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CHAPTER 6

Governing safe operations at a distance
Enacting responsible risk communication at work

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This chapter argues that today’s organizational risk management, where employees are to adopt routines for proper self-control, is fruitfully approached as what Rose and Miller (1992) term governing-at-a-distance. Governing that relies on internal control and the self-governing capacity of citizens requires people to be involved in communication that signifies responsible behaviour. If there is hierarchical monitoring, then it is communication that is supervised which makes the signifying practices all the more important. While previous research has demonstrated that an increasing burden of responsibility is placed on citizens for the risks and health problems they face or envisage, less attention has been paid to the increased communication requirements this development involves. Bridging this gap, this chapter investigates how social interaction in meetings works to facilitate employees to become responsible risk communication subjects. An intensive discourse analysis of five safety meeting episodes demonstrates how the responsibilization of employees’ risk communication extends questions of a) form – such as the duration of talk, b) paper work, c) genuineness, d) contributing on-topic, e) economization, and f) reliability regardless of illness and place. The study takes inspiration from positioning analysis (e.g. Bamberg, 2005), allowing for a detailed account of the moment-to-moment process of responsibilization, something that previous research on risk management tends to skim over.

1 Introduction

Risk management used to be about experts designing directives for workers or laypeople to follow. Other than hierarchical instructions, risk management was largely embedded in everyday practices and handled through tacit knowledge, largely beyond the management’s gaze and control. This has changed since management strategies increasingly attempt to
reveal and use more of the ‘soft’ capacities of employees, through the use of culture management and employee involvement, also known as ‘empowerment’ (Gee, Hull, and Lankshear 1996). It has also changed as risk management has become a collective construction process in a network of managers, engineers, workers, and HSE-officers (health, safety and environment) who have to feed information to external bodies and headquarters. The requirements have risen for organizations to report to government and non-governmental bodies to obtain (a) voluntary certifications in risk management areas such as safety, health and environment, which is sometimes very much needed for credibility among business partners and customers, and (b) mandatory licences that governments demand (Frick and Wren 2000, 29). Various means of communication play an important role in facilitating these reports, programmes and other risk management activities requiring employee involvement.

These developments invite attention to governing practices and discourse in relation to risk communication. The developments correlate well with the interest in the academic world of rationalized governing as opposed to sovereign governing (Foucault 2008), governing at a distance through responsibilization (Rose 1999; Rose and Miller 1992) and textualization at work (Iedema 2003). Previous research has tapped into these themes, analysing how risk and responsibility are distributed through the use of organizational practices and communication (e.g. Gray 2009; MacEachen 2000; Rasmussen 2013; Zoller 2003a, 2003b) and also how ICT such as incident reporting (Rasmussen 2011b; Waring 2009) and meetings (Iedema 2003; Rasmussen 2011a) are used to this effect. Concerning the research on meetings, several studies have focused primarily on the chair person’s role (Iedema 2003; Jarzabkowski and Seidl 2008; Rasmussen 2011a; Wodak, Kwon, and Clarke 2011), but what has been lacking is a focus on the growing responsibilities of employees to give meaningful feedback during meetings and how this feedback relates to the chair’s behaviour and, together, form more or less productive subject positions and outcomes. This study will thus contribute by focusing on how chair and employee interaction in meetings works to facilitate employees to become responsible risk communication subjects. Through its focus on how responsibility for risk communication is proclaimed, taken up or resisted in interaction, the chapter helps develop a discourse approach to governmentality analysis and responsibilization.

Drawing on ideas developed by governmentality theorists (Foucault 2008; Dean 2010; O’Malley 1996; Power 2007; Rose 1999), this study does not assume that it is obvious what a risk is, or that risk communication is primarily used in a non-constitutive way to conference about risks. It is rather that certain more or less hazardous phenomena become named risks, and they become objects of risk communication, organizational procedures, and collective control. It is useful to see these processes of becoming because risks are not perceived here as
existing independently of human discourse (Power 2007). Dean (2010, 196) explains that: “Risk is a way of representing events in a certain form so they might be made governable in particular ways, with particular techniques and for particular goals.” This does not imply that there is no material world which, with its degree of toxicity or energy, may exceed the limits of what the human body can withstand – and injure or kill us. Instead, if such phenomena should be viewed and treated as risk objects they must be articulated as such through discourse. Moreover, if living things or property values are to be protected they must also be articulated discursively as somehow exposed and worthy of protection. Taking a discursive approach thus means to not overlook important steps in the analysis of the formation of risk management and its everyday political claims and negotiations.

The chapter aims to investigate how social interaction is used by employees and chair to negotiate employees becoming responsible risk communication subjects. The study takes departure from the idea that identities are forged relationally and through discourse (Foucault 1972). However, in order to analyze in detail interaction and its identity-effects, the chapter draws on positioning analysis. First introduced by discursive psychologists Davies and Harré (1990), positioning analysis has been modified and developed into more concrete analytical tools (Bamberg 1997, 2005; Hausendorf and Bora 2006; Korobov 2010). It essentially centers on the effects that particular discursive actions have for establishing the identities of social actors. Using selected concepts from positioning analysis, the study seeks to answer the following research questions:

- What subject positions are created with regard to liability for risk communication?
- How are discursive strategies used to create these subject positions?
- How can these moments of risk-talk be said to challenge or reinforce more long-term and persistent rules, norms and logics in the area of risk and safety?

In the following, a theoretical basis is provided for the study’s central themes; the governing of organizations and risks through the use of communication and workplace meetings. Subsequently, the study’s methodological approach and discourse analytical concepts are described, before moving on to the analysis of actual meeting interaction. Five episodes are examined carefully in order to demonstrate how the interactants’ discursive choices form subject positions with regard to liability for risk communication. I end the chapter with a discussion of how the analysis complements earlier studies of meetings and governmentality.
2 The governing of organizations and risks

The increased demands for risk communication and the dispersion of responsibility for it in working life must be understood as part of a changing governing rationale, one that assumes control at a distance through encouraged self-governance followed by responsible reporting, or perhaps ‘confession’, to superiors. In the following, two explanations of this development in work organizations are explored.

