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Paper for Sub-theme 32: "Risk, Ethics & Practical Wisdom in Project Management"

# "*Just institutions*, a Ricoeurian model to construct ethical organizations"

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## 1. Introduction

As Meredith and Mantel write, "Businesses regularly use project management to accomplish unique outcomes with limited resources under critical time constraints" (2012, p.vii) and more and more frequently, for "internal" (i.e. related to organizational activities and processes) as well as "external" (for instance, building a new airport) tasks. Risk management systems are no exception to this overall dynamic.

Under their many differences, projects share what the authors call a "triple constraint", namely specified deliverables (or scope), time (or schedule) and cost. Traditionally, organizational risk management systems set safety-related objectives such as a limited number of accidents per year while remaining within a set budget. Achieving this objective may rely on such actions as buying new individual protection equipment or ensuring that material is properly maintained. It usually also implies the enforcement of a system of rules and procedures that determines how to act, and monitors whether an action is compliant, imposing a priori and a posteriori control of action. In terms of project management, this has given birth to analysis of errors and incidents using an "organizational factors" perspective and to organizational learning loops (cf. for instance Cooke, Rohleder, 2006; Desmorat et al., 2013), in an attempt

to evaluate the efficiency of these rules and procedures, possibly leading to new rules and procedures aimed at compensating the shortcomings of existing ones. As a consequence risk management systems (and associated projects) regularly gain in sophistication, complexity and rigidity.

Yet, it is now broadly documented that the complexity of the environment is such, that situations are always unpredictable and unique (cf. for instance Hollnagel et al., 2006), rendering predesigned rules insufficient to successfully preserve safety. This is acknowledged for instance by Grote (2014), according to whom organisations must reach a balance between stability (i.e. established rules and procedures) and flexibility (i.e. ability to develop ad hoc solutions when situations require so) to effectively preserve safety. At the micro level of individuals, this is consistent with Hollnagel's "Safety-II" concept (Hollnagel, 2014). There is therefore a growing consensus on the idea that it is in situations, through individual, ad hoc action, that risk is managed and safety preserved. Instead of additional sophistication, this seems to call for a simplification of safety-related actions, at the organizational as well as the individual level.

In this article we aim to demonstrate that it is not only individual ad hoc action that is necessary to preserve safety, but *motivated* individual ad hoc action, and that the possibility to express such motivation through action partly depends on the organizational environment. To do so we build on the work of Paul Ricoeur, a contemporary French philosopher. We use his concept of "practical reason" (Ricoeur, 1986 (1991)), which is the practical tool individuals use to decide on courses of actions that are simultaneously strategic and ethical. Ricoeur defines ethics as "a good life, with and for others, within just institutions" (Ricoeur, 1992). Practical reason is the tangible expression of a broader ontological and philosophical approach of human identity that may be termed "practical humanity". All human beings share practical reason and practical humanity, but it is only the "just institution" that allows their full expression. Reflexivity, which is necessary to evaluate the quality of one's actions and whether it may be deemed "ethical", is central to practical humanity, at the individual as well as institutional level.

"Practical reason" as a theory of action; "practical humanity" as a theory of identity; "just institution" as a theory of collective action and identity; those constitute the three pillars on which we argue it is possible to build an approach of the preservation of

safety in organizations, distinct from the traditional, rational one. Such a shift would obviously imply a number of consequences for project management in general, and the way project managers take risk into account, be it central or peripheral to their own project. In particular, it could lead to conceptualize project management could as a practice, in the strongest sense of the word. The contemporary philosopher Alastair MacIntyre defines a practice as "any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended" (MacIntyre, 2007, p.187). This definition of practice, and the notion of "standards of excellence" it introduces, will be useful for what follows. More broadly, we will consider that any working situation answering to the triple scope / schedule / cost constraint may be considered as a project managed, even if it is not labelled as such.

In the rest of this introduction we will quickly outline the main components of our Ricoeurian framework and the reasons why we believe they offer a heuristic to conceptualize safety in organizations. It will pave the way for the rest of our article, where we will describe the resonances we found between this framework and data gathered in a large gas distribution company.

### *1.1. "Practical reason", reason "irreducible to scientific-technical rationality"*

According to Ricoeur, rationality is only one of the many forms that reason can take; another one is practical reason, "a concept which would deserve to be called "reason" all the while maintaining characteristics irreducible to scientific-technical rationality"[1] (Ricœur, 1986, p.263).

The main characteristics of Ricoeur's practical reason are that: it stems from individual desires, and therefore free will; these desires are "reasonable", i.e. understood by others as possible motivators for action, meaning that they are made explicit to others who can confirm such reasonableness. It is strategic, i.e. it

[1] Our translation.

articulates a means to an end, and leads to the development of complex reasoning. This triggers teleological causation, which is particularly useful in contexts where the environment is too complex, the information load too heavy, and things moving too fast for people to take truly informed, “rational” decisions; this is similar to the process underlying Karl Weick’s “enactment” theory (Weick, 1995). Finally, practical reason is oriented towards an ethical aim. As such it offers an opportunity to reassert what safety is ultimately about, i.e. preserving oneself and others from harm potentially caused by industrial activities.

To sum up, anchored in individual freewill, practical actions are motivated and autonomous, favouring individual implication in action. This differs from the heteronomous logic behind safety management systems, with its adverse effects on engagement. Furthermore, one’s desire for an action has to be made explicit to others, so that they can confirm reasonableness; the process strengthens redundancy and relevance of the action chosen and proves helpful in a context where complexity and pressure usually induced by situations where safety is at stake make it difficult to determine the right course of action. Others are also interiorised in the form of “alterity” which is necessary for individuals to reflexively analyse their actions; central to self-evaluation and to build an ethical life, reflexivity is also key to ensure individual and collective learning and progress in the ability to face difficult situations and preserve safety. Practical reason is therefore confirmed as heuristic to shed light on safety matters, and even more so considering that it is only one aspect of a broader “practical humanity”.

