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De Saint-Georges, Ingrid; Jacques, J.-M.; Wallemacq, A.

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TECHNOLOGIES OF DIS-INVOLVEMENT IN CRISIS MANAGEMENT: OBJECTIFYING, IMPERSONALIZING AND DESENSITIZING INFORMATION FROM THE GROUND

[pre-publication draft]

Ingrid de Saint-Georges (ingrid.desaint-georges@fundp.ac.be), Anne Wallemacq (anne.wallemacq@fundp.ac.be) et Jean-Marie Jacques (jean-marie.jacques@fundp.ac.be)
Research Center for Crisis and Conflict Management (ReCCoM)
University of Namur
Faculty of Economics, Social Sciences and Business Administration
Rempart de la vierge, 8
B-5000 Namur (Belgium)
Phone: +32.81.72.48.71

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, there has been a growing interest in examining the role of text and talk in the study of work and workplace settings. Disciplines as varied in their goals and methods of inquiry as organisational studies, management, ethnomethodology, communication studies, social psychology, sociology or discourse analysis (see among others, Drew & Heritage, 1992 ; Iedema & Wodak, 1999 ; Grant, Keenoy & Oswick, 2001, Jacques, Laurent et Wallemacq 2004) have become interested in examining the role of linguistic exchanges in organisational settings. With the ‘discursive turn’ in the social sciences (Iedema & Wodak, 1999 ; Stubbe, 2001 ; Filiettaz, 2001), it has become common to view organisations not as reified, static entities with deterministic properties, but instead as complex systems dynamically constituted in the ‘acts of communication between organisational members’ (Iedema and Wodak 1999: 7).

While this take on organisations has importantly challenged the views of organisations which held them as relatively permanent, abstract, macro-structures, the focus on the micro-processes of daily organisational interactions have often failed, as Iedema and Wodak point out, ‘to appreciate larger processes of which they form a part’ (1999). As a result, much still need to be learned regarding how, in an organizational setting, micro-processes connect to larger systems of meanings.

In this article, our interest has been to address this concern by attempting to specify what were larger orientations or systems of meanings a specific group of professionals—professionals in the field of crisis management— were speaking from and from which they drew concepts, conventions and forms of expressions. To do so, we chose to follow ‘webs of meanings’ (Blommaert and Verschueren 1998) inter-textually woven across different institutional settings dealing with crisis management and to examine how these webs of meaning were engaged in the local discourse of the members of these various institutions. Taking the view that ‘meanings are meaningful in the first instance, because they belong to socially shared and ongoingly enacted (but often subconscious ‘systems of differences’, we became interested in making explicit patterns (recurrent cognitive images, conceptual frames and rhetorical behaviours) prevalent in the discourse of these individuals. Indeed, while research on crisis management has established that the representations decision-makers formed about a critical situation is crucial to their decision-making processes (Gatot 2000: 3, Jacques, Gatot and Wallemacq 2002), there has been little empirical research done so far to understand the psycho-social, cultural and cognitive models crisis managers use to direct their actions both in preparing for, and in reacting to actual crises. We thus became interested in making visible patterns in crisis management as they could

be inferred from the discourse of these various individuals and to see in what way these articulatory practices could be informative of the interpretative frames used by crisis managers to perform their work. At a more methodological level, we also became interested in developing a method for capturing the manner in which themes emerge intertextually in a data set and thus for apprehending the question of how ‘codes transcend structures’ (Chandler 2002).

In order to address these issues, we begin in the next section by describing the data we examined as well as the methodology we used. We next turn to a description and short discussion of three excerpts from our data set and show how similar distinctions are reproduced across these three texts. We pay particular attention to the specific connotations each speaker brings in relation to a common distinction which is made recurrently in our data set: the distinction between ‘the crisis center’ and ‘the grounds of the crisis’. We conclude with a more general discussion regarding the meanings this distinction might have in the larger context of crisis management and social life.

2. DATA

The data for this paper is drawn from a larger project in which the ReCCoM¹ has been involved over the past few years and which is concerned with studying ‘human factors’ in crisis management (Gatot 2000). As a part of this project, the ReCCoM became interested in exploring how professionals in the field of crisis management define crisis and their role during one. To gather representations about crises, members of the team set out to conduct semi-directive, in-depth, interviews with actors at different institutional settings dealing with crisis management. The original corpus we will be referring to in this paper consists of 25 interviews of individuals occupying a variety of functions in different types of institutions dealing with crisis management in Belgium: the Red Cross, the Federal Police force, the Fire-fighters, the Army, 911 services, a regional office for emergency preparedness, the Federal Crisis Center, the emergency unit of a chemical plant, the Unit for Safety and Environment of the Province of Namur.

A diagrammatic representation such as the one proposed in Reisigl and Wodak (2001: 38-39) seemed apt to capture the particularities and interrelations between documents in this data, and we have thus largely drawn from their research both in the constitution of the diagram and the discussion of it below:

