, not to process but to value and interpret them (Gabriel, 1993; Ybema, 2010). Attention is paid to the way change narrators create problem logics in narratives (Carlsen, 2014). Moreover, to reveal the narrative dynamics of the Vlink narrative within the field, we first analyze the narrative techniques of the narrators. Carlsen (2014) explains how narrators are often unaware of the way they construct and reconstruct their stories and summarized six narrative techniques to exert narrative power, namely, framing, omission, fitting facts, means-to-aims, glorifying, and scapegoating.

3. Methods

The aims of this paper are to critically reflect on the way safety is negotiated between construction workers and their managers in small–medium enterprises, and the way Vlink's urgency narrative dynamically interacts with these narratives. These aims point to an interpretative research approach (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2012).

Interpretative research grew from the idea that to understand the actions of people, it is necessary to know how they think, and what their motives and mental plans are. Because we cannot observe the mental plans of managers and employees in construction, we have to interpret the words and stories we hear from them. First, the method implies that subjective meaning of the people under study is relevant research material. Second, it implies that the interpretation of the researcher on this research material is also relevant (Bonet and Sauquet, 2010).

The research is performed by a change consultant working for platform Vlink. Thereby, access to the required research sites, stakeholders, and key players in the field is granted.

From November 2014 until December 2017, a team of four consultants (one of them also being a researcher) had a contract with Nederlandse Aardolie Maatschappij to create the platform and support the involved construction companies. For the research, a case study (Yin, 2009) is conducted within small–medium enterprises that have no more than 50 employees (Legg et al., 2015). Being a researcher and consultant simultaneously, suggests a critical reflection on the way knowledge is produced and studied, and how people (the researcher and others) in the research are reflective. Hence, an ethnoventionist approach (Marrewijk et al., 2010) was adopted:

“Ethnoventionist approaches raise questions concerning values, power, closeness, minutiae, practices, concrete case studies, context, how-questions, narrative/history, actor/structure, and dialogue” (Marrewijk et al., 2010, p. 218).

The approach distances itself from the subject–object split and strengthens the interpretative research approach of the study. The research requires a high level of involvement, in which the position of working for Vlink is helpful. Gaining similar insights on safety culture would be difficult, considering the outside position of the researcher. The long-term commitment between the consultants and Nederlandse Aardolie Maatschappij permits longitudinal research. Hereby, between March 2015 and May 2017, several research materials were gathered for this analysis. Working for Vlink, the consultants engaged in several activities, such as the following:

- visiting construction sites to talk to carpenters or other professionals and supporting managers in safety leadership onsite while gathering relevant photo and film materials
- organizing start-working conversations with all the involved construction professionals that focused on discussing their activities and making safety decisions
- organizing thematic safety meetings for the construction companies’ management
- facilitating internal safety programs within the small–medium construction enterprises
- safety leadership training for the construction companies’ managers and leaders

First, field notes were made on all these and other activities by using “the salience Hierarchy method,” Wolfinger (2002). In this method, notes are made on specific situations and stories related to the research

question that strike the researcher as the most noteworthy. Second, all the managers in the field must complete a leadership course on safety. The training focuses on discussing and changing participants’ interpretations of safety. After each workshop (14 workshops with 15 participants), the trainers took a photo of the list of interpretations from the participants and the leading author made field notes. Third, the project materials, information from the Vlink website such as blogs and photo- and film materials, were also gathered. Fourth, 10 construction workers and the five members of the Vlink team (four consultants, one chairman) were interviewed by two master’s students from Rijksuniversiteit Groningen. They adopted a qualitative narrative interview approach, using semistructured interviews as described by Kvale and Brinkmann (2009). Crucial to narrative interviewing is to focus on the stories people tell, the way the plots are formulated, and the way these stories are built up.

All research materials were imported to Atlast.ti version 1.0.51 for further analysis. To understand the meanings produced (Deetz and Alvesson, 2000), the research materials in Atlas.ti were closely read to interpret emergent meanings about the logic in the urgency narratives (McClellan, 2014). To structure the data and code all the materials, an interpretative coding method was used called ‘holistic content perspective’ (Lieblich et al., 1998; 62); however, instead of colored markers, program Atlas.ti was used. From these analyses, personal and composite narratives were revealed (Polkinghorne, 1988; Vaara et al., 2016). Composite narratives were constructed to reveal mutual safety logics in the narratives of small–medium construction enterprises and summarize the urgency narrative of Vlink. Subsequently, a case study (Yin, 2009) was conducted on a safety program executed by Vlink in a small–medium construction enterprise, to demonstrate how the three composite narratives dynamically interact.

