Falling outside the system: Occupational safety and health inspectors’ experiences of micro-enterprises in Sweden

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ABSTRACT

In this study, 11 Swedish occupational safety and health (OSH) inspectors were interviewed about their views of and experiences interacting with micro-enterprises (1-9 employees). The qualitative content analysis found one theme, “Falling outside the system”, and three subthemes, “The inspector—shaped by specific standards”, “The bureaucrat and the micro-entrepreneur—two separate worlds”, and “System faults and system changes”. According to the inspectors, the Swedish OSH regulatory system, with inspectors on the frontline, neglects the specific needs, circumstances and characteristics of micro-enterprises. Therefore, we suggest revising the OSH regulatory system and following inspection methods and enforcement styles to better address the needs of micro-enterprises.

1. Introduction

Micro and small enterprises are seen as key drivers of economic growth, innovation, employment and social integration (Legg et al., 2015). Approximately half of the European workforce is employed in this sector of working life, and effective occupational safety and health (OSH) management is essential to ensuring both the well-being of workers and the long-term economic survival of these enterprises (European Agency for Safety and Health at Work [EASHW], 2018). Nonetheless, most OSH research, policy and legislation has been and remains focused on larger companies (Legg et al., 2015). Furthermore, small companies have fewer resources to influence stakeholders in developing policies or research in the field (Legg et al., 2015). Statistics and studies show that the safety and health of many workers employed in micro-enterprises is poorly protected and that ensuring good OSH management in these enterprises remains a considerable challenge (EASHW, 2018; Vickers et al., 2005). Thus, European Union directives declare that member states should improve work environment processes and OSH management in micro-enterprises (EASHW, 2016).

Micro-enterprises are businesses with one to nine employees. The number of micro-enterprises has grown over the last decades, and in 2017, micro-enterprises (enterprises with 1 to 9 employees) represented 24 percent of all registered companies in Sweden (Statistics Sweden, 2020). According to Swedish law, micro-enterprises are required to follow OSH legislation, although they are exempt from the full requirements for documentation (AFS, 2001:1). Meanwhile, research shows that the resources and knowledge of micro-enterprises are often limited and that systematic work environment management (SWEM) is therefore prioritized at a lower level (Hasle and Limborg, 2006; Legg et al., 2015; SWEA, 2013). Thus, it is of great relevance to review ways to improve conditions in micro-enterprises to ensure a sustainable work environment.

OSH inspectors are often designated as key actors in the process and improvement of SWEM. The interaction between the OSH inspector and the business owner during an inspection influences the outcome of the inspection (Nielsen, 2016). Research concludes that more knowledge is needed on the interface between inspectors and micro-enterprises to better understand the processes that occur during an inspection (Niskanen, 2015; Niskanen et al., 2014). Furthermore, research should focus on developing enforcement styles, clarifying OSH inspectors’ work descriptions, and specifying the needs of workplaces as well as how these factors interact and affect one another (Niskanen, 2015;
Niskanen et al., 2014). Niskanen (2015) argues that there is a need to develop inspections and enforcement styles at the individual, group, and organizational levels. To contribute to filling this gap in knowledge, the aim of this study is to elucidate OSH inspectors’ views of micro-enterprises and their OSH management. Furthermore, the study aims to describe inspectors’ experiences of inspecting micro-enterprises.

1.1. Occupational safety and health in Micro-enterprises

A body of literature has studied the workplace environment in general and OSH in specific in micro-enterprises, albeit primarily from the enterprise or owner-manager perspective. This literature identified aspects that can be risk factors for a poor work environment or strengths and weaknesses for sustainable SWEM and OSH management in micro-enterprises. For instance, studies show that micro-enterprises experience even greater risks and problems in terms of the physical work environment and organizing SWEM (Bornberger-Dankvardt et al., 2003; Frick et al., 2000; Hasle and Limborg, 2006; Hasle and Relfsund, 2018). There can be several reasons for these increased risks and problems.

Micro-entrepreneurs, the owner-managers of the micro-firm, often experience high demands, numerous and diverse work tasks and long and irregular working hours (Gunnarsson et al., 2007; Hagqvist et al., 2015, 2016; Legg et al., 2015; Stephan and Roesler, 2010). Many micro-entrepreneurs are responsible for many different and varied work tasks and responsibilities, for instance, accounting, invoicing, monitoring employee health, addressing staff shortages, communicating with clients, and ensuring business survival and growth, while simultaneously participating in the operation of the business. In various interview studies, managers of small businesses describe their situation as “always on”; they are always developing the company and must always remain reachable to clients and staff (Hagqvist et al., 2019; Hedlund et al., 2017; Hibbrecht and Lero, 2014). These owner-managers have difficulties balancing their work with their private lives (Hagqvist et al., 2018; Kirkwood and Tootell, 2008) and experience great time strain (Hagqvist et al., 2015). The complex work situation of micro-entrepreneurs might be one reason that the employees of micro-enterprises in specific are exposed to a more hazardous work environment (Legg et al., 2015). Time limits lead to difficulties for micro-entrepreneurs in remaining up-to-date on OSH legislation and regulations and establishing a structured OSH management system (Landstad et al., 2017; Legg et al., 2015; Masi and Cagno, 2015; Vinberg et al., 2017). This strained work situation causes the owner-manager to focus exclusively on his or her core business and neglect OSH issues (Hasle and Limborg, 2006; Hasle and Relfsund, 2018). Moreover, micro-entrepreneurs often have considerable resource constraints and greater financial pressure compared with larger, more established companies (Legg et al., 2015; Vickers et al., 2005). Cost and competitive pressure might also restrain owner-managers to focus resources on and invest in OSH issues (Vickers et al., 2005). Other reasons might be the high incidence of precarious work situations and the high number of migrant workers in micro-enterprises (Lamm et al., 2013).

