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# Complaining about occupational safety and health: a barrier for collaboration between managers and workers on construction sites

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## ABSTRACT

Collaborative safety practices between construction site managers and workers are considered essential in occupational safety and health (OSH). However, establishing joint OSH engagement between managers and workers is still a challenge. Little is known about how managers and workers' "complaining" about OSH affects collective OSH action and the quality of manager-worker relations. Drawing on an understanding of complaining as "boundary work", this study empirically analyses how managers and workers' verbalisations either downplay (collaboration) or build (demarcation) boundaries. Interviews and observations between managers and workers were carried out on a construction project in Denmark to identify why and how complaining is used. A typology consisting of four "complaining" mechanisms was developed, highlighting their associated relational dynamics: (1) Shifting responsibility for advancing OSH, (2) Defending oneself against strained working conditions, (3) Dealing strategically with criticism, and (4) Blaming other occupational groups. Complaining about OSH as boundary work – both collaboration and demarcation – between managers and workers furthers professional fragmentation and conflicts OSH collaboration, yet it occurs in a "safe space" for professional disagreement. We suggest that these communicational aspects and associated relational dynamics should be an area of increased focus in order to promote managers and workers' OSH collaboration.

## Introduction

It's important, if you have a process you want to speed up, and we all need to be so busy, then we need to have something proper to walk on. [ … ] it's grotesque that they [managers] continually put pressure on us, we have to lift and carry (heavy objects) and have all these things with us, and it has to be done in half the time - but they can't provide us with proper stairs to get up into an apartment. They can't give us a proper path to walk on, nor a safe place to walk without risking being run over [by vehicles]. This is really, really bad … and it's not something that promotes morale out here. (Interview, worker)

Complaining, the act of expressing dissatisfaction or frustration about someone or something (Boxer 1993, Kowalski 2002), is a common feature of everyday group and organisational life (Pouthier 2017) and a widespread phenomenon in the building sector (Styhre 2010, 2012). The above-mentioned quote is

taken from an interview with a construction worker, who complained about unsafe on-site work conditions, insinuating that site management is not collaborating properly regarding the establishment of occupational safety and health (OSH). This article scrutinises this statement by investigating how issues of OSH collaboration between construction site managers and workers are linked to the practice of complaining. Previous research on complaining stressed the relational and emotional importance of these seemingly mundane and recurrent communicative activities, both for the quality of social relations at work and for the collective identification in teams (Weeks 2004, Styhre 2010, Pouthier 2017). Yet, surprisingly little academic consideration has been given to the practice of complaining on construction sites (Styhre 2010); particularly in understanding how complaining may or may not develop collaborative safety practices between managers and workers. This triggers questions regarding

mechanisms capable of fostering the development of more positive emergent conditions for OSH collaboration. Thus, it is argued that complaining may be an important social activity to build "a shared ground for continual collective action" (Styhre 2010, p. 801), and thereby improve OSH collaboration between managers and workers.

The construction industry is a particular interesting context for examining how construction professionals' complaining practices are linked to OSH collaboration, due to a fragmented professional landscape (Fellows and Liu 2012). Construction projects are replete with various boundaries or distinctions between different participants' knowledge claims, resources and practices, concerning what is and is not safe and how to achieve safety goals. Safety knowledge is understood as something dynamic, diverse and sometimes contested (Pottier *et al.* 2003, Antonsen 2009, Hale and Borys 2013). Previous studies on safety climate and safety leadership pinpoint how managers' communication and behaviour affects workers' safety perception (Zohar and Luria 2003, Zohar 2003, Kines *et al.* 2010) and how safety leadership or managers' ability to gain subordinates' trust and respect (Wu *et al.* 2016) is associated with positive safety practices (Grill *et al.* 2019). Thus, enhancing manager-worker relations is imperative to improve collaborative safety practices. OSH collaboration is both organised by formal structures based on legal frameworks (European Agency for Safety and Health at Work 2018), and practiced informally in everyday work. Although several studies recognise the importance of OSH collaboration, and have provided theoretical insights relevant for understanding manager-worker relations and their significance for OSH practices (Paap 2006, Thiel 2012, Ajslev *et al.* 2013, Andersen *et al.* 2015, Grytnes *et al.* 2020), OSH collaboration between managers and workers is described as conflicted (*Grytnes et al.* 2020). For instance, Grytnes *et al.* (2020) exemplified the difficulties in establishing collaborative safety practices by exploring resistance and distrust among the workforce. In other research, the manager-worker relation is described as an "oppositional relationship" (Andersen *et al.* 2015, p. 646), where construction workers identify themselves in opposition to their managers and employers (Paap 2006, Thiel 2012, Andersen *et al.* 2015). Managers and workers' oppositional relationship makes an analysis of how complaining is used to tackle and negotiate distinctions between these two groups plausible.

There is a lack of insight on why and how such distinctions regarding OSH are negotiated in order to enhance the quality of OSH collaboration. From a boundary work perspective, this article aims to analyse the mechanisms of construction site managers and workers' complaining practices, and their implications for the manager-worker relations and OSH collaboration. Thus, in search for promoting OSH collaboration within construction management, the case of managers and workers' complaining practices may yield new insights precisely because previous research suggests that OSH collaboration is challenged in such professional fragmented and contested work settings (Antonsen 2009; Fellows and Liu 2012; Grytnes *et al.* 2020). A focus on managers and workers' boundary work is both theoretically interesting and practically relevant, as there is a lack of insight into how occupational groups construct their boundaries and distinctions (Battilana 2011, Bucher *et al.* 2016), and thereby purposefully influence such distinctions (Lamont and Molnár 2002, Phillips and Lawrence 2012). A deeper understanding of how complaining as boundary work is played out, may elucidate the establishment of collaborative OSH practices and improve construction projects' coordination work in general.

In order to discuss the premises for OSH collaboration and manager-worker relations, the empirical results from a qualitative case study of a construction site will be involved. Drawing on the concept of boundary work (Langley *et al.* 2019), we conceptualise complaining as "purposeful individual and collective effort to influence the social, symbolic, material and temporal boundaries, demarcations and distinctions affecting groups, occupations and organizations" (2019, pp. 4–5). In short, the empirical analyses focus on the group level, and investigate managers and workers' purposeful efforts to influence their distinctions by using complaining practices. We contribute to the literature on complaining in organisations and boundary work by elaborating a processual constructivist view of boundaries as continually becoming (Langley and Tsoukas 2017), and as subject to human agency which is not always reflected in concepts of boundary spanning or boundary objects (Bresnen 2010, Fellows and Liu 2012).

