More now than in the past, organizations are seeking to manage risk for the sake of human health, productivity, and economic growth. Yet what should be considered a risk is not given, nor is what should be done about it, or by whom. Instead, the shaping and reshaping of risk and safety are subject to multiple forms of governing and the negotiating powers of human communication. This means that the management of risk and safety may not only be an employer’s responsibility delegated by the State, in line with welfare standards, but may also take different forms through a variety of institutional, communicative means.

To learn more about these issues, this dissertation analyses the discursive practices and assumptions by which various employees discern what objects are health and safety risks and through which they may know what to do about them. It centres on three workplaces at which there is reason to assume that risk and safety are considered particularly central, namely chemical factories.

The dissertation makes a contribution to research on both organizational discourse and risk and safety management. It demonstrates how strategies of individual responsibility and collective protection are advocated and negotiated in discourse, and the dilemmas that emerge in the process. Particularly noteworthy is that the analysis is able to reveal how the pervasiveness of a strategy of individual responsibility is due to the co-presence of traditional, hierarchical advice-giving and self-reproach, which amplify the importance of workers conducting themselves with greater caution, and of those newer concepts and technologies for increased worker involvement and responsibility which are implemented in line with neoliberal ideas of human resources utilization. Furthermore, as the placing of risk responsibility involves moral judgment, it is shown to involve dilemmas as employees, consciously or not, take egalitarian norms into account.

For those who work in industry this is a study that uncovers and calls for reflection on the common norms of managing risk and safety, and the kinds of labour relations in which they are formed. It can also help to raise critical awareness of language in relation to risk and safety.