

Other Stories of Resilient Safety Management in the Norwegian Offshore Sector

Resilience Engineering, Bullshit and the De-Politicization of Danger

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Other stories of Resilient Safety Management in the Norwegian Offshore Sector: Resilience Engineering, Bullshit and the De-politicization of Danger.

Introduction

In an environment characterized by increasing complexity and uncertainty, and faced by a never-ending barrage of change and disruption, management is continuously looking for new coping-strategies. One set of new strategies emphasizes strengths and robustness rather than weakness and failure, and with this change of perspective *resilience* has entered the vocabulary of a growing number of academic traditions (Dahlberg, 2015). The term has also become popular outside of academia, and a Google Ngram search shows almost 300% increase, from 1980 to 2007, in publications in English where “resilience” occurs (<https://books.google.com/ngrams>).

In recent years the term has also taken hold within the field of safety studies, (Pettersen & Schulman, 2016) with leading authors on Resilience Engineering (RE) (e.g. Hollnagell, Woods & Levenson, 2006) reintroducing the idea of moving away from focusing on error and rather viewing risk and safety as products of ‘normal’ (e.g. Perrow, 1984) organizational processes (Patriarca et al., 2018). In this new tradition, resilience tends to be conceptualized as a necessary trait, which allows systems to stay within their functional, or ‘normal’, limits when they are faced with risks and unanticipated disturbances (Bergström, van Winsen & Henriqson, 2015, p.139).

The empirical setting of this paper is the Norwegian oil and gas industry where resilience became increasingly popular following the crisis in 2014¹. A dramatic drop in oil-prices, and subsequent battle for scarce resources amongst stakeholders had ushered in an era of cost-cutting, tougher contractual agreements and increasing competition (Skarholdt et al., 2017). The sector simultaneously experienced a worrying increase in "*safety challenges and serious incidents*"² As industry stakeholders expressed concern about the situation and looked for possible solutions, the resilience concept was increasingly invoked as a potential means of overcoming

¹ See e.g. Vogdrup-Schmidt (2018) at <https://shippingwatch.com/secure/Offshore/article10667160.ece>

² <http://www.ptil.no/getfile.php/1333132/PDF/%C3%85RSRAPPORT%202016.pdf>, p. 5

the crisis. It was (and still is) propagated by actors such as the Norwegian government³, numerous academics (e.g. Bergstrøm et al., 2015; Tinmannsvik, 2008), the Norwegian Oil and Gas Association⁴, Statoil (Nesheim et al, 2011) and many others⁵, who apply the term in relation to various kinds of organizing and management challenges⁶. As an example, fearing a potential decline of safety standards as a result of cost-cutting, in 2017 the Norwegian Petroleum Safety Authority (PSA) encouraged an industry-wide move towards more resilient operations. In its publication “*Reversing the trend*” the PSA rhetorically asks:

Do the technical facilities have the necessary resilience, and are we good enough at thinking resilience into the development of the petroleum industry, both onshore and offshore? Organization is the other side of this. Companies must build adequate resilience into work organization and deliver resilient operative solutions, (...). Last but not least, they must ensure adequate resilience, when developing these operative solutions. (PSA 2017, p.18) [authors translation].

On this particular page alone, the term ‘resilience’ is used no less than 24 times.

Resilience engineering is now the dominant theoretical perspective among both safety researchers (Bergstrøm et al., 2015) and practitioners in the Norwegian offshore sector. When we began our research for this paper⁷ this abundant use of the term quickly stood out, from strategic documents as well as interviews with industry practitioners, as oddly intense and prolific, almost as if the users of the term were overcompensating for something. While the PSA, - along with the majority of researchers in the field (Ibid.) - purportedly subscribe to the resilience concept developed by the Resilience Engineering-tradition we began to suspect that the intense use of the term cannot be properly accounted for by use of that perspective alone. Our hunch was that other theoretical perspectives might also be able to shed productive light on the potential meanings and effects of this oddly prolific use of the term.

³ <https://www.regjeringen.no/no/aktuelt/nye-utbygginger-pa-norsk-sokkel-godkjent/id2527385/>

⁴ <https://www.norskoljeoggass.no/Global/2013%20Dokumenter/Publikasjoner/Petroleumsindustriens%20beredskap%20mot%20akutt%20forurensning%20-%20status%202014.pdf>

⁵ eg. <http://www.nofo.no/om-nofo/var-virksomhet/>

⁶ In Norwegian, as in safety science studies more generally (Patriarca et al. 2018, p.79) robustness is a synonym for ‘resilience’. This paper will thus apply the term resilience, as this is the more widely used term in the research community.

⁷ The data for this article was gathered as part of the RISKOP research project at the Western Norway University of Applied Sciences, Haugesund, Norway.

The present paper thus reflects on what possible ‘other stories’ might be told about resilience in the Norwegian offshore sector by presenting three different possible readings of the concept. The first outlines the RE-perspective and describes those empirical qualities of operations that the resilience concept purports to refer to. It also explores how this perspective might justify the spread of, and apparent need for, resilience in the Norwegian offshore-sector. The second story applies the concept of organizational bullshit (Frankfurt, 1973/2005; Spicer, 2013) to show how the term resilience is used in ways that contributes to an “unclarifiable unclarity” and “strategic ambiguity” that makes it virtually impossible to grasp the specific meaning of particular claims. Part of this story is an exploration into some of the ways in which the resilience concept is used to invoke organizational legitimacy, without necessarily having much tangible connection to day-to-day operations. The third story connects the resilience concept to the rise of neoliberalism (Evans & Reid, 2014), and explores its potential for depoliticizing risk and danger as well as facilitating the individualization of responsibility among offshore workers.

Analyzing the resilience concept through three different perspectives allows us to observe the ambiguities and ambivalences of the concept that tend to be overlooked - particularly in the safety management literature and among practitioners in the Norwegian oil and gas industry. The purpose of this paper is thus primarily to problematize, destabilize and nuance the way in which resilience is generally conceived in the Norwegian offshore sector, and secondarily to provide resources for exploring the potential ramifications of these conceptions.

The main interest, then, is not so much concerned with determining which of the three stories is more ‘correct’ or ‘true’, but rather the degree to which the readings can facilitate critical reflection. Or as Weick (1989, p. 524) has stated (...) “*the contribution of social science does not lie in validated knowledge, but rather in the suggestion of relationships and connections that had not previously been suspected* (...). Consequently the paper is primarily aimed at industry practitioners and safety management researchers, as a resource for them to critically reflect on how they use the resilience term, how it may be understood by others, and possible ramifications of these various meanings of the term.

The paper proceeds by first outlining where in the existing literatures on safety management and resilience its contribution applies. The subsequent sections present the methodological approach applied as well as the empirical material used for the analysis. The analysis is then structured in three parts, each part initially outlining a theoretical reading, which is followed by an empirical illustration of that reading in the context of the Norwegian offshore sector.

A few words about terminology is needed before proceeding. In this paper resilience is sometimes referred to as a *term* and other times as a *concept*. Towards the end of the paper we also use the formulation ‘resilience discourse’. These distinctions are intended and important in order to communicate different claims and arguments. We use *term* to refer to instances when we have observed the *word* resilience in documents, interviews and in conversations. In these instances our point is merely to say that this word has been used by certain actors in certain contexts. When we refer to resilience as a *concept* our point is to say something about the meaning of the term; i.e. the abstract ideas that the term refers to, or how it may be interpreted, when used in the contexts where we have observed it. The phrase ‘*resilience discourse*’ is adopted directly from our third theoretical perspective (Evans & Reid, 2014) and refers to the communicative contexts where the term resilience, and its conceptual meaning, are among the more important messages communicated. In sum, we have observed actors using the *term* resilience in a number of different ways, and in a number of different contexts and as part of a number of different discourses. As they use it the term refers, or is interpreted as referring, to a variety of abstract ideas, and when we try to describe and discuss these meanings we refer to resilience as a *concept*.

