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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Safety management and power relations in outsourced industrial work: A case from the Swedish mining industry

Magnus Nygren

Lulea University of Technology, Sweden
Email: magnus.nygren@ltu.se

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Abstract

This study explores the relational conditions that influence contractors' safety management on multi-employer worksites, with a focus on the Swedish mining industry. Using interviews, observations, and informal conversations, the study examines how the blurred boundaries between client companies and contractors shape safety practices. The findings show that safety management is influenced not only by formal contractual relationships but also by the relational dynamics between social actors, where power asymmetries and informal networks play a significant role. The research highlights how these relational conditions – defined by the positions and symbolic authority of the actors involved – impact coordination, communication, and accountability regarding safety. Contractors, often struggling to assert their expertise and legitimacy within the relational field, face challenges in aligning safety practices with client companies' priorities. The study concludes that to improve safety management on multi-employer worksites, it is essential to address the relational dynamics between contractors and client companies, moving beyond formal agreements to consider the underlying power relations and position-takings that shape safety practices.

Keywords: clients; contractors; multi-employer worksites; organisation-as-field; safety management

Introduction

In the wake of rapidly changing market conditions in the late 20th century, outsourcing is now common in the heavy industry sector, with large producers seeking to maximise flexibility, effectiveness and competitiveness (Weil 2019). Traditional industrial worksites with one unified workforce have largely been replaced by multi-employer arrangements, requiring companies to manage and coordinate their activities between, and sometimes across, organisational boundaries (Marchington et al 2005).

In recent years, a number of studies have focused on the management challenges connected to outsourcing, including the problems of upholding safety standards on multi-employer worksites (Jackson and Quinlan 2024). The failure of safety management among contractors hired to perform work within specific client companies, and how this tends to undermine safety in general, has been singled out as particularly problematic (Nygren et al 2017). However, a focus on the nature and constitution of these networks shows the development towards more fluid organisational entities where the very boundaries between companies have become a point of theoretical and practical contention (Flecker

2009; Rubery et al 2002; Swart and Kinnie 2014). In these situations, it is not merely a case of inter-organisational processes and dynamics but a partly new (or at least hybrid) type of organisation with its own emerging form of organisational life (Marchington et al 2005).

The purpose of this article is to analyse relational conditions influencing contractors' safety management in one of the increasingly hybrid organisational forms found in the Swedish mining industry. As the empirical material was collected in the mid-2010s, the study captures a historical moment in the evolving landscape of industrial relations, when intensified outsourcing and increasingly blurred organisational boundaries in Swedish mining began reshaping safety management. However, rather than offering a time-bound case study, the article offers theoretically generative insights into the relational mechanisms that structure safety management practices in outsourced and interdependent work environments. The power asymmetries and coordination challenges examined – including contractors' symbolic marginalisation, informal boundary-crossing, and struggles over authority – are not confined to the Swedish mining context in the 2010s. On the contrary, they reflect structural dynamics that remain salient in many contemporary industrial settings (Nygren et al 2017; Weil 2019). By adopting a relational framework, the article contributes to an understanding of how transformations in organisational control and authority continue to shape safety practices within evolving industrial relations systems.

In particular, the findings show how shifting boundaries between firms transform the conditions under which coordination, authority, and accountability are negotiated – issues central to the field of industrial relations. To capture these dynamics, the article adopts a theoretical framework developed by Emirbayer and Johnson (2008), in which multi-employer arrangements are conceptualised as organisations-as-fields. This perspective enables a deeper understanding of how structural relations and power asymmetries influence the everyday interactions between client and contractor actors, with significant implications for how safety is practised, prioritised, and contested.

The article proceeds as follows. I first review research on outsourcing, multi-employer worksites, and the challenges of safety management under blurred organisational boundaries, with a particular focus on the Swedish industrial relations context. I then present the empirical case from the Swedish mining industry, before introducing the organisation-as-field framework as a lens for analysing how relational dynamics shape contractors' safety management. Finally, I discuss how the findings contribute to understanding power and safety in outsourced industrial work.

A note on method

> Social network studies . . . are to be faulted only insofar as they deny that the truth of interactions is to be found always (at least partly) outside those interactions themselves (Emirbayer and Johnson 2008, 10).