### *1.2. Ricoeur’s “practical humanity”, a philosophy of “being-with”*

In a nutshell, practical humanity refers to the set of sentiments and actions that allows a person to achieve an ethical life.

Sentiments refer in particular to the desire and motivation to reach an ethical aim; to “self-respect” (i.e. reflexive evaluation of the quality of an action leading to self-respect) and “self-esteem” (i.e. reflexive evaluation of whether an action reaches to an ethical aim, leading to self-esteem); to “respect for others” (based on an evaluation of the quality of their actions) and “solicitude” towards them (i.e. consideration of others as sharing a humanity similar to one’s own, leading to the

willingness to protect others from harm). Anchored in deontology, self-respect and respect for others are developed through a reflexive evaluation of the quality of an action against “standards of excellence”, a concept inspired from the work of another contemporary philosopher, Alastair MacIntyre (MacIntyre, 2007). According to MacIntyre, “A practice involves standards of excellence and obedience to rules as well as the achievement of goods. To enter into a practice is to accept the authority of those standards and the inadequacy of my own performance as judged by them. It is to subject my own attitudes, choices, preferences and tastes to the standards which currently and partially define the practice” (MacIntyre, 2007, p.190). The concept of “standards of excellence” leads to assert once again the possibility of an autonomous obedience to rule, as well as the relationship between self-respect and the community that sets the standards. It also offers a tangible link between ethical sentiments and actions.

There are four main categories of action that fall within the scope of practical reason. First, “hermeneutic analysis” indicates an act of interpretation. Considered as a specific way of analysing the world, it invites to decipher a meaning that can only be found by relating separate elements to one another in order to make sense of a situation. In addition to offering a specific analytical approach, it is considered by Ricoeur as necessary to access one’s identity, which in turn is an effort to be carried out to become fully human. Second, “Practical reasoning” refers to the ability to develop complex reasoning leading from one’s desire to achieve an ethical aim, to the achievement of this aim. This requires that one articulates all the intermediary motives and actions necessary to achieve it. Third, through an act of “narrative configuration”, an individual gathers one’s diverse experiences into a coherent life tale oriented towards “the good life”, hence building one’s identity as an individual and as a human being. Reflexivity is an essential part of the process, which also requires personal implication in the evaluation – construction – narration of the life tale. Both reflexivity and implication in the construction of one’s own life are beneficial to safety practices and organizations.

Finally, “deliberation” is the process through which “practical wisdom”, the ultimate stage of practical humanity, can be achieved. Deliberation is necessary when the “tragic of action” arises, i.e. when rules are not applicable to a singular situation, either because they contradict one another or because they do not exist. In such

cases, a dialogical confrontation must be carried out in order to determine what principles are at stake until a decision is reached, which must respect the overarching principle of "solicitude" towards others. The deliberation process therefore determines what action is required by genuine solicitude towards others, so that no one is harmed simply because a general, abstract rule has been applied, notwithstanding its tangible consequences. Deliberation is therefore the node where general rules are articulated with singular situations, where morals and ethics meet – and where the ethical aim takes precedence over moral rules.

The articulation of moral with ethics in deliberation and practical wisdom, or universal rule with singular situation, is crucial to safety preservation and organizations in general. Indeed it opens the possibility to build rules that could coexist with situated, ad hoc decision. Through his articulation of morals and ethics and its culmination in solicitude, Ricoeur asserts explicitly the role played by others in individual action and identity. Be it the others that we know, all those we don't know but recognize as sharing our human nature, or under the interiorized form of "alterity" which allows reflexivity, others are present at all stages of Ricoeur's conceptual framework. Therefore it is not surprising that he dedicates part of his work to conceptualizing collective life, which leads him to developing the concept of "just institution", the most appropriate environment to foster practical humanity.

### *1.3. "Just institution", a model to build organizations revolving around ethics*

Defined as "a good life, with and for others, within just institutions" (Ricoeur, 1992), ethical life is the way for individuals to become truly human. Conversely, all human beings, by essence, bear this practical humanity. Yet there are environments that are more or less favourable for it to be expressed. Ricoeur terms "just institution" the ideal-typical environment, constructed in such a way that individuals truly have the liberty to reach for an ethical life.

According to Ricoeur, "protective measures against others' abusive interferences (…) are vain if specific measures are not taken, guaranteeing a minimal capability to act. This capability to be and to act is inseparable from the liberties guaranteed by

political and legal instances"[2]. Through this statement, Ricoeur indicates that the role of institutions is to build the conditions for the people to be able to act freely, in a just environment, rather than to protect subjects against potential harm. He defines the concept of "institution" as the "being-with" structure of a specific, historical and cultural community, built on common customs and not on constraining rules (Ricoeur, 1992). In this perspective, an institution appears as a space allowing power-in-common, rather than domination. This power-in-common is based on two pillars, plurality and dialogue.

According to Ricoeur, it is this willingness to act and to be together that is at the heart of justice, which defines the just institution. To him, justice constitutes another "point of application" for ethics (ibid.). Indeed it looks in two directions, the direction towards the "good", where it extends the aim of the good life to interpersonal and collective relationships, and the direction towards the "legal", thanks to which the legal system can be coherent and assume the right of coercion (ibid.). Justice therefore refers to both the legal system, and to the "sense of justice" (i.e. the "good") it triggers in individuals. This sense of justice results from the balance between the obligations imposed upon the people, and the privileges and opportunities they grant. The concept of "distribution", which refers to the repartition of roles, tasks, benefits, etc. is central to the sense of justice: it is by "receiving part of" and "taking part in" the power-in-common that the subject joins in the institution.

