A balancing act: Swedish occupational safety and health inspectors' reflections on their bureaucratic role when supervising micro-enterprises

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Abstract The safety and health of many workers employed in micro-enterprises (with less than 10 employees) is poor, and legal arrangements related to working environments remain a considerable challenge in these enterprises. The aim of this study is to gain a deeper understanding of how Swedish occupational safety and health (OSH) inspectors perceive themselves as inspectors and their role as bureaucratic regulators when meeting micro-enterprises. In the study, 11 Swedish inspectors were interviewed and asked to reflect on their role as inspectors, how they perceive themselves as inspectors and what their role is as bureaucratic regulators when inspecting micro-enterprises. The qualitative content analysis revealed one theme—a balancing act—

and three categories: one inspector, many roles; interactions with micro-entrepreneurs; and exercise the profession as an inspector. The results showed that OSH inspectors experience challenges in meeting the requirements of street-level bureaucracy while addressing the needs of micro-enterprises. In conclusion, OSH inspectors need organisational support to develop inspection models and enforcement styles tailored to micro-enterprises, as this could ease their work and contribute to better inspection outcomes. The implications of this study include a need for increased competence about working environment issues in micro-enterprises, development of enforcement styles among the inspectors, emphasis of the importance of specific governmental projects for OSH and development of models in this enterprise group. Additionally, development of micro-enterprise managers' competence and ability to handle issues related to the working environment and health were also important.

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1 Introduction

Micro-enterprises (with 1 to 9 employees) are seen as important for economic growth, innovation, employment and social integration in the European Union (Roper and Hewitt-Dundas 2017; European Agency

for Safety and Health at Work [EASHW] 2018). Around 30% of the European workforce is employed in micro-enterprises (Muller et al. 2016), and effective occupational safety and health (OSH) management in these enterprises is crucial for the well-being of employees and for enterprise survival (Walters 2001; EASHW 2018).

Good working conditions and work environments are central in the contemporary discourse about sustainable working life (Nielsen et al. 2010; Dellve and Eriksson 2017). Research shows that the safety and health of many workers employed in micro-enterprises is poor (Wagner 1997) and that ensuring good occupational safety and health management in micro-enterprises remains a considerable challenge (Eakin et al. 2000; Champoux and Brun 2003; Sørensen et al. 2007; EASHW 2018). Accordingly, European Union directives specify that member states should improve work environment processes in micro-enterprises (EASHW 2016). However, most policies and legislations on OSH are defined for large enterprises and measures to improve working environment still need to consider specific conditions of small enterprises (Encrenaz et al. 2019). OSH inspectors have been identified as key actors in helping micro-enterprise managers address OSH issues and in encouraging systematic work environment management (SWEM) (Quinlan et al. 2009; Masi and Cagno 2015; Niskanen 2015).

OSH inspectors are at the frontline of regulatory supervision. Their role and influence over work environment can be understood using theories on street-level bureaucracy (May and Wood 2003; Johansson 2006; Hupe et al. 2016). As street-level bureaucrats (SLB:s), OSH inspectors work at the interfaces between citizens and the state and between government and enterprise. Through their work, they have legal power to enforce civilians to follow requirements from the government (Hupe et al. 2016). However, to develop adherence to OSH regulations and requirements in micro-enterprises, research suggests that more knowledge is needed regarding the work of inspectors and to understand the interface between inspectors and micro-enterprises (Niskanen et al. 2014; Niskanen 2015). To the best of our knowledge, most studies on OSH inspections and micro-enterprises focus on the results of regulations and the role inspectors have in this process. In this study, we intend to add to the current knowledge by shifting the focus to OSH inspectors themselves and how they

view themselves as bureaucratic regulators in relation to micro-enterprises. The experiences of these individuals can offer an important foundation for gaining a better understanding of the inspection process and the subsequent outcomes of inspections (Johansson 2006). Thus, the aim of this study is to explore how Swedish OSH inspectors perceive themselves as inspectors and their role as bureaucratic regulators when meeting micro-enterprises.

2 Background

To understand the bureaucratic role OSH inspectors carry in relation to micro-enterprises and how they are key actors in improving OSH in those small firms, we draw on the theoretical concept of street-level bureaucracy. Lipsky (2010) first coined the concept of street-level bureaucracy, defining it as “the public services with which citizens typically interact. In this sense, all teachers, police officers, and social workers in public agencies are SLBs without further qualification” (Lipsky 2010 p. xviii). Lipsky (2010) argues that SLBs are groups of workers who, through their work, have power over other individuals either by granting benefits or by issuing sanctions. It is through SLBs that political directives are implemented among citizens, and therefore, SLBs need a certain level of discretion. Discretion, in relation to street-level bureaucracy, refers to the degree of freedom to conduct regulations granted to an inspector by the government and the ways in which this freedom is used (Lipsky 2010; Hupe et al. 2016). Hupe et al. (2016) argue that Lipsky’s understanding of street-level bureaucracy is too broad and imprecise, and they contend that the concept has other dimensions. They argue that one important dimension is the location of power in relation to SLBs, as this is fundamental to the legitimacy of control (Hupe et al. 2016). They further argue that as representatives of state agencies, SLBs have a variety of tasks that range from routine activities to complex duties demanding a high degree of discretion including administrative tasks for which no bureaucratic control is needed. As such, Hupe et al. (2016) assert that a second important dimension is the context in which street-level bureaucracy is constructed.