There is considerable heterogeneity in managers’ views and experiences of OSH issues in small firms (SWEA, 2013; Vickers et al., 2005). Most managers have a positive approach to OSH, but they also criticize regulation as bureaucracy and place part of the responsibility for the work environment on employees (Hasle et al., 2012; Hedlund et al., 2017; Lamm et al., 2013). A number of complex internal (within the business organization) and external (societal) factors negatively or positively affect OSH and SWEM in micro-enterprises (Vickers et al., 2005). In terms of negative aspects, internally, staff shortages, economic conditions and lack of time complicate the implementation of SWEM (Hansen et al., 2016; Hasle and Limborg, 2006; Masi and Cagno, 2015; Park et al., 2017; Vickers et al., 2005). Moreover, poor management skills as well as employee attitudes and behaviours towards OSH (Lamm et al., 2013; Legg et al., 2015) and a relatively low knowledge of legislative requirements (Vickers et al., 2005) are important internal factors. A systematic review of the qualitative literature concludes that in small firms, informal workplace relations can limit workers’ and employers’ apprehension of risk (MacEachen et al., 2016). Externally, regulations and information shortages are perceived as barriers to sustainable OSH management by small and micro-enterprise managers. These concerns are formulated as bureaucracy, stringent legal requirements, and a lack of guidelines and support from regulating authorities (Legg et al., 2015; Masi and Cagno, 2015). The complex contractual conditions in which small firms are often engaged (such as chains of subcontracting) can also complicate OSH responsibilities (MacEachen et al., 2016).

Turning to positive aspects, micro-enterprises can have advantages in relation to larger companies with respect to OSH management. Landstad et al., 2017 conclude that in smaller businesses, the relationship between individuals is close, and such businesses often exhibit high coherency within the working group. A good relationship between the employer and employees contributes to solidarity and feelings of responsibility among the employees that in turn strengthen the micro-entrepreneur’s ability to engage in SWEM (Meggeneder, 2007). Furthermore, short decision paths in micro-enterprises and high levels of job control among business leaders are additional factors that can contribute to improving SWEM (Hansen et al., 2016). Factors that contribute to a sustainable work environment include time and competence as well as motivations and priorities (Gunnarsson et al., 2010).

Several studies suggest that support from a competent network is a key factor for successful SWEM in micro-enterprises. Support can increase motivation for and knowledge about the work environment (Hedlund et al., 2017; Vinberg et al., 2017) and help the owner-manager create a sustainable work environment that fits his/her own context (Niskanen, 2015). This network can consist of for example owner-managers in micro enterprises, board members, employee safety representatives, occupational health services, which would cost the business money, or OSH inspectors (Niskanen, 2015; Niskanen et al., 2014; Vinberg et al., 2017). Focusing on OSH inspectors, research shows that OSH inspectors are key actors in helping micro-entrepreneurs improve SWEM (Niskanen, 2015; Quinlan et al., 2009). However, studies also show that more time is needed to support micro-entrepreneurs in implementing SWEM in their daily work tasks and to help them evaluate what has been done and consequently address shortcomings (Niskanen, 2015).

1.2. Inspecting Micro-enterprises

In the Swedish context, the process of regulatory implementation, which ranges from the input of state objectives to the output of work environments, is described by Bruhn and Frick (2011) as a supervision chain. State objectives are expressed in the Swedish Work Environment Act (Bruhn and Frick, 2011). The Swedish Work Environment Authority (SWEA) is mandated to develop these objectives into mandatory regulations through provisions and inspection methods, and competent and professional staff are tasked with employing appropriate enforcement styles to ensure compliance with the regulations (Bruhn and Frick, 2011). The authors argue that eventual changes in a regulated organization are the result of how the individual factors in the supervision chain are linked and the ability of the SWEA to transfer those links to supervision strategies and inspection methods. This reasoning is strengthened by Niskanen (2015), who argues that to develop inspection and enforcement styles, involvement is needed at the individual, group and organizational levels.

May and Wood (2003) highlight enforcement style as an important tool in inspections. Enforcement style represents the interaction between the inspector and the regulated entity. The authors describe enforcement styles using a two-dimensional model. The first dimension refers to the degree of facilitation, and the second refers to the level of formalism (May and Wood, 2003). Enforcement style can influence
micro-entrepreneurs' knowledge of OSH and SWEM, which can in turn increase compliance. However, if enforcement styles are inconsistent, the risk increases that owner-managers will be less compliant.

Inspecting micro-enterprises can be difficult. For instance, OSH inspectors encounter situations in which micro-enterprises have many employees on short-term contracts, which complicates these inspections (Quinlan et al., 2009) because it limits the opportunities to create good relationships with the employees. Furthermore, temporary employees often exhibit more risk behaviours and lack basic knowledge of OSH (Park et al., 2017). Additionally, inspectors encounter shortcomings in the psychosocial work environment that are difficult to identify (Johnstone et al., 2011). Niskanen et al. (2014) conclude that OSH inspectors should devote more time to following up with micro-enterprises regarding continuing SWEM.