This means that our primary research question is: What are the conceptual meanings of the term *resilience* as it is used, and interpreted, by industry actors in the Norwegian oil and gas industry? Based on our empirical data we argue that resilience is a conceptually ambiguous term, referring to several fundamentally different sets of abstract ideas. Our secondary research question is thus: What are the possible ramifications of these various conceptual meanings of resilience? The stories we offer not only show the conceptual ambiguity of the term, but also suggest ways of

exploring whether these various conceptual meanings of resilience are useful or harmful for the practical management and continuous reproduction of safety in the offshore sector. We do not aim to answer these questions, but argue that they need to be asked, and provide some possible avenues for inquiry in order to investigate them in greater detail.

State of the art

As mentioned, over the last decade resilience has gradually become a prevalent term in safety studies (Pettersen & Schulman, 2016) with resilience engineering scholars promoting a particular concept that implies “*a focus on operational success and deem[ing] the study of normal work more appropriate than safety science’s traditional (hegemonic) focus on failures and accidents.*” (Bergstrøm et al., 2015, p.131). Historically, resilience was first established as a scientific concept in material physics in the 19th century in order to describe and account for how material objects manage to absorb energy and regain their original shape after suffering strain. Subsequently the term found use in psychology, to describe why and how some individuals survive and even thrive in the face of adversity, as well as ecosystems theory (Ibid., p. 3) designating how some eco-systems have a greater capacity to absorb disturbances, while remaining the same system. Developments in these schools of thought have since allowed the term to enter the societal discourse on safety and security (Ibid.), and the study of complex social-technical systems, such as transportation, energy and medicine, which require extensive safety measures (Morel, Analberti & Chauvin, 2008, p. 2-3). From there it entered popular language and can now be heard and read in a large number of contexts. Figure 1. shows the exponential increase in the use of the term in English publications since 1980.



Figure 1. Google Ngram showing the percentage of publications in English with the occurrence of “resilience” (case sensitive) 1800-2008.

During the last couple of decades, resilience has thus entered the vocabulary of an increasing number of academic traditions, some of which have begun to question the usefulness, and indeed, ethical implications of the various conceptual meanings that the term refers to in these traditions (e.g. Evans & Reid, 2014; Joseph, 2013; Schmidt, 2013). This critical developments has, however, gone largely unnoticed within the field of safety studies, where the conceptual meaning of resilience is defined almost exclusively based on understandings derived from Resilience Engineering (Bergstrøm et al., 2015, p. 138).

In a comprehensive review of the research literature on occupational health and safety (OHS) management in organizations, Zanko and Dawson (2012, p. 328) contend that:

The prescriptive literature now dominates, with a focal point on tools, techniques and practices rather than on definitions or concepts, or any systematic engagement with comprehensive empirical studies that serve to inform theoretical debate.

Furthermore, they identify a lack of studies that highlight other narratives as well as how various narratives interact and shape individual and collective experiences of health and safety in organizational settings. Consequently they recommend pursuing “multiple stories in the pursuit of a more comprehensive understanding rather than reconstructing a one-model account of OHS.” (ibid., 339). Safety studies can be seen as a subfield to OHS (Ibid., 336-7) and a similar overview of the major theoretical approaches within the former (Rosness, Guttormsen, Steiro, Tinmannsvik, & Herrera 2010) confirms that the same prescriptive and instrumental focus that dominates in

OHS research also dominates safety management studies. Subsequently Zanko and Dawson's recommendation to pursue 'multiple stories' is valid for both safety studies in particular as well as more generally within OHS.

Methodology

The analytical methodology applied in this paper takes as its point of departure the aforementioned dominance of prescriptive safety theories, and the concomitant lack of non-prescriptive theories, in the academic field known as safety management research. As part of a critique of this perspective our analysis engages with our empirical material (presented in the next section) in order to both inform theoretical debate and pursue '*multiple stories*' rather than one-model accounts, as suggested by Zanko & Dawson (2012). The empirical material used for this analysis is thus construed as a resource for developing theoretical ideas through the active mobilization of existing theoretical frameworks (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007; 2011). In this conception, empirical material "*may be mobilized as a critical dialogue partner – not a judge or a mirror – that problematizes a significant form of understanding, thus encouraging problematization and theoretical insights*" (Ibid., p. 1266). Theories, on the other hand, are used as '*repertoires*' or '*lenses*', each providing and communicating particular understandings (Ibid., 1276). In this methodological perspective theories are resources for interpretations rather than representations of generalized empirical patterns.

This emphasis on theoretical lenses and the dialogical qualities of empirical material, entails that the researcher must:

(...) try to reach empirical material that can produce, or inspire the construction of, a variety of alternative "stories" (...) This view differs from a position aiming to passively mirror reality – for example, through collecting data and coding, processing, and trying to "discover" the facts and meanings that are assumed to be already present. (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007, p. 1269)

The role of the empirical material in this paper is thus to facilitate different theoretical readings, or "stories" about what resilience means when it is used in the context of safety management in the Norwegian offshore sector. Such an approach undoubtedly

leads to considerably more methodological freedom, compared to an approach in which empirical data are seen as mirror images of a “reality“ that researchers try to stay very close to as they provide the solid building blocks of theory (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007, p. 1270). This does not imply, however, that "anything goes"⁸, and that the researcher has *carte blanche* to follow any creative hunch. Theorization of this kind must be understood as a form of "*disciplined imagination*" (Mills, 1959), which requires both the use of imagination, and a variety of different kinds of discipline. Building on the epistemological assumption that empirical material is socially constructed, and never exists independently of inter-subjective perspectives and existing repertoires of interpretation, there are still a number of restrictions on the imagination of individual researchers. Some constructions simply make more sense than others. This stance is a form of ‘*moderate constructionism*’ (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007, p. 1265) in which the empirical material to a certain extent anchors the theorizing in “reality” prevents arbitrary interpretations from arising. As this is not the place for an ontological discussion, it suffices to say that the finer details of how reality is socially or materially constructed is of no consequence for our argument. Our position is that individuals are bound by both material and social constructions. However, the subject matter of this inquiry is the conceptual meanings of resilience; and concepts are social constructions through and through. The only reality that matters for this inquiry is thus the socially constructed meaning of resilience. Methodologically speaking, this amounts to a move away from focusing too strongly on procedures and techniques for "collecting" and analyzing data, and towards paying more attention to researcher reflexivity in the interpreting and reinterpreting of empirical material (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007, p. 1268).

The back-and-forth process between empirical material and theory applied in this paper is sometimes referred to as *abduction*. According to Alvesson and Kärreman abduction consists of three steps: 1 the application of an established interpretive rule (theory), 2: the observation of a surprising – in light of the interpretive rule –

⁸ This expression is commonly, and erroneously, held to sum up Feyerabend's main point in "Against method"(1993). He used the expression to say that *if* there is one underlying rule of scientific progress, *then* that rule can only be "anything goes". He did not mean that anything goes all the time and did not advocate for that as a methodological rule. His main argument was to show how scientific progress is contingent on a large range of factors, only some of which have to do with reason and logic. His point was, in other words, that there is not one underlying rule of scientific progress, and in order to understand how a field of knowledge unfolds, a number of different stories need to be told.

empirical phenomenon, and 3: the imaginative articulation of a new interpretive rule (theory). (Ibid., p. 1269). Part of the researcher's engagement with the empirical material thus consists of looking for 'surprises', or 'breakdowns' (Ibid., 1270), in which the empirical finding cannot easily be accounted for by available theory. Or in the words of Karl Weick:

"Whenever one reacts with the feeling *that's interesting*, that reaction is a clue that current experience has been tested against past experience, and that past understanding has been found inadequate" (Weick, 1989:525).