OSH inspectors represent the government by conducting supervision of regulated entities and compelling workplace managers to follow laws and regulations (Johansson 2006; Lipsky 2010; Hupe et al. 2016;

Nielsen 2016). As SLBs, OSH inspectors must be both compliant and compliance gaining (Johansson 2006). Being compliant refers to being acquiescent to the government, legislation and work regulations. To be compliance gaining, the OSH inspector must understand and want to make decisions based on the societal democratic organisation and have the knowledge to do so. To gain compliance from regulated entities, the inspector can use control and enforcement, and the inspector must develop enforcement styles that make compliance possible for the regulated entity. Enforcement styles are the street-level behaviours of bureaucracy and represent the specific ways in which inspectors interact with and relate to those regulated (May and Wood 2003). Enforcement styles can vary based on two dimensions: formalism and facilitation (Ibid.). Formalism refers to the strictness with which rules are interpreted and applied. Facilitation refers to the willingness to help and support regulated entities. Inspectors have a range of enforcement tools to change business owners' behaviour; in addition to offering guidance and information, the most important tools are command, control and sanctions (Nielsen 2016). Thus, the interface at which OSH inspectors meet business owners is an interaction 'that always takes place in the shadow of the state's legitimate power' (Nielsen 2016 p. 117). Bruhn (2006) concludes that OSH inspectors must be highly competent; they need to be flexible in individual situations and develop appropriate enforcement styles that they can adjust to the context.

2.1 The Swedish context

The Swedish Work Environment Act covers a number of factors under the umbrella of work environment legislation, including the organisation, planning and management of work. The purpose of this Act is to ensure a work environment which does not expose workers to ill health or accidents and which is satisfactory in terms of the nature of the work and the social and technological development of society. The general statements in the Act are supplemented and made more concrete by approximately eighty provisions issued by the Swedish Work Environment Authority (SWEA). Important provisions include SWEM, which relates to requirements for employers to annually demonstrate that they have policy and routines for following the work environment, regularly investigate and document working environment risks and ascertain that managers and

employees have sufficient knowledge and resources for performing improvement work (AFS 2001:1). Other important provisions relate to the psychosocial and social aspects of the working environment (AFS 2015:4), job adaption and rehabilitation (AFS 1994:1), and the physical working environment (e.g. ergonomic issues, noise reduction and chemical hazards) (AFS 2012:2; AFS 2005:16; AFS 2018:2). The Act and these provisions apply to all employers, except that there are fewer mandates regarding documentation of work environment processes in micro-enterprises. Important Swedish stakeholders concerning OSH are OSH inspectors, occupational health services and safety committees and safety delegates in the enterprises. However, according to the Act, only enterprises with more than 50 employees are required to have these committees or if the employees necessitate a safety committee. Enterprises with more than five employees are required to have a local safety delegate.

Since the 1970s, the Nordic OSH regulations have changed "from a descriptive definition of occupational health and safety as a gradually increasing list of risk factors to a more principal definition of the work environment as every aspect of work and its conditions that may affect workers' health" (Frick and Wren 2000; SWEA 2013b). The Swedish government's strategy for a modern working life (Work Environment Department at Swedish Government 2015) prioritizes three areas: death and occupational accidents, a sustainable working life and psychosocial working conditions. The strategy includes a need for specific actions towards small- and micro-enterprises and industrial sectors with high accident figures. Therefore, the government has given several assignments for SWEA to increase control of OSH in Swedish enterprises. For example, SWEA should particularly focus on small enterprises in their communication with organisations, increase their inspections in enterprises that not follow working environment regulations due to reasons related to competitive advantages and in sectors as building, transport, restaurants and cleaning industries (SWEA 2018a). In these sectors, there are a relative large number of micro-enterprises. According to investigations by the SWEA, compared with larger organisations, micro-enterprises generally lack awareness and knowledge of SWEM methods and lack the ability to apply these methods (SWEA 2013a). Results show that the obstacles to complying with OSH measures are lack of awareness, knowledge and application of SWEM yet that micro-