OSH inspectors seem to experience difficulty when attempting to balance qualitative and quantitative goals and attain high quality standards in the inspections they conduct (Niskanen, 2015). According to past interview studies, inspectors experience that challenges and difficulties in inspections often lead to a worse work environment (Johnstone et al., 2011; Park et al., 2017; Quinlan et al., 2009), possibly because they have not managed to create a good relationship with the owner-manager (Quinlan et al., 2009). Walters et al. (2011) argue that enforcement prohibitions may have opposite effects, as they might trigger regulatory resistance among business owners, including those who have an interest in OSH improvements.

In summary, OSH inspectors are important in developing SWEM in micro-enterprises. Meanwhile, inspecting micro-enterprises can be complex and difficult. Studies have explored regulatory processes in micro-enterprises and the outcome of these processes primarily from an enterprise perspective. Far less attention has been paid to OSH inspectors' experiences of micro-enterprise inspections (Johansson, 2006), which is the purpose of this study.

2. Method

Since little is known about OSH inspectors' views and experiences of micro-enterprises, this study adopted an exploratory qualitative design. The overall goal of the interviews was to better understand how inspectors work and interact with micro-enterprises (their enforcement styles) and how they view the regulating context.

2.1. Participants

In total, 11 OSH inspectors were interviewed. We first approached local managers of the SWEA, who conveyed our request to the regional manager. The managers of all the regions made a joint decision to allow us to conduct 11 interviews. The local managers then approached OSH inspectors and asked them to participate. Some local managers asked the inspectors to contact us, while others gave us the names of inspectors to contact.

The inspectors we interviewed were from moderately to sparsely populated areas in Sweden. All the participants stated that they had experience conducting inspections of micro-enterprises; however, the number of inspections performed per year in the group of interest varied. Of the 11 inspectors, three had worked as an inspector for two years, one had worked for six years, and the other seven had worked between 12 and 18 years. Some differences in experience with regard to length of employment were identified within the group and are highlighted in the findings. The individuals varied in terms of age, gender and educational background; however, all had a university degree. When they started working as an inspector, they received six months of training.

2.2. Data collection

Individual face-to-face interviews were performed at the inspectors' workplace or by phone based on the individual's preference. The interviews lasted between 22 and 52 min. The interviews were conducted by MH, SG and EH. All interviews were tape recorded and transcribed verbatim by a professional transcriptionist.

A semistructured, open-ended interview guide was used to allow the inspectors to talk about their experiences with micro-enterprises. Initially, the interviewees were asked about their background and practical experience conducting inspections of micro-enterprises.

2.3. Data analysis

The collected data material were analysed using qualitative content analysis as described by Graneheim and Lundman (2004) and later modified by Graneheim et al. (2017). In the first step, EH led the analysis of the material and led ongoing discussions with the co-authors (MH, SG, SV and BJL). The material was condensed and coded, and the codes were compared to identify similarities and disparities and then clustered into categories. At this stage, the main author and co-authors systematically discussed the codes and categories until consensus was reached. Further abstraction was attained in the process, and subthemes were created. In the final analytical discussion, one unifying theme was identified. Although the process is presented as linear, it involved constant abductive movements back and forth to maintain the inspecto-voices in the findings (Graneheim et al., 2017; Graneheim and Lundman, 2004). The NVivo (7.0) qualitative data analysis package was utilized to analyse the material.

2.4. Ethical considerations

The Regional Ethical Committee reviewed the study and approved the methodological design of the project [Dnr. 2018/388-31/5]. All participants were thoroughly informed that they could resign participation at any point during or after the interview. The informants gave written consent to participate in the study. The material was immediately anonymized to remove identifying data in the transcriptions of the interviews. All data were properly stored according to the Swedish Act on Ethical Review of Research Involving Humans [SFS 2003:460 (2005)].

3. Findings

The content analysis of the transcripts resulted in one theme, Falling outside the system, and three subthemes: The inspector—shaped by specific standards, The bureaucrat and the micro-entrepreneur—two separate worlds, and System faults and system changes. The following sections describe the theme and each subtheme. The findings indicate that the OSH inspectors’ views of and relationships with micro-entrepreneurs are complex. Through the analysis, it became evident that the inspectors, as bureaucrats who are part of a governmental and legal system, view micro-enterprises as entities that deviate from the norm and perceive micro-entrepreneurs as less knowledgeable than the owners of larger enterprises. The inspectors experienced and acknowledged that the system they are a part of is not tailored to the needs of micro-enterprises and that the system needs to change. The theme and subthemes are presented below and illuminated by extracts and quotations from the narratives.

3.1. Theme: Falling outside the system

The inspectors described “Falling outside the system” as the misalignment between micro-enterprises and the organization of the work environment system (including laws, regulation methods, inspections, enforcement styles and organization). The OSH inspectors described micro-enterprises, the inspections of these businesses and their meetings with owner-managers by comparing them to large companies. Thus, it became clear that enterprises with more than 10 employees are
the norm, and the inspectors used this norm as their reference when describing their experiences with micro-enterprises. It appears that integral to the inspectors’ view was the notion that large companies are the norm and that micro-enterprises are an exception to this norm that demands adjustment and sometimes causes guilt among the inspectors. This seems to influence how OSH inspectors experience their interactions with micro-entrepreneurs, regulation and inspection methods and enforcement styles. Nevertheless, the inspectors acknowledged faults in the system that need to change in order to improve the conditions in micro-enterprises.

Therefore, the understanding obtained from the inspectors’ narratives is that micro-enterprises are “Falling outside the system”, the system that should support them in improving OSH management.