4. Results

In this section, the results from the study are presented. We start with the composite narratives from the narrative analysis. The titles we gave the three composite narratives that we have found, reflect the temporality in the narratives. Carpe diem, Memento mori and Carpe pecunia highlight the temporal characteristics of the story on the line of past, present and future. While the future plays an important role in memento mori, carpe diem and carpe pecunia are more focused on the present. We will further elaborate on the temporal elements in the analysis and discussions section. In the second part, the findings from the case study are used to elaborate on the narrative dynamics. We start by an overview of stakeholders, narrative titles, and main codes for this section in Table 1.

4.1. Coding system construction companies

After the first round of the “holistic content method,” all the codes were merged into main groups. Based on the study of Ozmec et al. (2015), a coding system to analyze the logic in narratives of both managers and employees of construction firms was developed. Table 2 presents the coding system.

Table 1
Overview of results.

Stakeholder group	Narrative title & description	Main codes
Employees of construction enterprises	Carpe diem: Although employees have a high risk of injury, the urgency to change that situation is not part of the dominant story. The freedom to do the work in your own way is valued highly.	– Safety perception– Safety negotiation between manager–employee– Safety and the client
Managers of construction enterprises	Carpe pecunia: Money is a critical impetus; the fear of losing a client is often given higher consideration than the urgency to work safely.	– Safety perception– Safety negotiation between manager–employee– Safety and the client
Vlink team members	Memento mori: an attempt to influence the cultural practice of the field of construction by both criticizing and relating to it. It stresses the value of a human life and the risk of an injury or fatality.	– Root cause of the problem– Solutions of the problem– Challenges for solving the problem– Chances of success– Role of actors in the field

Table 2
Coding system for the construction companies.

Main coding group	Underlying codes
Safety perception How is safety perceived and practiced in small constructions companies? (161 quotations)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Think before acting ● Work is unpredictable ● Trusting the situation ● Time pressure ● Taking measures ● Shit happens ● Search for the causer ● Safety rules are impractical ● When unsafe, I do it myself ● I use safe materials and equipment ● Trust in the team ● Taking care of each other ● Saying no ● Just do it ● In the heat of the moment ● Cost of safety ● Client determines safety
Safety negotiation between manager-employee How is safety negotiated in interactions within the companies – particularly between manager and employees? (106 quotations)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Safety is a luxury ● Dare to take risk ● Being alert and attentive ● Following the rules ● Fear of external control ● (Not) recognizing errors, taking risks
Safety and the client How do interactions between employees and customers influence safety priorities in work situations? (64 quotations)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Safety is the responsibility of practitioners ● Our work is risky ● My and our health first ● Giving feedback ● Coming home safely

4.2. Employees’ urgency narrative on safety: *Carpe diem*

Table 3 summarizes the dominant composite narrative on the urgency for safety. The work of employees (with permanent or flexible contracts) in these enterprises is characterized by considerable freedom. When they work on a job (e.g., in earthquake-related work replacing a high-risk chimney on a roof), the employees are responsible for assessing the risks and organizing the work. Injuries are accepted as part of the job. Safety rules and procedures do not play an important role because, as asserted by the workers, the rules and procedures do not match their specific working circumstances. Personal experiences and feelings are much more crucial when making workplace decisions.

Often, workers cherish their freedom to make decisions and believe that when a safety issue exists, they can and should solve the problem with the materials at hand. Management issues like staying within the project’s budget or planning (e.g., finishing the job in time) have a high influence on the way employees work; thus, they must balance these concerns.

The employees exhibit considerable loyalty toward their manager (sometimes also the firms’ owner) when planning and meeting budget demands. Almost all the employees the Vlink team have spoken to have experienced injuries themselves or know a colleague who was injured.

Table 3
Coded remarks of Carpe Diem narrative (selection).