enterprises experience these obstacles to a lower degree than larger enterprises (SWEA 2013c). Results in a Swedish thesis concerning micro-enterprises show that the employers did not reflect on OSH working environment activities or give priority to formalised ways of working. Instead, they tended to give responsibility to employees for these activities (Axelsson 2002). According to the SWEA (2018b), OSH inspectors should compel private and public organisations to follow the Swedish Work Environment Act and its related provisions through inspections and should investigate occupational accidents and injuries. All enterprises should be treated equally, thus no consideration should be taken of the size of the enterprise, nor its economical organisation in the inspections. The SWEA states that the aim of inspections is to strengthen the ability of individual workplaces to prevent risks and ill health. During an inspection, the OSH inspector should identify work environment shortcomings that may exist and explain the risks and rules that apply. When the inspector identifies serious risks in the mandatory work environment, he/she issues improvement notices, prohibition notices or sanction fees. Improvement notices give the business time to make the necessary changes and report back to the OSH inspector within a certain time frame (SWEA 2018a). The SWEA makes around 25,000 inspections in both private and public organisations annually (SWEA 2018b). In Sweden, approximately 24% of all enterprises are micro-enterprises (Statistics Sweden, 2020). The number of Swedish micro-enterprises (which are in focus in this study) is around 292,000, and the number of start-up enterprises last years has been around 68,000 (The Swedish Agency for Growth Policy Analysis 2019). Related to these numbers, it can be assumed that a relative large number of these enterprises do not have visits from the SWEA.

2.2 OSH management in micro-enterprises and the role of OSH inspectors

According to Eakin et al. (2000), small workplaces have problems with OSH for two reasons: they are at greater “risk” for work-related illness than larger enterprises because of economic reasons and they are difficult to reach and change in terms of prevention and promotion. Previous research has identified obstacles that could hinder consistent and adequate OSH management in micro-enterprises. Compared with larger enterprises, micro-enterprises often have higher occupational risks

than larger enterprises and often lack the economic and managerial resources to secure these risks (Walters 2001; Champoux and Brun 2003; Hasle and Limborg 2006; SWEA 2013b). Micro-enterprises work more informally, have less structured work environments and have less time and fewer resources to pursue OSH improvements (Axelsson 2002; SWEA 2013a, Vinberg et al. 2017b). They often have greater resource constraints and financial pressure than larger, more established companies (Legg et al. 2015). Micro-enterprise managers, the owner-managers of micro-firms, often experience high demands as well as long and irregular working hours (Gunnarsson et al. 2007; Stephan and Roesler 2010; Hagqvist et al. 2015, 2016; Legg et al. 2015). Many micro-enterprise managers also have several different and varying work tasks and responsibilities, such as accounting, invoicing, employees’ health, staff shortages, clients and business survival and growth, while they at the same time might participate in the business operation (Gunnarsson et al. 2007; Stephan and Roesler 2010; Legg et al. 2015). Time limits result in difficulties for micro-enterprise managers to be up-to-date with OSH legislation and regulations and to have structured OSH management (Legg et al. 2015; Masi and Cagno 2015; Landstad et al. 2017; SWEA 2013a, Vinberg et al. 2017a). Meanwhile, they often have fewer employees to assist with OSH issues, less competence and knowledge and more problems in the physical work environment (Bomberger-Dankvardt et al. 2003; Hasle and Limborg 2006; Park et al. 2017; Hasle and Refslund 2018). Managers of micro-enterprises also often lack external competence in and support for OSH management (Vickers et al. 2005; Vinberg et al. 2017b). Because of a strained work situation with limited resources, they tend to focus exclusively on their core business and neglect OSH issues (Hasle and Limborg 2006; Hasle and Refslund 2018). Thus, improving OSH management in micro-enterprises can be challenging.

In a systematic review about health and safety interventions in small enterprises (Breslin et al. 2010), results were that interventions focusing on a combination of training and safety audits, and a combination of engineering, training, safety audits and motivational components, were associated with positive changes in safety-related attitudes. In another review about qualitative studies on OSH in general (MacEachen et al. 2016), results show that “inspectors are reluctant to apply enforcement when they see a low likelihood of conviction,

as is the case with management standards approaches and complex workplace psychosocial health issues where labour relations are entangled with occupational health". According to the authors, this raises the question if there is a need to make the OSH regulations more precise and to increase inspector's ability to deal with complex hazards. In a review about health-related interventions in small enterprises (Gerhardt et al. 2019), a conclusion was that the planning and implementation of such interventions seems to be harder in comparison with larger enterprises. However, the results show that it could be effective to integrate workplace health promotion with preventive measures and to combine person-related measures with working condition measures.