3.1.1. Subtheme: The Inspector—Shaped by specific standards

In their narratives, the OSH inspectors talked about micro-enterprises in relation to larger companies, using larger companies as the norm. Rather than explicitly speaking about micro-enterprises, the inspectors described them by comparing to larger companies. Furthermore, the OSH inspectors experienced regulating situations in micro-enterprises as out of the ordinary and different from inspections in larger companies. This view and understanding of micro-enterprises seems to be shaped by past standards that were designed based on large companies. The inspectors are thus shaped by this specific norm, and it influences their views on and experiences with micro-enterprises. By referencing larger companies as the benchmark, inspectors view micro-enterprises as entities that are demanding and that require adjustment and flexibility from inspectors.

The inspectors reported that small enterprises exhibit large variations, which they do not experience in larger companies. They further expressed that unlike larger companies, micro-enterprises often have one owner and manager who is responsible for all areas of managing the company and keeping it running. There are no teams or special departments with expertise in different areas to support the owner-manager, as is often the case in larger companies. The OSH inspectors expressed that these owners must stay up-to-date with OSH legislation, sometimes in several different areas, while simultaneously supervising employees, managing the business’s finances and communicating with customers or distributors. These experiences are gathered under the label of the solitary micro-entrepreneur, as described by one inspector:

“Generally speaking, of course, micro-enterprises consist of only one person who owns it and needs to keep tabs on everything, and then there are employees. Obviously, it’s harder for that person to have all of the knowledge compared to if you have a staff of ten people.” [IP2]

The inspectors also described that the owner-manager is foremost someone who wants to run a business. However, wanting to run a business does not necessarily mean that the owner-manager has the full knowledge needed to run the business.

“Maybe they’re visionaries and have great ideas about how to run this [enterprise] and make money, but there are a lot of things about running a business that they don’t know.” [IP9]

Focusing on OSH work in micro-enterprises, the OSH inspectors in this study experienced that compared to larger companies, micro-enterprises lack structures and systems for OSH management and SWEM. The owner-managers they meet are “firefighters” rather than leaders who assess risks and work to prevent problems. The inspectors noted that many of these small businesses have little or no documentation and limited risk awareness. The inspectors expressed that most of the owner-managers they meet in their work have very little knowledge of what SWEM is and do not realize that micro-entrepreneurs are required to meet SWEM standards. The inspectors described OSH management in micro-enterprises and how it differs from SWEM in large companies:

“They are still experts in their area. But to get them to be aware of the risks...they haven't even considered that there might be threats and violence, in a shop, for example, they haven't thought that far. ‘No, nothing has ever happened here’. Well it might happen. Yeah, and how would you handle it? They haven't thought about precautions, but instead just ‘As long as nothing happens, it's all good’.” [IP5]

Some of the inspectors reported that there are many OSH rules and laws that owner-managers need to know, and gaining this knowledge can be hard work for the solitary owner-manager. Moreover, the inspectors acknowledged that unlike larger businesses, there is considerable variation across micro-enterprises and industries in how they approach OSH management. The inspectors noted that SWEM in micro-enterprises is more dependent on the person who runs the business than it is in large businesses. The interviewees also mentioned that compared to large companies, micro-enterprises could have advantages in meeting SWEM requirements due to their small size. Owner-managers often have good knowledge of and relations with all employees, they meet with employees regularly, and decision paths in micro-enterprises are shorter. One inspector exemplified this as follows:

“In a small company, it becomes like that right away; they socialize all the time, and they don't need to have such a defined routine for staff appraisal, for example, since they talk to each other constantly and meet in their day to day life, that’s why I don’t prioritize it as much in small companies. Unless I notice that it’s needed, of course; in that case, I make requirements accordingly.” [IP9]

When discussing inspection situations, the OSH inspectors continued to compare micro-enterprises to larger companies. The inspectors often referred to “informal inspections” when regulating micro-enterprises, which was not the case for larger companies. In particular, the inspectors told us that unlike larger companies, inspections of micro-enterprises often take place in a room around a coffee table and sometimes in someone’s home rather than in a conference room. In addition, fewer people participate in these inspection meetings at micro-enterprises than at larger companies. Most often, it is only the owner-manager who participates, and he or she also participates in production, answers the phone or talks to clients while the inspector conducts the inspection.

“From a strictly practical point of view, if you arrive at a big company or organization, there might be five or eight people waiting to participate in the inspection. At a small company, there might be one employee representative who joins you...so that is a practical difference for me as an inspector during the inspection. It becomes a more formal meeting in a different way and more informal at a small company.” [IP2]

The inspectors also highlighted some aspects of micro-enterprises that are advantages in inspections. They described that small businesses, because they have few employees and often only one person who is responsible for the business, have short decision paths. The owner-manager knows what OSH work has been done or not done and is aware of the existing documentation. In larger companies, many people could be involved, and there may be no one with full responsibility. One inspector expressed this advantage as follows:

“In a smaller company, things often run a bit more smoothly, a bit more easily; things become a bit more informal. It might be easier to obtain an answer, yes or no. In large companies, the people who are sitting there might not know. Large companies...they often know the rules, and they know how things should be. They might have a lot of documentation; the problem is that they sometimes have too much documentation. When it comes to routines...they should be well established and usable. Sometimes there are routines that nobody knows about. In smaller companies, they know: ‘No, we don’t have any routines’. You might ask, How does it work? What do you do? [……] it’s a shorter process. Yeah,
and there is often a CEO who makes the decisions about how it should be; they have all responsible for the work environment. Of course they will know if they did this or not, it’s a bit simpler that way.” [IP1]

The interviewees described that they had to make adjustments and be flexible because inspections of micro-enterprises differed from normal inspections. The interviewees mentioned adjusting how they interpreted the law or shortening an inspection and dividing it into two visits rather than the usual one visit. Using inspections in larger companies as the model, the OSH inspectors explained that when inspecting micro-enterprises, they wore other clothes, used simpler language, and lowered their standards, and they acknowledged that they needed to start from the beginning to explain what an OSH inspector is and the government agency they work for.