Main coding group	Quotations
Safety perception	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● I have not come across a lot of accidents in construction, luckily. It was mainly the stupid mistakes of the carpenter himself or the mason. (10:20) ● When we were young, we used to run around everywhere. We did not care for scaffolding. When you were on the roof, you would just run up and down the roof. (13:10) ● My grandfather turned 90 while smoking, that’s how I see safety. (21:20) ● In situations with a high risk, for instance, working on a roof, you must not act stupid. Keep your cool, so to say. There is only little that can go wrong actually. But yeah, it happens sometimes. (11:19) ● There are a lot of rules and legislation around safety nowadays. Rules can be nice and all that, but they don’t necessarily contribute to safety, I believe. (14:11)
Safety negotiation between manager-employee	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Before, I worked at another employer (..) but they were constantly on my back. Everything was in control over there. For every decision, you had to call the office: “Is this possible? Can I do this?” Well, I felt like a little child over there. (13:1) ● Of course, construction work is dangerous, and sometimes you struggle—you are simply not able to work safely. You think of your own safety. It is working with the materials at hand. (21:1) ● Sometimes it happens that you need to place an extra fence. Not everything can be thought off beforehand. In these cases, you say to the others: hey, we need those extra two fences. And you take them to the project and place them. You have to weigh up the situation yourself (21:31).
Safety and the client	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● I still feel the urgency to finish my work today. (21:15) ● Often, you start thinking for your boss. You think, what is this going to cost? (15:13) ● Before I had a stingy boss and did not have enough materials. So once, while building a new roof, I found myself on ladder, using slats to stabilize the ladder. And then you think, I am tired of placing these slats behind my ladder. You think, oh the tile laths are close by. In your head, you think: ah, if something happens I will just step on the tile laths. If I fall, I will just hop on them, it is no big deal. (21:12)

These past experiences have the function of stimulating the employees to stay alert in the present and future, they say. Although these employees have a high risk of injury, the urgency to change the work situation is not part of the dominant story. Their urgency narrative in this study is characterized by “carpe diem,” a temporal, Latin aphorism for a “seize the day” mentality.

4.3. Managers’ urgency narrative on safety: *Carpe pecunia*

Table 4 summarizes the carpe pecunia narrative. Managers show their concerns regarding safety with statements like “safety first” and “getting everyone home at night.” In longer conversations or in Vlink’s safety leadership course, competing logics come forward. Managers do not believe they hear everything that happens at the workplace (out of sight) and are not convinced they can prevent accidents from happening. They are critical toward rules and procedures and the amount of paperwork that comes with it.

Centrum voor Veilig Wonen requires that construction enterprises comply with the Dutch construction law and demonstrate this by producing safety plans where how they will execute the work and manage the risks is explicated. Managers of construction enterprises often argue this “paper tiger” does not contribute to safety but to unsafety.

Managers stimulate the self-steering capacities of their employees on the matter of safety. They show reluctance to confront employees with unsafe behavior and have doubts about whether safety commitments will be honored. The lack of qualified personnel in the field makes it even more difficult to take strong safety measures.

Money is an important impetus for the managers in these firms. They fear losing the client when they calculate safety measures. This situation is especially true for private individuals; however, the professional clients are not well informed on the matter of safety either. In general, managers want to work safely but find it difficult to realize this goal with employees that are difficult to control and clients that want the cheapest and fastest services. Managers must balance several concerns, among which safety is just one of the stakes. The dominant urgency narrative is characterized by “carpe pecunia” for this study and reflects how safety is often subject to negotiation while the client’s budget plays a key role in deciding whether safety measures are calculated or not. In terms of temporality, safety is a constant returning subject for reevaluation in the present while managers highlight issues like losing money on a project and the lack of margin on a project.

4.4. Coding system Vlink

After the first round of “holistic content method,” all the codes were merged into main groups. We developed five coding groups based on Carlsen’s questions for problem logics in change narratives and interpretations of actors in the field (2014). In addition to this coding group, we also coded the comments on the development of Vlink’s urgency narrative to consider the narrative dynamics (see Tables 5 and 6).

4.5. Vlink’s urgency narrative on safety: Memento mori

The purpose of Vlink is to diminish the amount of injuries to zero by working with construction enterprises in the field. The platform was established because the Nederlandse Aardolie Maatschappij interpreted the current safety performance of Dutch construction as a serious problem: *The current safety performance in the Dutch field of construction is at an unacceptable level which creates a great risk of injuries and fatalities in the earthquake-related (re)construction activities* (46:9)

Table 4
Coded remarks of carpe pecunia narrative (selection).