First, Foucault traces this rationalized, governing-at-a-distance to the impact of the theory of human capital, developed by Chicago school economists Gary Becker and Theodore Schultz, among others. Their transformation of the category labour entailed that if more of the inner and individual needs and capacities of the employee are revealed and utilized, then the ambitions of the enterprise and of the worker may overlap and generate highly motivated and self-actualizing individuals, which implies more efficient human resources management and as a result improved business performance (Foucault 2008; see also Jacques 1996). Psychology research influenced the theory of human capital through the observation that an employee’s competence and skills are inseparable from the individual. Consequently, an organization could create added value through educational investments bound for these individuals. Moreover, good employee health was deemed to be of paramount importance since health affects performance as well as the longevity of human resources, and the return on educational investments (Foucault 2008). So, according to the logic of human capital, everyone is morally obliged to manage risk and use proper self-care. Human vulnerability and proneness to injury and illness become perceived as originating in a lack of competence, which should be managed through education, training, and character development (Foucault 2008). So, somewhat paradoxically, while worker involvement earlier in the 1900s was a right that was captured through political struggle and trade unions, it is now, as a result of the impact of changing business management philosophies, encouraged by managers and even imposed sometimes (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005).

Second, from the late 1970s and early 1980s, political coalitions criticising welfarist, ‘big government’ and public spending on reactive risk insurance put expectations on both organizations and individuals to exercise greater preventive control of “risk behaviours” to avoid illness and related societal costs. This governing regime supports a combination of compulsory government standards; voluntary standards jointly developed by state and private actors; and private business consultancy programmes. The primary role of the state is to set the direction and aims of risk prevention, rather than bearing the major costs of direct monitoring and insurance (Frick and Wren 2000, 29). It is in line with these two historical developments that work organizations set up risk communication routines internally to maintain documenta-
tion confirming that they are responsibly taking care of risk management. Governing risk “at a distance” therefore implies internal and external, cross-professional communication (cf. Rose 1999).

The present study looks at risk management practices that place demands on employees to handle risk communication. This is a process which requires subjects to adopt new discourses of responsibility and self-manage accordingly. Since this form of risk management does not involve the direct hierarchical supervision and correction of unsafe behaviour, power is exercised, rather, at a distance and through processes of subjectification, meaning that the subject responds to external pressures and discourses, and internalizes these through reflexion and self-management (Foucault 1991). Foucault views subjectification from a historical perspective as processes where actors are assigned subject positions, that is, the differentiated roles and statuses that are made available to people who become relevant to specific discourses (Schatzki 2002, 50). By contrast to Foucault, discursive psychologists (e.g., Bamberg 1997, 2005; Korobov 2010) analyse the positioning of actors using an interactional approach (rather than an historical) and focuses on the fluid and dynamic identity-effects of moment-to-moment interaction. Bridging these two perspectives allows us to be sensitive to the ongoing positioning of participants in interaction, while at the same time trying to understand what is at stake and how the particulars of the interaction resonate with the bigger picture of risk management developments.

Several studies have documented changing discourses, responsibilities and subjectivities in the area of risk and safety (e.g. Chikudate 2009; Collinson 1999; Gray 2009; MacEachen 2000; Packer 2003; Zoller 2003a, 2003b), although without focusing on communication as a responsibility or examining discourse in a detailed way as done in the present study. This chapter will allow for a more detailed analysis of responsibilization through a focus on the local, “microscopic” discursive practices that Foucault (1978, 99f) ascribes constitutive capacity.

3 The ‘textualization of work’ and workplace meetings

There are some studies of the growing number of communication tasks, meetings and reporting practices in working life. Since the 1990s it has become evident that today’s organizational governing principles require of people that they talk and write about their work and not just simply perform it (Gee, Hull, and Lankshear 1996). Iedema (2003, 53) terms this the textualization of work – a process where new communication duties have been added, and the communication takes place on sites or via ICTs beyond the spaces where everyday work takes place, and together with colleagues that usually do not work together on
Inevitably, when these communication duties are performed at remove from the ordinary work setting, the language also changes (Iedema 2003).

Morrish and Sauntson’s (2010) study of such textualization and language change demonstrated how universities’ mission statements included positive attitude markers such as “excellent”, “excellence”, “highest quality”, “committed to”, “strive for”, “professional”, “robust”, “innovative”, “flexible”, “new”, “outstanding” and “employable”. A change of commitments and subjectivities appeared. Gone were the traditional identities associated with research disciplines and their authoritative and somewhat detached voice, and in its place emerged a more egalitarian identity, one which is personalized, presenting an informal relationship with the “customers” (Morrish and Sauntson 2010). Other critical linguistic researchers have showed how these same features can be found in the promotional material of hospitals, where language foregrounded the values of “communication”, “public engagement”, “openness” and “commitment to excellence”, often against a background of massive cuts in spending and jobs freezes for health professionals (Machin and Mayr 2012). Typical of the textualization of work, communication becomes not a process but an objective in itself (Cameron 2000). Communication takes on a moral quality, signifying openness and transparency, even when in fact the language being used is an abstract, generic management one. And importantly in all these cases the professional knowledge of educators and of health workers is backgrounded or completely absent (Machin and Mayr 2012).

Using Foucault’s concept of governmentality, Iedema (2003) argues that meetings are used to make work more transparent and workers visible, to ensure that they embrace metadiscourses governing the organization in their work. Meetings are thus used to make workers become, and confirm that they are, owners of new responsibilities. Meetings are thus about reconciling the individual with the logics of the organization, and dealing with the dilemmas that inevitably emerge (Iedema 2003). Moreover, Iedema compares two meetings of which one was, at least on the face of it, successful in creating common views and task orientations, and one that was not. To successfully conduct a meeting in accordance with a strategic objective was much about balancing and neutralizing one’s self presentation and the wishes and voices of the participants. The successful senior planner adopted, as chair, self-positionings ranging from acceptably authoritarian to approachable and listening, and could change from the authoritarian to egalitarian style in a very subtle way. He did not provide too much information that could stir up controversy, he reduced negotiability by not naming the present parties – talking instead of “stakeholders” – and he obfuscated conflict by “defusing and neutralizing contradicting and incommensurable views” (Iedema 2003, 136).
Moreover, Jarzabkowski, and Seidl (2008) analyse how particular patterns of interaction during the initiation, conduct and termination of meetings affect the group’s collaboration and strategic outcomes. While meetings offer an arena for choice opportunities, different meeting practices tend to stabilize or destabilize top managers’ plans, voting being one of the most destabilizing practices and agenda-driven control a stabilizing one. In a similar way, Wodak, Kwon, and Clarke (2011) examine the discursive strategies that a leader uses as chair to achieve consensus at meetings. Five prevalent strategies are identified; bonding, encouraging, directing, modulating, and re/committing. For instance, the use of the pronoun “we” functions to form a common organizational identity and consensus, and is particularly a part of the bonding strategy. To encourage participation, the chair asks for advice or knowledge, asks open questions, supports existing opinions, gives praise to other participants, leaves room for others to speak, or legitimizes what others have said through repetition.