Before turning to the literature and the empirical material, a note on method is needed. In line with the relational perspective adopted in this article, the methodological approach does not merely focus on visible interactions but also seeks to uncover the structural conditions that shape them. The above quote from Emirbayer and Johnson (2008) highlights this crucial starting point. It underlines the problems of taking more or less visible forms of interaction at face value when it comes to understanding the nature and dynamics of organisational life. It then shifts the analytical perspective in the direction of structural relations that, at least to some extent, form the very conditions of those interactions – being ever mindful, however, of not ending up in a structuralist fallacy (Emirbayer and Johnson 2008). The focus in the article is on both interaction and structure, but with an emphasis on the latter, i.e. the structural relations or configuration of power relations in an organisational setting framed as an organisation-as-field.

The study is based on interviews conducted during twelve visits (spanning a total of 31 days) from late 2013 to early 2015 at a mining complex and the surrounding local community in Sweden. Key informants from ten contractors were approached to participate in an interview study based on their substantial experience of working within multi-employer worksites and having experience of safety supervision or management. Subsequently, five interviews and five group interviews (two to three individuals each) were conducted with six supervisors, seven managers and three safety specialists, comprising a total of 16 individuals – one woman and 15 men. Two of the interviews were recorded and transcribed, and field notes were taken during the other eight, which were typed up after each session. The interviews lasted between 60 and 150 minutes and were mainly conducted in office settings within each company in or around the mining complex. Open-ended questions were asked covering two broad topics: (1) work organisation (including inter-personal and inter-organisational interactions), and (2) formal health and safety practices, with an emphasis on safety-related aspects. Informal conversations were also had with both contractor workers and mining company employees between late 2013 and early 2015, exploring similar topics as those addressed in the interviews, during participant observations conducted in relation to the mining complex. These observations included, for example, a two-day visit to an underground mine and an ore processing facility, as well as visits to contractors' workspaces, and were continuously collected in field notes and recordings. Several documents pertaining to outsourcing and safety in multi-employer arrangements, produced primarily by the mining company, were accessed as well.

The data was analysed by triangulation, focusing inductively on repeated patterns of meaning (Flick 2014). First, the interviews were analysed thematically as their own data set with the systematic development of codes from the explicit or semantic levels of the texts (i.e. the notes and transcripts), highlighting relevant features of the data (Braun and Clarke 2006). Then, the conversations and observational notes were analysed for patterns of meaning in a similar fashion to 'seek convergence and corroboration using different data sources and methods' (Bowen 2009, 28). As suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006), the analytic process should involve a progression from descriptions of patterns in explicit content to an analysis of the significance of the patterns and their wider meanings and implications. A theoretical framework developed by Emirbayer and Johnson (2008) was applied. This focused on possible indicators of positions and position-taking within the mining complex conceived as an organisation-as-field, with a view on social actors as not only acting in their concreteness but also as occupants of specific positions in a structure of relations. In other words, the focus switched from a description of interactions to an analysis of relations.

Safety and organisational boundaries on multi-employer worksites

Inter-organisational networks are common across many industry sectors and take different forms, such as outsourcing, offshoring, franchising and supply-chain partnerships (Weil 2019). One key development towards more networked and flexible organisational forms is outsourcing, whereby companies focus on their core activities and competencies and externalise less critical functions and work tasks to contractors. This is often seen as a strategic response to external economic pressures and global competition (Arias-Aranda et al 2011; Espino-Rodríguez and Padrón-Robaina 2006).

By outsourcing specific work tasks, multi-employer worksites may emerge in which contractors carry out work on-site within client companies' industrial installations (Nunes 2012). From a broader perspective, this can be conceptualised as a core–periphery

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structure in line with the flexible-firm model (Atkinson 1985). Stability and security are concentrated in core production structures while uncertainty is shifted to more peripheral actors (Aronsson et al 2002). External companies thus become carriers of this uncertainty, and flexibility demands are often transferred to contractor workers (Lamare et al 2015; Wagenaar et al 2012). Although the periphery can include large, internally stable contractors whose employees enjoy significant employment security, flexibility practices tend to affect contractor and other contingent workers most, since they are more exposed to workforce reductions (Marchington et al 2005). These networks are fundamentally hierarchical and shaped by existing power relations and dependencies (Aronsson et al 2002). Such organisational forms create structural conditions that extend beyond inter-organisational transactions and have implications for workplace safety and power relations on multi-employer worksites.

