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Constituting safety in hunter's education: An analysis of safety messages in Texas hunter's training discourse

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Abstract: Risk communication includes safety messages to reduce the likelihood of hazard and increase the likelihood of reliability. Hunter's education in the state of Texas uses safety messages to reduce fatal or injurious incidents and to promote a positive image of hunting as a safe, leisure sport. Analysis of Texas' hunters education training materials and messages related to safety reveals that safety messages construct an image of hunters as practicing safety first, conservationists, ethical, law abiding, and other-oriented. Given Texas safety record, much is to be learned about safety messaging that adopts a positive or ideal image that the trainee identifies.

Keywords — Safety messages, risk communication, risks, training, hunting

SUGGESTED CITATION: Spradley, R. T. (2020). Constituting safety in hunter's education: An analysis of safety messages in Texas hunter's training discourse. *Proceedings of the International Crisis and Risk Communication Conference, Volume 3* (pp. 41-44). Orlando FL: Nicholson School of Communication and Media. <https://www.doi.org/10.30658/icrcc.2020.10>

INTRODUCTION

Since 1966 when Texas issued voluntary hunter education training and since 1988 when Texas issued mandatory hunter education training, incidents and fatalities related to hunting have steadily decreased with only 3 fatal incidents recorded in 2018, of which none of the responsible parties had completed hunter education training. With 1.2 million hunting licenses sold by Texas Parks and Wildlife in 2018, hunter education training remains an important part of hunter safety in the state of Texas [1]. Hunting is lauded as a safe sport and leisure activity [2]. With hunters carrying one or more weapons across wooded and uneven terrain and climbing in and out of elevated stands, the safety record of incidents and fatalities calls into question how hunter education has constructed safety practices that resonate with and are adopted by its trainees. This study uses a practice-based lens to examine the manuals and instructor messages disseminated in the basic hunter education course in Texas that constitute safety.

Upon thematic, practice-based analysis of hunter education training messages, five themes emerged: 1) safety first, 2) conservation, 3) ethics, 4) law-abiding, and 5) other-oriented. Through humor, fear appeals, and positive appeals, instructional messages embodied one or more of these five themes to constitute safety practices for hunters. In particular, positive appeals were used in relation to conservation, ethics, and other-orientation that constructed safety in terms of hunters' ideal selves as stewards of the sport, environment, and wildlife. The role of positive appeals, especially with regard to constructing ideal identity messages, in constituting safety are of interest to other training programs focused on increasing records of safety.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Safety messages are significant in the canon of risk communication. Safety carries with it a specific set of meanings. In simplest form, safety is a set of practices to navigate perceived risks effectively. Costly, hazardous risks are risks that are detrimental to health and likely cause accidents including potential loss of life or profit. Kasperson [3] points out that risk is often defined in technical terms by highlighting the probability of a hazardous, or catastrophic event, and the level of consequences that follow. Generally, high-level risks are not common, but these costly risks do cause exponential crises. Unfortunately, such a technical definition hides the socially constructed nature of risk that is intertwined in the real,

ISSN: 2576-9111

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<https://doi.org/10.30658/icrcc.2020.10>

objective threats of risk. In other words, risk is simultaneously an objective threat and a social construct[3]. Thus, safety messages amplify risks when they are transmitted. Axley [4] provides a bright-line for moving away from strictly a transmissional perspective of communication that is more conduit, or one-way from a sender to a receiver, in nature. Safety messages are not only interpretations in and of themselves of risks, but they are interpreted and acted on by other social actors. For example, how an organization or government responds to the rise of infectious diseases is dependent on a multiplicity of voices interrelated with one another. These voices, or forces, include human and non-human actants [5], such as: various experts, laws and policies, different personalities, organizational and/or governmental goals and philosophies, perceptions of risk levels, etc. These human and nonhuman actants all play a role in the interpretation of risk and the creation of risk messages. How these actants interrelate co-constructs safety messages, but those messages are in constant flux as relationships and experiences continue. Safety messages are directly related to the perception of risks, organizational and/or governmental collective sensemaking of the risks, and public interpretations and interactions with the safety messages and the real objective risks present. Considering the nature of safety messages is significant to investigating how some safety messages have greater impact over others. This study investigates the different themes present in safety messages used by the State of Texas in trainings to communicate the inherent risks of hunting.