Other strategies of control are described in Rasmussen (2011a). The study examines how plans to implement a behavioural safety programme are presented and negotiated in a safety meeting at a chemical factory in Sweden. The study analyses in detail how the chair invokes discourses of partnership, hierarchy and competitiveness in order to gather consent around the programme implementation. The articulation of these three discourses constitutes a pervasive tactic of acting upon possible actions. That is, the discourse of equal partnership mitigates the hierarchical characteristics of the talk, making the differentiated right to direct, define, and decide more acceptable. Furthermore, the hierarchical discourse gives a strong sense of urgency to the competitive talk, which in turn aids implementation by connoting the positive, collective efforts of a sports team. The discourses therefore coincide in an attempt to create employees who are willing to implement a management program in which workers govern themselves through peer observation and by adopting conditions of self-control. Although the study gives some analyses of middle managers and workers’ positionings, many of them are largely silent during the sections analysed, leaving the contribution of less senior participants under-researched. The present study will analyse other recorded meeting data from the same factory, which allows for analysis of how social interaction is used by employees and chair.

4 Methodology

With the purpose of studying how interaction is used to facilitate employees becoming, or resisting becoming, responsible risk communication subjects, a case-study design was used. The study uses what Alvesson and Deetz (2000) calls a partial ethnography, meaning that we set out to learn from a situation that has been observed for a limited time, unlike a traditional
ethnography that examines, for instance, an entire organizational culture with numerous practices over a long period of time. The advantage of the partial ethnography is that the smaller amount of data allows for many careful observations, whereas a traditional ethnography demands a broader systematisation of a bulk of data which leaves less time for precise, in-depth situational analysis. The research project, from which this chapter is a spin-off, uses three case-study workplaces. All the data – 46 semi-structured interviews, numerous documents and meeting transcripts – were gathered between 2006 and 2008. This chapter focuses on one of the cases, a large-scale process industry, pseudonymously called West Plant. At West Plant, 12 semi-structured interviews were conducted. In addition, meeting interaction was observed, audio recorded and transcribed. In this chapter, the interviews provide contextual information rather than being analytical material, and the focus is instead on meeting interaction (for studies of the interviews at West Plant, see Rasmussen 2011b, 2013). The meeting that the present chapter focuses on lasted for 2 hours and 44 minutes.

To enable the study of how employees and chair negotiate risk communication responsibilities through the ways they position each other in talk, those passages where middle managers and workers responded to requests to participate were singled out for analysis. The analysis of positioning develops through three stages:

- Firstly, I analyze which social actors or phenomena are constructed within the reported events (Bamberg, 2005). Discursive devices that are relevant to pay attention to are pronominal choices and categorization, but also heteroglossic speech – when the speaker makes reference to other putative actors and viewpoints.

- Secondly, the analysis draws attention to how certain qualities and types of behaviour are assigned to these phenomena and to self and others, and how they are evaluated (cf. Hausendorf and Bora 2006). Some may be positioned as protagonists and others as antagonists (Bamberg, 1997). These evaluations are produced through the way the speaker judges, proclaims, disclaims, intensifies, de-intensifies, uses metaphors, etcetera (Martin and White 2005).

- Thirdly, through the examination of how interactants fashion different social positions, I also attempt to explain how certain rules, norms and identities are both endorsed and denounced as part of the social interaction (Korobov 2010, 274). The analysis thus leads progressively to distinguish what is at stake and how actors position themselves in relation to metanarratives or discourses (Bamberg 2005).

To analyze social positioning in the manner described above implies certain choices with regard to the analysis of discursive action. Instead of looking for a hidden truth, the focus is
on what appears on the surface of discourse, the spoken and written language, and in its patterns. There is no search for hidden meaning, which is the case in both ideology critique using the notion of false consciousness and in cognitivist approaches to identity (Korobov 2010). Moreover, the approach rejects any view of the subject as determinerad by “muscular” discourses in a unilateral world-to-agent process, but stresses more the agent’s attitude to the world, and a dialectical relationship between agency and structure (Bamberg 2005, 24). The analysis thus brings up discourses or meta-narratives in so far as such patterns of rules and norms are enacted by participants themselves (Korobov 2010). Finally, to notice and understand variations, contradictions, and dilemmas in interaction are seen as an integral part of the discourse analytical project (Oostendorp and Jones 2015). Analysing positioning in this fashion, using naturally occurring data, enables processes to be studied and reported on, rather than seemingly cemented political projects and discourses.

The episodes to be included in the chapter were translated from Swedish to English. As others have done previously (e.g. Osvaldsson 2004) the transcription alternates line by line between the original and the translation. The translated lines are in italics for increased clarity and to facilitate reading of one of the languages. Although the two versions are kept as consistent as possible, some lines appear unalike due to differences in syntax, word order and length of expression between Swedish and English. The transcription was done using some of the Jeffersonian conventions (Jefferson 2004), summarized in the following transcription key:

.(.) A micro-pause
(2.0) A longer and timed pause
[ word ] Left square brackets show where overlapping speech begins, the right where it ends
[ word ] >word< Arrows pointing inwards surround faster speech
<word> Arrows pointing outwards surround slower speech
( ) words within brackets were too unclear to transcribe
(( )) double brackets contain a description provided by the transcriber
word WORD Underlined parts are louder than surrounding speech, words in capitals are even louder
↑↓ An arrow pointing up indicates an increase in pitch in the utterance that follows, an arrow pointing down indicates a drop in pitch
.hh In-breath
hh   Out-breath
:::  Colons indicate prolongation of the preceding syllable, the more
     colons the longer prolongation
-    A dash denotes that a word is quickly cut off
=word Equal signs indicate that the talk proceeds without any pause
word=
laughter Several participants laugh (in capitals if very loudly)

5 Results

To begin with, the following eleven people from West Plant, seven men and four women, are
participating in the meeting. Monica, the local manager, chairs the meeting. The TQM
Coordinator, Ester, also represents the management team. Three department heads are
present: the production manager, Marcus, the head of maintenance, Andreas, and the service
manager, Thomas. Also present are Kent – the principal safety representative, Karin –
representing the occupational health service firm hired by West Plant, and an instrument
technician, Jens. Others participating are the operator and union representative, John, the
safety representative of the office workers, Margareta, and a representative of the
occupational health service that the company hires, Berit.