To sum up, anchored in plurality, dialogue, and such notions as "power-in-common" and "sense of justice", the concept of just institutions offers a heuristic to conceptualize organizations that would provide an environment where individuals would be free to act, rather than controlled, indispensable for the community's members to participate and actively engage in their institutional environment. Furthermore, in this perspective the "just institution" and the individual aiming the "good life" aim the same goal, strengthening what they have in common. Finally, asserting the centrality of plurality, dialogue and distribution offers a way to combine equality (as everyone is entitled to a place in the plural community and the dialogical process) with differentiation, implemented through distribution. This is particularly

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[2] Our translation. Original quote: *« la protection contre les interférences abusives d'autrui (...) est vaine si des mesures spécifiques ne sont pas prises qui garantissent une capacité d'agir minimale. Or cette capacité à être et à agir se révèle inséparable des libertés assurées par les instances politiques et juridiques »* (Ricoeur, 2004, p.31)

relevant for organizations where division of work and coordination are standard, the first inducing plurality and differentiation while coordination requires that everyone works in the same direction (cf. for instance Mintzberg, 1982; Heath, Staudenmayer, 2000).

In this introduction, we have briefly tried to provide the main components of Ricoeur's philosophy that we argue could be built on, in order to develop an approach of safety preservation in organizations structured around practical reason and ethics. We will now turn to the methodology that was developed to test this hypothesis, before describing the main results hence obtained and the avenues opened for further research.

## 2. An ad hoc methodology to identify traces of practical humanity in field data

The hypothesis that Ricoeur's philosophy could offer tangible tools to develop a new approach of safety preservation, as well as a heuristic, had to be checked against real-life practices. This was carried out thanks to an industrial partner, a French gas distribution company. We focused on the company's core activity, i.e. operating the gas distribution network[3]. Following an initial 5-week phase of non-participant on-site observation, twenty-one interviews were carried out in order to dig into the way workers experience their work and safety practices, and identify traces of practical humanity.

### *2.1. Gas distribution, a trade that induces safety stakes but requires little expertise*

The research's industrial partner operates and maintains nearly 200,000 km of pipeline. This involves: monitoring the status of the network and carrying out any maintenance operations that are necessary to avoid leaks; connecting new customers (expanding the network, creating connections); disconnecting parts of the network (removing connections, regulators, sections of pipeline); finally, coordinating with other companies whose activities may have an impact on gas installations.

[3] As opposed to such peripheral activities as cartography, call centres dealing with incoming calls signalling a problem with gas, or headquarter activity and support functions.

We decided to focus research on operations, which is both the company's central and oldest activity. It has been subjected to many transformations, from a technical, procedural and cultural perspective. Therefore it seemed a relevant field to try and access the profound level of identity and behaviour that Ricoeur describes. Indeed considering that practical humanity is an essential (in the strongest sense of the word) component of the individual, it should not be impacted by varying techniques or representations, and if traces of practical humanity were to be found it should be the case throughout the diversity of functions and experiences.

What's more the operations department is where workers are confronted with everyday safety preoccupations. Indeed they work in an open environment surrounded by people who may suffer from the consequences of an accident. Similarly, if their intervention on the network is not carried out correctly, it may lead to harmful consequences in the mid or long term, for instance by leaving a small leak on a pipe that could progressively accumulate in a nearby building and possibly, in extreme circumstances, lead to an explosion. Despite major safety stakes, the actual work that has to be carried out requires little technical expertise. Workers carry out such operations as creating or deleting connections, which mostly requires following procedures. An important part of their job is also to carry out maintenance operations, such as checking that a network valve is indeed accessible for manoeuvre in case it is needed, for instance to stop the gas flow from coming in a specific part of the network if there is a leak. Such an act is simultaneously crucial for safety, while requiring hardly any technical skill. This is particularly true for valve checking but, overall, operations now rely more and more on procedures and less and less on technical expertise. The situation raises a challenge in terms of meaning of work, and worker implication.

The gap between the safety stakes and low-expertise work made it particularly interesting to study. Indeed one could assume that all that remains for workers to stay alert on safety issues is their awareness of the potential consequences of their actions on third parties – ultimately, their humanity. Therefore it made sense to try and understand how – if at all – this humanity is expressed, through sentiments, ideas and actions, to preserve safety.

*2.2. Individual interviews, an opportunity to move beyond collective representations, into personal experience*

To carry out our research project, a phase of non-participant on-site observation was first carried out, on three different sites. This phase was crucial to develop an understanding of gas distribution as a technical and organizational activity, the way it is carried out, impediments the teams face and the way they are dealt with. Yet it was insufficient to understand the way workers experience their work, their relationship with safety, and possibly express their practical humanity.

Twenty-one interviews were therefore carried out. The group included twelve “operators”, i.e. workers who carry out the actual fieldwork; five “chief of operations”, who are in charge of ensuring that operations do not impact the rest of the network and are in line with procedures; four “team managers” and “preparers”, who respectively manage the team of operators from a human resource perspective (affectations, holidays, trainings, etc.) and prepare the fieldwork (technique chosen, procedures, administrative work, etc.). This distribution reflects the way teams are structured in real life.

Interviews were semi-structured, carried out individually, and revolved around workers’ representations of their work, the organisation, their individual and collective contribution to safety. An important part of the interviews was dedicated to asking them to reflect on past experiences that had left a mark on them, where they thought they had “acted well” or on the contrary, where they thought they had made a mistake.