The study reveals how managers and workers influence their boundaries through four complaining mechanisms concerning OSH: (1) Shifting responsibility, (2) Defending oneself against strained working conditions, (3) Dealing strategically with criticism and (4) Blaming other occupational groups. Both groups use complaining as a mechanism to downplay differences within their respective occupational group, thereby enhancing intra-group collaboration. However,

workers attempted at times to downplay boundaries towards managers, thereby enhancing collaboration across occupational roles. Yet, both groups mostly used complaining to mobilise and sustain differences between managers and workers, and thereby complaining widened inter-hierarchical division. Thus, we demonstrate that complaining is an important social activity on construction sites (Styhre 2010). Yet, instead of improving poor working conditions, it reinforces the "oppositional relationship" between managers and workers in relation to OSH (Andersen et al. 2015, p. 646).

This paper is structured as follows. First, we review the (scarce) literature on complaining in organisations before the analytical framework and methodology of the study is accounted for. Second, the empirical study is presented, followed by a discussion of the findings and implications for both site managers and workers' collaborative safety practices and OSH research in the construction industry more broadly.

## Theoretical frameworks

### Complaining in an organisational context

Within the literature on psychology, complaining at work provides an important coping mechanism through which employees can "mentally disengage and emotionally distance themselves from troubling or threatening situations that come with their job" (Pouthier 2017, p. 755). Here, complaining is known for its tension relief function (e.g. Kowalski 2002). Through complaining or "the exchange of plaintive and commiserative lines, organisational members communicate displeasure or annoyance with a past or ongoing action or situation" (Pouthier 2017, p. 755). Employees use complaints to manage stressful and difficult situations they regularly are confronted with at work (Weeks 2004, Pouthier 2017).

Beyond its psychological tension relief function, the literature on organisational culture suggests that complaining is important in creating and sustaining a sense of community and team engagement (e.g. Weeks 2004, Fine and DeSoucey 2005, Styhre 2010, Pouthier 2017). Styhre (2010) argues that the practice of complaining among construction professionals is "setting up the boundaries for what is a shared ground for further reflection and joint collaborations" (2010, p. 798). Complaining is also a source of humour (see e.g. Hatch and Ehrlich 1993, Rodrigues and Collinson 1995, Baarts 2009, Westwood and Johnston 2013). These previous studies have conceptualised complaining as interaction ritual in a bank (Weeks

2004), identification ritual within teams (Pouthier 2017), and as ideology for a whole industry (Styhre 2010). Common for these approaches is that complaining operates on the level of the subconscious, and is "largely inaccessible for commonsense thinking and self-reflexive endeavours" (Styhre 2010, p. 800).

Another approach is the concept of "boundary work," adding the notion of work as "involving ongoing activities or sets of practices" (Langley et al. 2019, p. 5). Thereby, this approach views complaining as subject to human agency by conceptualising boundaries or distinctions regarding OSH as purposeful created, maintained, blurred and transformed by managers and workers (Langley et al. 2019).

### Conceptualising organisational complaining as boundary work

In this study, we draw on existing literature dealing with the notion of boundary work (Langley et al. 2019) to conceptualise complaining and analyse manager-worker relations, and to investigate implications of this boundary work for OSH collaboration. The term boundary work was first coined by Gieryn (1983) to explain the discursive practices of scientists seeking to distinguish themselves from non-scientists. In more recent work, and in line with the "practice turn" in organisation and management theory (Schatzki et al. 2001, Nicolini 2012), boundary work is the "purposeful individual and collective effort to influence the social, symbolic, material and temporal boundaries, demarcations and distinctions affecting groups, occupations and organizations" (Langley et al. 2019, pp. 4–5). In contested and professionally fragmented work settings such as construction sites, symbolic boundaries refer to "socially constructed interpretative distinctions concerning concepts" (2019, p. 5), such as distinctions between what is and is not safe, resembling with different participants' differing safety understandings. Symbolic distinctions are often attached to social boundaries including certain people (e.g. higher-status professions such as engineers or managers holding higher-status occupational roles) and excluding others (e.g. lower-status professions such as craftsmen or workers holding lower-status occupational roles). Other boundaries are physical referring to the "spatial separation" (Langley et al. 2019, p. 5) including the role of materiality (Hernes 2004), for instance the distinction between workers' physical work on the tools outside, and managers' administrative work inside the site office. As such, boundary work views complaining as a purposeful effort to influence such distinctions,

and negotiate OSH collaboration between the occupational group of workers and the occupational group of managers.

The concept of boundary work helps to develop a deeper understanding of how participants from different occupational groups purposefully negotiate distinctions in relation to OSH, in order to downplay or create and maintain differences. Thus, boundary work entails two broad dynamics: *(1) boundary-downplaying or collaboration,* and *(2) boundary-making or demarcation*. Demarcation refers to "how people construct, defend or extend boundaries to distinguish themselves from others" (Langley *et al.* 2019, p. 8). This is documented in studies of how groups do boundary work to define legitimate membership and exclude others, for example employer brand managers' descriptions of their work protecting an ideal employer brand (Santos and Eisenhardt 2005, Mikes 2011, Edlinger 2015, Ashuri and Bar-Ilan 2016). This is also documented in studies of how professions do boundary work to defend, extend or maintain their jurisdiction, for example radiologists versus other medical specialists (Allen 2000, Burri 2008, Hazgui and Gendron 2015). Scholars have also suggested that higher-status professions tend to defend existing boundaries, while lower-status professions strive to change them (Abbott 1988; Battilana 2011). Boundary work as demarcation (boundary-making) corresponds with discussions about the construction industry's professional fragmentation, and the inherent challenge of differences in perspectives, goals and priorities in cross-boundary work settings as to what safety is, or is not, and who has the jurisdiction to act. Applied to the manager-worker relation it is assumed that the group of managers, holding a higher-status occupational role, may tend to defend their jurisdiction.