5.1 Taking responsibility for the form and duration of risk communication

In the first part of the meeting used for intensive analysis, Monica introduces the segment
dealing with the reporting of safety groups. The safety groups are made up of different areas
– production, service, and maintenance – with an area manager responsible for each. This is
typically an occasion where middle managers will be responsible for constructing a story of
past risk management work in their group. In this first case, it is Thomas, the service
manager, who begins to describe the work of his group.

Excerpt 1

1 Monica ↑ja (. ) ska vi skjuta vidare till nästa punkt (.5) skydds↑grupperna (2.0) jag kommer inte
   ↑yes ( . ) shall we jump to the next point (.5) the safety ↑groups (2.0) I don’t remember
   ihåg vem som fick börja först sist
   who got to start first last time
2 Marcus det va vi det
   it was us
In this first excerpt, Monica introduces the safety groups as the “next point” and immediately uses a discursive device of encouragement (Wodak, Kwon and Clarke 2011), asking for others’ knowledge regarding who got to start last time, thus invoking a script regarding who’s taking the turn to begin. After Marcus’ short response, she continues by – justly – giving the floor to the service group, again positioning herself as an encouraging leader due to the softened directive (“well maybe it’s service that should start” my italicization) and the raised pitch in her accounts. Thomas, then, starts lining up safety routines that his group has performed. He provides a detail of when they had their safety meeting (line 7) which functions as proof that it was carried out. He stresses that they did not only carry out the safety meeting but the safety round as well, thus scaling-up with respect to responsibility taken. He then stumbles a bit when describing another type of safety round that had been
carried out. This one was part of a consultancy programme – behaviour based safety – which is carried out via employees observing each other performing work tasks and looking out for risk behaviours. But in integrating the programme at the site, it was called “Safe Thinking” (Swedish “säkert tänk”) and the peer-observation rounds “safe-thinking rounds”. Consequently, since this programme had recently been introduced at the site (Rasmussen 2011a) Thomas had a couple of new concepts and routines to manage in addition to, e.g., traditional safety rounds focusing on the facilities. Thomas then rounds off his account with modulation implying that more has been done but that it is unnecessary to occupy meeting time for it (“I don’t think I’ll say that much more”). Monica then calls on Thomas to take up a subject position that is limited to asking questions instead of sharing ideas, new knowledge or complaints (“no ↑questions to the safety committee”). When Thomas confirms that they do not have questions, Monica gives an appreciative response to the work by Thomas’ group and his short presentation (“↑no (1.0) ↑great (.5) admirably brief”), but the group reacts with laughter to a humorous cue, which tells us that a longer presentation was expected of Thomas. Marcus adds to the evaluation of Thomas, jokingly constructing a competition between the groups (“it’s you who set the bar”) and positioning Marcus – through reported speech at increased speed – as if now self-satisfied with a quickly completed job (“>yup- we’re done<”). Thomas, on his part, does not respond verbally to the jokes. In sum, the different turns consisting of evaluation and jokes discipline the form – the length – of Thomas’s risk talk.

5.2 Taking responsibility for both the paper work and the genuineness of risk communication

In this next stretch of talk (Excerpt 2), Monica gives the turn to Marcus, expecting a report from his safety group. What unfolds is a confident start from Marcus, but then a few interesting turns follow regarding the group’s paper-work and if Marcus’ safety group really has done anything on their own, apart from the general, site-wide processes and procedures. What is asked of Marcus is a description of a more genuine contribution from the group.

Excerpt 2

1 Monica o:kej (2.5) ↑ja: (.) ↑Marcus
   okay (2.5) ↑ye:s (.)↑Marcus
2 Marcus ↑ja: um skyddsronder ↑gås säkert tänk ronder ↑gås (.5) skyddsmöten ↑hålls =vi har
   ↑ye:s um we do ↑safety rounds we do safe ↑thinking rounds we have ↑safety meetings
däremot inte (.) ↑protokollet klart den här gången jag vet inte vars det är =jag har inte =
=but we don’t have (.) the ↑minutes ready this time I don’t know where they are =I
hunnit leta heller [de kan va-]
↑protokollet klart den här gången jag vet inte vars det är =jag har inte
=hadn’t had the time to look either [they can b-]
5 John  [ne:j det finns ↓inte]
=no: there is ↓none]
6 Marcus  det ↑finns inte
=there ↑is none
7 John  ne:j
=no:
8 Marcus  hah hah hh
hah hah hh
9 John  inte som jag kan hitta i alla fall
=none that I can find anyway
10 Jens han gick ju på semester Roger så att det var väl- det var ↓därför
=he went on vacation Roger so that’s that’s probably ↓why
11 Marcus  >men han had- han ↑sg att han skulle skriva det på dagsskiften innan men det kanske
=but he had- he said he would write it on the day shifts before but maybe something
kö:de hop sig (1.5) han har inte hört a:v sig i alla fall
came up (1.5) I haven’t heard from him anyway
13 Monica  um
um
14 Marcus  men det (.) löser sig =vi har ju många som var med på mötet som är här
=but it (.) will work out =we do have many here who attended the meeting
mer än hälften (h) i alla fall .hh (1.0) ehm (3.0) vi har pratat om lite framtidna fokus för
=more than half in any case (h) .hh (1.0) ehm (3.0) we’ve talked a bit about the future
skyddssarbeitet så själklart så är det ju BBS då som är (.) fokusområdet
focus for the safety work and of course it’s BBS which is the (.) focus area
17 Monica  ↑um’m
↑um
18 Marcus  för å jobba vidare inom drift’å’teknik (.5) men även å jobba mä å förbättra (.5) arbetet
=to take the work farther in production’n’technology (.5) but also to work to improve
med riskanalyser och (.5) processerna (2.0)
(.) the work on risk analyses and (.) the processes (2.0)
19 Monica  um’m
um
20 Marcus  kring det då (1.0) och där är ju Flexite inblandat (1.0) de:lvis =så att det är väl (.) .hh
around them (1.0) and that’s where Flexite is involved (1.0) in part =so I guess (.) .hh
förrutveckla (.) bli ännu [bättre]
*it’s to develop (.) get even [better]*