### *2.3. An ad hoc grid analysis to identify traces of practical humanity*

To analyse the data collected and identify potential traces of practical humanity, a grid analysis was developed, using the main components described by Ricoeur. The below figure (figure 1) is a screenshot showing the way the data was treated:

| | Ethical sentiments | | | Ethical acts | | | | Standards of excellence |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Desires, motivations, motives | Self-respect, Self-esteem | Respect of others, solicitude | Hermeneutic analysis | Practical Team manager asoning | Narrative configuration | Deliberation | |
| Operator 1 | | | | | | | | xx |
| Operator 2 | x | x | x | | | x | | xxxx |
| Operator 3 | xxxxxx | x | xx | | x | xx | | xx |
| Operator 4 | xxxx | | | | | x | | xx |
| Operator 5 | x | | | | | | | xx |
| Operator 6 | x | | | | x | x | | x |
| Operator 7 | x | xxx | | | | xx | | xx |
| Operator 8 | xxx | xx | x | | xx | xx | | xxxx |
| Operator 9 | x | | | | | xx | | xxxx |

**Figure 1.** *Analysis grid developed using Ricoeur's "practical humanity".*

The three main categories composing practical humanity are "Ethical sentiments", "Ethical acts" and "Standards of Excellence"[4]. Although standards of excellence are not so to speak a sentiment nor an action, the structuring role they play in a practice, in one's relationship with deontology (i.e. "job well done") and ability to reflexively evaluate the quality of one's own actions, make the category relevant to reflect on the way a profession works and on the motivators behind workers practices.

Ethical sentiments were identified as follows: 28 instances of respect for others / solicitude mentioned by 14 interviewees; 26 desires / motives by 13 interviewees; 12 expressions of self-respect / self-esteem mentioned by 9 interviewees; amounting to a total of 66 instances.

Ethical acts were identified as follows: 24 instances of hermeneutic analysis by 15 interviewees; 10 instances of practical reasoning by 6 interviewees; 6 instances of narrative configuration by 5 interviews; 6 instances of deliberation by 4 interviewees; amounting to a total of 46 instances.

The fact that respect for others and solicitude are so well represented in the discourse of interviewees leads to think that a form of ethics, understood as "the good life for oneself *and with others* in just institutions", is present already in their work and safety practices. Similarly, the number of instances expressing a desire and motivation to "do the job well" shows that interviewees find internal resources to remain somewhat engaged in their work. The fact that these internal resources are

[4] For a detailed component of what each category comprises, cf. introduction.

not reflected in feelings of self-respect and self-esteem may come as a surprise, and be related with the relative absence of narrative configuration, leading to think that interviewees do not take the time to reflexively reflect on their own practices and integrate them in a broader narrative on their professional practice and life. It seems faire to interpret the high number of instances for the “hermeneutic analysis” category as a sign that interviewees are aware of the complexity of their environment and the necessity to interpret situations to make the best possible decision, rather than simply obey rules and procedures, without questioning their adequacy with the situation. It contrasts with the relative absence of testimonies of practical reasoning and deliberation, which may be expected as the natural consequence of situated hermeneutic analysis. It is also at odds with the broad documentation provided by Safety Sciences that tradeoffs are usually necessary to carry out the work while preserving safety (cf. for instance Marais, Dulac & Leveson, 2004; Hollnagel, Woods, Leveson, 2006; Hayes, 2013).

Finally, let’s note that the sole “Standards of excellence” category gathers 50 instances, mentioned by 15 interviewees. This both attests to an existing “ideal” of the profession, and needs to be related with the low number of expressions of self-esteem and narrative configuration, which may be interpreted as a difficulty to relate the ideal model of work with actual, experienced practices, possibly another consequence of the organizational environment.

To sum up[5], ethical sentiments are more present in the discourse of interviewees than ethical acts. This is in line with Ricoeur’s theory of just institution, according to which the environment is more or less favourable to practical humanity. Indeed it seems fair to interpret the results as an indication that practical humanity is indeed present in interviewees, but that the environment that frames their action either doesn’t favour this type of action, or even prevents it.

[5] For more details on the data analysis and results, cf. Blazsin, 2014.

## 3. Three main results open avenues to build organizations inspired from Ricoeur's "just institution" and "practical humanity"

The ideas stemming from our research should likely be considered as opened doors, confirming the relevance of Ricoeur's philosophy to conceptualize safety preservation and organizations, and opening avenues for further research, rather than as finite results. This is consistent with our research question, which asked whether Ricoeur's practical humanity could offer grounds to conceptualize and build a new approach of safety in organizations. Based on our data analysis, three main avenues appear. Using Ricoeur's metaphor of "action as text", the first one proposes to structure managerial relations around an author – reader relationship, as an alternative to the traditional hierarchical perspective. Second, we argue that personal engagement in professional practices and lives could be strengthened if individuals were in a position to develop and express their own narratives and generally, to express themselves freely, which would also contribute to deliberation and practical wisdom.

### *3.1. The author – reader relationship, a horizontal, collaborative model of managerial relations*

According to Paul Ricoeur, actions are similar to texts. This assertion, central to his broader literary outlook on human identity, offers an opportunity to analyse individual and collective action under an angle other than rationality. Subsequently, it opens new possibilities with regards to the way such actions are structured in organizations. After quickly describing Ricoeur's metaphor of action as text, we will show how it resonates with situations encountered in the field opened by our industrial partner, and outline the consequences for project management and organizations.