“You quickly notice if the owner-manager has knowledge about things or not, and you quickly place yourself on their level. So you have to think to yourself, Which end am I at? And then you start at a basic level and come back for another visit. That’s one thing.” [IP10]

3.1.2. Subtheme: the bureaucrat and the Micro-entrepreneur—Two separate worlds

According to the interviewees, inspections at micro-enterprises appear to represent the interaction between bureaucracy and reality. The inspectors noted that they aim for good dialog but identified several factors that could hinder this. Furthermore, the inspectors viewed themselves as someone evil who could ruin micro-enterprises rather than help them improve; this feeling did not seem to surface in the case of larger companies. The inspectors talked about several situations in which they presented themselves as the giant bureaucratic inspector with power over the small micro-enterprise. An unequal power relation was expressed when the inspectors talked about micro-entrepreneurs as people with little knowledge of OSH, while viewing themselves as individuals who came with knowledge and could offer solutions to remedy the faulty work environment.

In their first meeting with a micro-entrepreneur, the OSH inspectors noted that it was important to create a good relationship with the owner-manager. However, they identified some challenges specific to smaller businesses that could prevent the achievement of what the inspectors regarded as a good meeting. For instance, many owner-managers were nervous when inspectors came to inspect their business and needed to be reassured. One inspector provided an example of a nervous microentrepreneur:

“Well, a lot of micro-entrepreneurs are nervous. I have visited companies that just consisted of a few staff where they had a stack of napkins, dabbing their foreheads, you could see how uncomfortable they were with you being there. To try to make them more relaxed…in some way so they feel secure with your presence and let them know that you don’t mean them any harm…you just want to find out how they do things. That’s the important part.” [IP8]

The interviewees described that they use an inspection method that aims to create a dialog with employers during inspections, as it is easier to have a dialog after establishing a good relationship. The inspectors explained that in such a dialog, the aim is to let the owner-manager describe his or her organization, OSH management and documentation and to focus on identifying shortcomings and talking generally about what it means to engage in SWEM.

“Our inspection method is based on a dialog with the employer. I feel that the most important thing is not for me to be asking the questions but instead to get them to tell me, and I’ll get my answers during their story.” [IP11]

Although inspectors aim for a good dialog, the interviewed inspectors identified several challenges specific to micro-enterprises in ensuring a good meeting and dialog. Few owner-managers have knowledge of the SWEA or the purpose of inspections. Other micro-entrepreneurs are frightened by government agencies. One inspector noted the challenges involved in meeting owner-managers in their social context and at their knowledge level. The inspectors experienced that in relation to the owners of larger businesses, micro-entrepreneurs generally have less knowledge about the purpose of a good work environment. Lack of knowledge means that inspectors must spend time educating the micro-entrepreneur instead of conducting the inspection. As one inspector said,

“In a small company, the challenge is that they don’t even know that there is a Work Environment Act. In a situation like that, the challenge is to make them aware of what obligations you have when you start a company. Small companies are often relatively new.” [IP9]

The lack of necessary and legally required documentation, which the inspectors experienced as common in micro-enterprises, is another factor that OSH inspectors find very challenging. Limited or no documentation results in difficulties understanding the processes used by the micro-enterprise and creates challenges to following up on their work.

The OSH inspectors said that some micro-entrepreneurs they meet simply do not want to address the work environment and want nothing to do with the agency. One inspector gave examples of owner-managers who locked their doors, so help from the police was needed to gain access to the premises. Another challenge experienced by the inspectors was making micro-entrepreneurs understand the importance and benefits of the work environment.

“It’s hard to get them to understand that it in part is something positive, something that’s good for them in order to create a routine around this [OSH management], but also that it’s required by law. It can sometimes be a challenge, particularly when it comes to older employers. It can be tricky to teach an old dog new tricks. It’s like, ‘We’ve always done things this way, why can’t we keep doing that?’.” [IP9]

OSH inspectors are bureaucrats with the task of ensuring that private and public organization follow relevant laws and regulations through inspections. Their bureaucratic role implies that they issue improvement requirements, prohibition notices or sanction fees when deficiencies in the work environment are identified. While this is something the inspectors are required to do, they sometimes experience it as difficult. Levying a sanction fee or issuing many demands can result in bankruptcy for a microentrepreneur. This is rarely a problem for larger companies, as a sanction fee or the cost of addressing regulatory demands represent a marginal cost the yearly budget of a large company:

“Yeah, it’s really hard. It’s easier to place a sanction fee on a large dragon consisting of 5000 employees, that’s cash differences. […] But to drop that on a small enterprise, that’s tough. But the law has been designed so that the expenses involved in following the law should be included in the company budget.” [IP4]