Monica

[så är det väl det vi tänkte fokusera [på]
*so that’s what we’re going to focus [on]*

Monica

[är] det (.) är det inom e:ran skyddsgrupp [så att säga]
*[is] this (.) within your safety group [so to speak]*

Marcus

[ja precis]
*yes exactly]*

Monica

[um’m]

Marcus

sen påverkar det ju andra också självklart (.) när det gäller riskanalyser deltar ju många
*but it affects the others as well of course (.) when it comes to risk analysis many more*

Monica

um’m så det sker en samordning [över]
*um so there is coordination [across]*

Marcus

[ja]
*yes*

Monica

skyddsområdena
*the safety areas*

Marcus

precis
*exactly*

Monica

[ja bra]
*yes good*

Marcus

det måste det göra det =det är därför jag berättar det
*there has to be =that’s why I tell you this*

Monica

[um’m]

Marcus

här r då (.) BBS är ju redan samordnat tvärs över hela
*here (.) BBS is already coordinated across it all*

Monica

[ja-]

[ys-]

Marcus starts accounting for his safety group’s work using a three-part pronouncement, a tricolon (line 2), which gives emphasis to his group’s reliability. It also forecasts and counters any reliability doubts that his next sentence potentially could stir (“but we don’t have (.) the
minutes ready this time”), which reports the absence of a necessary document accounting for a prior meeting. He attributes the document not being ready to high workload and time pressure (line 4). The situation is, however, sharpened when John interrupts Marcus with a counter-proclamation (“no: there is ↓ none”), and the status of the minutes goes from unfinished to non-existent. Marcus replies to this face-threatening act by repeating John’s comment (“there ↑ is none”) indicating surprise and disbelief, and by laughing (line 8) which lightens the mood and displays strength rather than dejection. Then, Jens offers an explanation (“He went on vacation Roger so that’s probably why”) and Marcus positions Roger as the one responsible (line 11). However, again, drawing on the context of workload and time pressure, he down-scales Roger’s personal responsibility (line 12). Marcus then, skilfully, tries to salvage the situation with the missing protocol with a positive judgment and by appealing to collective memory (“it (.) will work out =we do have many here who attended the meeting”). In addition, his laughter (line 15) signals a good atmosphere, which prevents the situation from becoming articulated as serious. What happens in the next few lines is that Marcus continues to explain what his safety group has done, but the response from Monica is minimal. The reason seems to be that Marcus refers to site-wide projects, such as behaviour-based safety (BBS) involving all employees (see Rasmussen 2011a), which is also the case with the incident reporting program Flexite (see Rasmussen 2011b), and gives a very general attitude promise while Monica expects responsibility taken by his group specifically, which she eventually makes plain (“[is] this (.) within your safety group”). The contradiction that these processes could be both site-wide affairs and the concern of Marcus’ group is resolved by Monica’s positive interpretation, that Marcus’ group plays a role in coordinating joint risk communication work (line 30). Marcus endorses and is upscaling the validity of this assessment (line 31 and 33) and justifies further his previous account (“that’s why I tell you this”). Consequently, he has to struggle and re-position to make his group appear as having contributed to risk management in a genuine way.

5.3 Taking responsibility for communicating on-topic

Moving on to another example (Excerpt 3), in this case a safety representative speaks about the needs expressed by staff regarding facilities to clean rail carts and “cars” (probably slang for truck trailers) that have contained hazardous waste (abbreviated to “EWC”). The sequence is particularly interesting because what unfolds can explain why the safety representative Stina takes up a quite modest position, as the relevance of her contribution comes to be negatively evaluated by superiors.
Stina tycker det finns ett stort behov av en spolplatta på VP (väteperoxid) så man kan spola ur (1.5) järnvägsvagnar och bi:lar (2.0) you can flush out (1.5) rail wagons and ca:rs (2.0)

Monica spola ↑ur: järnvägsvagnar och bil:ar
flush ↑out rail wagons and cars

Stina ja spola ur re:ngö:ra
yes flush out cle:an

Monica ↑um’ m (2.0)
↑um (2.0)

Stina vi kanske kan ja >ta med det till nästa möte<
maybe we can well >take it to the next meeting<

Monica ja’ a
ye: s

Thomas är det ↑in:vä:ндig rengöring du prata om
is it ↑in:te:rnal cleaning you’re talking about

Stina ↑okej
↑okay

Monica hh .hh hh besvä:rliga frå:gor
hh .hh hh di:fficult questions

Stina ja’ a (.5) re:ngöra dom invändigt (1.5) om det har varit EAK ((akronym för Europeiska ye:s (.5) cle:an them internally (1.5) if there’s been EWC ((acronym for European avfallskatalogen)) i dom till exempel så var det problem att få dom ren Waste Catalogue)) in them for example there’s a problem getting them clean

Monica Det lå:ter- om jag ska säga- visst hör det hemma här om det är en skydd och
it so:unds- if I should speak- sure it belongs here if there’s a protection and

säkerhetsaspect på det va annars så låter det ju mera kanske som en ↑investe:ring
safety aspect to it right otherwise it sounds more perhaps like an ↑investe:ring

Marcus kvalitetsaspect
quality aspect

Monica ja
yes

Marcus møjligen
possibly

Monica investe:ring också va (2.0) så det är kanske fler för:rum som det här bör tas upp i det är
investment also right (2.0) so maybe there are more forums where this should be
mera det jag menar med (2.5) men (.) ska vi hh (1.0) ja vi: vi får se om vi hinner
raised that’s more what I mean by (2.5) but (.) shall we hh (1.0) well we: let’s see if
diskutera för jag kan tänka mig att (1.0) de::t- annars så kanske [de::t]
there’s time to discuss it because I can assume (1.0) i::t’s- otherwise maybe [i::t]
Marcus [ja det är inga] det är inga självklara svar i alla fall
[>yes there are no<] there are no easy answers anyhow
Monica näe annars så kanske det är nånt ing som går till Marcus och (. eh Thomas
no otherwise maybe it is something for Marcus and (. eh Thomas-
Marcus um
um
Thomas um
um
Monica å titta på
to look at
Thomas det kan ju va en arbetsmiljöfråga ur det pespektivet att man- dom som har hantera den
it could be a safety issue from the perspective that one- those who managed it haven’t
inte har (1.0) ja (1.0) slängt den till rätt (2.0) jag vet inte
(1.0) well (1.0) tossed it to the right (2.0) I don’t know
Monica aa ↑um aa >men vi- kan vi ↑säga så< (.5) såå
yes ↑um yes >but is- is ↑that a plan< (.5) we’ll
Marcus um
um
Monica gut ((tyska)) (1.0) ↑ja (1.0) va:l av ↑mötessekreterare (2.0) kan jag få några ↑försla:g
gut ((German)) (1.0) ↑yes (1.0) election of ↑secretary (2.0) can I get some ↑suggestions