#### 3.1.1. "Action as text", a heuristic metaphor

According to Ricoeur, human action holds an intermediary status, blending causality (i.e. external factors determining a course of action) and motivation. The notion of "desire", which designates simultaneously "a strength that pushes forward, that moves" and "reason for acting", expresses the ambivalence of human action. It is also desire which places human action simultaneously on two different plans, the plan of rationality and that of discursivity. According to Ricoeur, reasonable action is

therefore essentially dual, bringing together sense and desire, requiring explanation as well as interpretation. It is the fact that motives underlying an action are desired, and need to be expressed and interpreted in order to be deemed reasonable, which places action on the plan of discursivity. Action therefore requires discourse in order to be considered as reasonable and ultimately, ethical.

Conversely, actions can be compared to texts, in the sense that once they are achieved, they are out in the world, available for interpretation by third parties who may not share the frame of "reference" for the action, i.e. the situation from which it stems. As action is primarily a way to bring about a change in the world, it leaves a trace. This "mark" inscribes the action in the world, making it an "archive" of the initial act. Therefore, in addition to the intention, an action can also be evaluated against the "persisting configurations" that it brought about. Yet, the world is so complex that actions may trigger "long lines" of unintended consequences. They are sometimes so distant from the original action that they could not have been foreseen by their author, who therefore cannot be held accountable.

Interpreting an action, considered as a tangible change brought to the world, therefore differs from evaluating the subject's intention when he decided upon a specific course of action, with the knowledge that was at his disposal at the time. In the context of safety issues, evaluation of action is known to be subject to hindsight bias[6]. The differentiation of intention and action is therefore a strong point to assert, both for the actor and the interpreter. Indeed the actor is thus reminded of the necessity to imagine as many potential consequences as possible for his action, rather than focus solely on the situation; this is consistent with Ricoeur's teleological perspective on action and the need to focus on the aim of an action before determining the means to achieve it. On the other hand, it also asserts the necessity for the interpreter to bear in mind that the world from where he interprets an action differs from the world where it was conceived; and therefore, that hermeneutically analysing the world resulting from an action does not give access to the actor's intentions and identity.

[6] Hindsight bias refers to the tendency to overestimate the probability, or "obviousness", of a specific course of event, after the event has occurred.

### 3.1.2. The possibility of a horizontal and collaborative managerial relation

In the context of contemporary organizations and safety preservation, this leads to asserting the importance of sharing a world, for two people to be able to interpret an action in a similar manner. Yet, it is usually considered that different social worlds coexist in organizations, depending on the social (technical, hierarchical) group one belongs to, leading individuals to enact differing realities (cf. for instance Burr, 2003; Schein, 2004; Blazsin, Guldenmund, 2015). By considering the actor as the *author* of one's action, and the interpreter as *reader*, Ricoeur's literary metaphor offers a tangible way to bring them together, and provides ground for a type of managerial relation distinct from the traditional, hierarchical one.

This idea stems from a situation that is currently typical in the industrial partner's organization. In emergency situations, for instance when a gas leak needs to be stopped, a field worker is sent on site to operate the decisions made by his supervisor, who is located at his desk, where the computer tools, maps, etc. that help develop a clear vision of the situation are available. Therefore in such cases knowledge of the situation is divided between two people, as is the responsibility for the action taken. Indeed the individual on site can see, literally, what is going on, describes it to his supervisor so as to help him make a decision, and ultimately carries out the action. On the other hand, the supervisor needs to interpret the situation based on the description provided to him by the person on site, combined with information provided by the tools available, to make a decision which will be obeyed by his supervisee. Therefore one describes, the other interprets; one is responsible for doing, the other for deciding.

The current situational and hierarchical configuration leads to two main difficulties. First, there is no attempt at constructing a shared world, but an attempt to provide one of the parties, the manager, with as much information as possible so that he can make his decision. Second, the decision thus made is imposed on the field worker, who may or may not consider it appropriate, leading to heteronomous action – which the subject is still responsible for, should something go wrong, leading to a situation where he is simultaneously irresponsible (in terms of decision-making) and responsible (for the consequences of his action). In the situation described the subjects are located in two different places, but the process is similar to any decision imposed through hierarchical authority.

We suggest that a way to solve the issue would be to consider the two subjects as author and reader of a situation, rather than as supervisee and manager. Indeed the construction of a situation where a specific action is required may be considered as a broad and complex action. Ricoeur's metaphor can therefore be transferred to entire situations, which can in turn be considered as texts. In our perspective, the emergency situation mentioned above could be treated as a text, and the two subjects taking part in it, as respectively author and interpreter. Indeed by describing a situation he is currently witnessing, i.e. where the gas is leaking, how strongly, what seems to be the cause, the surroundings, etc., he may be considered as writing the text of a situation that he makes available for someone else to read. The reader then has the possibility to read the text which has be submitted to him, interpret it using his own knowledge and tools, and submit his interpretation to the author, who is thus enabled to refine his text if need be. Ultimately, the process may lead to a shared interpretation of the text and therefore, to an agreement on the action which has to be taken. As he has contributed to conceiving it and recognizes it is the best course of action, the supervisee can carry out the action autonomously, while the supervisor, who may retain the legal responsibility for the decision, is assured that it is indeed adequate to deal with the actual situation.

### 3.1.3. Organizational implications of the author – reader managerial model

This perspective solves the issue of responsibility pointed out above, where a subject could find oneself in a situation where he would feel responsible for an action carried out heteronomously. By authorizing autonomous action it favours practical reason, of which autonomy is a prerequisite. It also seems fair to consider that by clarifying the part played by each party, asserting their equal importance, and allowing autonomy, it favours individual engagement in the successful resolution of risky situations and more broadly, in their work. It also triggers redundancy and therefore, strengthens the relevance of the action taken.