Feelings of guilt or sorrow related to being the person destroying a small business was more evident in the narratives of more experienced inspectors than in the narratives of participants who had worked as inspectors for one to three years. On the other hand, the less experienced inspectors mentioned that they sometimes felt pleasure when a micro-entrepreneur was forced to close, as it meant that they had saved the work force from a poor employer. One inspector expressed this as follows:

“In 99 percent of all construction visits, there is something to regulate; it’s always like that. Of course, it depends on what type of company it is, how many sanctions they can manage in order for them not to suffocate completely. But it does sometimes happen that we inspect companies that
after a number of visits give up and close their operations, go bankrupt. It’s good for the people who work there and so on, that they don’t get hurt.” [IP8]

The notion of being the saviour of the good work environment in a micro-enterprise was repeated by all the OSH inspectors in their descriptions of different situations. For instance, the inspectors talked about themselves as teachers who must educate owner-managers about OSH issues. The inspectors spoke about micro-entrepreneurs as individuals who do not know what is best for them and who cannot not see the full picture. The inspectors stated that owner-managers forget the information they receive, and some owner-managers cannot write at all. Other owner-managers are knowledgeable about the work environment but cannot express what they do using the “right OSH vocabulary”. The inspectors described themselves as saviours of micro-environment but cannot express what they do using the “right OSH vocabulary”.

The inspectors stated that owner-managers forget OSH issues. The inspectors spoke about micro-entrepreneurs as themselves as teachers who must educate owner-managers about OSH issues.

“These occupational groups [craft industries] are not the ones with the highest school grades. They did not find theoretical subjects in school the most fun. These are the guys who sat at the back of the class. They’re really skilled craftsmen, they get things done, they’re entrepreneurs, but documenting and reading this and that is something a lot of them find pretty tough, and they see no meaning or purpose in it either.” [IP7]

The inspectors expressed that they can offer solutions to micro-enterprises with no or poor OSH management. The participants said that if they could have more time with micro-entrepreneurs, they could provide them with more information, enabling the owner-managers to become more knowledgeable.

“I feel like one needs to be there more, that maybe it’s not enough to just go out there for two hours and talk and then follow up on how things went, but maybe one needs to be there for a longer period of time, to invest time into it. I’m not sure how much, maybe a day or so, divide it up and come back several times, to not drop it. If we’re talking about a five-year period, one could come back 1–2 times a year, three times. Or during a three-year period, that you really come back and talk, you look at how things are, you follow up and provide information, then maybe you would get more out of it.” [IP1]

3.1.3. Subtheme: system faults and system changes

The inspectors identified both faults and factors in the system that need to change to better fit the needs of micro-enterprises. They specifically mentioned that the legislation and regulatory demands do not align with how micro-enterprises operate. Thus, legislation, information and inspection methods need to be tailored to micro-enterprises.

The OSH inspectors experienced faults in the system with regard to businesses with fewer than ten employees, as the OSH enforcement system was constructed for large companies. Businesses with fewer than ten employees are under no legal requirement to document their work environment. However, the law says that they need to document risk analysis and assessments and have written policies. The inspectors disclosed that the legal requirements are inconsistent, and one inspector described this issue as a system fault:

“If you don’t have it in writing, you still need to have the routines. How can you have them if they’re not in writing? I feel that we have a systematic error here. It’s really difficult.” [IP5]

The interviewed inspectors concluded that the number of micro-enterprises and solo enterprises are increasing and that these entities often have conditions and challenges that differ from those in larger companies. The inspectors acknowledged that the bureaucracy they represent is rigid and unyielding, and owner-managers must fit into that bureaucracy.

The interviewees experienced that OSH inspection methods and the information and support material for micro-entrepreneurs from the SWEA were developed using large companies as a model. Furthermore, the inspectors noted that little consideration has been given to the specific challenges of micro-enterprises. The participants mentioned that micro-entrepreneurs often have economic limitations and no support systems and lack the time needed for SWEM, which involves creating documentation and writing policies. The inspectors said that the system does not take these issues into consideration in relevant policies and legislation.

The inspectors identified some areas that could be improved to better support micro-entrepreneurs and to obtain better knowledge about OSH management, and they mentioned specific trades in relation to this. In Sweden, pupils can choose a trade to learn in upper secondary high school (i.e., construction, electrical, car repair and painting), and many of these individuals start their own craft trade enterprise.

The inspectors suggested that high schools should be responsible for educating pupils about SWEM and risk analysis. Furthermore, individuals who aim to start a business often participate in start-up training. The inspectors suggested that these trainings should include information about OSH issues. Finally, the inspectors recommended that when a new business is registered at the tax insurance agency, the business owner should automatically be enrolled in an OSH course.

“Well, a little bit in light of what I’ve mentioned about knowledge, I feel that—before you’re allowed to start a company, there should be more requirements for knowledge about occupational safety and health issues because there currently aren’t. A lot of other things are required, but there are no demands for knowledge about occupational safety and health. So you’re able to start a company without having…nobody checks to make sure you have the knowledge needed.” [IP10]

The inspectors also talked about some areas within the SWEA that could be improved. For instance, information and support material should be adjusted to accommodate the needs of micro-enterprises and could preferably be industry-specific. The inspectors noted that information about the building industry would not be suitable for a hair stylists since these industries involve completely different risks. In addition, the inspectors’ mentioned that if support material were industry-specific, it would be easier for the micro-entrepreneur to read and understand, avoiding the need to have an owner-manager search for the specific information he or she needs (within a large amount of information) for his or her company. This could improve compliance with OSH regulations.