Main coding group	Quotations
Safety perception	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● The goal is to get everyone home every night (28:88). ● But I do not deceive myself that nothing ever happens during our projects (28:22). ● I am strongly convinced that you can’t prevent all accidents from happening. There are people that just do certain things and say “this just needs to be done”. This will always be the case (18:30). ● Safety has become a cliché, the balance is destroyed, too much paperwork, which creates mistakes (28:23). ● Safety is a bunch of papers on the passenger seat (28:59). ● Asbestos measures slow the execution of work; rules and regulations slow down the work (28:19). ● The work of my men is different every day; so, if you can’t do it the way you should, then do it the way you can (28:53).
Safety negotiation between manager-employee	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● It begins with the toolbox, you know. When you are working somewhere and you organize a toolbox about scaffolding or telehandlers, or whatever, then your story of safety begins. And still, we are both responsible. I am not around the entire day; may I assume that they keep working and do not act stupid? If you are in a telehandler, safely wired, you don’t unwire. You always say that, you give toolboxes about it. You expect them to do it, right? And what you don’t expect is that you arrive at the project and there is an employee with both his feet on the roof (18:17). ● I believe they (employees) should feel safe and make their own decisions (28:70). ● The problem is that commitments between me and my men are often broken. They do it (unsafe acts) anyway (28:47). ● When I address the unsafe behavior of the people that work for me, they immediately say I am not doing my job properly and demand a list of things I should fix for them (32:45). ● If men are foul-mouthed and working unsafe, it is difficult to send them away (28:87). ● We need those men, so don’t give them a “yellow card”. These men have a lot of freedom and our influence is limited (32:46). ● Our clients are often not well informed on the matter of safety (28:35). ● For instance, we tell our client that we cannot do the job for safety reasons. That we should do it in another way to do it safe. And then, I hate this, there is a freelancer, yes, and he will do it. And then they say: oh, that contractor is way too expensive (28:23). ● In our field, we have a false competition with the freelancers (28:2). ● Especially when the tide is low, you start crossing safety boundaries (28:3). ● If only all contractors would work according to the same safety rules (28:13).
Safety and the client	

The root cause of unsafety, in sum, is argued to lie in the central role of capital as the impetus of performance, a lack of enforcement of rules and regulations by inspection, underdeveloped safety leadership, and a general lack of attention to safety. The solution for the problem is claimed to lie in developing safety leadership and trying to allow employees to think about risks and safety measures (for instance in start-working-conversations). Addressing the moral obligation of leaders to manage safety is crucial. The logic of this narrative is that leaders should not forget they could also say no to an unsafe project. It is argued that presenting yourself as a victim in the situation is not part of proper safety leadership.

The challenges to realizing change is the tenacity of the problem, in which institutional forces pull hard on the leaders of construction enterprises to neglect safety. In the narrative, the subordinate role that construction companies take with their main client, Centrum voor Veilig Wonen, is criticized. Moreover, the time for safety in these enterprises is scarce, especially when the workload is low.

The team doubts the chances of success for Vlink and whether the chosen interventions are the appropriate ones. They also fear a fatality in the field, which would be devastating for everyone involved and harmful for Vlink. The urgency narrative of Vlink is characterized as “memento mori” for this study, related to the Latin Christian aphorism on mortality. From a temporal viewpoint, this narrative focuses more on the future than the other two narratives, which are more present-oriented.

4.6. Development of memento mori

According to the Vlink team, the story of Vlink did not change much during the project. However, three developments are notable. First, although, in the beginning, there was a certain reluctance to focus on safety rules and regulations within the interventions, later in the project, this subject gained more attention from the team: *We wanted and still want to involve employees and let them participate, but often this is a bridge too far. For instance, if employees do not wear their helmets, that’s where we suggest making better safety commitments and advice leaders to enforce them* (83:29).

Second, the institutional topics of Vlink and other players in the

Table 5
Main coding groups Vlink.

Main coding group	Underlying codes
Root cause of the problem (32 quotations)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Management ● Money ● History of economic recession ● Fading norms and ethics ● Start-working conversations ● Facilitating toolboxes and meetings ● Rules and regulations ● Commitments and agreements ● Trust ● Time for safety ● Workload earthquake-related work ● Doubting effectiveness ● Chance of a causality ● Positive exception ● Centrum voor Veilig Wonen ● Nederlandse Aardolie Maatschappij ● Vlink
Solutions of the problem (63 quotations)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Institutional field ● Assumptions, behavior, culture ● Clients
Challenges for solving the problem (26 quotations)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Management development ● Safety knowledge and information ● Changing assumptions, behavior, culture
Chances of success (5 quotations)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Tenacity of the problem ● Competition in the field
Role of actors in the field (56 quotations)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Construction companies ● Definition of field and players

field were added to the Vlink narrative: *We see that only behavioral changes on the work floor is not enough. We increasingly focus on leadership within the organizations by zooming out into the systemic, institutional aspect. So, which position do Vlink and the other players like Nederlandse Aardolie Maatschappij, Centrum voor Veilig Wonen, and government and inspection have for change in the field? And what is the effect of these players on the work floor?* (92:4).