The analysis in this paper is the result of the interesting and surprising "breakdown" constituted by the hypothesized inability of the hegemonic theoretical approach, from which the use of resilience in the Norwegian offshore sector derives, to fully account for the, at times, oddly intense invocation of the term. By engaging in the third step of the abduction process, this paper attempts to fill the gap left by that breakdown. It questions the meaning of resilience in this context and through an imaginative articulation of new interpretive rules or theories attempts to provide alternative explanations for the proliferation of the term. Providing such alternative explanations makes it possible to raise future questions about how these different conceptual meanings impact the risk-situation in the Norwegian off shore sector.

Empirical material

The unit of our analysis is thus the term resilience and our aim is to explore its different conceptual meanings as it is used, and interpreted, by researchers, bureaucrats, managers and operators in the Norwegian oil and gas industry. To achieve this aim we have collected empirical material from a range of different sources using different methods which include document analysis, interviews and ethnographic fieldwork.

Our analysis began with the construction of an archive of documents, from and about the Norwegian offshore sector, that contain the term resilience. In total, the archive consists of around 250 documents, containing approximately 1000 pages. The search for relevant literature was a mix of both systematic and non-systematic work; a combination of internet searching, pursuing references in other documents, and tips

and referrals provided verbally by experts and scholars in the field. The systematic search employed search-words like ‘resilience’, ‘safety-management’, ‘risk-management’ and ‘offshore’⁹ on Google, Google Scholar and the local library. The initial criteria for selecting documents to include in the archive was simply that the term resilience was used, and secondly the extent to which the resilience concept was discussed and elaborated in the context of safety management in the Norwegian offshore industry.

Having constructed the archive, we began to trace the explicit and implicit mutual references between the documents, which after a while revealed a certain redundancy and circularity in terms of both arguments and descriptions (see e.g. Andersen, 2003). During this saturation process, several interesting themes began to emerge, with the fundamental vagueness of the term, and the almost exclusively celebratory terms used to describe it, being chief among them. The documents were then read in conjunction with various relevant theories in an abductive back-and-forth process (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007) as explained above. These readings subsequently informed the observations in the field and guided the choice of texts and interview-excerpts that are quoted below. The quotes chosen should thus be understood as *exemplary* (Villadsen, 2006, p. 101) in the sense of being particularly illustrative of the theoretical readings applied in the analysis.

As a supplement to the document-study we conducted three explorative semi-structured on-land ‘expert interviews’ (Finkbeiner, 2017) with representatives from the industry who were also co-authors of documents included in the study. The interviews were exploratory and conducted while we were also analyzing our text-archive. Themes and preliminary conclusions that emerged from the document-study were thus tested and adjusted by observing, during the interviews, how they resonated with the understandings of key actors in the field. While the primary purpose of the interviews was to enrich, and in a sense ‘triangulate’ (Silverman 2005, p. 121) the document study, the interviews also supplement the ethnographic field work with a more ‘elite’ perspective (Littig, 2009) than those obtained from actors at the front-end of operations.

⁹ Both the English and Norwegian versions of the search words were employed.

The ethnographic fieldwork (e.g. Gold, 1997) informing our study consists of six stays lasting 3 to 7 days each on Platform Supply Vessels (PSVs) and Anchor Handling Tug Supply Vessels (AHTS) at the Norwegian Continental Shelf between 2013-2017¹⁰. Such fieldwork implies continuous interactions, in naturalistic settings, between researcher and informants, and on these ships it included spending time and interacting with officers on the bridge, hanging out with able bodied seaman (ABs) in the dirty mess, observing the ABs at work on deck as well as participating in everyday activities such as eating with the crew, lounging in the TV room, working out in the gym etc. All these fieldworks were conducted according to methodological standards in contemporary social anthropology (see e.g. Oakley 2013; Robin and Sluka 2012; Whitehead 2005). This implies that extensive notes were taken from the time the fieldworks were arranged and until their conclusion. Notes about observed behaviors, interactions and conversations were made at the first possible time when the researcher could find a private spot to make his notes. The notes used in the analysis have since been slightly rewritten for clarity. In addition to notes the researchers also kept a diary where they reflected over their own personal experiences and emotions in the field.

A series of informal ethnographic interviews (e.g. Spradley, 2016) with crew-members were also conducted during the fieldworks. As participant observation implies continuous interactions with informants it also includes dialogue that varies over a scale from small talk to ‘informal conversational interviews’ (Allen, 2017). The latter typically evolve spontaneously from everyday conversations when these turn to topics that the researcher finds worth inquiring about in greater detail. A conversation can thus gradually turn into an “interview” in the sense that the researcher asks more detailed and pointed questions than what is common for actors who just work together or socialize (Whitehead, 2005). Informal interviews usually

¹⁰ Two different of ethnographic fieldworks has produced data for this article: The primary fieldwork (2 stays of 5 days) was conducted after the initial document analysis and sought to address specific issues that emerged through that analysis. This was supplemented with fieldwork carried out at the Norwegian continental shelf prior to the document analysis, where the themes and problematics from the document analysis inspired a re-analysis for the data. Additionally, three other fieldworks were carried out by the same researcher at the same time, but outside of the Norwegian sector; one in the British sector, one offshore Australia and one offshore Labuan in Malaysia. Even though our unit of analysis is the discourse on resilience in the Norwegian oil and gas industry, these other fieldworks are also mentioned as they yielded contextual data that highlighted some of the themes relevant for our study.

end in an equally gradual fashion and when finished informants may not even identify them as “interviews”, but merely a curious researcher asking detailed questions. The questions we asked in the interviews generally revolved around safety procedures, and the crew-members thoughts and practices around these. The initial questions would often be more general in nature and relate to e.g. the career of the crew-member, sea-sickness ‘war-stories’, the politics of oil and gas drilling etc. As these interviews were informal, formal interview guides do not exist. The interviews conducted vary greatly in duration; from 10 minutes and up to several hours, and there is thus a certain ‘grey area’ when determining whether to classify a short conversation as an informal interview, or merely a casual conversation as part of the ethnographic fieldwork. Nevertheless, all conversations (whether classified as informal interviews or not) were recorded in our notes, and depending on the method of classification, we conducted between 100 and 150 informal interviews during our field work.

The crews were informed that the ethnographers were aboard the ships as researchers collecting data about the management of risk in supply and anchor handling operations. Researcher presence seemed to be accepted by all crewmembers who willingly socialized and participated in conversations with them. Ethnographic fieldwork in a ‘*total institution*’ (Goffmann, 1968) such as a ship, where people are crammed together in close quarters over extended time periods, is characterized by the difficulty to maintain ‘front stage’ performances (Goffmann, 1959). In addition, it has been asserted that in total institutions a whole year's cycle of social life plays out, and can be observed, within very short periods, at times as little as 24 hours (Vandeskog 2016, p. 230). This implies that observations made on ships are both relatively rich and relatively ‘untainted’ by face-work from crewmembers seeking to impress a researcher.

Analysis

In order to tell ‘other stories’ our analysis is structured into three different accounts of the conceptual meaning of resilience in the context of the Norwegian petro-maritime sector. As previously mentioned, each reading relies on a different theoretical perspective which allows us to observe different aspects of the same phenomenon, and thus highlights its complexities and ambiguities as opposed to giving a one-model

prescriptive account. The three theoretical perspectives are (1) Resilience Engineering, (2) Bullshit and (3) resilience as the de-politicization of danger. Each theoretical perspective is followed by an empirical account, or ‘story’, from the Norwegian Petro–maritime sector which supplements, illustrates and contextualizes the theoretical perspective.

1st theoretical perspective: Resilience Engineering

The first theoretical perspective is Resilience Engineering (e.g. Hollnagel, Woods & Levenson, 2006). It enjoys a strong position in contemporary academic safety research¹¹ and is presently the dominant, near hegemonic, perspective in the Norwegian offshore sector, in the sense that no other theoretical perspective, or theoretical terms are employed as frequently by actors in this context. This implies that in addition to being a theoretical lens (for us researchers) RE is also the perspective that predominantly influences the conceptual contents of the resilience term as it is used and interpreted by actors in the Norwegian offshore sector. As we shall see, when trying to explain the conceptual meaning of the term resilience actors most commonly supply denotative definitions drawn from RE.