Some studies consider the term boundary work in a broader sense that addresses its relevance for collaboration (Faraj and Yan 2009, Ybema *et al.* 2012, Quick and Feldman 2014, Meier 2015, Lindberg *et al.* 2017). Collaboration emerges as people work in interdependent, cross-boundary settings where they cannot achieve goals alone. In the construction industry boundary work as collaboration (boundary-downplaying) is reflected in the discussions about OSH collaboration as a negotiation (Grytnes *et al.* 2020), and refers to "how boundaries are negotiated, accommodated, aligned and downplayed in order to get work done" (Langley *et al.* 2019, p. 26). The conceptualisation of complaining as collaboration (boundary-downplaying) corresponds with an understanding of OSH as positioned, and sometimes contested (Pottier *et al.* 2003,

Antonsen 2009, Hale and Borys 2013). Applied to the manager-worker relation, it is assumed that the group of workers, holding a lower-status occupational role, may strive to downplay distinctions. Hence, boundary work also contributes to the maintenance or change of power relations among groups (Allen 2000, Bucher *et al.* 2016).

The concept of boundary work is relevant for this study due to its focus on the dynamics of collaboration (boundary-downplaying) and demarcation (boundary-making) that may influence work practices, learning and effectiveness in and around organisations (Zietsma and Lawrence 2010, Yagi and Kleinberg 2011, Mørk *et al.* 2012, Lindberg *et al.* 2017). Thus, understanding the phenomenon of complaining as demarcation and/or collaboration serves to understand its relational dynamics within organisations, and its consequences for the manager-worker relation and OSH collaboration. Our theoretical framework, then, combines the literatures on complaining and boundary work using the notions of collaboration and demarcation to conduct our analysis of the manager-worker relation.

## Methods

### Research setting and participants

The present study is based on a qualitative single case study design (Stake 1995, 2005), which is particularly suitable to investigate why and how complaining as boundary work influences the quality of OSH collaboration and social relations at the workplace. The case is a construction project in the greater Copenhagen area in Denmark, based on a turnkey contract employing four site-managers and one part-time safety manager (all managers were male, Danes and working for the main contractor), and approx. 50 workers (all male; a combination of Danish and migrant workers) from 13 different sub-contractors. The 13 sub-contractors delivered services within carpentry, joinery, masonry, plumbing and sewer work, electrical, insulation, painting, roofing, earth and concrete, scaffolding, flooring and installing special designed wooden walls. Workers worked in small crews consisting of three to eight people. Both the crew foremen and crew leaders (both considered as "workers" in this paper) were mainly observed working alongside with their worker colleagues. As the construction project at times demanded additional staff, sub-contractors hired temporary workers for special job tasks, of which many workers were migrant workers. A high turnover rate affected the construction project's formal safety organisation (i.e. a joint safety committee

with representation of managers and workers). Based on an explicit legal OSH framework (European Agency for Safety and Health at Work 2018), construction work is organised through formal structures that foster OSH collaboration, for instance an internal safety organisation like the joint safety committee. The establishment of a safety organisation within all companies with more than 9 employees is therefore legally bound (Dyreborg 2011). Management communicated with workers from sub-contractors via several weekly on-site meetings, including production meetings, foremen meetings and safety (OSH) meetings. At these meetings, managers and workers could communicate and coordinate the building process. Very rarely, however, had the work crews chosen safety representatives, who were to participate regularly in safety meetings, which thus diminished workers' influence to improve OSH.

## Data collection

The empirical data draw on ethnographic methods (Pink *et al.* 2012) which were applied differently by previous ethnographic studies (Thiel 2007, Baarts 2009, Löwstedt 2015, Jia *et al.* 2017, Grytnes *et al.* 2020). For this particular case, these studies inspired our fieldwork collecting observational data, interviews with construction managers and workers and archival data (reports from safety meeting and on-site inspection rounds) over three months in 2018 illuminating daily practices and situated interactions. In particular, Gherardi and Nicolini (2002) provided strong support for studying daily practices and social interactions at construction sites. Therefore, several site visits were carried out to enable 50 hours of observation of situated social interactions and (everyday) communication between managers and workers. During these visits, data were collected by the first author, in the form of observations *in situ* (on site) of how the managers and workers interacted with each other, in both formal and informal conversations. The multiple site visits varied from three hours per day, to at times two full workdays (8 hours each) in a row for three months, thus generating extensive field notes. The first author took part in formal safety and production meetings as well as site walkarounds with the on-site safety manager, and was able to walk around the site freely, talking to and observing what was going on amongst the managers and workers. An open research approach was adopted, where the researcher openly clarified OSH was the topic of investigation. Compared to previous ethnographic studies (Thiel 2007, Baarts 2009, Löwstedt 2015, Grytnes *et al.* 2020) the researcher's

role in this case was that of a visitor and observer, and only in very few instances did it involve engagement in the daily work. The researcher regularly talked informally with site managers in the office, at lunch, during on-site walkarounds and in meetings. This alternating between managers and workers was important to study empirical examples of complaining instances, and how complaining fostered and inhibited safety.

After the observations, semi-structured interviews with the site managers and workers were conducted, which provided an opportunity for the researcher to refer to actual daily practices, receive immediate feedback on observations, and to verify interpretations. Six semi-structured interviews were conducted with the entire line management, including one foreman, three site managers, one project manager and one safety site manager. All interviews were conducted on-site by the first author and lasted 40–95 min. The interview guide dealt with open-ended questions about daily work tasks, and participants were asked to exemplify situations where they collaborated and experienced contradictions. Interviews were used to explore the perception and management of differences and conflict in the management team. Additionally, one focus group interview was conducted with five members of two crews working as carpenters and joiners. Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

## Data analysis

Data were analysed using a preliminary conceptual framework, and from there on, iteratively developing the analytical categories. Complaining was not initially part of the research focus; its significance emerged through observations as to what was special and surprising during fieldwork. A sense of opposition between managers and workers made the observations and analysis on the group level of situated social interactions between the groups plausible. We began the investigation aiming to understand how managers and workers tackle their differences and looked for evidence of boundary work (Langley *et al.* 2019) in social interactions. As the study proceeded, new issues arose, and we pursued new possibilities as we followed up on situations the first author had observed. Among the practices identified in interactions, complaining stood out by its frequency of occurrence, and workers addressed their complaining mostly towards the group of managers and vice versa. Therefore, we focussed our attention to the discursive and subtle practices of complaining between managers and workers (including workers

from the different sub-contractors and one work crew employed by the main contractor). Field notes from observations and transcriptions from recorded interviews were analysed to produce knowledge about the situations in which complaining about OSH developed, the different purposes of complaining (complaining mechanisms), and their impact on fostering or hampering collaborative safety practices (collaboration or demarcation). The transcribed interviews and field notes were read through closely, and the data material were coded in NVivo12 according to this theme.