Although the process does not change dramatically, the metaphor invites to a radical shift in the posture, where two parties of a situation both play a different, but essential part in a process where they are engaged. Therefore it leads to installing a horizontal, collaborative relationship between the two parties, instead of the vertical,

hierarchical one, currently in place in organizations. This is especially relevant for project management in matrix organization structures, where a number of people need to work together without necessarily being hierarchically related. In such cases the project manager cannot even rely on formal authority to make people work on the project. The ability to create a relationship where others will be motivated and willing to indeed carry out the work then becomes crucial. By allowing

It also implies that each party contributes to the decision-making process equally, and differently. Consequently it favours equality and differentiation within the organization, two features that play a part in the existence of a “just institution”. Constructing managerial relations around an author-reader relationship working together on the text of a situation could therefore be one avenue to build organizations closer to the model. Furthermore, equality is necessary for people to express themselves freely, especially if it leads to contradict one’s supervisor, while differentiation allows for different opinions to coexist. As such they favour dialogue, i.e. a conversation that allows discordant standpoints to be expressed and confronted. According to Ricoeur, dialogue is necessary to understand others, as well as one through them, consistently with his hermeneutic perspective on identity. Dialogue is also an internal process, through which the subject may evaluate the ethical dimension of his motivations and action, as well as the quality of his actions. Internal dialogue is therefore the central practice allowing reflexivity. Finally, deliberation leading to practical wisdom rests on a dialogical process. Consequently, it seems fair to consider that by favouring dialogue, the author-reader model of managerial relationship ultimately favours practical wisdom.

To conclude, developing such a model of managerial relations, at odds with the current hierarchical practices, could be a first step to build organizations closer to the model of the just institution. Conversely, the many consequences such a change would imply confirm the impact of the organizational environment on the expression of practical humanity. Ricoeur’s literary analysis of individual and collective action could therefore give birth to an alternative form of organization, which would also require that individuals can express themselves freely in order to aim an ethical life and achieve practical wisdom.

### *3.2. Renewing engagement thanks to individual narratives and dialogue*

According to Ricoeur, "Experience can be told, it demands to be told. Putting it in words is not changing it into something else, but, articulating it and developing it, allowing it to become itself"[7]. In Ricoeur's perspective, putting one's experiences into words plays a crucial part in one's relation to action, and in one's identity. Yet in our data, speech is hardly individualised, leading to wonder how interviewees can make sense of their experiences and relate these to their professional identity. In this section we first outline how Ricoeur relates individual speech and narratives to identity. We then describe our findings, based on an analysis of the data gathered during individual interviews, and interpret their implications for individual identity and deliberation.

#### 3.2.1 Meaning and action intertwined to build identities oriented towards an ethical life

According to Ricoeur, a "hermeneutic effort" is necessary to access one's identity and become fully human. This means that one has to make the effort to interpret the world and the meaning of one's actions in this world, i.e. how these actions make sense in the cultural context in which they take place. Ultimately, this allows one to build the broader narrative in which actions take their full meaning, and which, conversely, they give substance to.

By showing that each specific action makes sense with regards to the whole tale, the person builds his/her identity, who s/he is under the diversity and heterogeneity of actions and experiences one goes through all along life. Ricoeur names this process "narrative configuration" and defines it as "composing one story with multiple elements that are related by relations of causality, motivation (rational or emotional), or contingency. A story leads an action from an initial state to a terminal state trough transformations"[8]. It articulates meaning and action into one same life tale and

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[7] Our translation. Original quote: *"L'expérience peut être dite, elle demande à être dite. La porter au langage, ce n'est pas la changer en autre chose, mais, en l'articulant et en la développant, la faire devenir elle-même"* (Ricoeur, 1986, p.61).

[8] Our translation. Original quote: *l'acte de configuration narrative "consiste à composer une histoire une avec les elements multiples qu'elle relie par des liens de causalité, de motivation (rationnelle ou émotionnelle), ou de contingence. Une histoire conduit une action d'un état initial à un état terminal à travers des transformations"* (Ricoeur, 2013, p. 380).

project, which is to be oriented towards the ultimate human goal, ethical life, and which allows the individual to access his/her identity.

Ricoeur calls the result "narrative identity", stories being according to him the only way to articulate the two dimensions that compose human identity. Narrative identity articulates the two levels of identity, "identity-idem" and "identity-ipse". Identity-idem is what remains identical throughout life, notwithstanding the particular experiences one goes through, such as one's name. Identity-ipse designates the dynamic dimension of identity, which allows one to remain the same despite the different states he experiences throughout time. Identity-ipse is the reflexive dimension of identity, where the subject makes sense of his own history and is able to read it: according to Ricoeur, "a subject recognizes himself in the story he tells himself about himself"[9]. As the area where one reflexively evaluates the quality and ethical dimension of one's actions, identity-ipse is where one's attempt to live a "good", ethical, life, unfolds.

By articulating idem and ipse, Ricoeur conceptualizes identity simultaneously as a stable state and as a dynamic process, a perspective that seems heuristic to better understand professional identities. According to Ricoeur, "promise kept" and "character" are the two features that best represent the permanence of identity over time. Keeping the promise one has made at a time when he was experiencing a state different from the one he finds himself in when keeping the promise, exemplifies the interplay between identity-idem (stability) and identity-ipse (dynamic). On the other hand, character refers to traits acquired through life, "the set of durable dispositions by which a person is recognized"[10]. Made of habits that both sediment and evolve under the influence of practices, dispositions are stable, without being unchangeable. This perspective leads to assert once again the importance of reflexivity for practices, and is particularly relevant for project management practices. Indeed each new project requires that existing practices are confronted to its new symbolic and practical requirements, in order to determine what remains relevant and what is no longer so. Reflexivity and the notion of disposition thus help understand how habits

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[9] Our translation. Original quote: *"un sujet se reconnaît dans l'histoire qu'il se raconte à lui-même, sur lui-même"* (Ricoeur, 1985, p.445).
[10] Our translation. Original quote: "l'ensemble des dispositions durables *à quoi* on reconnaît une personne" (Ricoeur, 1990, p.146).

and innovation can be articulated to produce bespoke work and project management practices.