¹ ReCCoM = Research Center for Crisis and Conflict Management

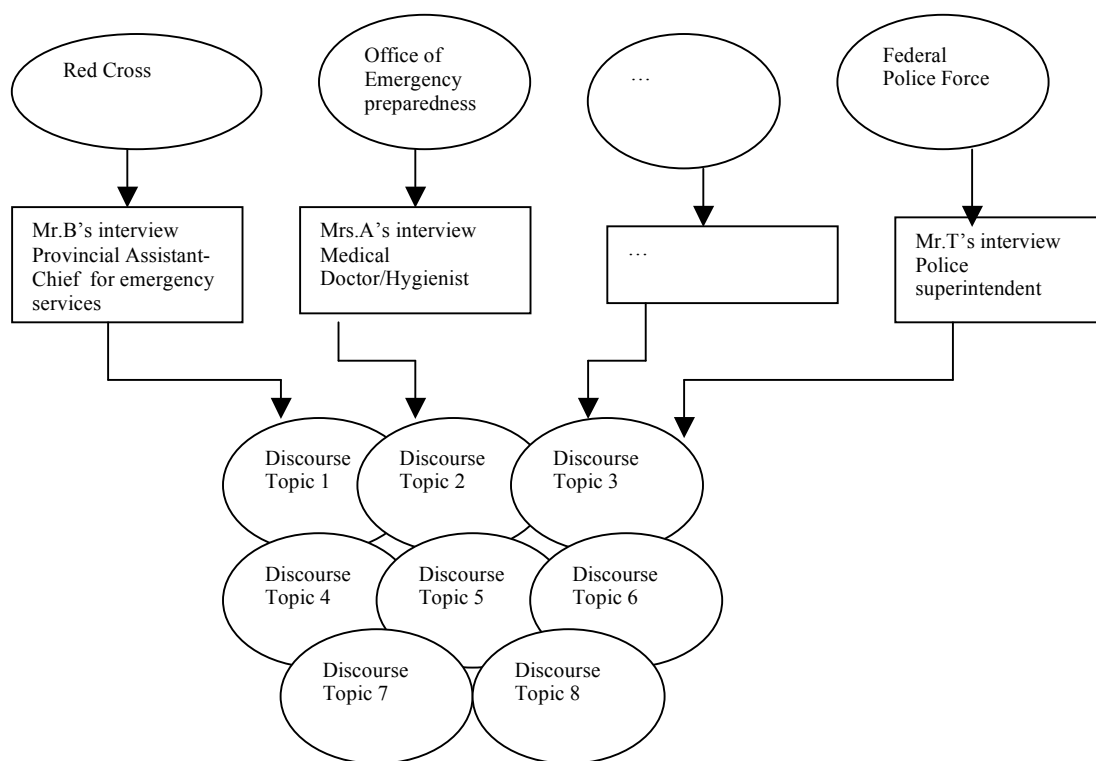


Figure 1: Interdiscursive and intertextual relations in the data set (reproduced from Reisigl and Wodak 2001: 38-39 and adapted to our data)

In the diagram above, the top ellipses represent the various organisational settings where we interviewed workers. Each of these organisational settings also corresponds to specific ‘fields of action’² and to preferred modes of intervention and interactions. For example, the Police’s work is different from the work of the Red Cross although in case of a catastrophe these various groups have to co-ordinate their actions. The squares symbolise the individual interviews that were carried out with the members of these organisations. Each of these interviews is a coherent text with topic sequentially discussed and organised. The discourse topics making up the interviews are represented through the ellipses in the lower part of the diagram.

In the course of our investigations of the data, it became clear that while aspects of the frames of references organising individual actors’ perceptions, knowledge and actions were shaped by the codes of the organisation to which they respectively belonged, other distinctions regarding crisis and crisis management cut across the various organisational settings and could thus be perceived as ‘shared codes’. There were thus principles of division and distinctions that could be traced intertextually across these various interviews. They appeared notably in topical correlations and thematic overlaps in the discourses of the interviewees (symbolised through the overlapping ellipsis in the diagram). Since our general interest was to contribute to the understanding of how representations individuals hold about crisis management affect how they reason about critical situations, how they react during crises and how they relate to partners, it seemed important to us to examine empirically these intertextual relations. The analysis which we propose is thus a first step in that direction. We would like here to explore some of the

² Reisigl and Wodak borrow ‘fields of action’ from Gernth 1996 and define them as ‘segments of the respective societal ‘reality’, which contribute to constituting and shaping the ‘frame’ of discourse.

‘commonsensical’, ‘naturalised’ ways of viewing crisis management for professional in the field, with the hope that a fine analysis of these interpretative frames might help us contribute to better understand crisis management from the point of view of the actors directly involved in it.

In order to observe topic overlaps and the intertextual emergence of themes, we have chosen to make use of a computer tool for qualitative data analysis, EVOQ[®]. In the next section, we describe briefly the usefulness of this tool for uncovering common discourse threads in the data. As this software has been extensively described elsewhere, we will only describe some general aspects of its workings (see Wallemacq, Jacques, Bruyninckx, forthcoming for more information).

3. EVOQ[®]

If we take the premise that the language speakers use to express individual meanings ‘connects each perception to a larger orientation and system of meaning’ (Deetz 1982: 135, quoted in Iedema and Wodak 1999: 7), accounting for these webs of meaning in the ‘multiplicity, heterogeneity and variability’ that characterize them constitutes a methodological challenge to traditional social scientific methods (Teil and Latour 1995). Macroscopic views are probably best to uncover how these webs of meaning are constituted on a large scale and to show the ties existing from text to text. On the other hand, keeping at the macroscopic level, we risk losing sight of the detailed ways in which actors themselves define their own terms of references about a domain. To treat this kind of issue, Teil and Latour have suggested that what was needed was: ‘... to give qualitative workers a Computer Aided Sociology CAS tool that has the same degree of finesse as traditional *qualitative* studies but also has the same mobility, the same capacities of aggregation and synthesis as the *quantitative* methods employed by other social sciences.’

EVOQ[®], a software solution currently developed by our team of researchers at the University of Namur, was conceived as such a *quali-quantitative* tool. Teil and Latour (1995) use this label to refer to computer tools for sociological analysis which aim to be a remedy against statistical approaches that are too large scale to describe appropriately the fine texturing of relations in the data, and detailed analyses of case studied which are too fine-grained for showing the relations existing across texts and data sets.

How does it work?