In addition to these broader effects on work organisation and employment conditions, the management of workplace safety has become more complicated in multi-employer arrangements. Safety management – the systematic efforts by organisational management to uphold workers' safety (Sundström and Nygren 2024) – has suffered from poor communication and insufficient hazard identification (Schubert and Dijkstra 2009), unclear roles and divisions of responsibility (Jackson and Quinlan 2024), inadequate safety training and limited knowledge of the work environment among contractors (Nygren et al 2017), and economic pressures that constrain investments in safety (Quinlan and Bohle 2008). According to Rosness et al (2012), dominant firms often set the terms of operation and can effectively enforce their will on other actors, which renders power central to safety management: subordinate actors may lack both autonomy and voice. This subordination, shaped in part by economic dependency (Perraudin et al 2014), may exacerbate safety risks in interconnected work environments (Nenonen and Vasara 2013).

Collinson (1999) found that contractors in the North Sea oil industry refrained from reporting accidents and incidents as a defensive response to asymmetrical power relations and a culture of blame. Despite managerial claims that there was no 'us and them' culture on the platforms, contractors experienced deep-seated divisions and inequalities and often felt treated as second-class workers, contributing to under-reporting of safety-related incidents. Rousseau and Libuser (1997) similarly argued that where core and external workers operate side-by-side, perceived differential treatment can reduce cooperation; status differences thus risk undermining interpersonal trust (Connelly and Gallagher 2006) and weakening safety-related cooperation and communication (Milch and Laumann 2016).

Research also indicates that outsourcing does not necessarily protect core workers as shifts in value-chain relations may place pressure on their working conditions (Flecker 2009; Quinlan and Bohle 2008). Contractors may perform tasks traditionally carried out by the core firm, use client equipment and even share production lines and social spaces with in-house personnel (Baraldi et al 2014), which complicates the core–periphery distinction.

Taken together, these studies show how outsourcing and multi-employer arrangements complicate safety management by introducing power asymmetries, fragmenting responsibilities and blurring organisational boundaries.

Blurred organisational boundaries

Although the blurring of organisational boundaries has attracted renewed interest among organisational scholars, the phenomenon is not new. Blois (1972) described client–supplier relations as a form of vertical quasi-integration, whereby clients obtain some advantages of integration without bearing the full economic risks; this can create unilateral dependency and make suppliers particularly susceptible to top-down influence (Diamantopoulos 1987).

Marchington et al (2005) stressed the prevalence of blurred boundaries and the complications that follow when traditional organisational forms and employment relations are disrupted. In such settings, employees may face competing demands for commitment beyond their formal employer (Rubery et al 2002). From a network perspective, dominant firms may extend control beyond legal boundaries and thereby shape the work practices of external actors (Grimshaw and Rubery 2005; Perraudin et al 2014).

Baraldi et al (2014) argue that organisational boundaries are continuously shaped through interactions among actors, resources and activities. Contractor and client personnel may thus collaborate closely over extended periods, sharing workspaces and practices in ways that challenge clear organisational distinctions. In practice, boundaries are defined not only by formal arrangements but also by everyday interactions.

Despite the growing attention on boundary blurring, there remains limited research on how these dynamics shape safety management and how they may vary across countries, national institutional contexts matter. In Sweden, a strong tradition of collective bargaining, high union density and an extensive regulatory framework for occupational health and safety provide a distinctive backdrop for client–contractor relations on multi-employer worksites. As the following section shows, however, these institutional strengths do not prevent the emergence of power asymmetries, blurred responsibilities and relational tensions. To contextualise the empirical case, it is therefore necessary to outline the core features of Sweden's industrial relations system and its approach to safety governance.