First off, safety representative Stina’s account is characterized by low investment as she
attributes authorship to a third person (“Tess”) who reportedly is the one requesting better
facilities for washing rail carts and truck wagons. This way she “represents the proposition as
but one of a range of possible positions” (Martin and White 2005, 98). As safety
representative, Stina could instead act as a representative of her colleagues. The local
manager’s initial response is only one of repetition (“flush ↑out rail wagons and cars”), which
seems to restrain Stina from continuing more confidently. Stina suggests the issue can be
managed in the next meeting instead of during the present one, and even then it is with low
force and hurriedly (“maybe we can well >take it to the next meeting<”).
Later on, Stina refers to the trouble of getting EWC-soiled carts entirely clean, and the
local manager then evaluates if it is a relevant issue for the meeting. At this point the local
manager takes an independent, leading position (“if I should speak”) and then uses a “con-
cede and counter” strategy, first admitting that the question may be legitimate (“yes, it belongs here if there’s a protective, safety aspect to it, right”) and then countering (“otherwise it sounds more perhaps like an ↑investment”). Marcus counters as well (“quality aspect […] possibly”), giving Stina’s issue the low status of possibly fitting in another area than she had intended. The local manager then interrupts Stina, anticipating that their response was too disapproving and she re-positions (“so maybe there are more forums where this should be raised that’s more what I mean”) and Marcus follows (“there are no easy answers anyhow”).

However, the head of service continues on the path of criticizing the suitability of the issue, also using the strategy of first conceding (“it could be a safety issue”) and then countering (“from the perspective that one- those who managed it haven’t (1.0) well (1.0) tossed it to the right (2.0) I don’t know”). Consequently, Stina’s attempt at risk communication backlashes as Thomas distinguishes it as a case of miscommunication which one possibly should pay attention to as a risk in the future. So, Thomas’ risk gaze zooms in on risk communication itself when it appears to be off-topic. This indicates the importance of correct reporting procedures and categorization in today’s rationalized government of risk. Finally, Stina gets more support from the local manager, who confirms that Thomas and Marcus will look at the issue before piloting the group to the next point.

5.4 Communicating risk with due consideration to economization

In the following extract (Excerpt 4), we are witnessing an altercation taking place when Andreas tells the others what he has done and not done in a case relating to measures for an uneven floor. There is some ridicule going on, as well as a more serious dispute where the TQM coordinator positions Andreas’ conduct as contrary to a previous decision and Andreas appears as not keeping self-discipline in terms of spending the company’s money. Andreas himself claims he acted in line with an agreed idea, but missed the details - writing a cost-calculus. Marcus then joins in and defends Andreas’ actions.

Excerpt 4

1 Monica ↑ja (.) ↑sista ↑punkten (2.0) nä:st sista punkten (1.0) ojämt ↑golv batteri fem sex ↑ja (.) ↑the ↑final point (2.0) second last point (1.0) uneven ↑floor battery five-six (5.0)

2 Andreas ja vi har varit ute å ↑vandrat (.) vi har konstaterat att- yes we’ve been out ↑walking (.) we noticed that-

3 Marcus å stukat ↑fötterna tre gånger hah hah hah hah and twisted your ↑feet three times hah hah hah hah

4 Andreas (1.0) och ↑sen har vi pratat nu om hur vi ska göra då och så har jag lämnat det till Erik
and then we’ve talked about what to do and I have left it to Erik Backstrom

Bäckström (unclear) så får han åtgärda det

(unclear) and he’ll get it done

Monica "um" "um"

men jag har inte (.) jag har inget (.) att det kostar något utan ha- han får göra det på

but I haven’t (.) I have no (.) what it costs but he- he can do it in the best (.) way

Andreas men jag har inte (.) jag har inget (.) att det kostar något utan ha- han får göra det på

but I haven’t (.) I have no (.) what it costs but he- he can do it in the best (.) way

läggbudget

Andreas men jag har sagt att det ä: det ä: låggbudget

no but I’ve said that i.t is it’s low budget

Andreas och då (1.0) då tycker jag kanske inte att jag behövde skriva mer (.) och så

and then (1.0) then I don’t think perhaps I should have to write more (.) anyway

Andreas och då (1.0) då tycker jag kanske inte att jag behövde skriva mer (.) och så

and then (1.0) then I don’t think perhaps I should have to write more (.) anyway

Monica "ja" "ja"

Andreas [ja men det] tanken är väl att det ska fixas

[yes but] the idea is really that it’s going be fixed

Monica "um" "um"

Ester det ska vara en kostnadskalkyl (.) vad det ko- [med priset]

there shall be a small costs calculation (.) what it co-[with the price]

Andreas ja men det] tanken är väl att det ska fixas

[yes but] the idea is really that it’s going to be fixed

Monica "um" "um"

Andreas "eller"

"or"

Monica "hh .hh"

"hh .hh"

Ester ja tanken var väl att få fram om det behövde göras beroende på pris

yes the idea was really to get to know whether it needs to be done depending on price