EVOQ[®] works from qualitative documents (open or closed interviews, field notes, newspaper articles, archives, minutes of meetings, etc.) and the representations individual speakers construct in these texts. Contrary to many existing software tools, which usually treat qualitative data on the basis of the frequency of terms appearing in the text and their ranking, EVOQ[®] does not rely on a lexicometric type of coding. It considers that ranked lists of verbs, nouns and adjectives are not a sufficient means to uncover these representations. EVOQ[®] consequently borrows the structuralist idea that the significance of the elements of a representation is always relational. Much in the same way that the image of a jigsaw is only reconstituted when all the pieces are related to one another (Piret, Nizet and Bourgeois 1996), EVOQ[®] considers speakers’ representations as organized systems of ‘oppositions’ and ‘associations’ and is interested in how these systems are articulated from the point of view of the speaker in the text examined. The researcher is thus responsible for the informed reading of the text and the manual coding of the relations of ‘conjunction’ (when the speaker associate some element in the text with another element in the text) and ‘disjunction’ (when some element in the text is opposed to another element in the text by the speaker). In the coding process, the researcher is not only invited to code the meanings expressed explicitly (the ‘surface meanings’) but also the meanings carried along implicitly (the meanings ‘on the rebound’) in texts. This coding is not arbitrary but follows theoretical and methodological principles (we followed for this paper the principles of structural analysis laid out in Piret, Nizet and Bourgeois [1996] to ensure inter-reliability of the coding among the team members). The relations, once encoded, come to

constitute a *dictionary* of relations for part of a text, a whole text or a set of texts. This first coding thus allows the researcher to move from the level of more global, undifferentiated representations to the more precise and differentiated analytical level of showing how these representations are assembled (Reinert 1997).

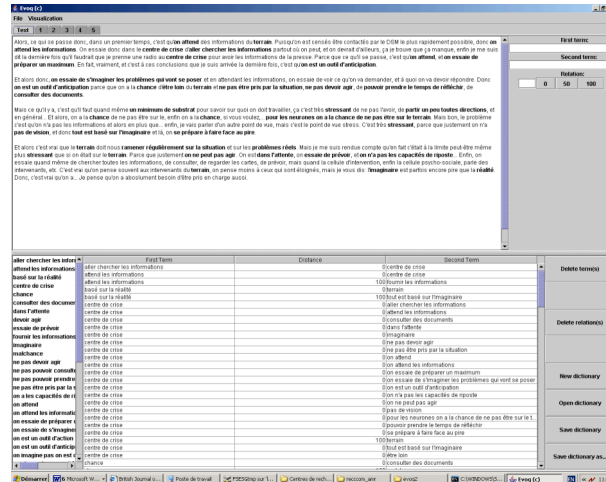


Figure 2: An example of the interface with the ‘text’ (top) and ‘dictionary’ (bottom) modules

The crux of the program however is the intelligibility it seeks to bring to the researcher through producing visual and dynamic maps of the textual relations thus encoded. The relations between explicit text and implicit sub-text can be made visible under different guises: in 2-D dynamic maps which auto-organize (1) and show lines of oppositions between terms (2), in textured, three-dimensional semantic landscape (3) or in movable, three-dimensional, semantic constellations (not shown here) (for a discussion regarding interpretative issues linked with visual representing a text, see Wallemacq and Jacques 2000).

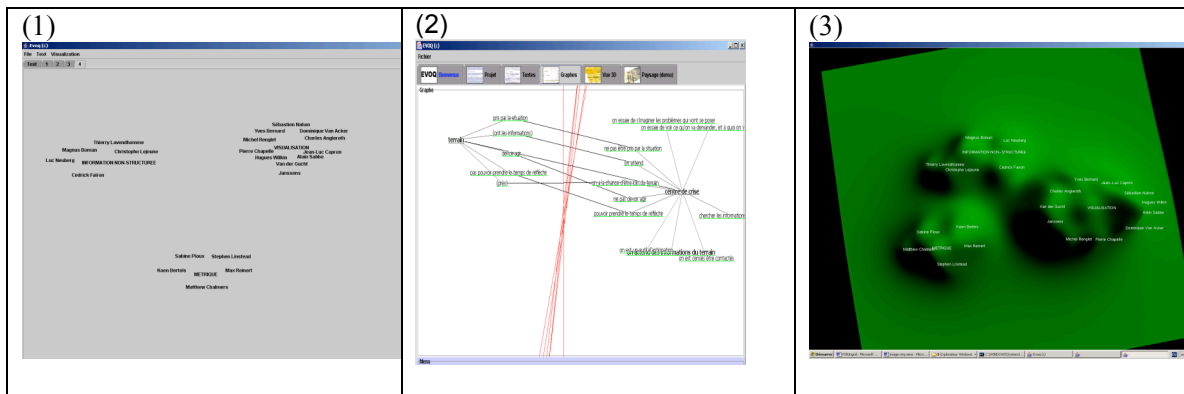


Figure 3: Still shots of animated 2-D and 3-D maps³

These representations show which terms are attractors, where distinctions lie (marked by topographical boundaries in the representations). They also display what is the text, the counter-text against which particular lexical choices are made and the sub-text (implicitly coded). The

³ add implicit subtext

researcher can pull on a word and see the web of evocations carried explicitly or implicitly in its trail thanks to the dynamic animation of the graphs. Such graphs allow to visualize the ‘rhetorically and socially constructed webs of meaning’ (Blommaert and Verschueren 1998), in which an individual is immersed, from which s/he speaks and from which s/he draws concepts, conventions and forms of expressions. Carrying analyses on large corpora allows us to start seeing how some maps may follow the shape of others, see the level of resemblance or dissonance among maps or show how one system of meaning may invade another for example.

In the course of exploring our data with EVOQ[®], we were struck by a distinction which came back regularly in the discourse of the speakers, independently from the questions we asked as part of the interviewing process, and seemed to crucially structure how the speakers viewed crisis management. This distinction, in part conceptual and in part practical, concerned the relationship between ‘the crisis center’ as a center for decision, and the ‘ground’ where the crises occurred. In the next section, we begin by investigating connotations associated with the two poles of this distinction: what conceptual frames do they contribute to constitute and what they tell us about crisis management. We do so through looking at three excerpts drawn from our data sets. Although we only discuss three examples, the themes we will be alluding to were found repeatedly in the data which makes us believe that they are part of a much more general frame for conceptualizing crisis management. In the discussion that will follow the description of these three excerpts, we will propose that these distinctions might not only be confined to the domain of crisis management but maybe be of a more general, archetypal order.