The Swedish industrial relations context and safety governance

Sweden's industrial relations system is widely recognised for its strong regulatory framework, high union density, and a long-standing tradition of collective bargaining and social dialogue. (EU-OSHA 2019). Under the Work Environment Act (1977, 1160), each employer is formally responsible for managing the safety of their own employees. However, when multiple employers operate within the same worksite, the company that controls the setting – typically the client – must assume coordination responsibilities to prevent risks arising from overlapping activities. Two distinct forms of coordination are stipulated: one for permanent establishments, such as ongoing production facilities in mining, and one for construction and civil engineering projects. In the former, the client is expected to oversee general preventive measures, while in the latter, separate coordinators must be appointed for the planning and execution stages. These requirements reflect an attempt to balance individual employer responsibility with overarching coordination needs.

The Swedish Work Environment Authority (SWEA) is the government agency responsible for health and safety matters in Swedish working life. In a 2014 government-commissioned report, SWEA acknowledged that the traditional legal framework struggles to accommodate the reality of outsourcing and subcontracting chains. Contractor workers often operate within environments over which they have limited control, while the client exerts substantial – yet formally diffuse – influence. SWEA proposed clarifying coordination duties and extending its own enforcement powers, including the right to prohibit clients from hiring contractors deemed unsafe. Still, as of 2025, SWEA has stopped short of proposing full equivalence in legal responsibility between client and contractor. This is partly due to the practical difficulty of demarcating responsibilities in shared worksites, and partly because contractors are presumed to possess the technical expertise for safe execution of their specific tasks. The resulting system leaves room for interpretive ambiguity, where coordination may spill over into control, and roles and responsibilities become blurred in practice (Nygren 2018).

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These regulatory tensions gain further urgency when considered alongside accident trends in the Swedish mining industry. The overall lost time injury frequency rate (LTIFR) has decreased significantly over the past decades, from 51.3 in 1981 to 6.0 in 2020 (Sundström 2025). However, it is important to note that this trend only reflects accidents among mining companies' own employees. Contractor injury data has historically been reported separately and has shown substantially higher LTIFR than in-house workers. In some years, while making up to 50% of the total work hours in the industry, the LTIFR for contractor workers is two times higher (Nygren 2018). This discrepancy persisted throughout the 2000s and 2010s, with only partial convergence in more recent years.

These patterns align with international research, which consistently shows that contractors in high-risk industries, such as mining, experience greater exposure to accidents and often lack the same integration into safety systems (Jackson and Quinlan 2024; Nygren et al 2017). That such tensions persist in Sweden, despite its highly institutionalised, prevention-oriented health and safety regime, highlights the extent to which relational asymmetries may override formal protections. The following case highlights how formal structures of responsibility are mediated by relational fields of power, in which client companies and contractors navigate overlapping mandates, symbolic authority, and practical dependency.

Client company-contractor interaction – An empirical illustration

The mining company at which this study was conducted had approximately 4300 contractor firms and other suppliers in 2014 that in some way delivered goods or services, according to their own published documents. These goods and services were delivered mainly to three separate mining complexes. From the perspective of the global mining industry, this company was a minor producer but still had some of the largest operations in Northern Europe. Contractors and other temporary personnel were estimated to have performed between 40–50% of the total number of working hours in the mining company since 2009, compared to the work performed by roughly 4500 in-house workers. The high number may in part be due to the mining of several large construction projects during these years, which required an extra influx of external companies and specialists. However, besides these time-restricted projects, there were also many local companies with long-standing business relationships with the company, which regularly performed work in direct connection to the different mines and ore processing plants.

The ten contractor firms in the study were mainly active within one of the mining complexes, conducting maintenance work and other specialised services. A few were also involved more directly in core production-related work. This site was located next to a small town that had evolved over the years because of the mining operations. These contractors had offices in the town or within the mining complex itself, which meant that they could be on-site at short notice. Since some of them were called in during acute crises, such as breakdowns in production, the proximity to the installations was essential. Given the dominant position this one industry sector had in the region, most of the contractors were relying on this one large client company for contracts. A few had even developed services that were tailor-made for this client.