Andreas ja men asså
To begin with, Andreas gets ridiculed as Marcus wittily links his opening statement, that he has “been out walking”, with the issue to be discussed, the uneven floor which may cause a fall or sprained joints (“and twisted your ↑feet three times hah hah hah hah”). Andreas does not respond to this masculine collegial banter, but instead immediately explains that he has contacted a contractor to fix the floor, which testifies to his commitment to problem-solving. However, what comes next is a confession (“but I haven’t (.5) I have no (.5) what it costs”) and a justification (“but he- he can do it in the best (.5) way”). The factory manager’s response (“at ↑any price”) maximizes the potentially negative effect of the missing cost estimate,
which constructs money spending as far off the mark. Andreas’ affirmative answer (“yes”) defies economic responsibilization, which creates a humorous effect and everyone laughs, because it is interpreted as an unexpected breach of rules and contrary to the sensitivity to costs that the boss, who is present, expects. Andreas, positioned as someone who has made a mistake, tries to mitigate his actions and re-position by drawing on the context that in personal communication he had told the contractor that the work is “low budget”, and that he therefore would be able to avoid having to write a cost estimate report. Indeed, he simplifies the task of reporting by naming it “to write”, thus invoking categories of general paperwork versus more physical work tasks. The factory manager’s response is short and thus implicitly still casts doubt on Andreas, while the TQM coordinator’s response explicitly pronounces the expectation on Andreas that he did not fulfil (“there shall be a small ↑costs calculation”). Andreas interrupts her, and claims that he has acted in the spirit of a decision even if a detail has been missed, while the TQM coordinator argues that the cost estimate would have been decisive for which of the two measures would be selected. Yet she admits others may think different (“that’s (. .) how I see this”).

At this point, Marcus resolves the argument, temporarily at least, by offering both sides a compromise. By stating that repairing the floor may be cheaper than getting a roadblock, neither communicative project is blocked (“yes which one is cheaper (. .) perhaps the cheapest is to fix the ↑floor”). Still, his last justification of Andreas’ actions implies that this route is indeed the more expensive one, otherwise he would not mention, with added intensification through repetition, that they have been forced to be penny-wise for a long time (“we ha:ve (. .) degraded and degraded”) and then down-scaling the present problem (“the only ↑problem is that there are potholes in some places”). The episode shows how communication is disciplined into adopting economization, although not without negotiation and compromise. The example indicates that when employees do not take on the appropriate responsibilities themselves in a manner deemed appropriate, and do not refer to written documentation that functions as proof of accountability, meetings are a venue where disciplinary measures are taken (as last resort). Employees may be positioned as mistake-ridden and therefore also morally inferior in a regime of practices where sensitivity to cost is key.

5.5 Communicating responsibly irrespective of illness or place

In the last sequence of analysis (Excerpt 5), it is an occupational physician, Dan, who is positioned as one who does not fulfil expectations regarding risk communication. Although he has, reportedly, been ill for a month, he does not escape responsibilization.
1 Jens en fråga (1.0) dammätningarna har vi fått nå’
   a question (1.0) the dust measurement have we received any (2.0)
2 Berit inget svar
   no answer
3 Jens jaha okej
   oh okay
4 Thomas jag har prat- frågat Dan efter rapporter (.) jag får inga rapporter av han (.) han har ju
   I have talk- asked Dan for reports (.) I get no reports of him (.) he’s been ill now for a
5 varit sjuk nu en månad så han hade inte haft möjlighet och tid (.5) .hh mätningarna
   month so he has not had the opportunity (.5) .hh the measurements were made he
6 är gjorda ↑provresultaten har han fått säger han själv då
   received the ↑test results he says himself
7 Berit men ingen rapport
   but no report
8 Thomas nä:e ingen rapport (.) jag påminde-
   no no report (.) I reminded-
9 Berit jag har också påmint han
   I’ve also reminded him
10 Monica bra om (.) vi kanske (.) trycker på
    good if (.) we perhaps (.) press the issue
12 Berit trycka på ↑använd för nåt annat finns inte att ↑göra
    press ↑again because there is nothing else to ↑do
13 Monica um
    um
14 Berit det var märkligt om han ↑har redan ↑resultaten
    it’s strange if he’s ↑got the ↑results already
15 Thomas ja det gjordes ju mätningarna gjordes i juni (. ) augusti hade han ju fått svaren för då
    yes they were made the measurements were made in June (. ) August he had received
16 var det första gången jag var i kontakt med han ( . ) och sen har jag stött på han några
    the results ‘cause that’s when I was in contact with him the first time ( . ) and then I’ve
17 gånger (.5) och nu snart förra veckan (3.0)
    reminded him a few times (.5) and most recently last week (3.0)
18 Berit ja det va inte (unclear)
    yes that wasn’t (unclear)
19 Thomas den frågan (h) får du gärna ta med
    you’re welcome (h) to bring the question with you
20 Marcus vi har inte mycket tid på oss ↑kvar innan det är kört
we don’t have much time left before it’s over

21 Berit det får vi beklaga den biten men jag kan inte ansvara för att han inte hanterar det we regret that but I cannot answer to the fact he has not handled it

22 Thomas nej men det va inte så jag mena no but that’s not what I meant

23 Berit nej det förstår jag ju men att no: I understand but

Jens introduces this topic by asking about the results of the dust measurements. Berit responds that there has been “no answer” but without saying who should have answered, implying that everyone knows who. Jens’s response expresses surprise but also tolerance (“oh okay”). Thomas, then, names the one responsible and constructs both an expectation and its denial (“I have talked- asked Dan for reports. I get no reports of him”). Then, Dan’s month long illness is drawn in as a contextual resource, somewhat elevating his standing. In the next sentence, Thomas provides a straightforward declarative but with an ambiguous closing (“the measurements were made he received the test results he says himself”) possibly emphasising the sincerity of the truth claim, but also opening up for the interpretation that others would say different had they had the facts, i.e. that Dan is dishonest. This sentence also sets up an expectation – if the measurements were made then communicating the results would be doable – which then is denied by Berit (“but no report”). Then Thomas continues constructing an expectation (“I reminded”) and Berit sharpens it (“I’ve also reminded him”), wherein they also fend off potential critique against them regarding inaction on the issue. Monica, instead of dwelling on and worsening the image of Dan’s lack of communication, is offering a solution (“if we perhaps press the issue”) and Berit is upscaling it to a proliferation of options (“press again because there is nothing else to do”). What then happens is there is further co-construction of expectations on Dan, by Berit (“it’s strange if he’s got the results already”) and Thomas (“yes they were made the measurements were made in June August he had received the results”). When Thomas claims he has reminded Erik, an altercation follows between him and Berit concerning responsibility – Berit beginning to say, it seems, that she does not blame Thomas (line 18), while he, in turn, responds with exaggerated politeness, and with laughter in the middle of the talk, that the question belongs to her (“you’re welcome to bring the question with you”). Marcus adds that they are under time pressure (“we don’t have much time left before it’s over”), which gives force to Thomas’s previous statement, implying that Berit must act quickly. Berit responds by refusing to take responsibility for someone else’s actions (“we regret that but I cannot answer to the fact he has not handled it”), drawing on a collective identity (“we”)
representing her business and/or colleagues, and more explicitly than ever before attributing responsibility for the failure, which has been built up in the previous turns, to Dan. In this case, the laughter becomes expressive of the absurdity that anyone would be responsible except Dan. To sum up, a couple of participants repeatedly position Dan’s behaviour as contrary to expectation, thereby suggesting that he does not take responsibility for work tasks, in this case regarding communication of measurement results. These discursive moves position him, despite a month’s illness, as morally inferior to others who reportedly take responsibility. The absence of any talk about his illness and how he might feel indicates that it is a matter too private for sharing and possibly too intangible to grasp.

