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Risks governance and risky operations helping each other to face unexpected events: A few contributions of pragmatist philosophy

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Abstract

Introduction

This paper seeks to highlight a few contributions of pragmatist philosophy to the understanding of risks governance. The capacity to handle unexpected events is a necessity for high risks organizations, as known by the academic community for about thirty years (Rochlin, La Porte, & Roberts, 1987). In this communication, we study a French regulated process called “ safety demonstration ” which force nuclear operators to demonstrate the reliability of their technical solutions before implementing them. This process is settled since 2006 and is embedded in the French regulation of nuclear risks governance. It is currently facing its difficulties in grabbing the management of unexpected events, which until now were managed through rules. Dismantling operations brings new situations, where unexpected events are more common and more significant.

Theoretical gap

While management of unexpected events is considered as a combination of dynamic processes grounded in action (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 1999), management of inter-organizational relationships implies a form of structuring grounded in representations (Dumez & Jeunemaître, 2010). Theoretically, the dynamic management of unexpected events is made difficult by the structuring involved in management of inter-organizational boundaries. We seek to understand how this structuring may contribute to the management of unexpected events in the operations, and vice versa how the management of unexpected events may enrich the inter-organizational structuring.

Pragmatist philosophy contributed to our way to approach the problem. We employ the Montréal school of the “ Communication as Constitutive of Organizations ” perspective (CCO) as an analysis framework (Cooren, Taylor, & Van Every, 2013). As it considers the organizations to be constituted inside communications, it helps represent management of unexpected events and inter-organizational boundaries on a same plane. We rely upon the theory of inquiry of Dewey (1993) as applied in management studies in order to understand the management of unexpected events in operations (Journé & Raulet-Croset, 2008) and to understand the decision-making processes occurring in the safety demonstration (Journé &

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Raulet-Croset, 2012).

Methodology

To understand at best the two kinds of inquiries, we focused ourselves on heavy handling operations, which are both widespread in dismantling sites and whose management consists mainly in managing the unexpected. We did an ethnographic fieldwork of 15 weeks in two industrial sites in order to understand how heavy handling is executed and managed. We especially paid attention to the way skills required to handle unexpected events are constructed and discussed. Then we did a fieldwork on two safety demonstration sites, based on documents collection and interviews with actors about their analysis and writing works. We especially took into consideration how it has been decided to write or not to write things into safety demonstration texts.

Results

Our results suggest a porosity of the boundary made by the CCO literature between texts and conversations. As Pierce (1878) pointed out, we observe that safety demonstration texts are not viewed by the actors as important for what is literally written in them. What seems important for them is the beliefs they fix, which are both constituting the dialogue between organizations and related to habits we observed in heavy handling operations. We also notice that conversations occurring in these operations concerning skills required to handle unexpected events always include some part of reference construction, of “ estheticism ” in the words of Dewey (2012, p322-355) who differentiated it from art. This estheticism of the operation is also found in the safety demonstration texts.

Our results also highlight how inter-organizational risks governance and operations are contributing to the reliability of one another. A solidarity is constituted between them by the surpassing of their respective linguistic contingencies (Rorty, 1989). In the first field, decisions made in governance context have an impact on the management of heavy handling operations. In the second field, specific words of heavy handling operations are integrated in inter-organizational discourses. The two contexts, the one of risks governance and the one of operations, are present one in the other.

Conclusion

With the help of the theory of valuation (Dewey, 2011), our study suggests an interpretation of how the structuring occurring in inter-organizational relationships and the management of unexpected events contributes to the reliability of one another. Valuation processes give “ values ” to things so that they are able to open and close inquiries. Values established in risks governance context have an impact on the heavy handling management and realization. Values established in heavy handling operations in order to manage unexpected events are being valued in the safety demonstration dialogue. Processes of valuation occurring in the operations and in inter-organizational risks governance, usually separated, are gathering temporarily so that it increases the reliability of the both.

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