According to the mining company's official outsourcing and contracting policies, there was no question that all external companies were separate organisational entities. Indeed, this distinction was essential to ensure that the company wouldn't be held liable for the actions of contractors, for instance in the case of an accident. Many of the more serious incidents in recent years involved contractor workers, including a fatal accident involving two individuals. Given this, the mining company had a strong incentive to improve overall safety arrangements, without losing sight of the separation of the organisations. This distinction was particularly emphasised in the temporary projects conducted by the mining company on a regular basis in relation to the mining operations, where many contractors were involved. These projects, however, often took place separately from the regular production activities.

During everyday operations and general maintenance work, the situation was different. All ten contractor firms regularly worked in connection with production activities, which meant that their work sometimes intersected with that of the mining company. One informant provided an example of maintenance work conducted in an ore processing plant, where the sparks from belt sanders were intermingled to such an extent that it wasn't always possible to decide which company it came from. During conversations had with managers, supervisors and safety specialists, examples were given of coordinators from the company, who oversaw the everyday formal contact with the contractors, coming close to being 'extra' supervisors for contractor work groups. Investigations conducted by the mining company had identified this traversing of managerial boundaries as especially problematic, where the coordinators and other company personnel were taking charge of matters that should fall under contractor management responsibility. Many of the contractor workers and company employees knew each other well, having worked in the same facilities for years and living in the same close-knit community surrounding the mining company. So, although workers were formally employed by different companies, informal networks and friendships had developed on a workplace level, making it easy to traverse organisational boundaries in actual practice. This could include, for example, the planning of future work together across organisations in an informal manner, i.e. outside the confines of the contract itself. One informant described this dynamic as the mining company being almost like a 'big brother' for the local contractors in the surrounding town.

However, despite these 'success stories', where client company and contractor personnel co-existed harmoniously – in part facilitating, and being facilitated by, the blurring of organisational boundaries – the predominant narrative was that of hard-to-define, informal boundaries on the worksites. Basically, even though these local contractors were closely connected to the mining-related operations, there was still a fundamental difference between being affiliated with the company or being a contractor, in terms of the status and rights each affiliation entailed. An example of this was the experience of some of the informants who noted it was much easier for the mining company to accuse them and their workgroups of not following the safety rules compared to the company's own workforce. As one contractor manager, administering the work that a group of subcontractors conducted in the underground mine, explained:

> When our contractors come across mining company personnel, it often causes some animosity. The contractors come to us and ask: why must we wear helmets when the company employees don't? So we have talked to mining company managers, or at least one of them, and said that you are damn bad at telling your own personnel [when they do not follow the rules]. You can complain about contractors but not your own personnel.

An open and vocal opposition of this kind was, however, rare – in most cases, the contractor informants kept quiet and focused solely on the work that was being conducted. This 'culture of silence' was also evident when it came to reporting risks and incidents to the mining company's safety database, something that contractor managers in general did to a lesser extent compared to the company personnel. In instances where reports had been filed, they often lacked information on what had transpired in the incident in question. A lack of two-way communication on safety-related matters and a low degree of reported risks and near-misses were thus ongoing problems in the operations.

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These frictions may have been, in part, a consequence of the strong focus that the mining company placed on 'Safety First,' something that had led to an increased focus on the safety performance among the contractors. Safety First was a strategic safety programme that the company started in 2005, which initially was directed towards its own personnel, in an attempt to encourage workers to focus more on safety in all aspects of their work. A special focus was directed towards the mining company managers and the importance of a leadership style that prioritised and supported safety in the day-to-day work. By 2010, however, the general concept had begun to expand to include all companies entering the mining facilities, including contractors. In line with this ambition, a joint set of health and safety rules was established, applying to all workers, irrespective of formal company affiliation. All contractor employees had to take a mandatory online safety training course and get a passing grade before they could enter the industrial installations. The overall health and safety policy was also directed at all workers performing work within the company, in-house workers, as well as contractor personnel. Connected to this was the ever-present guiding slogan, Safety First, that was repeatedly communicated in written form (e.g. in safety protocols and handbooks) and verbally during work meetings. Significant resources had been devoted by the mining company to making this the one true principle for all activities taking place within its operations. Still, in practice, it may have contributed to a division between the client company and some of its contractors due to the increased focus on the latter's safety performance.