Resilience Engineering has enjoyed a rapid increase in popularity among both researchers and safety managers during the last decade, and resilience has, as mentioned, become a widely used term (Bergstrøm et al., 2015; Patriarca, Bergstrøm, Di Gravio & Costantino, 2018; Pettersen & Schulman, 2016). Even though the scientific literature in this tradition is relatively coherent in its articulations of the resilience concept (Bergstrøm et al., 2015, p.135), some degree of conceptual ambiguity can still be found. Sometimes this literature defines resilience as ‘*the ability to adapt to or absorb disturbing conditions*’ (Ibid., see also Carmeli, Friedman & Tishler, 2013) or “*the capacity to cope with unanticipated dangers after they have become manifest, learning to bounce back.*” (e.g. Wildavsky, 1988, p. 77). At other

¹¹ Research on High Reliability Organisations (HRO) (e.g. Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2008) is a related theoretical perspective which holds a less dominant position than RE, but is still highly influential. Both traditions focus strongly on resilience, either in the form of individual or organizational ability to deal with, recoup from and possibly flourish in the face of adversity. In HRO-theory the term is however less central, and we shall only refer to the tradition in passing as we mainly focus on RE.

times resilience is not just associated with bouncing back from errors, but also encompasses the idea of coping with surprises in the moment (e.g. Weick et al. 2008). Moreover, theoreticians of this vein argue that it is important to retain both denotations in order to avoid the idea that resilience is simply the capability to absorb an undesired event and still persist - here resilience also means to utilize the misfortune that is absorbed (Ibid.).

A third layer of ambiguity is added by some RE scholars who maintain that resilience should be understood as “*the ability to succeed under varying conditions, so that the number of intended and acceptable outcomes (..) is as high as possible.*” (Hollnagel, 2014, p. 137). This latter emphasis is on the intrinsic ability of an organization to maintain or regain a “*dynamically stable state*” (Hollnagel et al., 2006, p. 16), which allows it to continue operations after a major mishap and/or in the presence of a continuous stress. This means that Resilience Engineering understands failure as “*a result of the adaptations necessary to cope with to the complexity of the real world, rather than a breakdown or malfunction*” (Hollnagel, 2014, p. 68). Consequently, this aspect of the RE theory emphasizes that the aim of safety management is not to eradicate risk and danger, but to focus on how individuals and organizations continuously adjust what they do under the current conditions where time and resources are always finite (Ibid.).

In the RE tradition resilience thus refers to three different types of outcomes from three different types of processes: (1) Coping with and bouncing back from an unwanted event (expected or not); (2) the ability to take advantage of (not only bounce back from) an unexpected and unwanted event: and finally (3) achieving success in general; since danger is intrinsically immanent, and failures cannot be entirely avoided, success is always also a story of resilience. The conceptual meaning of the term is consequently somewhat vague and it is not always clear which of these outcomes or processes the term refers to. This may, on the one hand, be seen as an epistemological weakness, but, as we argue in the next story, it may also be one of the major reasons for its popularity among safety managers.

In spite of drifting between being a way of relating to anticipated or unanticipated dangers, and a more general way of describing successful operations, the relevance

and usefulness of the RE concept of resilience is generally supported by reference to the increasing complexity of social–technical systems (Bergstrøm et al., 2015, p. 134). Such complexity is believed to generate new kinds of risk, to which resilient safety management, and its emphasis on monitoring, anticipating, responding and learning, is the solution (Bergstrøm et al., 2015). An example of this conceptualization is Tveiten, Albrechtsen, Wærø & Wahl’s (2012) description of how the use of new technology, along with changing constellations of actors in a distributed system, generate more complexity and new threats in the Norwegian oil and gas sector. Managing these threats thus purportedly necessitates a more resilient approach. Another example can be found in a study of ‘resilient cooperation’ in the same industry (Skjerve, Kaarstad, Størseth, Wærø & Grøtan, 2012), which claims that resilience is a useful trait that enables the complex collaboration needed to build and install new petroleum installations. Resilience is, in other words, a quality needed to flexibly and safely navigate complex and risky process and to “*work efficiently and safely across the various operational states that may arise*” (Ibid., p. 1952).

In sum, the safety-literature on resilience is generally functionalist and prescriptive in the sense that it promotes resilience as a way to achieve successful (and implicitly also safe) operations. This optimistic perspective, in which resilience is presented as a desired, albeit somewhat vague, safety management ‘recipe’ of sorts, is also the dominant view among practitioners in the Norwegian offshore sector, the story of which we tell in the following section.

Story 1: ‘Being able to handle the rigors and stresses that arise’

An empirical example of the ways in which ideas from Resilience Engineering are used and understood within the Norwegian offshore industry emerged during an interview with a representative from the Norwegian Petroleum Agency (PSA). The informant explained the rationale behind the agency’s decision to promote the concept:

“(…) The background for choosing resilience is [that] we haven't necessarily seen a sudden weakening in a few specific areas (..). If this had been the case, it would be our job as a supervisory authority to point to those areas and alert the industry. This is more case of a general weakening across a wide range of areas and a high degree of uncertainty.”

As opposed to more technical solutions, that address specific and clearly defined problems, resilience presents itself as a broad and widely applicable concept. This makes it highly suitable for addressing the current situation in the oil and gas industry, where low oil-price and the resulting cost-cutting runs parallel with and an industry-wide perception of risk and safety developing “*in the wrong direction*” (PSA, 2016, p.5).

Considering the ambiguity of the resilience concept within RE, it is not surprising that industry actors demonstrate an even less coherent understanding of it. Data from formal interviews and the industry literature reveal a broad spectrum of uses and understandings. On one end of the continuum are references directly to Resilience Engineering or scholars such as Hollnagel (e.g. 2014) and Aven (e.g. 2014), as well as reports (e.g. Lloyds Register Foundation 2015) that promote resilience from an RE perspective. Other definitions are slightly vaguer yet still in line with general conception of the term within safety studies. When the PSA defines resilience as “*a system or an organization which operates reliably even under difficult conditions*” (PSA, 2017, p. 19) or “*being able to handle the rigors and stresses that arise*” (PSA-interview) one can see a clear connection to Resilience Engineering. Furthermore, the arguments for the usefulness of resilience made by actors in the industry often mirror the previously outlined scholarly arguments in emphasizing complexity and risk as problems to which resilience is a solution. Here, a PSA agent describes the complex nature of accidents in the offshore sector:

We are talking about really complex incidents, really complex, and they are always unforeseen. You can never predict everything that is going to happen. (...) There are things, that you wouldn't have thought possible, they come as an absolute surprise (...). And this is where resilience becomes extremely important.

On the other end of the continuum are utterances indicating that resilience has become a catch-all concept. For example, a representative from Statoil emphasized that resilience is “*something that we need to focus on*”, and is about having “*good channels of communication*”, “*ensuring compliance with checklists*”, “*uncovering mistakes*”, and having “*good systems onboard*”.

One of the difficulties with grasping the conceptual contents of the resilience term, as it is used and understood by industry actors, is thus this broad reference to a range of abstract notions. Consequently, it is often hard to pin down its exact meaning, resulting in a situation where a host of different meanings and definitions are attributed to the term both by academics and industry actors. This has become an irritation to academics, some of whom now question the usefulness of the term ‘resilience’ and ask whether concepts such as “*High Reliability Organizations*” or “*Safety Culture*” in fact cover the same phenomenon (Bergstrøm et al., 2015, p.131). These same qualities may, however, also significantly contribute to why and how the term has gained hegemony among safety managers in the Norwegian petroleum sector; a theme we now turn to in our second theoretical perspective.