Furthermore, dispositions are made partly of “acquired identifications”, i.e. traits developed based on an identification with values, models, etc. offered by a specific community. As dispositions partly reflect a community’s values and identity, which determine what a “good life” and associated standards of excellence refer to, and that they are expressed through one’s actions, it is fair to consider that dispositions help an individual carry out ethical actions and reach a good life. Indeed Ricoeur considers that they are part of the features from which practical reason can spring. As such, dispositions articulate the individual and collective dimension of action, and assert the social dimension of ethics, complementing its ontological essence. Once again, Ricoeur emphasizes the role played by the collective environment in the way individuals may or may not aim ethics and therefore, ultimately, that of the just institution.

Therefore Ricoeur’s theory of identity helps analyse how habits (“sedimentation”) coexist with innovation, and the role played by reflexivity in their coexistence. It also articulates the individual and collective dimensions of action through the notions of disposition, promise kept, and narrative identity. By requiring that one involves oneself in the process of evaluation – construction – narration of one’s life, the theory of narrative identity requires reflexivity as well as implication. As reflexivity favours the relevance (on the moment) and enhancement (following evaluation) of action, it is useful to safety preservation. Increased implication is also beneficial, given the issue of disengagement identified in many professional contexts. This is why we focused part of our research on narrative configurations, and aimed to analyse their presence in our data.

### 3.2.2. Individual narratives, a possible way to renew implication in work and organizations

In this section we focus on the data gathered with field workers, leaving aside the two other populations interviewed, i.e. chiefs of operations and team managers / preparers. Indeed the instances identified were very few in those two groups, which

could have led to focus on individual stories, coming in the way of generalization. On the contrary, analysis of the data gathered with field workers seems to open avenues for further research.

9 field workers mention 15 instances of narrative configuration. The striking element when looking at those in detail is they are instances of narrative configuration in the technical sense of the word, i.e. attempts at making sense of experiences in a broader professional narrative leading from an initial state to a terminal state, but they seem hardly individualised. Typically they follow a before / after pattern, separated by an event that has transformed the interviewee's awareness to risk. Occasionally (3 instances), the before / after pattern refers to the way employees were trained "before" a number of organizational changes occurred in the company, as opposed to those who have been trained "after", supposedly in a less thorough manner.

The before / after structure, applied first to risk awareness, second to training and organizational change, is therefore the only structure used by interviewees to construct the narratives around significant events experienced while carrying out their professional activities[11]. This should be related to the fact that while all field workers, without exception, mention one to four standards of excellence in their interviews, leading to a total of 30 instances, only six field workers express self-esteem (9 instances in total). It seems fair to infer that although field workers develop a rather precise idea of what it is that makes a "good" professional in their field, only few of them relate their actual work practices to this ideal. This is consistent with the lack of truly individualised narrative configurations, the very place where singular experiences should be reflected upon and integrated in the broader narrative showing how the subject aims a good life through his actions. Similarly, it appears that the motivations provided by interviewees are very similar to one another, amounting to three main items: "being independent", "keeping busy" and "avoid a catastrophe", hardly positive and implicating motivations.

Analysing narrative configuration instances and putting them in perspective with other aspects of practical humanity researched in our data therefore leads to think

[11] N.B: one of the questions asked as part of the interview process was to recount events, positive and negative, which could have been significant in the experience of interviewees.

that interviewees project themselves in stereotypical[12] roles, rather than construct individual identities. Although Ricoeur does not call up to Goffman, we believe the concept of "role" (Goffman, 1990 (1959)) to be heuristic to analyse our data. It refers to the enactment of situations by individuals who, through their behaviour (i.e. the role they enact), define the situation and the behaviour that is expected of other participants. Roles can be recognized and used by others because they are socially constructed, recognizable from a set of abstract traits and characteristics that can be appropriated by individuals. Therefore by playing roles, and stereotypical ones, individuals enact what they believe is expected by the community, rather than their own singular experiences of reality. Therefore these experiences cannot be made sense of with a specific narrative through which one's identity could be constructed and made conscious, and which could in turn orient actions towards a broader life tale and project.

Obviously, the analysis we just presented offers an avenue for future research, rather than a result in the classical sense of the word. We show that there is a negative correlation between lack of narrative configurations, lack of self-esteem and disconnection with standards of excellence and stereotypical role incarnation by the interviewees. In our perspective, this confirms the relevance of Ricoeur's theory of narrative identity to address the issue of professional identity and individual implication in work. As, according to Ricoeur, there is a positive correlation between these features, then it seems fair to hypothesize that allowing individuals to construct individual narratives to make sense of their experiences and build their identity could favour self-esteem, motivation and overall implication in one's work. This leads us once again to the role played by the just institution.

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[12] We use "stereotypical" in the sense defined by Ruth Amossy, according to whom a stereotype is a "mental operation that consists of relating what is singular to a general category endowed with fixed attributes". It is "the equivalent of a standardised object in the cultural realm (…) Its contours and contents are not defined clearly". Our translation.
Original quote: *le stereotype est un « acte mental qui consiste à ramener le singulier à une catégorie générale dotée d'attributs fixes ». Il constitue « l'équivalent de l'objet standardisé dans le domaine culturel. (...) Ses contours et ses contenus ne sont pas déterminés clairement »* (Amossy, 1991, pp. 9 et 14).

