Safety in the Making
Studies on the Discursive Construction of Risk and Safety in the Chemical Industry

av

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Abstract


This compilation thesis aims to analyse how risk and safety are constructed, reproduced, and negotiated by communicative means in safety-critical workplaces. It conceptualizes these communicative moments of shaping and reshaping risk and safety as enmeshed in multiple forms of governing. That is, the management of risk and safety may not only be an employer’s responsibility delegated by the State, in a welfareist fashion, but may take different forms through a variety of institutional practices and communicative means. These defining practices seem particularly urgent to study, since it is through them that the locus of risk may be moved from one type of area or object to another, that attention is or is not paid to certain conditions of human exposure, and that parties are appointed responsible for safety measures.

The thesis centres on three safety-critical factories located in Sweden that handle corrosive and/or explosive chemicals. It analyses interviews with various employees as well as recorded talk at a safety committee meeting. Previous research has addressed the existence of a tension between a strategy of individual responsibility and one of collective protection. This study makes a further contribution by demonstrating how these traditions are advocated and negotiated in discourse, and the dilemmas that emerge in the process.

Although the study demonstrates that a discourse of collective prevention is reflected and reproduced in some narratives, it also makes evident that a great deal of responsibility is placed on the individual worker to avoid risk. The analysis has been able to show that this 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 worker involvement and responsibilization which are implemented in line with neoliberal ideas of human resources utilization.

Furthermore, the thesis demonstrates how employees’ risk and safety discourse exposes dilemmas, especially when, consciously or not, egalitarian norms are taken into account. For instance, the moralizing elements of behavioural discourse are regularly supplemented by mitigating, pronominal, or entirely agentless discursive choices, and thus by an anticipatory display of awareness of egalitarian norms. It is argued that this discoursal softening of workers’ risk responsibilities helps condition the sustained prevalence of a behavioural approach to risk and safety. It also exposes some of its fragility.

Keywords: safety, risk, occupational health and safety, organizations, chemical industry, discourse, discursive practices, discursive strategies, power, governmentality, responsibilization.

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