2nd theoretical perspective: Bullshit

As our second theoretical perspective, we rely on the notion of *bullshit*, which was originally conceptualized by philosopher Harry Frankfurt in his classic essay “*On bullshit*” from 1973 (Frankfurt, 1973/2005). In recent years the concept has been productively applied to organization and management research (e.g. Allen, Allen & McGoun, 2012; Christensen, Kärreman & Rasche, 2019; Spicer, 2013 and 2017) and is now commonly used to denote obscure, empty or pretentious talk (Cohen 2006; Hardcastle & Reisch, 2011; Kelly 2014). More specifically, in this context bullshit is understood as a self-referential buzzword-filled discourse that is strategically ambiguous, over-packed with information and deliberately fleeting in nature.

“(…) bullshit is talk that has been emptied of meaningful content and become hot air. It is a form of discourse which roves across topics, buzz words and conjectures without stopping to test its own worthiness against any criteria of truth (whether that be a comparison with empirical reality, basic criteria of reason or some kind of inter-subjective checking against broadly shared social understandings of reality).” (Spicer, 2013, p. 657)

Furthermore, Cohen (2006) understands bullshit as ‘*unclarifiable unclarity*’, or in other words discourse that essentially cannot be rendered clear or unobscure. One sign of such unclarifiability is when terms can easily be negated or exchanged without

altering the plausibility of the statement. (Christensen et al., 2019, p. 5). Hence, emptiness and disconnection from day-to-day operations is often present in bullshit management discourses, where the vocabulary is virtually interchangeable (Spicer, 2013, p. 658). Following from this, a certain “*strategic ambiguity*” (Ibid., p. 661) is a central characteristic of bullshit, where terms are used in ways that make it difficult or impossible to pin down their conceptual contents. This strategic ambiguity also makes it virtually impossible to inquire, in any depth, into the meaning of the particular claims that are made. Broad words like “excellence”, “quality” and “innovation”, that could mean almost anything to anybody, are examples of this kind of ambiguity. Bullshit is claimed to have specific significance in contemporary organization and management, where increased complexity, multiple interests and conflicting agendas tend to promote particular communicative practices that we might label as bullshit. As an analytical perspective bullshit thus allows us to study unclear, vague, misleading or nonsensical dimensions of managerial talk and the different social and managerial functions of such talk. (Christensen et al., 2019:11).

In our second story we thus argue that the discourse around “resilience” is fleeting, ambiguous and disconnected from operational reality and as such can be understood as manifestations of bullshit.

Story 2: ‘Bend Over Here It Comes Again (BOHICA)’

Firstly, it is worth refreshing the point that safety management scholars have begun to debate whether the resilience concept has become too generalized and abstract¹². Hence, some scholars have contended that “*the failure to parse out and empirically ground the concept of resilience (...) has led to misleading perceptions of the concept*”. (e.g. Pettersen & Schulmann, 2016 p. 16), with others asserting that “*(...) resilience seems to become a stand-in for the notion of safety*” (Bergstrøm et al., 2015, p. 139). In a response to such criticisms other scholars have tried to sketch out different types of resilience in order to improve the conceptual precision and clarity of the term (e.g. Woods, 2015).

¹² Since bullshit-discourses frequently get their raw materials from management scholars and business schools (Spicer, 2013, p. 665), this might also be interpreted as a debate on the extent to which resilience research leads to organizational bullshit.

Our interviews with industry practitioners, and documents describing resilience by and for such practitioners, reveal that the ambiguity of the term in academic discussions is even more prevalent in the industry. As already mentioned, in the document ‘Reversing the trend’ the PSA describes resilience as “*a system or an organization which operates reliably under difficult conditions*” which, among other things, implies having ‘*safety margins*’. In addition, “*Resilient solutions*” are described as “*the effective identification and handling of dangerous conditions*” and “*adequate time and resources to bring a dangerous situation under control*”. (PSA, 2017, p. 19). The same document specifies that the need for resilient solutions applies to “*technology*”, “*capacity*”, “*competence*”, “*organization*”, and “*management*” and “*on all levels of the organization*”. (ibid.). These understandings of resilience are not particularly similar to the established RE-understanding of resilience, but they definitely share the same kind of ‘unclarifiability’. Furthermore, the omnipresence of resilience (‘*all levels of the organization*’) adds an element of abstraction and non-specificity to the already slippery term. Apart from the idea that it will somehow make things safer, and sounds rather impressive, it is unclear what resilient *solutions, technology, capacity, competence, organizing, management* etc. (PSA, 2017, p. 19) look like in practice.

Christensen et al. (2019, p. 3) note that advertising, public relations and consultancy organizations are likely to be ‘full of it’ (see also Graeber & Cerutti, 2018) as a large part of their *raison d’être* consists in the production of bullshit. One might expect, however, that bullshit would be less likely to flourish in High Reliability Organizations, such as nuclear power plants or offshore drilling vessels, where failure is to be avoided at any expense. As it appears, this is not necessarily the case. When interviewed about the considerations going into creating the abovementioned ‘*Reversing the trend*’- document, a PSA official explained that ‘*there is always an interpretation-cost*’ with these types of concepts, and one must expect, and accept, a certain element of dilution:

"We have deliberately chosen not to theorize it too much, and not start talking about Hollnagel and so on, even though I am familiar with this theoretical tradition".

The ambiguity that saturates the strategic documents is thus only enhanced when interviewing practitioners in the industry. Interviewees systematically gave longwinded answers and covered many different aspects of safety management operations when asked about resilience. For example, a manager at one of the largest technical suppliers in the industry, described resilience as: "*the thing that you are doing has to be completed in a safe and efficient manner*" and went on to add that resilience is also about "*taking account of uncertainty*", and the ability to "*complete an operation under many different circumstances*", while also stating that resilience is about "*the reliability of the vessel*" and that "*the personnel on board are familiar with the operations*", and that "*the equipment on board is used in the correct fashion*". The only common denominator between all these opinions about resilience seems to be that they can somehow be related to "safety" or "good operations". In that sense, the term becomes rather hollow, and has little relation to actual empirical or operational reality.

Having established a certain prevalence of bullshit around the idea of resilience, we now move to discuss some of the possible reasons for, and effects of, this prevalence. The introduction of the concept of resilience to the Norwegian Offshore sector is thus in large part a result of various processes of strategizing, whether this be in the PSA, Statoil or elsewhere. And there seems to be something about this process, which structurally conditions it towards the production of bullshit. Even when uncertainty is high, the success of visionary strategies thus hinges on the ability of managers to instill confidence. This is often done by describing future realities in an assertive and bombastic manner as if these realities (e.g. 'resilience at all levels of the organization') were almost already achieved. Furthermore managers are:

(...) inclined to produce bullshit especially when they talk about issues that exceed their knowledge, but fail to confess the limits of their understanding. This condition is practically endemic in strategizing processes, where management frequently need to articulate interesting and inspiring strategic goals for their organizations without fully understanding what is going on. (Christensen et al., 2019, p.9)

Bullshit can thus be seen as a product of the structural conditions within which strategic safety management takes place, but is also used to build an impressive image for others and to increase one's own self-confidence. Furthermore, bullshit can help rationalize and legitimize managerial decisions, for example by positioning unpopular restructuring programs as 'cutting edge' or 'increased resilience' that will bring the

organization a number of benefits (Christensen et al., 2019, p.8). Relatedly, bullshit is frequently also used by organizations to build their broader legitimacy in a way that resembles how it has been described in classic institutional theory (Spicer 2013, p. 662, see e.g. Meyer/Rowan 1977, DiMaggio/Powell 1983). A central insight here is the idea that organizations often adopt policies and practices because they are considered to be broadly socially acceptable and not because they are particularly efficient. This means that such practices will often be adopted somewhat ceremonially, and that the symbolic value of something like resilience ultimately supplants its technical value. An employee from the PSA alluded to this mechanism of ceremonial adoption as he described the reaction the agency often receives when promoting new concepts and standards in the industry. The interviewee said that the reaction can be summed up in the acronym “*BOHICA*”. He then continued with the following explanation: “*Bend Over Here It Comes Again. Meaning, if we just lay low for a while, it will pass.*” The fact that the PSA knows and openly talks about this, indicates some level of acknowledgement that compliance with their ideas has an important ceremonial component, and that practitioners often view PSA-initiatives as bullshit.