4. ANALYSIS

4.1. ‘Sometimes imagination is worst than reality’

The first extract we would like to discuss is drawn from an interview carried out by Jacques et al. (2002) at the services for emergency preparedness of the Province of Namur (Belgium). This service is responsible for dealing with catastrophes at the provincial level (floods, major road accident, chemical hazards, etc.). The interviewee, a medical doctor, describes how she views the role of the crisis center. To the right of the text of the interview we have highlighted the disjunction encoded explicitly or implicitly⁴ in the text:

(1) Transcript:

First part of the excerpt

So, er, what happens thus, is that at first, we wait for information from the ground. Since the DSM is supposed to contact us as quickly as possible, thus we wait for information

The ground \leftrightarrow the crisis center
(they) \leftrightarrow we
(they contact us to give us information) \leftrightarrow we wait for information

We thus try at the crisis center to go and search for information everywhere we can, and in fact we should- that- I think this is lacking, well I told myself last time that I should get a radio from the crisis center to get information from the media. Because what happens, is that we wait, and we try to prepare to the best extent we can. In fact, really, and that’s the conclusion I reached last time, is that we are an anticipatory tool.

(we do not wait) \leftrightarrow we wait
(we do not try to prepare to the best we can) \leftrightarrow we try to prepare to the best extent we can
(action tool ?) \leftrightarrow anticipatory tool

And so then, we try to imagine the problems that will arise and while waiting for information, we try to see what we will have to ask, and what we will have to answer to.

(not try to imagine) \leftrightarrow we try to imagine the problems
(do ?) \leftrightarrow wait

So we are an anticipatory tool because we are lucky to be

⁴ in which case they are signaled by parentheses.

far away from the ground and to not be caught in the situation, to not have to act, to be able to take the time to reflect and consult documents.

(absence of luck) $\leftarrow \rightarrow$ luck
 (close) $\leftarrow \rightarrow$ far
 (caught in the situation) $\leftarrow \rightarrow$ not caught in the situation
 (action) $\leftarrow \rightarrow$ not have to act
 (no time to reflect) $\leftarrow \rightarrow$ time to reflect and consult documents

Second part of the excerpt

But the thing is, is that we need a minimum of substrate to know what we need to work on, this is very stressful not to have it, to be going a little bit in every direction and in general... And so, we are lucky not to be on the, well we're lucky, if you want,... for the neurons, we are lucky not to be on the ground. But well, the problem is that we don't have the information and so in addition, well, I'll talk from another point of view, but it's the point of view of stress. It is very stressful, because precisely, we do not have a vision, and so everything is based on imagination and there, we have to prepare to face the worst.

(substrate) $\leftarrow \rightarrow$ not a minimum of substrate
 very stressful
 going in every direction
 (for neurons, unlucky to be on the ground) $\leftarrow \rightarrow$ for neurons lucky not to be on the ground
 (have information) $\leftarrow \rightarrow$ don't have information
 (non stress) $\leftarrow \rightarrow$ stressful
 (vision) $\leftarrow \rightarrow$ lack of vision
 (based on reality) $\leftarrow \rightarrow$ based on imagination
 know the reality of a situation $\leftarrow \rightarrow$ to prepare to face the worst
 for the stress $\leftarrow \rightarrow$ for the neurons

And so it is true that the ground must draw us back regularly to the situation and the real problems. But in fact I realized that to a certain extent, it was maybe even more stressful than if we were on the ground. Because precisely we cannot act. We are expecting, we are trying to foresee, but we don't have the ability to react... Well, we try at least to search for the information, to consult, to look at maps, to foresee, but when the intervention team, I mean the psycho-social team, talks to intervening teams, etc. it is true that you often think about the team intervening on the ground, but we think less about those which are remote, but I tell you: imagination is sometimes worst than reality. So, it's true that... I think we imperatively need to be taken into account too.

(for the stress, unlucky to be on the ground)
 action $\leftarrow \rightarrow$ we cannot act, expectation, foresight
 intervention team $\leftarrow \rightarrow$ (those who do not intervene)
 (close) $\leftarrow \rightarrow$ far
 (reality) $\leftarrow \rightarrow$ imagination

This first transcript can be divided into two segments, which as we will show construct two different, even competitive interpretative frames (the contrast between these two views is encoded by the discourse marker 'but' which opens up the second part of the excerpt in the transcript above). Let's discuss these two segments in turn.

The first part of the excerpt begins by showing how the services of emergency preparedness are organized according to a very Western frame of reference, distinguishing workers who are 'on the ground', engaged in real-time action and workers located at the crisis center, primarily responsible for processes of decision-making. This distinction, both a conceptual one and a practical one, is probably heavily influenced by the more common divisions inherited from Taylorist principles of work organization: distinctions between conceptualization vs. actualization, manual labor vs. intellectual work. It is also reminiscent of military metaphors, distinguishing between agents on the front-line and agents in the back, at the control-room.

In her discourse, Mrs.A. endorses this system of conceptual distinctions, and the attribute usually associated with them: being located at the crisis center is considered a valued position since it is the place where decisions are made. The crisis center is located away from the crisis' epicenter and thus allows to avoid getting caught emotionally in its turmoil. In this context, individuals at the crisis center are in a position to reason about the situation, not just react emotionally to it. The distance is constructed as necessary to make the appropriate decisions. On the other hand, 'the ground' is the locus of action. To be on the ground is being emotionally caught in the situation, being short-sighted because one is directly involved in the situation, without the necessary distance to be able to reflect upon the situation and analyze its components.

Workers on the ground thus lack the physical and psychological distance to be able to analyze rationally the situation.

In the second part of the excerpt, however, appears a counter-text to this first one that threatens to destabilize the set of distinctions just established. Talking about her situation at the crisis center, Mrs. A. alludes to the fact that because she is away from the ground, she can only imagine how the crisis might develop. Her efforts are thus entirely oriented towards getting and finding information regarding the situation on the ground to try to form an image of it. From the point of view of what is happening on the ground, she is in fact not in a position to intervene in the course of action being performed there. Her actions of gathering information almost feel as ‘non-action’⁵ to her. As a result, another type of anxiety arises than the one experienced by individuals on the ground. This anxiety is ‘for the neurons/from the point of view of stress’: actors at the crisis center are left to resort to their imagination to construct an image of the situation but their imagination is not framed by reality anymore. Ideas follow one another but the principle of reality is not there to frame and limit them. This situation leads Mrs. A. to state that ‘imagination is sometimes worst than reality’.