Meanwhile, researchers also argue that these small enterprises have organisational characteristics that are ideal for introducing and implementing OSH improvements because their workplaces are less hierarchical, information is more easily accessible (Meggeneder 2007; Cocker et al. 2012; Landstad et al. 2017) and their management style is more informal than in larger enterprises (Matlay 1999; Tsai et al. 2007). According to a study by Champoux and Brun (2003), very small enterprises with fewer than five employees were characterized by a more participatory management style compared with larger enterprises. Some studies have also found that employees in micro-enterprises have better psychosocial working conditions (e.g. more decisional support and social support) than larger enterprises (Lindström et al. 2000), and lower psychological demands and better mental health than large enterprises (Encrenaz et al. 2019). These latter conditions can contribute to good possibilities for working with OSH improvements.

In summary, compared with many larger businesses, micro-enterprises often have fewer recourses and less economic and political power, which can result in different behaviour and treatment from OSH inspectors (Hagqvist et al. 2020; Nielsen 2016). Enforcement styles, behaviours and treatments from the inspector, can influence the dynamics between the inspector and the micro-enterprise manager, which in turn affect the outcome of the inspection (MacEachen et al. 2016; Nielsen 2016). For instance, inconsistent behaviours from the inspector can lead to higher risks of reduced adherence to OSH legislation by the inspected micro-enterprise (May and Wood 2003). Furthermore, the behaviour of and decisions made by the OSH inspector

have consequences for the business, sometimes very serious consequences (Nielsen 2016). Micro-businesses can be ruined by the sanctions placed on them. In comparison, larger companies with more resources might not be affected by sanctions to the same degree. The SWEA description emphasises the dialogue that should occur among the business owner, the employer and the safety representative or another employee representative (SWEA 2018). However, in micro-enterprises, the owner often fills all these roles (Legg et al. 2015), which can have an impact on an inspection.

3 Methods and data

This study has an explorative and qualitative design with in-depth interviews with Swedish OSH inspectors. Qualitative design is appropriate when the aim is to gain an understanding of how individuals, in this study OSH inspectors, make sense of their experiences of a situation, object or phenomenon. In contrast to quantitative analyses, an analysis of qualitative material results in categorise and interpretations of patterns of phenomenon. The interviews focus on inspectors' own experience of their role as bureaucratic inspectors in relation to micro-enterprises. A content analysis of the interviews was conducted.

3.1 Interviewees

The OSH inspectors were recruited from different regional and local offices of the SWEA. First, SWEA regional managers were contacted, and following a managerial meeting (for all regional managers in Sweden), the interviews were approved. The SWEA selected 11 inspectors, with equal numbers of men and women and with experience of inspecting micro-enterprises. They selected participants from urban as well as rural areas and with various employment duration. SWEA then gave us contact information for these 11. After the inspectors were informed about the study and their rights by the authors of this study, the 11 individuals consented to be interviewed.

Of the 11 inspectors, five were women and six were men. They all had a university education (in different subjects) and had been trained by the SWEA at the start of their employment. Employment duration ranged from one to 18 years; three of the participants had less than 2 years of experience, one had 6 years and the remaining

seven had between 12 and 18 years. Although none of the participants had specific training in inspecting micro-enterprises, they all had previous experiences of inspections at micro-enterprises.

3.2 Interviews

The interviews were conducted between April and May 2018. They lasted from 22 to 52 min and were held in a location chosen by the inspectors. Most of the interviews were conducted at the individual inspector's office, and a few were conducted by phone. A semi-structured interview guide was used to collect the data. Interviewees were asked to describe their work, their experience of micro-enterprises and, foremost, reflect on their own role when inspecting micro-firms. All of the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim immediately after the data collection. Interviews were conducted in Swedish, and all citations presented in the paper were translated from Swedish to English by a native English speaker who was familiar with the Swedish language.

3.3 Analysis

The material was processed using qualitative content analysis as described by Graneheim et al. (2017) and Graneheim and Lundman (2004). The analysis of the material was primarily performed by two of the authors (EH and BJL). Throughout the analysis process, an ongoing discussion occurred among the authors (EH, BJL and SV) enriching the analysing process.

The material covering narratives of the inspectors' views of themselves as inspectors, their role and their work in relation to micro-enterprise was then coded.

Codes were compared to find patterns of similarities and differences. The identified patterns across codes were clustered into sub-categories. Sub-categories describing the same phenomenon were then grouped into categories. Through reflection, discussion and abductive movement among the text, codes, sub-categories and categories, an over-arching theme emerged (Graneheim and Lundman 2004; Graneheim et al. 2017). The NVivo (7.0) qualitative data analysis package was utilised to process the material.

3.4 Ethics

The Regional Ethical Committee in Stockholm reviewed the study and raised no objections from an ethical point of view (Dnr: 2018/388-31/5). The informants gave written consent to participate in the study. All data were properly stored according to the Swedish Act on Ethical Review of Research Involving Humans SFS 2003:460 (Codex, 2020).