As the first analytical step, we marked all incidents of complaining identified in the mass of data, with complaining incidents being distinguishable by expressions of dissatisfaction and a tone of plaintiveness and frustration (Pouthier 2017). As a second analytical step, we read through all the resulting 412 complaining incidents, identifying recurrent topics and selecting only complaining incidents concerning OSH-related issues. In the third analytical step, we analysed the different purposes of managers and workers' complaining when addressing OSH issues. Styhre (2010), who suggests three complaining functions ("building a community", "to shrug off criticism" and "to cope with uncertainty" (2010, p. 800), inspired our analyses as we looked for complaining mechanisms in our data. As we draw on the concept of boundary work (Langley et al. 2019), our final analytical step was aimed at identifying how these complaining mechanisms were purposeful efforts to downplay or create boundaries between managers and workers. Thus, the following theoretical concepts were selected to conduct the analysis: demarcation (boundary-making) and collaboration (boundary-downplaying). We analysed complaining as boundary work that effected the manager-worker relation in two ways: First, as verbalizations of differences that may maintain or create boundaries (demarcation). Secondly, complaining as boundary work effects the manager-worker relation through verbalisations of similarities that may unify participants, and thus downplay distinctions (collaboration). These analytical tools were used to understand complaining mechanisms' relational dynamics better and their consequences for the manager-worker relation and OSH collaboration.

## Results

In this section, we initially present the various boundaries existing between managers and workers. We then present complaining in relation to OSH as serving four mechanisms, both supporting intra-group relations and constraining inter-group relations between managers and workers. We have categorised the identified four complaining mechanisms into two dynamics of complaining: collaboration or boundary-downplaying and demarcation or boundary-making. Each mechanism and their relational dynamics are exemplified by observational field notes and interview quotes.

### Boundaries between managers and workers

Both on-site construction managers and workers faced many challenges due to strenuous working conditions and professional fragmentations. OSH legislation (European Agency for Safety and Health at Work 2018, Arbejdstilsynet/Danish Working Environment Authority 2020) presupposes that managers and workers work together in order to coordinate the total process of the different construction project stages, yet site management dedicated minimal time to cross-boundary OSH coordination and problem solving. The challenge of differences in knowledge, practices, priorities and economic interests was always present in this cross-boundary and contested work setting, with managers and workers encouraged to professionally and/or organisationally construct safety in diverse, and potentially conflicting ways and to prioritise different goals. This contested work setting fostered various boundaries or demarcations between managers and workers, which were of physical, symbolic and social nature. Our analyses showed that complaining in relation to OSH incidents most often addressed "the other occupational group", referring to distinctions between managers and workers' domains of knowledge, their hierarchical status and their work performance. Managers characterised workers in general as "lazy", and depersonalised them as "arms and legs", who could not "be trusted", and distanced themselves from OSH-related work as not being a management task. Whereas workers told us, those managers were "incompetent", "lack knowledge to handle a construction project", as they were "hiding behind their desks", instead of being outside, and distancing themselves from OSH-related work as being a management task. This cultivated a tighter affinity within the participants' respective group than between these two groups.

### A typology – four complaining mechanisms about OSH

The observed complaining incidents were centred on recurring themes, occurring in situations where the following issues became the topic of conversation: (a)

**Table 1.** Typology of complaining and associated relational dynamics.

| | Associated relational dynamics of complaining | |
|---|---|---|
| Complaining mechanisms | Collaboration *Boundary-downplaying* | Demarcation *Boundary-making* |
| Shifting responsibility for advancing OSH | | Others are supposed to act; Fosters inertia |
| Defending oneself against strained working conditions | Bonding with own occupational group addressing shared concerns | Disengaging & distancing oneself from threatening situations by expressing anxiety and stress |
| Dealing strategically with criticism | Identification with own occupational group | Safeguarding one's own professional standards; Brushing off allegations |
| Blaming other occupational groups | Identification with own occupational group | Safeguarding jurisdiction against other occupational groups & own professional standards |

specific OSH risks e.g. lack of clear access paths, (b) challenging working conditions e.g. tight schedules and uncertain work tasks, (c) strained working relations, (d) low control over work demands, and (e) the other occupational group (managers versus workers). In the following we propose a typology of four mechanisms (see Table 1) that complaining may have, providing details on the recurring topics that both managers and workers drew upon, and analysing how collaboration and demarcation is accomplished through these complaining mechanisms.

### Shifting responsibility for advancing OSH

Complaining serves as a mechanism that may be used to shift responsibility for advancing OSH onto the other group (i.e. workers pointed at managers and vice versa). Workers repeatedly complained in an intense tone about dangerous and challenging working conditions, e.g. in situations where too many different work crews shared the same work area, scaffolding was blocking building entries or exits, or where on-site access roads were lacking. The most intense complaining incidents targeted site management, with whom workers were frequently disagreeing as to the best course of action for OSH, as exemplified in the following quote:

> It is totally grotesque that they have been allowed to do so [not provide safe access paths]. Their stairs for accessing the apartment are simply too high. They'll say 'Well, you'll just have to lift your legs five centimetres higher, right?' But if you walk on large plasterboards in and out of apartments, then you'll have pain in your hips when you get home, because you have to take that extra high stair. And the [makeshift] stairs are also loose, they are just laid there, so that they sometimes slide to the one side or the other when you walk on them …, and scaffolding is set up blocking the entrance. (Interview, worker)

This complaining incident addressed specific OSH issues like inaccessible workspaces and slippery stairs,

and may initially be perceived as an instance of "tension relief" (Kowalski 2002) or "handling difficult situations" (Pouthier 2017). However, at the same time, it is an example of boundary work (Langley et al. 2019), as the worker, through his expression of frustration, demarcated himself against site-management by pointing out managers' responsibility for the non-ergonomic workspace layout, as "their stairs" are too high. Complaining may therefore serve as a mechanism to shift responsibility for OSH-promoting activities onto the group of managers. Through complaining, the worker distances himself from managers' expertise, as managers' decisions to use certain stairs are described as "grotesque", indicating that managers lack an understanding of workers' challenges in entering buildings, and therefore do not act responsibly, even though OSH-promoting activities fall under managements jurisdiction. Complaining thus reveals a physical and social demarcation between managers and workers. Workers doing heavy work outside are the ones who potentially suffer physically from risky working conditions, and they lack the capacity to change the workspace layout, as their hierarchical position and their power demarcate them from that of managers.