The cynical approach described by the PSA-employee is indeed a common reaction to bullshit (Christensen et al., 2019 p. 7) and our fieldwork and interview data clearly attest to similar cynicism as well as a ceremonial quality to the way in which actors in the industry implement PSA-initiatives. There is thus no doubt that many operators pay them various degrees of lip-service while day-to-day operations remain unchanged. During our fieldwork and interviews we only met one seafarer who predominately had good things to say about the formal safety management systems that permeate the industry. Everyone else described authorities such as the PSA and Statoil as far-removed bureaucracies, who don't understand the realities of what actually goes on in the front-end of operations, and who “*don't really care about us*” as one captain put it. They are seen as implementing too many superfluous safety procedures, that are not connected to day-to-day operational reality, and cannot, for the sake of maintaining a self-identity as a competent professional, be obeyed but ceremonially or partially (see also Vandeskog, 2015). One of the starkest examples of this was a captain who loved to tell stories about the ridiculous bureaucratic procedures and demands placed on Norwegian offshore-vessels. One of his favorite

phrases was to take a piece of paper, wave it in the air and exclaim: “*This, the bureaucratic paperwork, I call it toilet paper – I only use it to cover my arse*”. As already mentioned, bullshit which is not called out is likely to be met with cynicism – as displayed by the captain in the above example - and thus prevent organizational members from taking relevant claims seriously. It may, of course, also be taken at face value, but when not it is usually met with politeness, skepticism and indifference. The latter seems to be the most prominent reaction among practitioners on off-shore vessels towards resilience-talk

Despite its wide proliferation elsewhere in the sector, most of the crew on the offshore vessels we visited were largely indifferent to it, with few having any substantial knowledge about it. This discrepancy between the abundant use of the term in the policy- and management-levels of the sector, and the lack of knowledge about and interest in it at the operational end, indicates a ceremonial conformity at the upper echelons of the industry, which is buffered from the actual operational reality. And this is of course the major problem with organizational bullshit; that it can cause organizational members to neglect problems; either because they are too self-confident about the profundity of their own talk, because they are silenced by similar talk by others, or because they become indifferent and cynical towards managerial initiatives, as in the case of the offshore workers (Christensen et al., 2019 p. 7). While impressive sounding bullshit can provide organizations and individuals with a sense of purpose, and make the person or organization uttering it appear clever and important (Spicer, 2013 p. 659), the danger is that too much bullshit can obfuscate and erode the organization's core tasks. This can subsequently lead to an increased sense of meaninglessness among employees, and a situation where *"any new initiative, direction or program is likely to be cynically treated as just another passing fad"* (Spicer, 2013 p. 663) - or what the PSA agent referred to as the BOHICA-attitude.

3rd theoretical perspective: The de-politization of danger.

Our third and final theoretical perspective departs from the concept of bullshit and return to taking the idea of resilience, as it is espoused by Resilience Engineering, at face value. However, rather than accepting the pragmatic and technical strand of that

research tradition, the following theoretical lens focuses, in a somewhat critical manner, on the political and ethical implications of the concept.

To contextualize our third theoretical perspective, it is helpful to recall the structural changes in the Norwegian offshore-sector outlined at the beginning of this paper. Cost-cutting, tougher contractual agreements, tougher competition and diminishing trust in the sector run parallel with a broader development in Norwegian capitalism (Skarholdt et al., 2017) whereby '*neoliberalist principles*' (see also Enjolras & Sivesind, 2011; Hermansen, 2005; Løyning, 2014) have increasingly gained prevalence in the political economy. This development has resulted in a change:

(...) going from the Nordic model (tripartite collaboration), through welfare capitalism (individuals rewarded and recourses abundant), and now real capitalism of competition between companies and rationalization inside these. (Skarholdt et al., 2017, p.2)

With this description of the sector as our point of departure, we examine how the introduction and dissemination of the resilience concept, in all its ambiguity, can be understood both as a sign of these changes, and a possible facilitator of them. In this section we primarily draw on Evans and Reid (2014), who argue that the rise of the 'discourse of resilience' (i.e. the encompassing discourse that resilience is a part of) runs parallel with, and even to a degree facilitates, the rise of neoliberalism with its emphasis on individual responsibility for the assuming of risks. The same overall discourse also introduces a new way of relating to threat and danger. Whereas the traditional idea of safety typically entails a conception of, and striving towards, eradicating threats and dangers, the underlying premise of the resilience discourse, according to Evans and Reid, is the idea that exposure to threat must be understood in positive terms rather than being a condition to avoid:

"Rather than enabling the development of peoples and individuals so that they can aspire to secure themselves from whatever they find threatening and dangerous in worldly living, the (..) discourse of resilience functions to convince peoples and individuals that the dream of lasting security is impossible. To be resilient, the subject must disavow any belief in the possibility to secure itself from the insecure sediment of existence, accepting instead an understanding of life as a permanent process of continual adaptation to threats and dangers which appear outside its control". (Evans & Reid 2014, p. 68)

From this perspective, the idea of resilience entails that we must embrace threat and danger and use it to thrive, both as organizations and as individual human beings. Inherently the idea of resilience thus promotes a view of the world as something we can only ever adapt to, as opposed to change. What is overlooked, however, is that the dangerous and volatile nature of the world we now find ourselves exposed and vulnerable to, is (to a major extent) of our own creation. The Norwegian petro-maritime sector is predominantly made up of purely man-made systems such as the economy (e.g. ‘real capitalism’ (Skarholdt et al., 2017)), politics, local sector-organizing and technology. Even the ‘natural world’, with its unpredictable weather, is partly a ‘man-made’ result of fossil fuel consumption and global warming (see e.g. Dawson, 2016). Eventually this leads to what Evans and Reid (2014) calls ‘*the exclusion of ‘the Political’*’ (p. 195); i.e. the exclusion of the practice of imagining and striving for worldly transformation.

The argument that resilience contributes to an ‘exclusion of the political’ can also be supported by interpreting resilience as a ‘rationality of government’, or a distinct mode of relating to complexity and uncertainty, that promotes individual responsibility and self-reliance along with the ability of systems to bounce back and preserve a preconceived equilibrium (Davoudi, 2016). According to critics this rationality aligns resilience with “*the liberal framing of freedom and responsibility and the conservative value of maintaining the status quo*” (Davoudi, 2016, p.2), and allows for a dynamic in which resilience, urgency and emergency feed off each other and legitimate the evacuation of ‘*The Political*’ (ibid.). This is achieved by representing events and interactions that commonly develop gradually into predictable and enduring clusters as if they are sudden, unpredictable and short-term. By the “*foregrounding of calculative practices, technical-rational risk assessments and resilience engineering*” (Davoudi, 2016, p.18), a de-politization of the discursive field is enacted.

As mentioned, one of the main criticisms against the RE inspired resilience-approach to risk management is directed towards the idea that risk and danger is not something to be avoided, but instead something that organizations and individuals can use to develop and thrive (Evans & Reid, 2013). This optimistic approach towards risk

management relates to what Resilience Engineering sometimes refers to as the “*safety/performance–conflict*” (Morel, Alamberti & Chauvin, 2008, p.2-3 and 2009; see also Hollnagel 2016; Kettunen, Reiman & Wahlström 2007); i.e. the traditionally held idea that increased safety leads to decreased performance, and vice versa. With resilience, however, operators can, in a sense, ‘have their cake and eat it too’ – i.e. evaporate the conflict and combine high degrees of safety with high performance in high-risk environments. As an example; in a study of resilience in sea fishing, Morel et al. found that although

“(…) the best safety response would be to stop fishing in borderline conditions, the resilient response is to go on, and develop survival skills, according to the situation. The willingness to take risks is actually based on genuine craft–style knowledge of resilience (…).” (Morel et al., 2008, p.13).