“It’s this thing about simplicity. I can imagine a small owner, how did that person get started? Well, he/she had a passion about something, is good at screws or something, and thinks that this is a blast. This is what I want to do with my life. So you do it, and things are going well; you start a company, hire two or three employees. Where does occupational safety and health management come into the picture? Nowhere. I fiddle around with cars.

To come in there and start talking about occupational safety and health management, it should be easy, and you should preferably give them something when you’re there, something specific. ‘Do this, and it’ll be ok’. I think that’s something that could be developed—support material.” [IP4]

4. Discussion

In this study, we aimed to elucidate OSH inspectors’ views of micro-enterprises and their OSH management. We also endeavoured to describe inspectors’ experiences of the supervision chain and their role in it with respect to businesses with one to nine employees. The analysis resulted in an overarching theme expressed as falling outside the system. Falling outside the system is reflected on several levels of the supervision chain: the inspectors’ view of micro-enterprises and inspections, the interaction between the bureaucracy and the micro-entrepreneur and the faults in the system and the need for improvement. This study
contributes knowledge that can have practical implications for developing inspection methods and enforcement styles, thereby improving the outcome of inspections and the general regulations and support system for micro-enterprises.

A key factor for attaining the analytic abstraction that describes micro-enterprises as falling outside the system was the position held by the interviewed OSH inspectors when describing their experiences with micro-enterprises, the supervision chain and the OSH system. The inspectors continually described micro-enterprises by using larger companies as a role model. When knowledge, inspection guides and information are lacking, inspectors construct a “norm” from a subjective similarity (Woodcock, 2014). In this study, the OSH inspectors seemed to construct their norm around larger companies, which then become a valid comparator.

4.1. Reshaping Inspectors’ views

Rather than describing micro-enterprises in their own context, the inspectors described them as differing from the norm—as something different from a large company. Inspections of micro-enterprises were talked about as informal and deviating in relation to inspections of larger companies. The OSH inspectors experienced the need to make adjustments for micro-enterprises, which involved lowering their standards and serving as teachers for owner-managers. Previous research highlights the importance of the quality of the inspection and the level of trust created between the inspector and the regulated entity for the successful outcome of the inspection (Nielsen, 2016; Niskanen et al., 2014). Furthermore, Niskanen et al. (2014) argue that the professional competence of inspectors promotes SWEM in organizations. Woodcock (2014) shows that inspectors’ decisions regarding regulation prohibitions are based on familiarity and individual preference. Thus, the fact that micro-enterprises are viewed as diverging from the norm can have negative consequences. Research (Legg et al., 2015; Masi and Cagno, 2015) shows that owner-managers perceive the regulating authorities as something that micro-enterprises represent as a hindrance to rather than a source of support for OSH management. Moreover, May and Wood (2003) show that inconsistencies in inspector enforcement styles cause the regulated to be less responsive to the inspector. However, the present findings highlight additional possible reasons for micro-enterprises’ less responsive attitude and behaviour. First, micro-enterprises are heterogeneous and cannot be compared as a group to larger companies (Hasle et al., 2012). Second, when compared to larger companies, micro-enterprises are perceived as differing from the norm. If the norm is equated with what is familiar (Woodcock, 2014), it is reasonable to argue that inspectors perhaps relate differently to micro-enterprises than they do to larger companies. Finally, if an owner-manager perceives this reaction from and perception of an inspector, his or her compliance with OSH management and trust in the regulating authority might be weakened. Therefore, inspectors need training and support to increase their familiarity with and knowledge about micro-enterprises and the specific characteristics, circumstances and needs of micro-enterprises. Inspections methods and inspectors need to change to use micro-enterprises as the model when inspecting micro-enterprises.

4.2. The bureaucracy and Micro-enterprises: Meeting mid-way

This study concludes that the bureaucracy and micro-enterprises are from two different worlds that need to meet at mid-way in order to strengthen SWEM in micro firms. Research identifies that bureaucracy is perceived as an obstacle to OSH management in micro-enterprises. The bureaucracy makes demands for, for instance, a large amount of paperwork that is excessive for the micro-entrepreneur (Legg et al., 2015; Masi and Cagno, 2015). Furthermore, the bureaucracy can be viewed as a representation of state control and power. With this in mind, when the interviewed inspectors expressed that they perceived themselves as the saviours of micro-enterprises and that owner-managers are less knowledgeable about and aware of OSH, they were actually describing what we interpret as an unequal power relation. The inspectors referred to themselves as saviours and stated that owner-managers should be thankful for this help. Interviews with Swedish micro-entrepreneurs reveal that these individuals have limited knowledge about SWEA and its purpose (Hagqvist et al., 2020).

Hence, there is a need to develop inspection methods and enforcement styles that are better tailored to micro-enterprises. Increased knowledge of cooperative enforcement styles can lead to increased compliance with SWEM among micro-entrepreneurs (May and Wood, 2003). Thus, if both inspection methods and enforcement styles are developed in accordance with the needs of micro-enterprises, it is more likely that the inspector and owner-manager can meet on the same level. This can result in better compliance with OSH and greater trust in the system.

4.3. A supportive system

The inspectors described owner-managers as hard working individuals who often desire a good work environment but lack resources, time and knowledge, which can have a negative impact on SWEM. This description by the inspectors resembles the picture presented in previous studies on micro-entrepreneurs (Landstad et al., 2017; Vinberg et al., 2017). This finding raises the question as to whether the system can adjust to these circumstances. For instance, Masi and Cagno (2015) find that regulations and lack of information are much greater barriers to OSH management in micro-enterprises than in larger companies. In the present study, OSH inspectors remarked on the lack of comprehensive information and support material tailored to the context of micro-enterprises and the heterogeneity of micro-enterprises.