On the other hand, managers regularly complained in a mild tone about strained working conditions, as they told us that their own "work is constantly interrupted", and that they had to manage complex and uncertain working conditions due to ongoing changes in organising the work at the site. On the one hand, they had to work within a tight budget, and on the other hand they had open business contracts with sub-contractors that pressured them to "hire whom they could get", while unpaid bills from sub-contractors piled up on their desks. Managers blamed the tight time schedule and high turnover among the workforce, forcing them to compromise their

professionalism, as the following conversation between managers illustrates:

> Manager 1: We have such a high turnover among people out here, we don't have a culture … [is interrupted]
>
> Manager 2 [interrupting]: There is no shared sense of responsibility. We probably won't be able to develop a culture. But we should probably be able to have that sense of responsibility, right?
>
> Manager 3 [in an accusatory tone]: We haven't held the start-up meetings we need. That is, [colleague's name] did it a lot in the beginning. Every time new people came, they had to pass by [colleague's name] and go through the site-introduction process, or at least an excerpt of it.
>
> Manager 1 [shaking his head]: But we can't achieve this at all now.
>
> Manager 3 [looking at the table]: And that's also a big mistake. (Field notes, managers)

In this complaining situation, managers at first glance expressed their frustration over the lack of a "shared sense of responsibility" among the workers – a "complaining over difficult situations" (Pouthier 2017). Managers in general described not having the capacity to bond with ever-changing work crews in order to develop a shared sense of "we"-ness, and a shared understanding of being mutually responsible for the construction project's success. Manager 3 reminded his colleagues of their responsibility towards the workforce, and that they did not live up to it, which manager 1 disclaimed, blaming the tight time schedule. Here, complaining enables boundary-making, and with that the shifting of responsibility onto working conditions and circumstances such as the tight time schedule and workers' lack of shared responsibility.

Complaining exchanges referred recurrently to the tense manager-worker relations, as workers often complained in an intense tone about breakdowns in communication, whereas managers addressed workers' carelessness at work. Both groups indicated a lack of trust towards each other, and a lack of confidence in the other groups' expertise and willingness to support OSH. Workers jointly complained about managers' miscommunicating and a lack of information needed for their work progression, as the following quote illustrates:

> Worker 1 [shaking his head]: I think it's frustrating […] to have to raise a question over there [pointing his head at the site-management's office hut] and get answers. I don't think you can always get that. Otherwise, they just tell you that you've already been told, even though you may not have been told.

> Worker 2: Or else, you'll receive [the information in] an email.
>
> Worker 1: To be completely honest, I think it has a lot to do about disclaiming responsibility. (Field notes, workers)

Venting frustration, and seeking to develop solidarity among co-workers (Katriel 1985), workers pointed out that receiving an email did not satisfy their need for information, as it meant that management was neither present nor accessible. Here, complaining enabled demarcation or boundary-making between managers and workers by drawing on differences in professional practice, for instance in using verbal and written communication to exchange information. Whereas managers wrote emails to negotiate demands towards other project participants, workers did not.

The three complaining examples above exemplify complaining as a mechanism enabling the shifting and avoidance of responsibility for advancing OSH activities. Here, complaining serves to construct distinctions between managers and workers and as such nurtures demarcation, whereby the others are supposed to act, but nobody feels obliged to do so, thus fostering inertia.

## Defending oneself against strained working conditions

We also identified complaining as a mechanism that may be used to distance oneself from troubling situations by expressing anxiety and stress. Managers and workers described being exposed to both physically straining and psychologically stressful working conditions, stemming from heavy workloads and organisational demands to meet a tight time schedule. Both managers and workers told us that they worked long hours to catch up with the schedule, "one has to work overtime," "the time schedule cannot be met," and that work was "interrupted." This affected workers' daily work performance directly as "work pace is sped up," affecting them mentally "when one should block out (all other demands) and focus on oneself." Workers commented together on how pressured they felt due to uncertainty, and low control to decide how to accomplish tasks and to prioritise work, as can be seen in the following conversation between crew members from two sub-contractors:

> Carpenter [grimacing]: Three days ago, I was a day ahead of schedule. Now [according to this new schedule] I'm four days behind.
>
> Joiner [in an angry tone]: We are three months behind. From the one day to the next, we are suddenly three months behind schedule. This is what

they [referring to site-management's schedule] came up with yesterday.

Carpenter: It's about you working your arse off until finally you can say, now, now we've caught up. And then … [not finishing sentence].

Joiner [frustrating voice]: And then they come up with something new. (Field notes, workers)

In this complaining situation, workers jointly expressed their frustration over the uncertain work situations strengthening the bonds within the group of workers, as they jointly faced the same situation. This is an example of complaining used as collaboration or boundary-downplaying, as workers from different subcontractors shared concerns, which may have fostered a shared understanding within the social boundary of being a worker (Styhre 2010, Langley *et al.* 2019). Workers not only expressed their frustration, but also developed a sense of "we"-ness. The simultaneous display of irritation and weariness linked the workers together in a companionship of exposure to similar work stressors (Pouthier 2017). In this complaining situation, workers addressed as well site-management as "they come up with something new", demarcating themselves from managers, using verbal cues like "we" (us) and "they" (them). Workers ascribe their experienced uncertain work conditions to managers' handling the time schedule and project coordination, insinuating that managers' jurisdiction to control work processes actually is hampering workers' capacity to influence such uncertainty. "Being behind schedule" is synonymous with doing a poor job, and not being professional. Workers "work their arse off" to stay on time, but cannot win the battle. Here, complaining not only serves for boundary-downplaying or collaboration within the group of workers, but also to demarcate oneself from managers, in order to cope with uncertainty, as workers do not know whether and how they ever will be "on time".

Managers and workers experienced uncertain and ever-changing work tasks on a daily basis, and described this as unpleasant. They met regularly in weekly coordination meetings to organise the upcoming work and to reduce uncertainty. However, workers described these coordination meetings as "useless," and as an attempt to diminish workers' control over work, as the following quote illustrates:

Carpenter: I have the feeling that at those foremen meetings you get reprimanded afterwards, if you said anything.