Third, interventions in which managers and employees engaged in an ongoing critical conversation around safety commitments have been interpreted as the most promising areas for change: *And what we are trying right now is to start small safety trajectories by organizing a few interrelated moments of contact with employees and management. Think of field visits, coaching, and other activities as part of a trajectory of a few months, to give more weight to it* (83:33).

4.7. Dynamic interaction between narratives: a case study

To support the development of safety commitments between the leaders and their team, Vlink facilitates safety trajectories at small–medium enterprises. The process consists of coaching the leaders to

develop safety rules, fieldwork (i.e., visiting construction sites, interviewing employees), toolboxes with the team, and follow-ups. (Toolboxes are meetings in which all employees at the enterprise are present to discuss a safety subject.)

These safety trajectories ran for several months in the companies. Field notes and documentation of one trajectory are used to reveal the manner in which urgency narratives come up and struggle in the conversations between the Vlink team, the managers, and the employees. After a first period of consultation and field visits, the owner–manager of the firm wanted to make the following commitments: “I work safe or I don’t work,” “I will start my work once I am well informed,” “I will not lift materials above 23 KG (as prescribed in Dutch construction law),” “I will report machinery defects,” and “I keep the workplace clean.” In the conversations during field visits, coaching and the toolboxes were two issues subject to debate: whether walking on a roof without a proper edging or fall protection is an issue (or not) and how to deal with issues regarding lifting materials. Tables 7 and 8 present the summary of the field notes on how the three narratives dynamically interact during toolbox meetings.

The conversations in Tables 7 and 8 are a selection from the field

Table 6
Coded remarks of memento mori narrative (selection).

Code	Urgency narrative – Vlink: Memento Mori
Root cause	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● There is a societal acceptance that people die during their work (87:9). ● Norms fade when the dominant thinking is “I want to make money for my company” and this is not corrected. There is too little law enforcement (85:6). ● The problem is that when injured in construction, too often the damage is limited to a bruised ankle an incision. This creates a logic of “that’s just the way it goes and always did” among carpenters (85:9). ● Moreover, there is a certain “badassery” in construction of “do not complain, don’t be a sissy now” (83:18).
Solutions of the problem	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● The purpose of Vlink is to diminish the amount of injuries to zero. We work toward this goal by working with construction enterprises in increasing the level of safety awareness and safety behavior in the field (56:1). ● We focus on leadership development, killer items, and small–medium enterprises (85:10). ● What works is not being too didactic, but being respectful, warm, and open, that is how you get in (87:17). ● If you have all these plans that no one reads, what happens in the real world? What risks appear in execution that no one has thought about? How alert are people to anticipate these hazards? (92:3) ● Leaders in construction firms are responsible for what happens in their organization. If something happens, the question is, what have you done to prevent it? (92:10)
Challenges for solving the problem	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● If every construction enterprise would stick to the rules of safety, something would change, but there is always one that doesn’t, and this company gets the project (83:26). ● Disappointments are that sometimes it’s flogging a dead horse with these construction enterprises (85:14).
Chances of success	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● When do we reach our goal? If there is a heavy injury of a worker tomorrow, our work up until now is pointless (93:9). ● We will probably not be able to change the system, but we can help the people within the system to work as safe as possible (83:25).
Role of actors in the field	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Construction enterprises are playing second fiddle to their client, Centrum voor Veilig Wonen. They are the client and have the money and assignments. So, if a calculator of a construction company cannot calculate scaffolding within the budget, but he wants the assignment, he will be inclined to say yes anyway (91:11). ● The level on which we are not active enough yet is the institutional level of large client and governmental organizations. (...) There is no level playing field, there is no fair game now (85:11).

Table 7
Coded field notes of issue roof edge and fall protection.