We now see how previous distinctions are re-structured in relation to this new set of connotations: while the ground is still where actions take place, the crisis center is not anymore just where decisions are made but also a place of ‘non-action’ or ‘inaction’. While the ground is still depicted as the space ‘where things happens’, which is to say the domain of the ‘real’, the crisis center is not anymore just the domain of rational thinking. It becomes also a place where phantasmagoric drift is likely because of the distance from reality. If actors on the ground are too close to reality, people at the crisis center are too far away, they are not in touch with what is really happening on the ground. The crisis center thus becomes constructed as a place where decisions are made sightless, without any means to construct an accurate picture of what is happening for real. The field was largely de-valued in the first part of the excerpt. It gains here a set of positive attributes associated with the fact that the ground is ‘real’, actors can act, they maybe short-sighted but they do not grope their way as blinds.

Paying attention to the text, sub-text and counter-text thus allows us to show the complexities of the frames of representation organizing Mrs.A’s perception and knowledge regarding crisis management. A table will help us summarize these relations:

	ON THE GROUND	AT THE CRISIS CENTER
First part of the excerpt	ACTION EMOTION REALITY CLOSE SHORT-SIGHTED -	DECISION RATIONALITY REFLEXION DISTANCE ACCURATE VISION +
Second part of the excerpt	ACTION EMOTION REALITY CLOSE SHORT-SIGHTED +	INACTION STRESS IMAGINATION TOO FAR AWAY BLIND -

⁵ During the simulation of an accident, observers noted how actors at the crisis center were desperately seeking ‘to do something’ but that whatever they did, in their eyes, never fully qualified as real ‘action’.

Figure 4: The distinction crisis center/on the ground in Mrs.A.'s interview

In this table we see that two sets of frames are in competition. In the top portion of the table: a certain number of positive values are associated with the crisis center (rationality, decision-making, time for reflection, distance) and negative values with the situation 'on the ground' (emotion, short-sightedness, being caught in the action). In the bottom part of the table, the same terms are used to describe the ground but they almost acquire on the rebound positive value in opposition to a new set of connotations associated with the crisis center and which are this time rather negative (inaction, stress, distance, blindness). In other words, the second game of oppositions almost re-qualifies the first.

4.2. 'It is better to be outside, because if you're inside, in my view, you can't manage anything anymore'

The two excerpts discussed next are drawn from an interview with Mr.T, a manager with a company in the pharmaceutical and chemical industry (the interview was carried out by Jacques and Gatot, 1997). Mr.T has been asked to describe in a general way emergency planning in the plant (how it is internally organized). We will discuss the two excerpts jointly since they both belong to a long answer to a same question.

(2) Transcript:

First excerpt

T: Okay so, as for the other contacts that we can have outside there are possibly the residents. There can be residents who violently complain, the guard will try to answer them, but in principle it's not his job to give...He does not have information anyways, so he will transmit the info. So these are calls which are also very important, because residents are...In my mind, a call from the residents, it's as important as a call from the governor. Because the governor surely has decisions to make, but our residents, it's really an indicator extremely...For me it's really a very very realistic image of what is happening. You can tell me many things internally, but if there is a resident who calls saying that it coughs, it coughs, and that it smells of rabies..., it's that information that will supersede the others. So this is also information that we like to have. All this information...What I am always saying is, when we have a crisis like that, there is the place where it happens, we get information from there. This information is in general relatively precise. There is a hole in the pipe, ..., there is this thing happening, etc. Except for complicated developments, because there can be developments in a situation that develop and that were not foreseen, but that's not I think the major aspect of the difficulties. On the other hand, where it's always more blurred is the impact around. Does it smell in street X, well yes, it smells a little bit, but how much, etc. This is the information that is difficult to manage. And difficult because yes okay, we know the direction the wind blows but pffff with that we don't know all, so what I had felt to be a difficulty, is to construct an image of what is happening around the plant, when you are outside of the fence. And that image is really the most important, because to evacuate people internally, it just requires to say: withdraw the guys from PVC 3 and the guys from

A call from the resident \leftrightarrow a call from the governor
(Information to give) \leftrightarrow decision to make
Very very realistic image \leftrightarrow (not realistic image)
It coughs, it coughs and it smells of rabies \leftrightarrow (not realistic image)
(externally) \leftrightarrow internally
Information that counts \leftrightarrow (information that does not count)
Information we like to have \leftrightarrow (no information?)

The place where it happens \leftrightarrow the impact around
Information relatively precise \leftrightarrow information that is blurred
 \leftrightarrow information difficult to manage
(inside the plant) \leftrightarrow outside the plant
(easy to construct an image) \leftrightarrow difficult to construct an image
(inside the fence) \leftrightarrow outside the fence
(least important image) \leftrightarrow most important image
evacuate people internally \leftrightarrow evacuate street X
information easy to give \leftrightarrow a little more complex to order

evaluate the situation inside the plant \leftrightarrow evaluate situation outside the plant

\rightarrow environment guy

\rightarrow information important to get

(to stay and wait for information) \leftrightarrow to go and see around

PVC3 they will evacuate, it's an information easy to give. To evacuate [Latham] street, it is a little more complex to order. So...

But to do that we also call upon the environment as a resource. The environment [guy], so if I need it, he takes his little van and goes around in order to evaluate the situation around the plant. And this is also information that is important to get. So, the environment, okay, that's the aspect [which invites] to go and see what happens around [...]