4 Findings

The analysis resulted in one theme and three categories. The theme was *a balancing act*. Being an OSH inspector in Sweden is a balancing act, especially with regard to micro-enterprises, and this act plays out in several dimensions described in the different categories: *one inspector, many roles*; *interactions with micro-enterprise managers*, and *exercise the profession as an inspector* (Table 1). First, inspectors describe that they must balance being the bureaucratic inspector with the non-bureaucratic roles of teacher, informer, mentor and comforter. Secondly, the balance played out between

Table 1 Sub-categories, categories and theme

Sub-category	Category	Theme
Earlier work experience as a tool	One inspector, many roles	A balancing act
Struggles with the inspector role		
Rural demands change the rules		
The good Samaritan	Interactions with micro-enterprise managers	
The evil bureaucrat		
Anomalies in meeting a micro-enterprise manager	Exercise the profession as an inspector	
Messenger of government requirements		
Inspections involve more than inspecting		
Micro-enterprises challenge the bureaucratic inspector		

being a helper and a destroyer. At the interface between the inspector and the micro-enterprise manager, the inspectors sometimes perceived themselves as the saviour of the enterprises. At other times, they experienced the feeling of being an evil bureaucrat whose decisions could ruin the enterprises. Thirdly, the work of the bureaucratic inspectors is shaped by guidelines, laws and regulations, but this must be balanced with the need to adjust to the situation, which was especially important when inspecting micro-enterprises.

4.1 One inspector, many roles

The first category reflects how OSH inspectors describe a move between different roles depending on the situation and context in the many heterogeneous micro-enterprises. They experienced the need to transition between and use different roles particularly when they met with micro-enterprises (as opposed to larger companies). The participants described a need to assume the role of informant, teacher or motivator depending on the inspected micro-enterprise. For instance, in some cases, the inspectors reported that the micro-enterprise managers behaved as if they were frightened of them, which meant that the inspector had to assume the role of comforter. In other situations, the inspectors described that they had to motivate the micro-enterprise managers and explain why a good work environment is important. When meeting micro-enterprise managers, the inspectors need to be sensitive to the situation. As one inspector noted and exemplified:

You have to pick up on the atmosphere when you get there. Some people think it's pretty hard when we arrive and are quite nervous. They've probably never done this before. You often get coffee, and that's a good opportunity to take those first fifteen minutes to talk about other things, and after that, things are usually fine. It's important to achieve a...it doesn't have to be a good atmosphere...but at least an atmosphere that enables good conditions for a proper dialog and for the inspection. [IP10]

The inspectors reported that they used their educational or work background to help them adjust to new situations faced in inspecting micro-enterprises. Some had become specialists in areas in which they had education

or work experience. One inspector had worked as a builder and was now inspecting building sites. Another inspector was a trained physiotherapist and therefore focused on ergonomics at various types of work sites. Two of the inspectors had a background in teaching, which they found to be useful when meeting with micro-enterprise managers, as they felt a pedagogical background helped them communicate with micro-enterprise managers who had little knowledge of work environments. The inspectors said that this alignment between their educational and work background and the inspections helped them understand the regulated entities. One inspector said:

I believe my pedagogical background is useful, yes it can be. It is a tool. [IP11]

Some of the inspectors worked in less dense areas and had to adjust to the geographical situation in which they operated. This meant, for instance, when the inspection site was located some 100 km away, the inspectors had to call the company to make sure that someone was at the site even when the inspection was supposed to be unannounced (that is, they were not supposed to contact the company in advance). This was not necessary when inspecting larger companies as the inspectors then could assume that someone would be at the location when arriving. In summary, the data in this category revealed that the inspectors had to make constant adjustments and role changes especially when meeting with micro-enterprises. During the inspection at micro-firms, the OSH inspectors had to move beyond being the bureaucrat they are supposed to be.

4.2 Interaction with micro-enterprise managers

This category describes the duality perceived by the inspectors in relation to micro-enterprises. On the one hand, the participants described, sometimes with horror, how they are forced to issue sanctions or penalties to businesses they know do not have the resources to address the identified deficits. The inspectors mentioned that the deficits were sometimes the result of laziness and ignorance by the micro-enterprise managers; however, most of the time, the problems were the result of a lack of knowledge or resources. Thus, the inspectors reported feeling as if they were bad people who brought problems and trouble.