### 3.2.3. Free speech, a requirement for deliberation and practical wisdom

The resonance of narrative identity with data gathered in the field leads to assert the importance of individual speech to build organizations following the model of just institutions. So does the concept of dialogue. First, it is useful to allow contradiction and therefore avoid organizational silence (Wolef Morrison, Miliken, 2000; Bashshur, Oc, 2015), to the benefit of better decision-making. More importantly still, it is central to reflexively evaluate one's actions and motivations, and to carry out the deliberation process that leads to practical wisdom.

Relatively few instances of deliberation were identified in the data (six instances mentioned by four interviewees). One operator, two chiefs of operations and one team manager expressed them. There is one additional mention (which is not part of the count) where a second operator mentions the necessity to confront rules to situations where they cannot be applied and to determine an ad hoc solution, which he says is the responsibility of the chief of operations, therefore disengaging himself from the process and associated responsibility.

The two instances mentioned by the operator focus on the perceived conflict opposing two general principles, one that could be termed "duty" or "job well done", and the other being immediate safety. The two chiefs of operations develop a general discourse on the fact that by definition, rules can't be applied to all specific situations; when they don't apply, the safety of workers takes precedence without question. Finally, the team manager comments on the fact that general rules are subject to different interpretations and that it is necessary to confront them with field situations and tangible goals, such as being able to stop the gas from flowing in case a fire occurs, to interpret these rules in an appropriate manner.

Two main elements emerge from this description of deliberation instances. First, the fact that it is to be found primarily in the discourse of managers leads to thinking that deliberation requires some level of perceived liberty to question and, possibly, bend the rules conceived by the organization. Second, the fact that there are so few instances is astonishing, compared with the abundant documentation provided by the Safety Sciences community (cf. for instance Marais, Dulac & Leveson, 2004; Hollnagel, Woods, Leveson, 2006 ; Hayes, 2013). It is to be related to the fact that when asked about tradeoffs, most interviewees would answer that there are none, as

safety primes in any case. Yet, if a rule is applied without ever being confronted to its singular applications and questioned, they no longer make sense and cannot be applied autonomously by individuals. This is made clear by Ricoeur's articulation of moral rules and ethical aim, and its invitation to develop reflexive evaluations of practices. Therefore it seems necessary to allow discordant voices to be expressed and question rules and situations, in order to allow deliberation and practical wisdom, a possibility that very much depends on the organizational environment.

## 4. Discussion and perspectives

As the research presented here is in the very first stages of development, a number of critics could be voiced, in particular with regards to the relatively small scale of the study. At this stage, our aim was simply to show that Ricoeur's work resonates with actual working situations and experiences, hence justifying further research and the need for refinements. Therefore we did not present results in the traditional meaning of the word. Furthermore, our field of study wasn't dedicated to project management. We believe that our learnings apply, as we have tried to show in the article, especially since as stated in the introduction, project management methods are now used broadly, without necessarily being labelled as such. For instance, a typical working situation such as creating a new connection on the gas distribution network is dealt with by our industrial partner as a project with a scope, a schedule and a budget, offering the possibility to consider that a broad range of situations do fall within the perimeter of project management, even implicitly. In this perspective we believe that project management was present throughout the article.

What we have tried to show is that not only does Ricoeur's practical philosophy shed a new and heuristic light on the preservation of safety by organizations, it also offers a number of tangible avenues to build organizations more favourable to practical humanity.

In particular, a horizontal and collaborative model of managerial relations could be constructed, springing from Ricoeur's metaphor of "actions as texts". His literary perspective on action and identity could be further used, as it invites to offer a broader place to individual speech, particularly under the form of narratives and dialogue. Individual narrative could indeed help people make sense of their

experiences and project themselves dynamically in their professional life. Dialogue is indispensable for people to reflexively evaluate their actions, as well as for the deliberation process through which rules are confronted to singular situations and to one another, leading to practical wisdom.

Building such organizations could create new opportunities for individuals to be engaged in their work and in the life of their organization. Indeed, most of Ricoeur's philosophy applies to the collective as well as the individual levels. This is true in particular for narrative identity and aiming an ethical life. Indeed, just institutions are based primarily on justice, which itself unfolds under two forms, the legal system and the sense of justice. According to Ricoeur, the legal system is the institutional equivalent of morals, while equality, central to the sense of justice, is the counterpart of solicitude (Ricoeur, 1992 (1990)). Therefore organizations following the model of the just institution would favour practical reason both intrinsically, i.e. through their material and symbolic characteristics, but also because they would be follow the same principles guiding individual actions, nurturing trust and ultimately, engagement.

Finally, reflexivity is an indispensable feature of practical humanity, necessary to evaluate both the quality and ethical dimension of one's actions. It is also central to the dialogical process underlying deliberation, which leads to practical wisdom. Ricoeur's philosophy leads to assert the importance of both reflexivity and practical reason to make enlightened decisions, at once thorough and respectful of others through the expression of solicitude. Although the stakes behind reflexivity and solicitude are particularly clear when dealing with the preservation of safety by industrial organizations, we believe they come into play in all sorts of activities and sectors. For instance, the decisions made by bankers to attribute (or not) a loan have very tangible consequences for those who are concerned, as do decisions made in a variety of industries, ranging from pharmaceutical companies to the food industry to the car industry. They can impact final costumers as well as fellow workers. To sum up, we believe that reflexivity, practical wisdom and more broadly, practical humanity, could help reconsider the way safety is preserved in organizations but also more broadly, the way organizations carry out their activities.

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