Second excerpt

It's to tell yourself truly: you're not guilty, you need to manage a situation, but manage in the sense of a manager that must not forget anything, who must try to have information as complete as possible, and to give the right orders at the right moment, trying precisely, and I think this is very very important, it's to truly stay out of the fire, you know what I mean. The fact of being isolated, it's surely a good thing, because well, we imagine very easily, well I don't have difficulties imagining catastrophic situations like that. From the moment where you hear people bawling on the radio, you need a good dose of self-control, it's better to manage things, it's better to be outside, because if you're in the middle of it, in my view, you don't manage anything at all, you panic and you can't do anything anymore. You decompose yourself, like. So the idea of a crisis center, because the former DGI : everyone was on the ground.

JMJ: what does DGI stands for?

Mr.T: DGI is the former safety device, the former emergency plan, it was everyone in the field, that's where we have to be. But I think today, the idea is to say: there is a lad that is detached in a comfortable, muffled room, I think it's a good thing.

(you're guilty)	← → you're not guilty
(you don't manage the situation)	← → you need to manage a situation → manage in the sense of a manager
(non-manager)	← → manager
(forget something)	← → don't forget anything → must try to have info as complete as possible → give the right orders at the right moment → stay out of the fire
(in contact with the ground)	← → isolated
(reality)	← → imagine very easily
(living catastrophic situations)	← → imagining catastrophic situations
people bawling on the radio	← → isolated
in the middle of it	← → outside
you don't manage anything	← → (you manage)
you panic	← → (you don't panic)
you can't do anything	← → (you can do something)
you decompose yourself	← → (you keep composed)
former DGI	← → crisis center
everyone on the ground	← → some lad detached in a comfortable room
	→ muffled

In this second interview, we find figures of ambiguity similar to those which were found in Mrs. A.'s discourse. Let's examine them.

Like Mrs. A., Mr.T. associates the crisis center with a set of positive attributes. The distinction between the ground and the crisis center in terms of a Taylorist model is again validated: the crisis center is the place from which orders are given. The manager has the profile of someone who is emotionally balanced ('you're not guilty'), organized ('a manager that must not forget anything'), efficient and timely ('give the right orders at the right moment'), all qualities which are seemingly threatened for those who are on the ground.

	ON THE GROUND	AT THE CRISIS CENTER
1 st excerpt	LACK OF CONTROL PANIC/DECOMPOSE INACTION WAIT FOR ORDERS REALITY -	CONTROL REASON ACTION GIVE ORDERS ISOLATION +
2 nd excerpt	DIRECT PERCEPTION SENSORIAL INPUT SUR-DETERMINATION +	INDIRECT PERCEPTION REPRESENTATIONAL CRISIS UNDER-DETERMINATION -

Figure 5: The distinction crisis center/on the ground in Mr. T's discourse

For Mr. T, experience on the ground is constructed as traumatic because one is caught in the events without any means to escape ('you're in the middle of it'). This traumatic experience translates in a set of reactions and emotions ('you panic', 'you decompose') which are analyzed by him as hindrances to actions ('you can't do anything anymore'). The 'ground' is also constructed as the locus of 'direct perception' ('it coughs, it coughs and it smells of rabies', 'it smells', 'a very very realistic image' where sensorial modalities (smell, vision, sound) are called upon to construct a representation of the situation. On the ground, direct perception and emotions occupy a prevalent place.

On the contrary, the crisis center is the place from which events can be managed in a cold-blooded way, 'out of the fire'. To be outside of the crisis epicenter also allows the actors to keep at bay from the sound, the fury and the 'panic' associated with the experience of the crisis. From the point of view of sensory input, the crisis center seems to be a place where noises and perceptions from the outside world arrive muffled, softened, subdued, loosing part of what makes them 'real' and thus part of their traumatizing force. Isolation from the ground is connoted positively ('the fact of being isolated, it's surely a good thing'). It seems that constructing maps of the critical situation is more efficient when cognition is not saturated by sensory input and emotional responses. To be in an isolated place attenuates the potentially paralyzing impact that being at the heart of the crisis could represent.

Isolation and indirect perception are not however without presenting difficulties either. On the ground, there seems to be 'sur-determination' of representation via sensory input (a call from the residents is 'really a very very realistic image of what is happening', 'you hear people bawling on the radio'), at the crisis center there seems to be under-determination of representations, especially when one gets to the periphery of the crisis's epicenter ('it's more blurred'). Professionals of crisis management seem thus to always have to navigate between 'too much' and 'not enough information'. Too much information causes actors to be submersed, to lose their capacities to abstract, generalize, and distinguish relevant information from unimportant ones for the process of decision making. But too little information has in fact the same effect: actors are unable to abstract and generalize because they have only access to an image of the situation that is blurred, truncated and incomplete. On the ground, workers face a crisis, but at the crisis center, managers face a 'representational crisis', which creates another type of emotional reaction in lieu of the cold-blooded attitude that was sought to be produced via isolation. Isolation, as a tool for crisis management, thus appears to be a solution that presents not just affordances but also constraints for the decision-makers. It enables to be out of the fire but can translate in extra stress.

	ON THE GROUND	AT THE CRISIS CENTER
	SUR-DETERMINATION	UNDER-DETERMINATION
	-	-

Figure 6: The figures of perception on the ground/at the crisis center

None of the traditional solutions (everyone on the ground or decision-makers isolated from the ground) thus seem fully satisfactory for professionals such as Mrs.A and Mr.T.

What kind of solution can be offered to get out of this situation? One way to proceed highlighted in the text seems to be to resort to multiple technological tools. Together with the use of imagination, technological tools (fax, phones, a radio, etc.) seem to be able to play the role of a

sixth sense, to get back the sensorial abilities that were lost, without overwhelming managers with the reality of human suffering . Technologies can thus help constructing a more precise image of the situation. At the same time, sifting information through the filter of technology can help reduce its ‘effects of realness’ and thus alleviate the traumatizing effect potentially linked to direct perception.

4.3. ‘They are our eyes and our ears on the ground’

Let us explore further this pattern highlighting that a crisis is not only a material crisis but also a ‘representational crisis’. Our last example comes from an interview with Mr. B, director for safety and environmental issues with the province of Namur.