6 Conclusion

This chapter has argued that risk management in today’s organizations – with its focus on goal setting and evaluation – becomes a strategy of “governing at a distance” (Rose and Miller 1992). With the transfer of responsibility from the state and company to everyone, what is evaluated in today’s risk management are employees’ ability to take responsibility for uncertainty and wellness through guided self-management. This new form of risk management must rework older beliefs and practices, and shape employees’ motivations, aims and subjectivity to make them owners of new names and practices such as “behaviour based safety” (BBS), to always use precautions to minimize the so-called “Lost Time incidents” (LTI) (Rasmussen 2011a), and use written incident reporting through ICTs like Flexite (Rasmussen 2011b), and so on. In this development, communication is vital because it serves as the bearer of the new ideas and working methods as they are introduced, and the working methods include communication tasks rather than merely operational work, and employees use communication to assure management that they are indeed adapting and taking responsibility, or that they disagree.

While a theoretical basis for this chapter has been that new responsibilities at work involve the negotiation and shaping of social identities through discourse (cf. Foucault 1972), and thus processes of subjectivation (Foucault 1991), we have transitioned to empirical analysis of workplace interaction using positioning analysis (e.g. Bamberg 2005). The chapter thus contributes with an example of detailed discourse analysis which still attempts to retain ideas from the more macro-oriented governmentality framework. With the aim of investigating how interaction is used to facilitate employees becoming responsible risk communication subjects, this chapter has analysed how interaction unfolds in a number of safety meeting episodes. The analysis has demonstrated exactly how employees self-position and become positioned by others as responsible for how they communicate, e.g. with regard to the length of a
presentation or demonstrating orderliness by referring to minutes from group meetings or communicating on topic. The content of employees’ statements regarding risk management also turns out to be evaluated and negotiated. There were issues with whether a safety group contributed genuinely, and instances where communication is disciplined into adopting economization. Lastly, responsibilization also extended beyond the workplace to the infirmary, as an occupational physician was positioned as irresponsible with regard to risk communication duties despite being on sick leave. Drawing on a discursive regime of expected practices and responsibilities, management and employees construct some of the actions of employees as mistakes or irresponsible behaviour, which amplifies the importance of self-managing in accordance with the norm. Yet resistance was also apparent since employees in several of these examples do not exercise the required self-discipline, and sometimes explicitly argue against the factory manager’s position, as in the case with the funding to repair holes in the work floor.

The study has bridged two streams of research and filled a gap in the research literature in that (a) the Foucauldian studies on risk and safety (e.g. Chikudate 2009; Collinson 1999; Gray 2009; MacEachen 2000; Packer 2003; Zoller 2003a, 2003b) rarely adopt detailed discourse analytic approaches and therefore pay less attention to the negotiating powers of human communication, and (b) because the detailed discourse analytic studies that are available regarding meetings (Iedema 2003; Jarzabkowski and Seidl 2008; Wodak, Kwon, and Clarke 2011; Rasmussen 2011a) focus primarily on the chair’s discursive moves. What the study shows is how meetings are used for the purpose of responsibilization, to make employees visible and accountable for risk management. It has demonstrated that meetings provide an arena where it is possible for managers to question, praise, or alternatively to save on the praise and be reticent to awaken middle-managers’ and other employees’ repentance and will to improve. Employees are trying in different ways to prove that they are responsible, for instance by referring to records of safety meetings they should have had, or by using rhetorical repetition as a means to construct multiple efforts and therefore highly responsible work. When positioning others as irresponsible, employees use the discursive strategy of building up an expectation and then describing its denial, which positions the one responsible even more unfavourably than if no expectation would have been constructed. In these situations, employees articulate that where others have failed, they have still done their part and been responsible. Overall, it becomes clear that to be successful as an employee in these settings, time has to be spent on preparation and communication, both before the meeting to collect, and later refer to, the evidence of responsible behaviour, and during the meeting to report in an exhaustive and yet effective way.
If a rule emerges throughout these safety meeting episodes, it is a rule of suspicion. The safety groups and individual employees are positioned by others and themselves as guilty of neglect of risk management until they have proven, through discursive means, what their contribution has consisted of. To refer to specific details and records of activities helps the employee appear responsible. In the first excerpt, when Thomas mentioned the date on which they held their safety group meeting, he added proof of a completed activity, but in excerpt two, Marcus failed to provide such proof since their meeting minutes were missing. He found himself in a difficult position for a while. The meeting thus enlivens a logic of guilty until proven innocent rather than a logic of innocent until proven guilty. Employees are thus audited verbally, and according to Rose (1999, 155) audits “amplify and multiply the points at which doubt and suspicion can be generated” leading to an “expanding spiral of distrust of professional competence”. Despite this logic of suspicion, the meeting is mostly conducted in a high-spirited manner, partly created by the site manager’s use of an encouraging tone of voice.

By having shown the importance of verbal discursive “work” that indicates responsibility, the study adds observations of a working life that goes through textualization, where risks are governed by management at a distance through communication (Iedema 2003). If this development proceeds, communication and administrative systems, which can only indicate that risk and safety are managed properly, become the primary reality which is controlled by management and authorities, whereas the physical work environment becomes a less significant reality, something that employees themselves should assess (Power 2007; Rasmussen 2010).

Finally, what the study has shown is how responsibilization of communication duties occur in action in a safety meeting context. It has also contributed to the development of a discourse approach to governmental analytics of employees’ health, safety and responsibilization. This is an important area for discourse analysts, and future research should continue and examine how rationalized governing in organizations involves new work responsibilities, textualization, and questions of employee’s subjectivity and power.
References