This type of 'policing' by the mining company was singled out as especially problematic by the informants. They also saw it as being much easier for the company to downgrade contractors' competencies and skills in general, i.e. that work-related problems were due to substandard work performance rather than, for example, ill-planned work and unrealistically tight deadlines. Several informants mentioned this as a problem since they considered themselves to be the true experts when it came to the particular work their companies conducted in the various industrial installations, as well as how to perform it safely under the right circumstances. All in all, the contractor informants were significantly invested in the work they performed at the mining complex, rather than just treating it as temporary assignments. It was, in other words, far from the transient and detached relationships that these supervisors, managers and safety specialists had with the company. Still, this involvement did not always equal open and transparent two-way communication between them and the mining company personnel. Rather, sustained informal boundaries were in place, affecting the nature of the overall interactions between the individuals involved.

The (mining) organisation-as-field

The above empirical illustration focuses on the concrete forms of interaction between the social actors involved. However, this descriptive account and fundamentally interactional perspective do not fully reveal the underlying dynamics that were in play. It lacks a sufficient grasp of the more fundamental mechanisms that 'preconstruct, shape and constitute the *deeper truth of those interactions*' (Emirbayer and Johnson 2008, 9, author's emphasis). To further analyse the underlying structural mechanisms that expressed themselves in and through those interactions, the theoretical framework of the organisation-as-field can be applied.

Drawing on Emirbayer and Johnson's (2008) concept of the organisation-as-field, this article approaches client and contractor firms as occupying positions within a shared social space. Within this space, different forms of capital – economic, cultural, and symbolic – determine legitimacy and authority. The framework extends beyond existing analyses of outsourcing and industrial relations by illuminating how habitus and position-takings reproduce power in everyday practices.

The organisation-as-field perspective was developed as a way of transferring the sociological insights of Pierre Bourdieu into organisational research. It outlines a research agenda allowing for the systematic analysis of the structural relations in an organisation understood as a field in itself. This analysis then demonstrates how social actors occupying different structural positions – each endowed with distinct forms and combinations of capital – struggle to bring about the legitimacy of their own resources (i.e. capital), ultimately seeking domination over the field as a whole. The organisation-as-field, seen from a wider perspective, is thus largely defined by structural strain between the dominant and dominated poles of a space of positions.

The emphasis here is not necessarily on the internal workings of the vertically integrated company, but rather a broader configuration of power relations in which the social actors involved struggle for the 'legitimate definition of the dominant principle of domination' (Emirbayer and Johnson 2008, 24). The nature of this field sets the parameters and determines what is at stake in the struggle (Bourdieu 2005). Which social actors that actually are a part of the struggle must, in each case, be determined empirically and *relationally* as being part of the structural force holding sway over, and indeed constituting, the field in question. Put differently, all the social actors in a given field must have a stake in the 'game' at hand, which means that it is not necessarily a question of their belonging to the same formal organisation. This makes it a particularly useful framework to apply when exploring the relations that emerge between social actors on multi-employer worksites where the organisational boundaries have become blurred.

By applying the concept of the organisation-as-field, a different narrative emerges. The more obvious forms of interaction between the contractor informants and the mining company personnel were, to a significant extent, dependent on the underlying structural relations, meaning the different positions that the social actors occupied in the space of positions constituting the organisation-as-field. There was clearly something at stake in their transactions that didn't merely entail inter-organisational dynamics. Put another way, the issues related to, for example, status discrepancies and communication breakdowns were not simply due to inter-firm conflict but were connected to more fundamental issues related to the struggle for ascendency in the organisation-as-field itself. These issues were determined by the interplay of the different species of capital and their combinations (e.g. economic, cultural and social) active within the field. These, in turn, were endowed with specific positions occupied by social actors. The contractor informants were, for example, struggling to bring about the legitimacy of their own technical skills and competencies – as well as those of their workers – which entailed little if any symbolic authority in the field. In other words, it could not act as symbolic capital in the organisation-as-field as a whole. This imbalance also became evident in the ways client company representatives could criticise contractors' practices while refraining from applying the same scrutiny to their own employees – a clear expression of symbolic capital operating to protect the dominant group in the field.