Hunting, a sport and leisure activity, has inherent risks that necessitate risk assessment and corresponding safety messages to avoid, mitigate, or navigate hazards. Risks of injury or death in hunting are likely influenced by the perceived risk to the individual, extent of exposure to harm, personal judgment of risk, perceptions of likelihood of experiencing hazard, the severity of the hazard, and social trust with governing agencies [6]. Through safety messages, the greater public is alerted to self and collective efficacy actions that assist in avoidance, mitigation, or navigation of risks and hazards. Among safety messages highlighting specific self-efficacy behaviors are those warning of the dangers of handling weapons used for hunting and self-defense. For example, the Functional Resonance Analysis Method, when applied to the failure to identify deer when stalking, was developed into a three stage workshop administered by experienced hunters to promote self-efficacy of hunters ability to identify deer accurately and avoid hunting incidents [7]. Hunter's education in the state of Texas uses safety messaging to fulfill risk management needs and, thus, attempt to minimize hunting incidents. As noted earlier, these safety messages seem to highlight practices that seemingly have had an impact on lowering hunting related fatalities.

METHODS

Considering the opportunity to collect data, hunter education training messages, both written materials and oral messages from trainers, were analyzed using thematic analysis [8]. By using thematic analysis, flexibility and theoretical freedom were advantageous to examining messages from the different sources indicated. Using Nowell, Norris, White and Moules [8] step-by-step approach safety messages were examined in six phases: 1) familiarization with data, 2) initial coding, 3) searching for themes, 4) reviewing, 5) defining and naming themes, and 6) finalizing the findings.

RESULTS

Safety messages address risks inherent in the activity, and in this context, safety messages in hunter's education in Texas addressed risk through: 1) safety first, 2) conservation, 3) ethical, 4) law abiding, and 5) other-oriented.

SAFETY FIRST/DEFENSIVE HUNTING

To be a safe hunter is to keep safety first. "Safety first," was an orally repeated mantra in hunter's basic education. Even in the way the safety feature of a firearm was defined emphasized that safety was not inherent in a tool but a result of hunter practices. Safeties we're defined as "mechanical device that can fail." From finger placement, firearm and arrow handling, humor was used to illustrate poor safety choices, and positive appeals were used instructively to construct an idealized safe hunter. For example, Jones, an instructor, stated: "Your finger is your first safety." and "You have heard of defensive driving. Now you have heard of defensive hunting."

CONSERVATION MINDED HUNTING

To be a safe hunter is to be a conservationist. Positive appeals to an idealized hunter identity was accomplished, in part, through a conservationist identity. Idealizing the conservationist identity was discursively constructed through safety practices that protected ecosystems, affiliated with conservation organizations, and represented hunting and fishing positively to non-hunters and landowners. To be a conservationist is to preserve wildlife and their ecosystems. "Leave the land better than you found it" [9]. To be a conservationist is to affiliate with organizations that protect wildlife and their ecosystems. By purchasing a hunting and fishing license in Texas, money is allocated to conservation and law enforcement. Hunting is also about giving back through Texas Parks and Wildlife and other organizations like Ducks Unlimited. "Young hunters can be involved by joining organizations such as 4-H, Boy Scouts, and Girl Scouts" [9]. To be a conservationist is to preserve a positive image of hunting and hunters. Hunting was framed as a privilege that is threatened by anti-hunter discourse and poor choices of, primarily untrained, hunters. In interactions with anti-hunters, "Remain calm and polite, and do not engage in arguments – never lose your temper" [9].

ETHICAL HUNTING

To be a safe hunter is to be an ethical hunter, and hunter ethics exceed what is lawful in the state of Texas. Quoting Aldo Leopoldo, the hunting manual introduces ethics saying, “ethical behavior is doing the right thing when no one else is watching – even when doing the wrong thing is legal” [9]. Humor mixed with positive and negative appeals were used to construct the idealized ethical hunter identity. For example, when training hunters how to safely make a vital shot, the trainer joked, “Don’t shoot a deer in the butt. If I could give an ‘ignorant’ ticket, I would.” Humor underscored the unethical practice of taking “any shot” rather than refraining from shooting if no vital shot materialized, and humor also underscored how hunters and game wardens evaluate hunters who take unethical shots – as ignorant.