Some research suggests the use of various intermediaries to improve OSH (Hasle and Røflund, 2018; Lamm et al., 2013; Legg et al., 2015). The interviewed OSH inspectors highlighted several examples of different intermediaries, including upper secondary schools, government agencies that provide grants to start a business, banks (as loan providers) and start-up support agencies.

Although inspectors interact with micro-enterprises, they represent the last link in the chain of the supervision strategy of the SWEA (Bruhn and Frick, 2011). Inspectors cannot make changes in solitude; thus, a systematic approach is needed to improve regulations, inspection methods and enforcement styles to better reflect the circumstances of micro-enterprises. For instance, Niskanen (2015) suggests that local OSH agencies should provide training to inspectors to improve their enforcement styles and inspection methods. Moreover, the authors suggest that local agencies should provide opportunities for team reflection. However, Bruhn and Frick (2011) highlight the importance of support and willingness to change from top management in the SWEA as an important factor for successful change in inspection methods. If local or regional OSH offices initiate their own changes, there is a risk of introducing inconsistencies in inspection methods and enforcement styles across the different local and regional offices.

In conclusion, regulations, inspection methods and enforcement styles as well as information and support material need to be tailored to the needs of micro-enterprises. However, the SWEA, as the entity responsible for the supervision chain, needs to initiate and drive this change.

4.4. Methodological discussion

To ensure that the participation of the OSH inspectors was entirely voluntary, it would have been preferable to approach the inspectors directly. That was not possible, however. Instead, the SWEA selected inspectors who had an interest in participating. Because the SWEA selected the participants, they might have been reluctant to talk freely about their work, and this must be taken in consideration when reviewing the results.
When interpreting our results, some consideration must be given to the relatively small sample size and the fact that the study was conducted in the Swedish context. The findings must therefore be interpreted with some caution. Although the sample size was small, the material was rich (Fusch and Ness, 2015) and thus saturated (Guest et al., 2006). The purpose of qualitative research is not to extend findings derived from selected samples to people at large but rather to transform and apply them to similar situations in similar contexts (Polit and Beck, 2004). It is important to recall that a particular interpretation is one of many possible, but we judge the findings in this study to be transferrable to OSH inspectors in other countries. The strength of the study is that the inspectors represented different geographical areas in Sweden and varied in terms of gender, age and experience. The purpose of sampling in qualitative research is to ensure maximum variability that can inform the relevance of the findings rather than to seek homogeneity. Four researchers were involved in the analysis procedure. To enhance trustworthiness, the analysis process and content were continually discussed until consensus was reached.

5. Conclusions and implications

The overall conclusion of this study, based on narratives from OSH inspectors, is that micro-enterprises seem to fall outside the system. The question is: how can micro-enterprises fall inside the system?

In difference from previous research in the field, this study uses the experiences and views of OSH inspectors to gain a deeper understanding of SWEM in micro enterprises. The interviewed OSH inspectors describe an OSH supervision chain and bureaucracy that is shaped using larger companies as a model. In line with the results presented here, Masi and Cagno (2015) find that regulation is not adequate to meet the needs of micro-enterprises. They reach a similar conclusion to that of the present study, stating that the heterogeneity of small businesses must be considered. Micro enterprises deviates from larger companies in many aspects, which have impact on how the interviewed OSH inspectors describe that they conduct their inspections and how they relate to these smaller firms. In addition, falling outside the system is also described by the inspectors as a regulating system that need to adjust laws and regulation to better suit micro firms. If micro firms had better tailored regulations and support, they might improve their ability to fulfil SWEM standard. Lamm et al. (2013) confirm this reasoning by stating that organizational culture, cultural diversity and safety culture in micro-enterprises need to be acknowledged in designing a regulating system. We conclude that an understanding of the preconditions and circumstances of micro-enterprises and the diversity of these enterprises across sectors is necessary when designing and developing new methods, which was also suggested by Hasle et al. (2012). This was exemplified in this study by statements that more time is needed when OSH inspectors work with micro enterprises to give the owner-manager more knowledge about adequate working environment tools. In addition, support material for inspectors as well as micro-enterprises should be tailored to meet the needs of micro firms in different branches.

Although the SWEA needs to initiate and be responsible for changes or developments of new approaches and methods, inspectors who are in contact with micro-enterprises and those with the best knowledge of their context must be actively included in the development of a tailored regulation system. Furthermore, the government as the creator of state objectives needs to play an active role in any proposed changes. To improve the conditions for change and to develop new approaches and methods, future research should continue to study the specific context of micro-enterprises in different sectors.

Practical implications are that it is necessary for SWEA to prioritize and increase the number of inspections in this enterprise group by specific projects towards sectors with insufficient working environment. In addition, the OSH inspectors also suggest to integrate OSH issues in business start-up training and in other educational contexts. Research about successful SWEM in micro-enterprises show that the owner-managers’ personal view and ability is central for why and how to integrate OSH issues into other systems for development of their businesses (SWEA, 2013a). At a government level, it is of value to invest in specific projects for OSH in micro-enterprises when creating governmental working life strategies. For example, it is important to increase support from occupational health services that have specific knowledge about conditions in micro enterprises and ability to deliver adapted measures for this enterprise group.

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