Dynamic interaction of narratives: Issue roof edge and fall protection	
1. Okay. So, you say that most of you step on a roof with a shutter line as fall protection while working in a telehandler. Platforms are not tested for this method, which means something could happen. Every year circa fifty persons in construction die from falling from roofs. Why do you want to work this way? (101:1)	Vlink
2. We know what we are doing. In these cases, we are extra alert. (101:3)	Employee
3. The law is very clear on this matter; I must say you are not allowed to do it. But I understand there are these cases where you cross the line. There are these gray areas on the job. (101:5)	Manager
4. The fifty people that died probably also said they were alert. If you need to step off the platform, you probably chose the wrong tool. For instance, have you considered scaffolding for this project? (101:7)	Vlink
5. If you would get some shelves from our storeroom right now, I am sure that you will do this in a riskier way than I would, I am more alert than you. (101:4)	Employee
6. Who of you would rather work with scaffolding instead of telehandlers, raise your hands! (no one raised their hand) (101:8)	Manager
7. What if something happens tomorrow when you step off the platform on the roof? What do you think of this conversation if that would be the case? (101:9)	Vlink

notes of conversations in which the three narratives come up and a conflict ensues. After the aforementioned toolbox, some men in this company explain how they referred to the commitment on lifting materials to get the office to order a crane to lift wood for making timber skeleton constructions. The employees interpret this process of arranging tools as a negotiation process with the scheduler/expediter (108:1). During this discussion, they also criticized their manager for his comments on the gray areas and the “23 versus 25 kg” topic and believe he contributed to the ambiguity (108:2).

5. Analysis

In the results section, three urgency narratives are revealed that are further analyzed in this section. A narrative of employees is characterized as a *carpe diem* narrative (*diem-narrative*). *Carpe diem* is temporal aphorism for a “seize the day” mentality. The results show how safety is negotiated in the cultural practice of employees. Injuries are interpreted as part of the job and staying alert is the solution to prevent them. Although the practice of safety is predominantly the responsibility of the employees, tempo and budget are important factors regarding the way the work is accomplished. Safety is just one of their concerns, which is weighed against other concerns. In terms of past, present, and future, enjoying the present is valued the most in this narrative.

The managers support the existence of the *diem-narrative* by supporting this flexible and practice-oriented logic of work and safety. They recognize the law, rules, and regulations but are repelled by the bureaucracy. The managers support the idea that the employees are responsible for safety and do not underscore their own responsibility. Because qualified personnel are scarce, the managers are cautious about addressing unsafe behavior because they need the manpower. This situation creates a powerbase for employees, although you could also argue they are being left alone.

Moreover, the managers interpret client’s behavior as implicitly pressuring the managers to implement a low level of safety measures to increase the enterprise’s profits and competitive advantage. This urgency narrative is called *carpe pecunia* (*pecunia-narrative*). This term reflects the continuous negotiation of safety matters: *For instance, we tell our client that we cannot do the job for safety reasons. That we should do it in another way to do it safe. And then, I hate this, there is a freelancer, yes,*

Table 8
Coded field notes of issue lifting materials.

Dynamic interaction of narratives: Issue lifting materials	
8. The manager just suggested making a commitment to only lift weight under 23 kg. What do think of this commitment and what do you need to honor it? (101:12)	Vlink
9. One of the more senior employees asks: This commitment implies I can’t always finish the job, what then? (101:10)	Employee
10. You are one of the best-paid workers in our company. I expect you to come up with a solution before you call me when you can’t start your work. (101:11)	Manager
11. Another employee: Mortar comes in bags of 25 kg. Do we carry them or not? (101:13)	Employee
12. Around 23 kg is the commitment, so bags of 25 kg should be okay. (10:14)	Manager
13. Who is going to work with this commitment and who is not? Raise your hand if you will. (101:16)	Vlink
14. Two people don’t raise their hands and explain that they think this commitment is impractical and will not honor it. (101:17)	Employee

and he will do it. And then they say: oh, that contractor is way too expensive (28:23). Just like in the *diem-narrative*, the managers in construction are weighing safety against other concerns. Moreover, in terms of temporality, in this narrative, safety is a constant returning subject for reevaluation in the present.

The *memento-narrative* criticizes this *pecunia-narrative*, although it also expresses sensitivity to system forces that pull on the managers. Developing safety leadership has been argued to play a central role in the solution, whereas the *memento-narrative* takes the assumption that changing the system (in which society, clients, and inspection must change) will be an illusion. *Memento mori* refers to the aphorism of Latin Christian theory on reflecting on mortality. This name is chosen to mirror the serious tone of the narrative that contradicts the tone of the other two narratives, and because the story inhibits a strong awareness of mortality.