LAW-ABIDING HUNTING

To be a safe hunter is to abide by the law. Those in attendance at hunter’s education are complying with the law inasmuch as they are fulfilling the required safety course. Within the course, hunters are reminded that “ignorance of hunting laws is not a valid excuse for violating them” [9]. Firearm regulations, hunting and fishing regulations, tagging practices, deer sizing restrictions, and much more were reviewed to ensure that hunters understood the law and practices to fulfill or not violate it.

OTHER-ORIENTED HUNTING

To be safe, to be law-abiding, to be ethical, or to be a conservationist presupposes an other-orientation. Hunters are instructed in the manual to respect other hunters, landowners, and non-hunters (Texas Parks and Wildlife, 2017). To illustrate, the Ten Commandments of Shooting Safety are primarily oriented to protect others. From pointing the muzzle in a safe direction to being sure of what is beyond your target, the safety practices protect the hunter, others, and the shooting sports.

DISSCUSSION

Safety messages appealed to hunter’s ideal selves as conservationist and safety conscious, rational beings by highlighting the five themes mentioned above. Taking from these themes, the purposeful constructions of guiding practices establish a sense of mindfulness when entering the outdoors and engaging in hunting activities. Specifically, the themes appeal to similar sensemaking criteria enacted in high reliability organizations by seeking to train the practice of hunting relatively error-free.

For example, the safety practices correlate with Weick and Sutcliffe’s [10] five processes of collective mind: Preoccupation with failure is intertwined through the messages and practices of safety first and other-orientation. Trainees are exposed to messages that demonstrate failure in relation to accidents and death. Messages are couched in the “knowing your weapon” and “protecting others.” Reluctance to simplify is manifested in the practices of being conservationist, ethical, and law-abiding. Trainees are shown how the lack of these practices in the outdoors will negatively impact hunting as well as the advantages of seeing the big picture, the future of the sport, the protecting of the environment, and knowing the right thing to do in all circumstances. Deference to expertise is being practiced and advocated as the trainers and the process of hunters safety education seeks to advance understanding by empowering trainees with relevant expertise such as knowing how to handle a weapon, knowing specific safety practices related to identifying game, and knowing that ignorance of laws and safety practices does not validate harm. Commitment to resilience is noted in the themes that advocate trainees ability to improvise and adapt in circumstances where conditions present greater risk and is demonstrated in the emphasis placed in the training and future training. Sensitivity to operations is constructed through the consistent messages indicated in hunting as a privilege and a right that needs to be protected by the collective. Hunters are informed that knowing how to relate to other hunters, landowners, non-hunters, law enforcements officials, and the public is crucial for safe hunting practices. Additionally, trainees are consistently reinforced through the importance of knowing the collective understanding of safe practices and law-abiding, ethical sensemaking. The five themes that emerged from the emphasis on mindful hunting demonstrate safety messages that aim to result in a rise of reliable, safe practices in the State of Texas.

CONCLUSION

In sum, trainers emphasized the five safety messages by constructing deep-rooted connections to hunters identity. By constructing identity-based safety messages, trainers provided an appeal to one’s love for the sport by 1) being mindful of potential of catastrophic errors when hunting; 2) being mindful of the big picture impact of oversimplifying risks and noticing consequences of actions on the environment, the sport, and society; 3) being mindful of the significance of deferring to and gaining wildlife, firearm, archery, and safety expertise when hunting; 4) being mindful of the role each hunter plays in protecting the privileges and rights associated with hunting; and 5) being mindful of the complexity of risks and being able to adapt and improvise safely when risks are high. These safety messages, then, are embedded in the collective identity of hunters and demonstrate that safe practices are more reliable when hunters collectively make sense

of the risks versus operating in routine, habitual actions. Just as sports such as soccer, football, baseball, and basketball have co-constructed safety practices, so does hunting. The discourse of safety messages, when tied to a collective sense of what it means to be a hunter, works to construct mindful practices that put into action what it means to be safe first, be a conservationist, be an ethical citizen and practice sportsmanship, be law abiding, and be other-oriented.

Author Biography

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