Joiner [grimacing and nodding]: I think, it's one of the most indifferent events I've been to. (Field notes, workers)

Usually, a manager would lead such a work coordination meeting, presenting the time schedule for the next weeks and cross-checking it with the participating foremen in an attempt to coordinate work, as the following extract from the field notes illustrates:

In the meeting, the manager explains that several different work crews, including carpenters, would start working together on ceilings by the next day. A carpenter reacts amazed, looking around the table as he and several other foremen had not known about the new time schedule. The manager continues his explanations in an agitated tone, pointing at the time schedule: 'You're not on the same page at all.' The meeting room fell quiet, and the carpenter, shaking his head, complains in a hesitant voice: 'I'm sorry. No offense, but all of a sudden I'll need to have almost 70 more men, if we are to follow that.' The other foremen start to laugh in the background, supporting their fellow colleague in questioning the schedule's feasibility. As the manager states clearly: 'Yes. That's right.' the room fell quiet again, and the carpenter, almost speechless, replies: 'That is … no offense, but we can postpone it just a little bit, right? I have to try and see if I can find some more men.' At this point, a second manager - visibly upset - reminds the foremen of their possibility to veto the time schedule: 'This can't come as a shock to you, can it? It's now 14 days since that schedule had been sent out [ … ]. So we have to assume that you can meet it.' (Field notes, coordination meeting)

In this situation, the carpenter complained about the unforeseen amount of work that came with the new time schedule, questioning both the schedules' feasibility, and managers' capacity to plan accordingly. Planning work tasks and communicating future activities are part of managers' responsibilities and their daily practice. The carpenter's complaining about the sudden and increased need for new men was an attempt to expand workers' control over work processes, as the carpenter tries to negotiate managers' knowledge domain, and their jurisdiction to suddenly change the plan. The abovementioned situation is an example of complaining used to downplay existing boundaries between managers and workers as the carpenter insinuates that, compared to the manager, she/he knows the new work demands cannot be achieved in time, and that the sudden change may be a sign of managers' inadequate planning skills. Complaining also enabled the carpenter to deal with uncertainty by distancing himself from this troubling situation. However, complaining brought forth the existing demarcation of power and jurisdiction between managers and worker, as all foremen fell quiet when the manager replied: "Yes. That's right." His answer left no room for further negotiations. The second manager

manifested management's jurisdiction, demarcating themselves from workers, as he referred to the schedule sent by email. Due to workers' different practice domain, using verbal before written communication, the carpenters' control to veto sudden job demands was diminished. Workers described managers' use of the time schedule as legitimation to pressure workers and worsen their working conditions, as they experienced that work crews had to work even faster in order to catch up with the new time schedule. This is thus an example of how complaining serves as a mechanism to defend oneself against strained working conditions by downplaying boundaries towards the other group, and to safeguard one's jurisdiction.

### Dealing strategically with criticism

Complaining serves a mechanism enabling managers and workers to strategically brush off external allegations. The following example shows how managers strategically used complaining to deal with criticism stemming on the one hand from the construction company's internal safety manager, and on the other hand from sub-contractor workers who had contacted the national OSH inspection authority to express their concerns. To illustrate:

> Manager 1: There is no doubt that OSH here on site has been incredibly under press due to lack of time. Had there been a little more time, one would have been better able to fit things in.
>
> Manager 2: There's no doubt that we've had to speed things up, and we've hired more people. There have also been a few accidents, due to several different reasons, which is a sign that it has become a little busier, and more people means more working hours. Then the risks are also theoretically greater.
>
> Manager 3: Plus, you don't know who enters the site. It may be a carpenter, who's just not thinking.
>
> Manager 2: Or a joinery guy who jumps on something that's loose.
>
> Manager 1 [in an insecure tone]: You just don't know people. (Field notes, managers)

Here, complaining may initially be perceived as an instance of tension relief (Kowalski 2002), strengthening the bonds within the group of managers, as they jointly handled the same difficult situation (Pouthier 2017). This is an example of complaining used as collaboration, as managers shared concerns supporting a shared understanding within the social boundaries of their group (Styhre 2010). However, at the same time, it is an example of complaining that serves as a mechanism enabling managers to brush off critique for unpopular decisions that may have resulted in

an accident. They use complaining to justify the work site's accident statistic due to the tight schedule, being busy, and workers' behaviour, rather than being due to their own decisions and behaviour. Thus, managers may maintain that they are doing a good job, even though accidents still occurred. Complaining also enables managers' demarcation towards workers by stating that they do not "know people", indicating that they cannot be trusted, and that managers do not believe in workers' expertise.

Complaining was also used to cope with self-criticism, as managers repeatedly told us about their difficulties in prioritising work tasks, particularly when they had to fulfil several demands, e.g. being both the productive site-manager and the caring safety-manager at the same time, as illustrated in the following:

> Nine times out of ten, they [workers] don't have helmets or vests with them, so we're in the process of buying even more, we've bought ten of each I think. And they're already used up now, so we're going to have to buy some more, because people can't figure out to bring them with them. We could just say 'Well, then you have to go home again and come back with them.' But then just one more day goes by, and we can't do that either. (Interview, manager)

In the abovementioned excerpt, the manager described how his capacity to sanction safety rule violations, e.g. a missing helmet, is diminished by the project's tight time schedule. His professionalism of being a good manager is adhering to production time plans, which conflicts with his professional understanding of being a good manager, meaning to take care of his workers, not allowing them to work without helmets. Here, complaining serves to safeguard one's own professional standards and to brush off self-criticism, as the manager knows it is wrong to let workers work without proper safety equipment. Complaining stresses the distinctions between managers and workers, and as such is used for demarcation. Complaining serves as a mechanism to strategically deal with external criticism, brushing off allegations and safeguarding one's own professional standards, and to deal with self-criticism as an "escape route" to lift the burden of being expected to respond to more criticism (Styhre 2010, p. 801).

### Blaming other occupational groups

Finally, we saw complaining was used as a mechanism to nurture the blaming of the other occupational group, in this case managers blaming workers – and vice versa. The opening quote of the paper illustrates the clear demarcation between managers and workers.

Similarly, the following quote shows the common discursive distinction between managers and workers:

> I receive the summary minutes of the safety meeting and all that, but I don't want to participate in all their [site-management] email correspondence going back and forth, and to be made responsible for something. [ … ] all that legal stuff, they can keep that to themselves, as they are skilled in using it against us. (Interview, worker)

The above excerpt exemplifies how workers demarcated themselves from managers via their different knowledge and practice domains. Workers shared having practical expertise to execute work tasks on site, whereas managers voiced having legal knowledge and administrative skills in doing paper work in the office hut. Workers blamed managers for using email-documentation to control workers' job demands. Managers on the other hand demarcated themselves from workers, pointing out workers' disengagement in safety work, e.g. when workers did not use their possible influence to demand safe working conditions when given the possibility at safety meetings, as "very few actually set demands saying 'I want this and that stated in the summary minutes'". Managers are used to applying written documents to negotiate demands towards other project participants, whereas workers are not. Managers' interpretation of "workers being disengaged" may be justified in managers and workers' different practice domains, and with their differences in practicing safety (Grytnes et al. 2020).