The second question emphasizes the dynamic interchange of Vlink with other narratives; thus, in this last part of the analysis, the narratives techniques in response to the *memento-narrative* are analyzed. Departing from Carlsen’s (2014) narrative techniques, that is, framing, omission, fitting facts, means-to-aims, glorifying, and scapegoating, we analyze Tables 7 and 8 for the narrative techniques in use. Table 9 contains the analysis of the adopted narrative techniques.

We interpret comments 2 and 5 as a “blocking technique” of the *memento-narrative*. By using counter-argumentation and some humor, there does not seem to be any movement in the urgency narratives. We interpret comments 3, 6, and 12 as a “reframing” technique. By reframing Vlink’s interpretation of the activity of walking on the roof as risky and illegal as a gray area, the manager endorsed the *diem-narrative*. The comments in which the employees or managers start working with the commitments are interpreted as bridging moments and represent possibilities for further conversation on the *memento-narrative*. Blocking and bridging are additions to Carlsen’s narrative techniques (2014).

6. Discussion

In this study on safety culture, a narrative struggle between competing narratives on the urgency for safety in the Dutch field of construction is explored. The study focused on small–medium construction enterprises in the northeastern Netherlands: the earthquake region in

Table 9
Narrative techniques in fieldnotes.

Comment	Narrative technique
(2) We know what we are doing. In these cases, we are extra alert. (101:3)	Blocking
(5) If you would get some shelves from our storeroom right now, I am sure that you will do this in a riskier way than I would, I am more alert than you. (101:4)	Blocking
(3) The law is very clear on this matter; I must say you are not allowed to do it. But I understand there are these cases where you cross the line. There are these gray areas on the job. (101:5)	Reframing
(6) Who of you would rather work in scaffolding instead of telehandlers, raise your hands! (no one raised their hand) (101:8)	Reframing
(12) Around 23 kg is the commitment, so bags of 25 kg should be okay. (10:14)	Reframing
(9) One of the more senior employees asks: This commitment implies I can't always finish the job, what then? (101:10)	Bridging
Using the commitment on lifting materials to "get the office to order a crane to lift wood for making timber skeleton." (108:1)	Bridging

the province of Groningen. This paper distinguishes among three composite narratives frequently revisited in conversations between employees, managers, and the Vlink team. The employees often return to a *carpe diem* narrative, seeing safety as not a problem as long as you don't act stupid while appreciating the freedom of that comes with this type of work. In this practice, safety is predominantly the responsibility of the employee—incidents and unsafety are accepted as part of the job. Completing your work on time and staying within budget are the impetus for the way the work is accomplished. Safety is just one of the concerns, which is weighed against other concerns. *Carpe diem* reflects a temporal notion in which the focus is on the present.

In turn, managers narrate a *pecunia*-narrative—a present-oriented narrative. The managers support the *diem*-narrative through the logic that the employees are responsible for safety, depreciating their own responsibility on this matter. Money is a critical impetus; the fear of losing a client is often given higher consideration than the urgency to work safely. The job of these managers is to evaluate the risks in the work that they manage. In the negotiation process on safety, however, they are inclined to accept risks rather than lose a client or the profits from a potential project. This struggle creates a work context for workers as managers where safety is negotiated on a constant basis and is often outpaced by other concerns. Here, moral contemplations are often sidestepped by financial limitations or satisfying the client.

Following [Sonenshein \(2007\)](#), the managers frequently use post hoc reasoning and the *pecunia*-narrative to explain their choices. These sensemaking processes further feed and fulfill the *diem*-narrative and *pecunia*-narrative with logics and influences future sensemaking processes. The two narratives create a cultural practice that, in general, does not want to face its challenges on the matter of safety by focusing on present concerns. It demoralizes construction workers to work safe, it even forces them to ignore the risks. Following the Dutch supervisory body of safety, this paper argues that the cultural practice revealed in this paper contributes to high numbers of incidents in the construction sector.

The *memento*-narrative is an attempt to influence this cultural practice that both criticizes and relates to it by taking the assumption that safety is a systemic issue in which the society, clients, and inspections must change. The logic of this narrative is that the issue could not be reduced to a manager–employee negotiation. However, the *memento*-narrative does address the moral obligation of leaders to evaluate the risks of the work that they assign to their (or external) employees. The logic of the narrative is that safety should be the main concern in the negotiation process; however, the assumption is that changing the system is an illusion.