(4) Transcript:

Mr.B: ... so the first worry you have, is to acquire information. It is what is going to occupy you the most. Because you are in an isolated space and you don't have, at least in current circumstances, a real-time representation of what is happening on the ground, to be able to answer appropriately to..., to the challenges produced by the incident, you must necessarily have an information as faithful as possible and as contemporary as possible. And to remedy that, we thus have a certain system that we have created since the last exercises. So, we have designated delegate coordinators, which is to say, people, they are fire officers that we dispatch at the spot and who report for the crisis committee, so for, for the coordination effort. So in other words, they are the eyes, they are our eyes and our ears at the spot. And this appears to be necessary because when you have the beginning of an intervention, an escalation of the process, the people who are responsible for the intervention are maximally busy, so you have a lot of trouble obtaining a contact in order to perceive all the aspects of the intervention from the person in charge of the service, because the people are heavily busy, and experience the highest stress. And so, we found out with experience that we could not count on the head of disciplines on the ground, at least in the first moments, to obtain a steady report of what was happening there. And this prohibited our acting so to speak in the very first moment, at least, of the intervention. And so we came up with this system. So these people are independent. When we send them there, they don't go there as fire-fighters, they go as delegates and well, they don't have anything to do with the fire services, but they are our eyes and our ears on the ground.

(have information) $\leftarrow \rightarrow$ acquire information
 (immersive space?) $\leftarrow \rightarrow$ isolated space
 (real-time representation) $\leftarrow \rightarrow$ no real-time representation
 on the ground $\leftarrow \rightarrow$ at the crisis center
 faithful information $\leftarrow \rightarrow$ (not faithful information)
 contemporary information $\leftarrow \rightarrow$ (not contemporary information)
 delegate coordinators $\leftarrow \rightarrow$ people at the crisis center
 eyes $\leftarrow \rightarrow$ (no eyes)
 ears $\leftarrow \rightarrow$ (no ears)
 on the spot $\leftarrow \rightarrow$ away from the spot
 people responsible for intervention $\leftarrow \rightarrow$ people at the crisis center
 maximally busy $\leftarrow \rightarrow$ (not maximally busy)
 heavily busy $\leftarrow \rightarrow$ (not heavily busy)
 highest stress $\leftarrow \rightarrow$ (not highest stress)
 (not able to give steady report) $\leftarrow \rightarrow$ counting on steady report
 (enabled our action) $\leftarrow \rightarrow$ prohibited our action
 delegate $\leftarrow \rightarrow$ officers from the fire services
 don't have anything to do with the fire services $\leftarrow \rightarrow$ (have something to do with the fire services)
 our eyes and our ears on the ground $\leftarrow \rightarrow$ (no eyes and no ears at the crisis center)

In this excerpt, Mr.B. underlines that, unable to see, smell, touch or hear what is going on ‘on the ground’, the task of the individuals located at the crisis center is nevertheless to construct as accurate a picture as possible of the critical situation to be able to make timely decisions and react efficiently to contain the crisis. Here, to make up for the representational crisis always threatening the work of people at the crisis center, the strategy chosen is to send an individual, which becomes a kind of sensory ‘extension’ to stimulate the brainwork done at the crisis center. This time, the set of connotations associated with the crisis center shows the crisis center to be a place not only isolated acoustically and visually but where time and action work on a different time scale than on the ground. Actions and reactions at the crisis center depend on the timing of the actions of the people caught in the crisis. The actions at the crisis center are prohibited until

people on the ground have delivered their report concerning the situation. Their representations thus never occur in real-time but always slightly out of phase with the events. The situation in which they find themselves is not saturated with concrete actions and high level of emotions, rather they are in the expectative, they try to reconstruct the puzzle of a situation that is external to them and to which they can only react, and not so much anticipate, at least in the very early phase of the crisis development.

	ON THE GROUND	AT THE CRISIS CENTER
	IMMERSED PRE- /ANTE- SENSES (EYES AND EARS) REAL TIME HIGHEST STRESS	ISOLATED POST- BRAIN NOT REAL-TIME NOT HIGHEST STRESS

Figure 7: The distinction on the ground/at the crisis center in the discourse of Mr.B.

The isolation at the crisis center is thus a double isolation. It is both a sensory separation and a spatial and temporal remoteness and both affect the ability to construct a representation of the critical situation. To be able to reconstruct this representation, eyes and ears on the ground are required. Like the effects of technology, having ‘a representation of a representation of a critical reality’ via an external agent can help alleviate the traumatizing effect potentially linked to direct perception while ensuring that the more precise information required for decision-making reach the crisis center.

5. Discussion

In the discussion thus far, we have examined how individuals structure and communicate their knowledge, perceptions and emotions about the work they do at crises centers. We sought to show how the interpretative frames each constructed were shaped by socially shared and enacted systems of meanings and used EVOQ[®] as an analytical tool to make visible the ‘systems of differences’ constitutive of these systems of meanings. We would like now to turn to a discussion of the meanings of the distinctions we have described. Why is it that in a critical situation, when chaos is around and usual frames of reference dissolve, the first reflex (material, cognitive and psychological) consists in building this crisis center/ground dichotomy? What meanings can we associate with constituting these instances in the first place? Here, we examine upstream from the distinction we have established the underlying motives that may have conducted to such a division of labour.

5.1. *Thinking the unthinkable and mapping the unknown*

At the heart of the job of crisis manager lies a paradox: one the one hand crises are events or processes that occur as unexpected and unforeseeable events. By definition, they ‘upset ideals of stability and control’ (Grosz 1999b: 16), escape all known scenarios, in such a way that, as one speaker puts it in an excerpt not discussed here, ‘to foresee crises is impossible’. On the other hand, the job of crisis managers is to ‘be prepared for the unforeseeable’. The problem therefore that they face can be couched in the following terms: how do you think the unthinkable? Many strategies have been developed in the domain of crisis management to seek to ‘eliminate...the random, the wild’ (Scollon and Scollon 2002): check lists and procedures to follow in case a critical situation arises, scenarios of possible crises to identify what unstable situations may arise in the future and the consequences this unstable situations may carry (for the population, for an organization, for the country’s government, etc.). Procedures however never exhaust the range of situations that may arise in situated crises (as one interviewee puts it: ‘because procedures, you

can never write everything into procedures) and crises end up always being, as we pointed out earlier, as much material crises as they are crises of representations. Crises are crises of representations because one does not know how the crisis will develop. They are also crises of representation because crisis management is not just an intellectual exercise in foreseeing but often a matter of life and death, involving real people's lives. The nature of the critical situation can thus also contribute to annihilate the ability to think and to construct a coherent representation of the situation. The roots of the representational crisis are thus both cognitive and psychological.