The perception of workers using OSH complaints strategically is common among managers. Managers blamed workers for misusing OSH issues when they were unable to finish the job in time, as the following field note from a management meeting illustrates:

> Manager 1: Could you say that they [workers] use OSH proactively in order to make excuses?
>
> All the other managers [nodding]: Yes.
>
> Manager 1 [emphatically]: That's what they do.
>
> All the other managers: Yes.
>
> Manager 1: So there they have turned the argument around, and then they say 'Well, we can't work here because some steel plates are missing.'
>
> All the other managers [nodding]: Yes.
>
> Safety manager: That's how they use it, or even 'abuse it', yes, but in reality they are actually asking for some form of safety that we should have planned.
>
> Manager 2: But why do they do that?
>
> Manager 3: They just do it, because they're behind schedule. (Field notes, managers)

In the complaining situation described above, managers quickly acknowledged and validated each other's opinions that workers use OSH complaints strategically, signalling that they are experiencing similar situations with workers. On the one hand, complaining enables boundary-downplaying or collaboration, as managers identified themselves with their peers. On the other hand, complaining serves as a mechanism to enable blaming workers, thus permitting managers to justify and safeguard their jurisdiction as good managers, as OSH issues were raised by workers to "proactively" excuse being behind schedule, and not because of real safety issues. However, the safety manager, challenged their understanding, as he reminded managers of their responsibility, which the other managers quickly disclaimed.

Workers on the other hand complained that safety meetings held by management were not useful, and blamed management for using safety meetings and photo documentation of near misses to criticise workers' work performance, as described in the following:

> I don't think I can use them [safety meeting] for anything. A lot of nice pictures have been taken, where they [site-management] point out that this shouldn't happen. And it's usually all of us other workers again. As soon as it comes to access roads [site-management's responsibility] and that 'Arh, we can't do that', and 'I don't have time', and 'I've done it already'. I think it's a joke, and I think it's embarrassing. (Interview, worker)

Workers demarcated themselves from managers, drawing on symbolic and social distinctions between both groups. In the abovementioned quote, the workers complaining about managers' unwillingness to assure safety via access paths was described as "shameful" behaviour, making workers look superior. Here the message can be that certain things do not measure up to worker's expectations, conveying to colleagues that one has high standards. Managers were blamed for misusing photo documentation to criticise workers. Here, complaining reveals managers and workers' different practice domains, and with that their differences in practicing safety.

Complaining about managers' unwillingness enabled workers to maintain a critical position, safeguarding their professional expertise towards managers. Thus, they could continue their work without compromising their professional standards. Complaining served as a mechanism, enabling blaming the other group, and with that maintaining and nurturing existing boundaries.

On the one hand complaining fosters a sense of "we"-ness, through the construction of similarities

within the respective group of managers and workers. We identified complaining as boundary-downplaying or collaboration mostly within the group of managers and that of workers, not between managers and workers. Hence, complaining serves as intra-group collaboration as it enables bonding with their community of practice, addressing shared concerns. However, we showed one example of workers attempting to downplay boundaries towards managers in order to align the work process. Managers hampered this attempt as they defended existing distinctions between both groups. On the other hand, we presented various examples of complaining as demarcation between managers and workers, constraining engaged interactions through the unproductive focussing and handling of occupational differences. Thus, complaining serves mostly as inter-group demarcation, as it widens the inter-hierarchical division.

## Discussion: a view of complaining as boundary work

In the study, we have explored the phenomenon of complaining conceptualised as boundary work (Langley et al. 2019) drawing in the notion of collaboration and demarcation, in order to investigate how OSH collaboration between managers and workers is linked to the practice of complaining, and why and how both groups purposefully influence their boundaries to negotiate OSH collaboration. Complaining as demarcation and/or collaboration serves to understand its relational dynamics within organisations and its consequences for the manager-worker relation and OSH performance. We have shown that complaining paradoxically achieves both collaboration and demarcation, as complaining designed to change working conditions in fact reinforces current conditions, with negative implications for cross-boundary collaborative safety practices.

*Our first key contribution is* that we have identified four complaining mechanisms concerning OSH, and developed a typology highlighting their associated relational dynamics: (1) Shifting responsibility for advancing OSH, (2) Defending oneself against strained working conditions, (3) Dealing strategically with criticism, and (4) Blaming other occupational groups. Through complaining, group members indeed do more than release frustration, they stress their similarities, which mobilises them to deconstruct boundaries and transcend their differences, or it can bring into focus differences in perspectives, goals and status across occupational roles, thus mobilising their differences to maintain boundaries.

Notably, through complaining about safety issues, not only addressing unsatisfying working conditions, but also unsatisfying work relations and existing power structures, workers signal their similarities of experiences in a stressful work environment that requires them to work under time pressure, with low control of work demands, and to safeguard a professional front of "getting things done". These are challenges that all construction workers face, independent of their occupational background. Likewise, managers complaining about unsatisfying working conditions, such as working under time pressure and juggling planned and uncertain ad hoc work demands, stress their similarities of experiences, which all managers face. Thus, complaining serves as boundary work through which both managers and workers construct similarities within their respective group. Here, complaining serves as a tool for collaboration among workers from different sub-contractors, and downplays differences, e.g. being a carpenter or a joiner. Managers alike use complaining as common ground for continual collective action, developing a shared understanding of the social reality, e.g. in how to adequately respond to unsafe working conditions. Our findings correspond with what Styhre (2010) calls "building a community" (2010 p. 800), as complaining provides a shared ground for action within ones occupational group. Complaining together about OSH issues requires an understanding about the social setting and the groups' traditions, and enables "brushing off criticism" (2010, p. 800).

However, complaining as collaboration or boundary-downplaying may support inward-looking perspectives (Bresnen et al. 2003). Strong social ties within one's occupational group may foster demarcation towards other groups, such as between managers and workers. Demarcation (boundary-making) shields the group of workers from potentially important safety information regarding potential hazards or OSH risks that are known outside their group. Complaining fosters demarcation between managers and workers by cultivating symbolic, social and occupational differences in e.g. work performance and status position. Strong status differences hinder the emergence of integrative forms of complaining, in that distance can constrain sympathy and understanding (Weeks 2004). The substantial power differences between managers and workers in our case, suggest that strongly perceived boundaries cannot be managed through complaining. Yet, workers also attempted to downplay existing boundaries towards

managers, e.g. concerning managers' lack of expertise as to how to plan and coordinate work properly, whereas managers blocked this attempt and defended existing distinctions towards workers drawing on their higher-status position and authority claims. Thus, our findings support previous research that higher-status professions tend to defend existing boundaries, while lower-status professions strive to change them (Abbott 1988, Battilana 2011).