This implies that a resilient risk-taking approach will make a system “*safer than average for these exceptional conditions, even if this result is relative and the system suffers more accidents overall as it exposes itself to more risks*” (Ibid., p. 13). In situations of resource scarcity and competition, such as the current situation in the Norwegian offshore sector, resilience thus might have become a popular principle because it potentially allows for more risk-taking, while still retaining some general or abstract degree of safety. There are reasons to suspect that the concept of resilience, with its plethora of ambiguous meanings, might allow for promoting increased risk-taking without necessarily acknowledging how this compromises safety. Our data is not sufficient to conclude that this is the case, but certainly suggests that the way the resilience terms is used by industry actors has such de-politicizing potential.

In addition to the de-politicizing aspect of resilience critical scholars have also turned their attention to the supposed *ideal subject* implicit in the ‘resilience discourse’ – the resilient subject (Chandler & Reid, 2016; Evans & Reid, 2013; O’Malley, 2010; du Plessis & Sørensen, 2017). It is possible, they argue, that the idea of resilience, and its concomitant fundamental belief in the necessity and positivity of human exposure to danger, actually presupposes a particular type of subject:

As such, the resilient subject is as subject, which must permanently struggle to accommodate itself to the world, and not a subject which can conceive of changing

the world, its structure and conditions of possibility. However, it is a subject which accepts the dangerousness of the world it lives in as a condition for partaking of that world and which accepts the necessity of the injunction to change itself in correspondence with threats now presupposed as endemic. (Evans & Reid, 2013, p. 85)

The resilient subject thus not only handles danger, but thrives on it (Evans & Reid, 2013, p. 87) as it is exposure to danger and risk that enables the subject to develop and grow. Resilience entails the ability to ‘*endure more stress*’ without breaking down (Willig, 2013) and improving in the process. Relatedly, the resilient subject also embodies many of the traits of the quintessential neoliberal subject (Chandler & Reid, 2016) in the sense that it assumes total individual responsibility for coping with risk and danger, and does not recognize any structural determinants of this danger (Willig, 2013).

This dynamic is documented in a growing body of workplace safety research (e.g. Collinson, 1999; Gray, 2009; Rasmussen 2010 and 2013; Zoller, 2003), which highlights how safety is increasingly becoming the responsibility of the very employees who are the potential victims of hazards. Behavioral safety policies have for example been linked to the concept of ‘neoliberal governmentality’, (Rasmussen, 2010, p. 461; see also Maravelias, 2015) in which workers are designated as ‘*accident causers and objects of behavioral modification*’ (Ibid., p. 474). Relatedly, Gray (2009) argues that in “*the everyday practice of avoiding unsafe work, employees are instructed to become prudent subjects who must ‘practice individual responsibility’ ...*” (Gray, 2009, p. 327).

Research on resilience and safety often states that resilience can be seen on various different levels, ranging from individuals and teams to the whole organization and even broader systems. It is, however, typically the case in empirical studies that the capacity for resilience ends up being located at the level of the sharp-end staff (Bergstrøm et al., 2015, p. 136,139). This raises the concern that:

“(...) the notion of resilience functions chiefly to load the residual risks of our complex social-technological systems onto the backs of the individual (the front end operator or teams of operators),

asking them to rely on their adaptive capacities to overcome potentially dangerous disturbances and balance safety across multiple (often conflicting) goals.” (Bergström et al., 2015, p. 138).

Story 3: “We can never play the safety card”

As mentioned, the Norwegian offshore sector is seeing an increase in competition and cost-cutting that runs parallel with higher risks and more accidents. By applying the theoretical perspective outlined above we can speculate about how the introduction of resilience into this context might serve to normalize and depoliticize the new volatility in the sector. For example, when asked specifically about the political role played by the PSA in pushing for resilience in the offshore sector, one of the employees, who had been responsible for implementing the resilience-initiative in the PSA, referred to top management for these kinds of questions. Instead of answering the question he indicated that the PSA is guided by, but does not make political decisions:

“I think the real political direction that we are guided by in our work is the goal that we have to be at the top of the list internationally when it comes to safety. That is a political decision which has been made, and that we must try and live up to”.

In order to live up to this decision resilience was introduced, but the initiative was to a large extent based on "*a theoretical knowledge of the term*" and not political considerations. The above quote shows that potentially depoliticizing aspect of resilience is certainly detectable when speaking to actors in the sector.

The location of the resilient subject at the front end of operations is slightly more subtle, however, and examples from our fieldworks suggest that even though the term resilience is not always habitually employed by seafarers on offshore vessels, they may still subscribe to some of the ideas inherent in the ambiguous resilience concept described and discussed above. As an example, when asked about the risky and/or dangerous aspects of the job one Captain stated, in a somber, matter-of-factly tone, that "*everything is dangerous*", and continued to explain how the crew members must constantly stay on their toes and cannot allow themselves to get too comfortable or relaxed. This mirrors the "*constant sense of unease*" (Hollnagel et al. 2007, p. 355-56)

associated with resilience in RE, but also the acceptance of the dangerousness of the environment, and the injunction to constantly adapt to its volatility, described by critics of the resilience discourse (Evans & Reid, 2013). Furthermore, the crew on the offshore vessels also seemed to take pride in their ability to continue operations even in borderline conditions. During the ethnographic fieldwork, there was an incident in which the Platform Supply Vessel was unloading cargo to an oil rig as the “weather window” was about to close¹³ and the operation would have to be called off. When the crane-operator on the oil rig communicated his decision to stop the operation the officer on the Platform Supply Vessel spontaneously threw his right arm, with a clenched fist, into the air and exclaimed victoriously: *"Yes!! It was them that called it off, not us"*. This suggests that the ability to tolerate and navigate through risky and borderline conditions is associated with a certain amount of pride and honor.

Furthermore, our field observations show, that seafarers servicing oil and gas installations perceive the future of their contracts to depend on their performance, and believe that this performance must demonstrate that they are able to cope with and overcome potentially dangerous events. In other words, they must prove to be resilient, even though they do not necessarily use that word to describe it. The seafarers generally fear that if they refuse to do what the installations demand (i.e. show resilience) the ship and crew will get a bad reputation and not get their contracts renewed, because the ship will get ‘a bad name’. A particular episode from our fieldwork highlights this phenomenon. The researcher only had one week available for this particular fieldwork, and a re-routing of the ship he was due to embark made him nervous if it would make it back on time. He consulted the officers travelling with him and one of them said. *“If everything goes well we’ll be back in good time, but with the weather we’ve been having lately, there is no telling”*. The researcher asked if it happened that they had to remain at sea, waiting for a weather window wide enough so that they could deliver the supplies? *“All the time”* he said, *“Sometimes we may sit there for weeks, in 8 to 10 meter waves, waiting. Once, not long ago, we stood stand by for 3 weeks in a foul storm.”* He looked dead serious

¹³ In Guidelines for Offshore Marine Operations a weather window is defined as: *“The nominated duration of specific weather criteria required to undertake a particular operation, or critical phase of same, including an allowance for any contingencies”*. (G-Omo 2013 p 18, revision 0611-1401 downloaded from: <http://www.g-omo.info/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/201311-GOMOfinal.pdf> on 1.8.2018).

when he said it. The other officer nodded and said: “*Yep*”. The researcher asked if they could sleep well under such conditions, if they didn’t get awfully tired, and if it was safe to sit stand by for so long and then perform the supply operation? The officer said that they did not sleep well, got very tired, and that it certainly increased the risk of the operation. “*But, can’t you just say that it is dangerous and abort?*” the researcher asked. “*Yes, we could do that*” he responded, “*and then the installation would immediately abort and we could go to land and rest.*” With mild astonishment the researcher asked: “*So why don’t you?*” “*We can never play the safety card*” he replied, “*If we do, the whole safety management system is set in motion and the installation is forced to do what we ask for. But afterwards, we will never sail again.*”¹⁴ ‘Playing the safety card’ can thus be understood as the opposite of a resilient approach, and although formally endorsed, it is informally frowned upon – at least according the seafarers, who sense a demand on them to behave as resilient subjects, who thrive under – and do not question – high levels of risk and danger.