At first glance, this may seem like a rudimentary distinction to make. However, the ramifications for the ensuing interactions between the parties involved may be substantial when those lacking symbolic capital engage with the holders of the actual symbolic authority, not least when it comes to interaction in safety-related matters. As underlined by Emirbayer and Johnson (2008, 25): 'Struggles over symbolic authority . . . are often among the most significant of organisational dynamics.' To understand why this may lead to problems in safety management, we need to add another concept to the analysis of the organisation-as-field, that of position-takings.

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Safety first as a position-taking

Besides considering the constraints of the objective positions social actors occupy in the organisation-as-field, Emirbayer and Johnson (2008) also emphasised the importance of analysing the symbolically meaningful statements and acts of these actors, i.e. their individual position-takings. These are the attempts by social actors to distinguish themselves in the struggle for legitimacy and distinction in the field. Moreover, these position-takings, which occur in numerous forms and on all levels of a given organisation, 'derive their semiotic significance in relational fashion from their difference vis-à-vis other such position-takings within a *space of position-takings*' (Emirbayer and Johnson 2008, 14). A distinction can be made between spaces of positions (i.e. objective relations between positions endowed with various forms and combinations of capital) and spaces of position-takings (e.g. relations of symbolically meaningful acts). However, the interconnectedness of the fields is clear: to understand what symbolically meaningful acts are possible, we also need to know a given social actor's position in the overall space of positions or, put differently, the actor's position in the configuration of power relations.

A noticeable point of contention in the above case is that of Safety First. It had led to an increased focus on the safety performance of contractors and, in turn, contractor informants felt as if they were being 'policed.' From a relational perspective, the empirical material suggests that Safety First did not operate as a neutral safety programme but, rather, as a position-taking originating from dominant actors. Contractors could only partially adopt it, given their subordinate position in the field. Seen in this way, Safety First may be understood as a position-taking that originated from the top levels of the mining company management, and was then later adopted in practice by other social actors attached to the company in a supervisory or managerial role. This position-taking originated from, and was perpetuated through, social actors wielding significant symbolic authority at the dominant pole of the organisation-as-field. As a result, it was not necessarily the case that it would be espoused by those at the *dominated* pole struggling to bring about their own legitimacy – such as the contractor supervisors and managers. One of the more obvious position-takings (and ways of distinguishing themselves in the field) for these social actors, by contrast, was that of efficiency – i.e. getting the work done quickly and effectively, which, in some cases, may entail a lack of safety considerations. Since Safety First as a position-taking gained its semiotic meaning relationally in the overall space of possible position-takings, those social actors that took a different position, such as one of speed and efficiency (sometimes involving risk-taking), may be seen as fulfilling their differential role in that space. An argument can be made that it was only possible for some actors, under specific conditions, to actually place safety first. Given the close correspondence between spaces of positions and spaces of position-takings, the positions that the contractor informants often occupied may have significantly affected their subsequent position-takings.

However, these position-takings are not just a consequence of the position a social actor occupies in the field of positions. The habitus of the social actor in question will also have a significant impact on what position-takings are perceived as possible and even desirable in the first place (Emirbayer and Johnson 2008). Habitus is defined as a system of dispositions conditioned by social and cultural origins, shaped by the trajectories through various fields in life. This was one of the key insights of Bourdieu that allowed for analyses connecting the macro with the micro and vice versa – overcoming persistent dichotomies such as 'structure or agency.' The habitus functions as the focal point, or homology, for spaces of positions and spaces of position-takings, opening up for a certain kind of freedom under constraints given the experiences embodied in the habitus (Emirbayer and Johnson 2008). Such orientations can be interpreted as expressions of the contractor's habitus, shaped by long-standing

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expectations that their role is to deliver quickly and without complaint. This could, for example, explain why there were also examples of contractor supervisors and managers who communicated openly with the mining company about safety issues and made a point of underlining the problems they sometimes encountered. Still, from the point of view of the more dominated social actors, Safety First may not be the most desirable position to take, given the overall focus among these groups to get the work done as quickly as possible – even if it entails risk-taking. This notion of efficiency can furthermore be attributed to them belonging to a segment of the workforce where time constraints were part of the very nature of work. They were also largely local citizens, meaning that they were conscious of the role a contractor traditionally had within the mining company – that a contractor was supposed to get things done as quickly and efficiently as possible. The ability of these social actors to assume a certain position may in part be attributed to the overall distribution of capital in the field as a whole, as well as what kind of positions were perceived as being possible and desirable to take – something that, in turn, was influenced by each of the social actors' habitus.