It seems that to some extent, faced with having to construct representations of a critical situation, professionals of crises management find themselves in a position a bit similar to the early cartographers who had to map a terra incognita. Reflecting upon the origins of cartography, Lewis (1987: 51) notes that a normal attitude since the prehistoric ages is for humans to work at monitoring their surrounding environment for 'novelty—both unanticipated events in time and unexpected objects and conditions in space, which might constitute hazards (...) ' (Lewis 1987 : 51). For him, prehistoric consciousness was focused not so much on finding out regularities in the world, as modern consciousness tend to focus on, but rather at monitoring irregularities and uncertainties, thus 'maintaining a continuous state of alertness for the unanticipated and unexpected' (p.51). For *Homo Sapiens* living in the grassland, survival depended a lot on the biological apparatus of 'vision' and "involved developing strategies for achieving at the same time prospect through vision and refuge through self-concealment". Monitoring the unexpected thus relied heavily on that sense. In addition, for Lewis, mapping skills arose from the development of mental capacities, beyond vision, to

- 1) 'delay an instinctive response in favor of a pause for exploration'
- 2) 'stor[e] acquired information'
- 3) 'abstract and generalize'
- 4) 'carry out the required responses to information thus processed'.

Still, for Lewis, 'the mapping of topographical information per se was almost certainly not of practical importance (in the modern sense) to early man. Mapping may, however, have served to achieve what in modern behavioral therapy is known as desensitization: lessening fear by the repeated representation of what is feared. Representing supposedly dangerous terra incognitae in map form as an extension of familiar territory may well have served to lessen fear of the peripheral world' (p.53)..

The crisis center: a device for maximizing appropriate reflexes

We can now come to reflect about the meaning of a device such as a crisis center to manage crises and the meanings behind making such a strong distinction between 'the ground' and the 'crisis center'. It seems to us that similarly to what Lewis states about early cartography, crisis centers have developed as devices to 'see' without 'being immersed', to 'achieve prospect', to maintain a state of alertness, to 'manage' without being emotionally 'overwhelmed' and to 'generate appropriate responses'. Scollon and Scollon (2002) point out that:

'Both in planning and in preparing we look to the future, but in planning we seek to restrict the future, in preparing we seek to make ourselves ready. In planning we express our belief in our reason and our ability to control outcomes, people, technology. In preparing, we express our belief in our adaptability, our responsiveness, our willingness to accept what is.'

A crisis center thus seems to be a device to put individual in a situation of preparedness, to create the right context where appropriate reflexes and solutions will be able to emerge. As a device it allows:

- 1) *categorization*: In the very first moments of a crisis, it is usually difficult to determine whether a situation qualifies as a crisis or not. Most of the time the situation is unclear. What might appear dangerous may turn out to be trivial or vice-versa. The very fact of categorizing an event as a crisis is probably the first step in reclaiming mastery over the

- situation. Categorizing events as a crisis allows reframing the situation in a way that explains why one cannot think, foresee or find easy solutions regarding its development. From the moment that a frontal position is taken (as opposed to an immersive position), the chaos that prevailed becomes something that needs to be managed, not just a state of affairs than cannot be made sense of or acted upon.
- 2) *dis-involvement and dissociation*. The distinction crisis center/on the ground allows moreover the passage from a relation 'subject/subject' (on the ground, it is my fellow men and women with whose situation I empathize who are caught in the crisis) to a relation 'subject/object' (at the crisis center, I become able to abstract from the pain and to objectify the situation). It is not anymore subjects I am interacting with but a situation I am dealing with and that needs to be managed. Hence the vocabulary of management which is connected with work at the crisis center (and not with work on the ground), with its associated meanings of rationality and physical and mental distances from emotions.
 - 3) *de-sensitization*: In its passage from the ground to the crisis center through technological devices, experience is 'desensitize', transformed into facts, re-coded and information thus constructed can in turn serve as a basis to inform rational action. These practices of 'dis-involvement' and 'de-sensitization' contribute to 'objectifying/impersonalizing' (Iedema and Wodak 1999: 10-11) information from the ground. The isolation of the crisis center allows to act and think away from the sound, smell and fury of the crisis epicenter. This does not mean however that the task of management is not prone to its own stress as we have seen.
 - 4) *centralization*: A crisis center is also a point of convergence of information coming from various group, the terminal screen where the trajectories of many sensorial input register.
 - 5) *re-coding*: at the crisis center, the world taken for granted is discarded. There needs to be a different reading of reality than the one people have on the ground. Staff at the crisis center needs to identify whether things are what they appear to be. This requires creating a mental space where other scenarios than the obvious ones can be entertained and other solutions be invented. You need to be able to re-interpret facts and data: a lot of smoke may seem dramatic but the problem be trivial in reality, whether a smaller information (a smell, the direction and force of the wind) may on the other hand 'mean' a major crisis is on its way. Little by little, staff at the crisis center organize the picture, construct it, reconstruct it, sometimes very differently than the manner in which facts were presented from the ground. Pieces of nformation (and not perception anymore) become elements that are used or not, that I hierarchies in multiple ways until I find the right composition. Once the picture is formed (the representation), the crisis is usually under control as you know what to do. The 'wild and the random' have been tamed.

The distinction between 'the ground' and 'the crisis center' as it was constructed in the discourse of the interviewee is in many ways reminiscent of a more archetypal distinction in Western culture: the distinction between body and mind. To conclude, we might wonder: what would open up if instead of this very western view, crisis management redefined itself on another basis than the Cartesian distinction?

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