Yeah, it's really hard. It's easier to place a sanction fee on a 'large dragon' [large enterprise] consisting of 5000 employees, that's cash differences. [...] But to drop that on a small enterprise, that's tough. [IP4]

The OSH inspectors described that some micro-enterprise managers physically shut the inspectors out by locking the doors, and in those cases, the police had to come and compel the micro-enterprises to open. These situations diluted the feeling of being a bad person. On the other hand, the inspectors perceived themselves as saviours who bring knowledge and create a good work environment. They described themselves as the key to better SWEM in micro-enterprises, and they described liberating employees from poor work environments. According to one inspector:

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]

Another inspector reported the following:

Even if you're a small company, you still need to follow the law, and how can you do that wisely? If you're 4-5 employees, you don't need to have the same volume or level of ambition as a company of 5000 employees. So, in those cases, you need to give them some tips and ideas on how to go about it. [IP4]

The inspectors described how they adjusted their enforcement behaviours, moving beyond the traditional inspection methods when inspecting micro-enterprises. For instance, for announced inspections, the inspectors could call the micro-enterprise managers in advance to describe what happens during an inspection, or they could separate different parts of the inspection and focus on one area at a time. The participants said that they also try to describe the legislation in more understandable ways. This was not done in larger companies. They noted that sometimes they even interpret the law differently to better align with the needs of micro-enterprises. This was exemplified by one inspector's explanation:

We cannot inspect all 78 provisions, we need to start somewhere; you can't make too many sanctions because they'll just get sick of us and OSH management. Instead, we need to make sanctions that employers and employees can handle. And then we just need to make a return visit; I think the important thing is to get them on track. [IP6]

In summary, at the interface between OSH inspectors and micro-enterprise managers, the inspectors described how they balance the feeling that they are bad bureaucrats with the feeling that they are good helpers. Furthermore, they perceived meeting with micro-enterprises as different from meeting with larger companies, which caused them to change to a less bureaucratic enforcement behaviour.

4.3 Exercise the profession as an inspector

The third category describes the authoritarian inspectors, whose enforcement behaviour and level of discretion are regulated by the state. The inspectors described the need for precision, craftsmanship and skills in their work. To create the climate required for a good meeting during an inspection, OSH inspectors must have social skills and the ability to adjust to different situations. This is especially important in relation to micro-enterprises.

When the interviewees began working as inspectors, they were trained by the SWEA on regulatory methods and specific rules and laws. The inspectors described the instructional material and checklists formulated by the SWEA as supportive when they are on site performing inspections. The participants further described their typical workday as very formal and aligned with what SWEA describes that their inspectors should do. The inspectors reported that in their daily work situations, their colleagues offer good support when a difficult decision must be made. Furthermore, the inspectors described that they have regular meetings during which cases can be discussed, and they noted that legal support is available through the SWEA when needed. Other support could involve debriefing or discussing a specific decision or consulting a colleague who has more knowledge about a specific area.

I know that if I need help with work load ergonomics, I know who here [in SWEA] are ergonomists. If I have a question about chemistry, I know

who the chemists are. So we turn to each other.
[IP6]

In the interviews, the inspectors mentioned the need for many complex skills, particularly when meeting micro-enterprises. One inspector even expressed that the work of an inspector involves craftsmanship. The inspectors described different ways that this craftwork is carried out. At worksites, the OSH inspectors engage in detective work; they described reviewing papers, walking around the premises and asking the micro-enterprise managers questions. The inspectors map the situation and draw conclusions on which they can base their decisions.

And then we most often walk around the facility and observe. You can see a lot there too, you can spot inadequacies...yesterday, I was out doing several inspections at car workshops, and in those situations, we focus on lifting and pressure vessels. Have they been inspected or not? There's [also] a lot of chemistry involved here. Do they have an understanding of what chemical products they have? [IP2]

The interviewees frequently mentioned planning, which requires the inspectors to have the organisational skills to manage and conduct their work efficiently. Thus, it appears that planning and organising represent a substantial portion of the work. Inspectors need to plan their cases well to create a balance between the number of cases they are currently handling and the cases they are closing or beginning in order to maintain a reasonable flow. For geographical reasons, they need to plan to visit businesses in the same area at the same time.

It's about managing your cases from beginning to end, so we need to plan and notify people about visits. We should send a letter and inform them about when we'll be visiting and why. You also need to plan out potential visits; if I'm going to make an inspection in [city other than where IP6s workplace is], I try to schedule at least two visits on that day, and we need to prepare for the inspection. [IP6]

The interface between the OSH inspector and the micro-enterprise manager requires the inspector to create a good meeting climate to promote improved SWEM.

The inspectors described how this required them to adjust to different situations, have social skills and make bureaucracy manageable for the micro-enterprise manager.