This concludes the third and final story of resilience in the Norwegian off-shore sector, and we now turn to a concluding discussion about what these stories can teach us.

Concluding discussion

The point of departure for this paper was a mismatch between an empirical observation of a hectic and hyperbolic invocation of resilience among industry actors in the Norwegian offshore sector, and the theoretical understanding of resilience as a purely technical and rational term describing how complex socio-technical systems absorb and anticipate risk. Our analysis indicates that the meaning of resilience is significantly more nuanced and multifaceted than it has hitherto been given credit for, both within the field of safety management studies and in the Norwegian offshore sector. Multiple other ‘stories’ of resilience can be told than the prescriptive safety management model of absorbing risk and adapting to change, which currently dominates the field. These stories imply, among other things, that even though the term is used by RE scholars to denote a set of analytical tools, other actors in the

¹⁴ Even though this particular episode was observed in British waters, similar instances of vessels facing repercussions for ‘playing the safety card’ have also taken place on the Norwegian side of the North Sea (Antonsen & Bye 2015, p.138), suggesting that this episode is also relevant in a Norwegian context.

industry use it to denote a large range of ideas, including most things that have any relation to achieving safe results. In addition, the alternative stories leave little doubt that some of the conceptual contents of resilience, as the term is used and understood by industry actors, carry connotations of bullshit, of de-politization and of a neoliberal ideal subject who thrives on danger, and who is landed with the blame when something goes wrong. While this answers our first research question, our second research aim was to identify possible practical consequences of this ambiguous resilience concept. In other words, to identify possible ramifications and to explore and provide recourses for answering how the recent increase in the use of the resilience concept may influence the risk situation offshore; if it increases or decreases risk, contributes to better or worse management of risk, or if it has no consequence at all. As mentioned, it was never our intention to answer such questions, and we do not have empirical data to do so either. At the same time our analysis, and the alternative stories we provide, clearly indicate specific questions that need to be investigated in further detail. The different stories also provide resources for exploring such questions in greater detail.

While the RE-story associates the resilience concept with less accidents and more proactive risk management, through the ability to bounce back from unforeseen events, the bullshit story is quite different. Here, the best-case situation would be that the introduction of the concept, due to its emptiness and lack of connection to day-to-day operation, has no impact whatsoever on the risk-situation off-shore. The worst case in this story would be a worsening of the risk-situation due to the obfuscation and erosion of core organizational tasks, including safety procedures, that is potentially associated with the introduction of bullshit-terms. This story also raises the question of whether, and to what extent, resilience research leads to organizational bullshit. The third story suggests, that the introduction of the resilience concept, with all its ambiguities, could serve to legitimize and de-politicize the increasing levels of risk off-shore workers are expected to tolerate in an environment faced by cutbacks and harsh competition. It furthermore suggests that the volatile environment is naturalized as something that cannot be changed but only ever adapted to. This raises questions about the possibilities for off-shore workers of (re-)politicizing their working conditions, and perhaps also to what extent the oil and gas sector can and

should view unpredictable and extreme weather as a man-made result of climate change as opposed to random ‘acts of God’.

Critical reflection, however, is not only encouraged in relation to the RE-inspired understanding of resilience, but to all the understandings presented in this paper. The three stories supplement and correct each other; each perspective illuminates ‘blind spots’ that are overlooked by the others, and also draw attention to the weaknesses of the two others. While Resilience Engineering does not recognize the symbolic and political dimensions of resilience, the bullshit perspective can be accused of underestimating, as merely symbolic, the actual substantive effects a resilient approach might have on day-to-day operations (e.g. Bromley & Powell, 2012). Finally, the third reading can be accused of taking the term ‘too seriously’, and overlooking how it might be merely another vacuous and inconsequential management-term. It may also overlook how resilience might actually improve conditions for workers, by making them capable of tolerating and actually managing higher levels of risk. While none of the readings can thus credibly claim to encapsulate the whole ‘truth’ about resilience in the Norwegian offshore sector, hopefully their juxtaposition can encourage us to ask some interesting questions.

Future research might thus use the above stories as points of departure for producing more detailed answers to our initial research question about how the introduction of the concept of resilience changes the risk-situation in the Norwegian offshore sector (or ‘on the ground’ more generally). One way to do this is, would be to use the stories to develop hypotheses that can be tested empirically in different settings, for example through the use of large data-sets, simulations etc. More importantly however, the current study hopes to participate in the stimulation of a higher level of reflexivity in safety studies generally, and resilience engineering specifically, about the effects of the research on its object – and how these may very deviate from what is intended.

One way in which to frame this discussion could be through considering the *performativity* (Austin, 1962) of safety studies and resilience engineering. Austin thus famously describes how a performative utterance is one “*in which to say something is to do something; or in which by saying something we are doing something*” (Austin, 1962: 12). A well-known example is ‘I now pronounce you man and wife’, which

when uttered under certain circumstances has real effects on the world – it does something; it brings about what it says. Something similar can be said about scientific statements, which, as noted by Callon, are not external to the world to which they refer, but in fact “*actively engaged in the constitution of the reality that they describe*” (Callon, 2007: 318). The question about how theories help shape the reality they are describing, is currently a hot topic within Critical Management Studies (CMS), where it is discussed under the banner of *critical performativity* (see eg. Fournier & Grey, 2000; Spicer, Alvesson & Kärreman, 2009; Alvesson & Spicer, 2012; Cabantous et al., 2016; King 2015). When debating the effects of academic research on organizational practice, a common critique of CMS has thus been that it, in its eager to be radical, sometimes places too much attention on criticizing and questioning assumptions, and not enough on providing alternatives to the practices that are being critiqued (Alvesson & Deetz 2000), thus endangering it of becoming irrelevant to its object.

Our hunch is the Safety Studies and Resilience Engineering could potentially find productive inspiration in these debates, as these fields tend to have the opposite problem; namely, a desire for prescriptive models and tools that may come at the expense of more descriptive, curious and critical approaches. To be sure, the intended performativity behind studies in resilience engineering is to bring about, or *engineer* as it were, better safety conditions in the studied context. As stated by Woods and Hollnagel for example, the goal in Resilience Engineering is to “*help people cope with complexity under pressure to achieve success*” (Woods & Hollnagel 2006, p. 6) But what this paper has intended to show, and what others are pointing out (see e.g. Bergström, 2019), is that research on resilience may have performative effects on its object that are quite different from those intended (Butler, 2010, Fleming & Banerjee, 2016). This may be particularly true if the performativity of the prescriptive models is taken for granted and hence not questioned and scrutinized in order to potentially anticipate unintended performativities. Descriptive approaches that pay attention to the empirical grounding of theoretical concepts, as well as approaches that critically question their underlying assumptions, could thus be helpful in figuring out what, to paraphrase Austin, it is we are ‘doing’ when we say resilience. In fact, if we accept that resilience revolves around the traits of anticipation and adaption (e.g. Woods, 2011, p.1) then perhaps we could ask to what extent resilience research is itself

resilient; in the sense of being able to *anticipate* unintended performative effects and *adapt* itself accordingly? In that sense, the aim of this paper might even be construed as seeking to improve the resilience of safety studies and resilience engineering. But as we now know, the use of term resilience is by no means a simple matter.

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