Research on safety leadership (Wu *et al*. 2016) has shown that particularly the ability to gain subordinates' trust and respect, being able to motivate behaviour as well as displaying knowledge regarding relevant topics were especially predictive of safety performance and – leadership. Complaining as demarcation constrains such engaged interactions between managers and workers through the unproductive focussing and handling of occupational differences, such as knowledge domain and hierarchical position. Managers' complaining practices may thus hamper workers' participation, and affect their safety perceptions negatively, resulting in workers' distrust, declined motivation to work safely and potentially higher accident rates.

*Our second key contribution* is an elaborated processual constructivist view of boundaries as continually becoming (Langley and Tsoukas 2017), and as subject to human agency. Complaining as boundary work is situated and dynamic, as it is purposefully used to downplay boundaries across occupational roles as an attempt to align collaboration efforts in situations where workers tried to extend control over work processes. Whereas, in situations where managers experienced criticism, wanting to safeguard their professional standards, complaining is used to defend and sustain boundaries. Thus, we argue that complaining as situated collaboration and/or demarcation is theoretically interesting, as it adds to our understanding of why and how occupational groups construct their boundaries (Battilana 2011, Bucher *et al*. 2016), and how they can purposefully influence their differences affecting the manager-worker relation with implications for collaborative safety practices .

## Implications for occupational safety and health

Several studies on OSH management have shown that social support and collaboration are imperative to improve safety climate and participation (e.g. Clarke 2013). Safety climate is an important predictor of safety behaviour and safety outcomes such as accidents and injury (Nahrgang *et al*. 2011, Griffin and

Curcuruto 2016). A focus on managers and workers' boundary work is practically relevant as it may enlighten practitioners with knowledge on why and how both groups purposefully handle and influence their differences regarding OSH, and thereby enhance OSH collaboration. On a more practical note, we propose applying our complaining typology when performing analyses of safety barriers or preparing safety interventions. We point out the importance of employing communication and problem solving skills to nurture social awareness among managers, as safety leadership may improve when managers are sensitised to understand workers and peers' needs and expectations expressed through complaining for organisational learning. For instance, managers' communication and behaviours affect workers' safety perceptions (Zohar 2003, Zohar and Luria 2003, Kines *et al*. 2010), and transformational leadership behaviour (Bass *et al*. 1996) is associated with observations of positive safety practices (Grill *et al*. 2019). Thus, downplaying boundaries across occupational roles may be supported through transformational leadership behaviour and improved safety climate.

Complaining about safety is legitimate, and seems to be broadly accepted by both managers and workers as "the platform" to express all sorts of complaints. OSH as a recurring complaining theme may be understood as a "safe space", where boundaries are negotiated and reinforced, as little to nothing is perceived to be at stake. On the one hand, this may be the case, as safety work appears to have a low status among managers, who position themselves against safety work by stressing their different practice domains, e.g. not wasting important time doing inspection rounds. On the other hand, this may be the case, as workers are at minimal risk of being perceived as unprofessional when complaining about safety. Construction workers assert their sense of social value and self-esteem with strength and being professional (Thiel 2012). Thus, complaining about safety offers an opportunity to complain about precarious employment conditions or low levels of control, but still enabling workers to safeguard their professionalism, and with a low risk of losing their jobs.

Our findings suggest that future research may benefit from reviewing social mechanisms such as complaining, in order to discover communicational qualities and their impact on OSH negotiation. As the boundary work approach is foreign to both OSH research and the complaining literature, it provides the potential to theoretically elucidate analyses of social relations and OSH collaboration by focussing on

how boundaries are constructed, and how participants handle differences. Future studies may consider the wider organisational context, the construction industry's structural conditions and other relations, e.g. client-contractor, contractor-subcontractors wherein social mechanisms are at paly.

The study has some limitations, as we explored the phenomenon of complaining at only one construction site. There may be other complaining mechanisms and forms of boundary work in other empirical settings. We are aware of possible overlaps between the four complaining mechanisms. Nevertheless, they provide a joint language for analysing conflicted social relations and applying complaining conceptually and practically. Performing ethnographic studies always carry the methodological issue of affecting the subject under study. This applies to all studies of people (Foucault 1974), and is also an issue in natural sciences - where often times the subject under study must be affected, changed or destroyed in order to determine its properties or characteristics (Barad 2007). Usually, people under study will be affected in the direction that they display a more coherent and positive version of themselves, than they would show outside the gaze of the observer (Foucault 1977). In our study, this may be expected to be the case as well. Hence, we can expect, that both managers and workers under observation would seek to display themselves as more responsible and reasonable in their actions concerning OSH than would be ordinary practice. As the analysis shows, this is somewhat the case, but even so, this potentially positive self-display still contains numerous critical issues that assist in creating boundaries of different characters, and to complicate beneficial OSH work. Hence, this only strengthen the analytical arguments of the study and shows that the problems concerning boundary work in construction are perhaps even more serious than this study shows.

## Conclusion

The boundary work analysis presented here reflects how managers and workers negotiate OSH performance through complaining practices. Drawing on observational, interview and archival data, we explored the general qualities of complaining situations, and developed a typology of four complaining mechanisms and their relational dynamics. Combining these findings with literature on boundary work, we developed a view of complaining as tool for collaboration and/or demarcation. Complaining in relation to OSH nurtures the (re)production of an "oppositional relationship" between managers and workers (Andersen *et al.* 2015, p. 646), hampering collaborative safety practices.

Our first key contribution is to OSH research and the complaining literature as the study highlights two relational dynamics: complaining enhances collaboration and/or demarcation. Understanding the importance of managing relational dynamics of demarcation becomes clear as safety improvements need to address conflicted relations in cross-boundary work settings. This study provides new insights on how complaining as boundary work influences the quality of OSH collaboration by showing how occupational groups purposefully influence their differences.

Our second key contribution is to the boundary work literature as this study contributes with an operationalisation of complaining as boundary work in order to empirically examine how boundaries are constructed. Importantly, the notion of boundary work is useful to analyse situated and dynamic safety negotiations between managers and workers in a conflicted work setting.

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