I think we inspectors become rather well trained at meeting different types of people. Arriving at a smaller company dressed in the latest jeans and blazer...maybe that won't go over too well. You need to adapt a little. [...] Well, to get a good sense of things. [IP11]

In summary, the OSH inspectors expressed the need to be more than just a bureaucrat and to have different interpersonal skills to handle inspections. Although it is difficult, it is necessary to balance bureaucracy and skills. However, the interviewees described some inspections during which they encountered situations where they needed to use non-bureaucratic behaviours and step away from the role of the bureaucratic inspector.

5 Discussion

This study aimed to explore how OSH inspectors perceive themselves as inspectors and their role as bureaucratic regulators as they inspect micro-enterprises. Within the OSH inspectorate literature, little attention has been paid to how OSH inspectors view themselves, their work and their role (Niskanen et al. 2014; Niskanen 2015). To gain a better understanding of the inspection process, expected outcomes and how OSH issues can be improved in micro-enterprises, it is important to understand how inspectors perceive themselves as inspectors (Ibid.). In another study, OSH inspectors described differences between inspecting micro-enterprises and larger enterprises (with more than 50 employees) (Hagqvist et al. 2020), which also seemed to influence how they viewed themselves as inspectors and how they perceived their work. Three categories emerged from an analysis of 11 interviews with Swedish OSH inspectors: *one inspector, many roles*; *interactions with micro-enterprise managers*; and *exercise the profession as an inspector*. All three categories reflect *the balancing act* that inspectors face in their work.

Bureaucratic inspectors are shaped by the SWEAs work description of OSH inspectors, OSH laws and regulations, the initial training received from the SWEA

and support from colleges, lawyers and managers. The role of bureaucratic inspectors legitimises them as governmental decision makers, gives them power to enforce civilians to follow regulations and puts them on the front line of regulatory activities (Lipsky 2010; Hupe et al. 2016). As SLBs, OSH inspectors should be compliant to the bureaucracy they represent and the laws they enforce through inspections (Johansson 2006). However, they must also be sensitive to the contexts and situations they encounter in the field (Bruhn 2006). The interviewed OSH inspectors experienced that regulating micro-enterprises is a balancing act, and they expressed sensitivity to both context and situation, as proposed by Bruhn (2006). In fact, the inspectors mentioned a number of personal skills or roles that they felt were needed to regulate various heterogeneous micro-enterprises specifically. Previous research shows that micro-enterprise managers are heterogeneously related to health and working conditions (Bujacz et al. 2019). The OSH inspectors strongly emphasised the need to be able to read a situation, observe a context and make adjustments when inspecting micro-enterprises. Meanwhile, they expressed difficulty in simultaneously being compliant with their role as bureaucratic inspectors and being able to adjust to the specific contexts of various micro-enterprises. This difficulty was expressed through feelings of guilt and their self-perception as evil bureaucrats. It was viewed as a hindrance in interacting with micro-enterprises, and as a result, the inspectors modified some requirements of the legislation and work regulations. This difficulty represents one dimension of the balancing act: complying with their role as SLBs while simultaneously relying on and using appropriate personal skills to read a situation and make adjustments. While this is within the role of inspectors (Bruhn 2006; Johansson 2006; May and Wood, 2003), the interviews revealed that inspectors felt this was particularly true and difficult when meeting micro-enterprises. Having difficulties balancing different roles can also have implication on how their legitimate power is expressed and used. For instance, Hagqvist et al. (2020) found that an over use power was sometimes expressed and micro-enterprise managers were belittle and described as unknowledgeable.

Statistics about the number of Swedish micro-enterprises and the number of performed inspections each year point at that many of these enterprises do not have visits from SWEA and their inspectors. OSH inspectors, as SLBs, use different enforcement styles to

gain compliance (May and Wood 2003; Johansson 2006). In choosing their enforcement style, inspectors on the one hand develop routines to structure and control their interaction with the business and on the other hand the need to balance facilitation and formalism (Ibid.). One way to create control is to structure the time, location and context in which the interaction with the micro-enterprise manager occurs (Johansson 2006). Thus, some degree of familiarity with the situation is required for these structures and routines to be successful (Woodcock 2014). OSH inspectors experience inspections of micro-enterprises as different from inspections of larger companies (Hagqvist et al. 2020). Although all interviewees had experiences of inspecting micro-enterprises, they still seemed unfamiliar with the inspection situation and how to interact with micro-enterprise managers at these enterprises; thus, they lacked routines to build the needed structure. One reason for this could be the heterogeneity across micro-enterprises, making it more difficult to gain the familiarity needed. Another reason could be that policies, instructions and manuals focus mainly on larger companies. Essentially, the unfamiliarity expressed in the interviews seemed to cause them to feel imbalanced in their role as SLBs, which could influence the levels of and balance between facilitation and formalism in their enforcement styles. If an inspector's enforcement style is inconsistent, there is a risk that the micro-enterprise manager will be less compliant with OSH legislation and less willing to change to comply with the legislation (May and Wood 2003). The inspectors in this study expressed insecurity in relation to their own role, their interaction with micro-enterprise managers and the SWEA and the bureaucracy. The balancing act that arises from role insecurity might be the result of SLBs not having appropriate inspection models, regulatory methods or enforcement styles that focus on micro-enterprises specifically.