The analysis of the narrative struggle reveals how the *memento*-narrative, oriented toward changing the two dominant narratives in the Dutch earthquake region, is not always able to gain a foothold. Often, narrative techniques like blocking and reframing take place, by which the *carpe*- and *pecunia*-narrative remain in place. Only in small remarks and specific moments during the conversations were there opportunities for further conversation on and sharing of the *memento*-narrative.

6.1. Theoretical implications

The interpretative research approach has shown itself useful for interpreting the negotiation processes in narrative struggles and its effect on the cultural practice of safety. In this paper, a framework for change urgency is presented that contributes to critical studies on narratives and change. This framework followed [Vaara et al.'s \(2016\)](#) suggestion to integrate temporality in narrative studies. Although the *carpe*- and *pecunia*-narrative focus on the present, the *memento*-narrative focuses on the future consequences of present actions.

Using a temporal viewpoint contributes to reflecting on the narrative dynamics and the distance between these narratives. By studying both the dominant urgency narratives and Vlink's change in narrative over a longer time period, a strong example of ethnoventionist research ([Marrewijk et al., 2010](#)) is provided. Because the researcher is also an interventionist within Vlink, it was possible to gain first-hand cultural knowledge, making "the unremarkable, remarkable" ([Marrewijk et al., 2010](#): p. 225). This situation had a positive effect on the research process and its outcome. Moreover, narrative techniques in addition to Carlsen's selection were discovered, namely, blocking and bridging.

6.2. Practical implications

The results of this paper point to a construction sector with serious safety challenges. Safety is subject of negotiation on a continual basis; thus, changing the cultural practice is challenging. First, this paper stresses the importance of safety leadership. Leaders should not hide behind a *pecunia*-narrative but put safety first. Second, several change interventions are suggested in this paper, among which the internal safety program stands out. These safety programs run for a few months and are oriented at stimulating critical conversations between the management and workers and is oriented at creating and enforcing safety commitments.

6.3. Limitations and future directions

The focus of this study was on narratives of management and workers within construction enterprises and the *memento*-narrative; thus, the other narratives of key players within the field were not explicated. Future studies could widen the scope of narrative studies on safety within an organizational field. Because composite narratives require macro interpretations of all the materials, certain smaller-scale stories were ignored; for instance, micro stories of managers or employees working within the construction enterprises that narrate *memento*-like narratives and stress the importance of safety. The focus of this study was the dominant narratives that influence the cultural practices of the construction sector in the Dutch earthquake region. Other scholars are invited to explore the cultural practice of safety and employ the change urgency framework to discover narratives in other contexts.

7. Conclusions

This study focused on the way people make sense of safety in urgency narratives in the field of Dutch construction. It focused on small–medium construction enterprises in the northeastern Netherlands, the earthquake region. The first research question was oriented to reveal the urgency narratives in the negotiation process of safety between managers and employees. The second question was as follows: How does Vlink's urgency narrative on safety develop and dynamically interact with urgency narratives of construction workers and managers?

The results and analysis show three composite narratives frequently revisited in conversations between employees, managers, and the Vlink team. Employees often return to the diem-narrative, viewing safety as not really a problem, while appreciating the freedom of that comes with this type of work. In this practice, safety is predominantly the responsibility of the employee—incidents and unsafety is accepted as part of the job. Managers often narrate a pecunia-narrative, supporting the carpe diem narrative through the logic that employees are responsible for safety while the project budget and satisfying the client carries much weight. Money is an important impetus and often is a higher priority than the urgency to work safely. Thereby, safety is negotiated on a constant basis and often outpaced by other concerns. These narratives create a cultural practice reluctant to face its challenges on the matter of safety. This situation demoralizes construction workers to work safely.

The memento-narrative, developed by a team of consultants, is a narrated change attempt to influence this cultural practice and stresses the moral obligation of leaders to evaluate the risks of the work they assign to their (or external) employees. The logic of the narrative is that safety should be the main concern in the negotiation process.

This study shows how the memento-narrative is not always able to gain a foothold. Often, narrative techniques like blocking and reframing take place, by which the carpe- and pecunia-narrative remain in place. The only opportunities for further discussion and sharing of the memento-narrative are in small remarks and specific moments during conversations.

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Conflict of interest

None.

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Appendix A. Supplementary material

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