For OSH inspectors to be able to adjust their enforcement style to micro-enterprises, they need support from suitable inspection models, guidance on levels of facilitation and formalism, more familiarity with the situation of micro-enterprises and suitable regulations that support an appropriate level of discretion. The work of inspectors is sustained by agency behaviour. That is, the SWEA or the government establishes the framework for inspections through, for instance, the Work Environment Act and by mandating inspections of specific industries, groups or issues, which in turn influence

discretion levels and enforcement styles (Nielsen 2016). Bruhn and Frick (2011) describe this as the supervision chain, which begins with state objectives and ends with the work environment at the regulated entities. Bruhn and Frick (2011) evaluate the incorporation of the psychosocial work environment into regulations and conclude that as the SWEA is the entity responsible for connecting the links in the regulating chain, it must also be a key driver of change in inspection models and regulatory methods. Thus, changes must involve the entire regulation chain and include the experiences of OSH inspectors and micro-enterprises.

5.1 Methodological discussion

When interpreting our results, some consideration must be given to the relatively small sample size, and the findings must therefore be interpreted with caution. Although the sample size selected by the SWEA was relatively small and some of the interviews are relatively small, the material was rich (Fusch and Ness 2015), saturated (Guest et al. 2006) and was effective and straight to the point. However, when interpreting the results, the fact that the participants were selected by the SWEA should be considered, as this could have had implications for their narratives. The participants might have been reluctant to talk freely about their role in relation to the SWEA.

The study participants all worked in the Swedish context. 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). The strength of the study is that the inspectors represented different geographical areas in Sweden and varied in terms of gender, age, education and experience.

To enhance trustworthiness, the analysis process and content were continually discussed until consensus was reached. However, it is important to recall that a particular interpretation is one of many possible interpretations.

6 Conclusions

The overall finding was that OSH inspectors, when working with micro-enterprises, experience their role as a balancing act between aspects related to the bureaucratic inspection of the working environment and the

provision of information and support to the micro-enterprise owner. The inspectors seemed sometimes to feel astray about their own behaviour as a result of encountering unfamiliar situations when regulating micro-enterprises. Previous studies have acknowledged the importance of modelling enforcement styles in accordance with the context. The conclusion from the interviews with the OSH inspectors is that they may lack the tools and support needed to design relevant inspection models and enforcement styles. This in turn creates a discrepancy between being compliant and gaining compliance in relation to the micro-enterprise and between being an SLB and being a flexible inspector. The continuous balancing acts of inspectors can have a negative impact on micro-enterprise managers' adherence to OSH issues and to laws and regulations.

The implication of this finding is that it is important for OSH inspectors to have specific competences and skills related to the business context, working environment and work organisation when performing inspections of micro-enterprises. Important competence areas include specific physical and psychosocial working conditions, health-promoting leadership and models for a systematic working environment adapted for micro-enterprises. It is also important to develop the inspectors' pedagogical skills and enforcement styles in relation to micro-enterprises. These circumstances should be considered in professional educational programmes and when the SWEA recruits and educates inspectors. As suggested by Bruhn (2009), an 'academisation' and 'feminisation' among Swedish inspectors can lead to stronger team approaches among inspectors and more interest in psychological OSH issues.

However, inspectors cannot be drivers of necessary changes in relation to micro-enterprises; that responsibility lies at the organisational 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 and other consultants that have specific knowledge about conditions in micro-enterprises and the ability to deliver adapted measures for this enterprise group. Another implication is that a need exists to develop specific models for SWEM in micro-enterprises and adjusted working environment provisions for this group. It is also important to increase micro-enterprise managers' competence regarding working environment issues. For example, OSH issues can be integrated in business start-up training and in

other educational activities related to micro-enterprises. Based on our findings, it seems that the inspectors interact with the employees and safety delegates to a low degree. The fact that the Working Environment Act and several provisions points at the importance of employee involvement, it is important to develop inspection models that consider such involvements. In addition, it is necessary to prioritise this enterprise group in the future and to focus on specific sectors with demanding physical and psychosocial working conditions.

For future studies, more quantitative and qualitative research identifying the relevant inspection models and enforcement styles in micro-enterprises is suggested. Moreover, the work environment of OSH inspectors and the support they need in their work require further research attention. Of importance is also to study different effects of OSH interventions using a longitudinal design.

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Compliance with ethical standards

Conflict of interest The Swedish Work Environment Authority funded the project but did not have any impact on the content of the interviews.

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