Normalising domination

If the contractor informants, as sketched out above, tended to occupy positions at the more dominated pole of the space of positions constituting the organisation-as-field, how are we to understand the apparent normalisation of this situation? From a purely interactional perspective, this could be explained in terms of economic dependency – being contractors relying primarily on this one specific mining company for contracts, they had no choice but to accept the prevailing conditions (echoing Lamare et al 2015). This included avoiding being labelled as problematic to work with (e.g. by complaining about the work situation), knowing full well that word spread quickly in the small community surrounding the mine as well as in the industry more broadly. Still, from a relational point of view, the concept of habitus may also be used to explain that this very domination was part of the conditioning of the individual habitus of these social actors themselves, due to them being the targets of symbolic violence.

Symbolic violence, being propagated by those occupying positions with the dominant form of capital (including symbolic capital), 'operates inside organisations by virtue of the fact that the dominated in those contexts perceive and respond to organisational structures and processes that dominate them through modes of thought . . . *that are themselves the product of domination*' (Emirbayer and Johnson 2008, 31, author's emphasis). Fundamentally, this explicates the role habitus plays in the very reproduction of domination in the organisation-as-field. The domination was continuously perpetuated not only through the organisational structures and processes but also by the 'relations of domination embodied in and perpetuated by the dispositions of the habitus' (Emirbayer and Johnson 2008, 31) of the dominated social actors themselves.

This is not to say that this is the whole story. As underlined by Rosness et al (2012), where there are power relations, there will inevitably be some form of resistance on the part of the dominated. However, the 'complicity' of the habitus of the dominated social actors themselves in the reproduction of power differentials may have been one of the more pertinent problems in the mining operations in question, due to it being a potent but elusive form of power. Symbolic violence and its consequences thus constituted a potentially significant challenge when it came to upholding overall safety standards on the multi-employer worksites.

Conclusion

In recent years, there has been an increased interest in the blurring of organisational boundaries and the emergence of fluid multi-employer worksites due to outsourcing. Still, the nature and characteristics of safety management practices in these types of inter-organisational networks have yet to receive significant attention. By applying a relational perspective, new insights emerge regarding contractors' ability to uphold safety standards. More specifically, the study highlights that it is not enough to focus on interactions taken at face value to understand why contractors sometimes fail to prioritise safety. On fluid multi-employer worksites, contractors' safety management (or lack thereof) may significantly be affected by the various positions constituting the organisation-as-field – as well as by the symbolically meaningful position-takings and the habitus of the actors involved. Although the empirical data were collected between 2013 and 2015, it remains highly relevant for understanding the enduring dynamics of outsourced, interdependent work environments. At the same time, it is important to recognise that the dynamics described here may have further intensified since data collection. Subsequent developments in the mining sector, including increased reliance on subcontracting and ongoing regulatory debates in Sweden, suggest that the relational asymmetries identified in this study remain salient and, in some respects, may have become more pronounced. This reinforces the value of treating the case not as a closed historical account, but as a window into structural dynamics that continue to shape outsourced industrial work.

In conclusion, the study goes beyond describing inter-organisational interactions to analyse the relational conditions that structure contractors' safety practices. Situated within the Swedish industrial relations context and framed as an organisation-as-field, the analysis shows how capital, habitus, and position-takings interact in shaping safety management. In this way, the article adds a distinctive dimension to existing analyses of outsourcing and industrial relations: whereas global value chain and IR approaches emphasise contractual power and institutional regulation, the field perspective reveals how symbolic authority, embodied dispositions, and position-takings reproduce asymmetries in practice. This underscores the generative potential of applying a relational lens to the issue of safety management. Ultimately, the study demonstrates that contractors' safety practices are undermined not only by formal dependency but also by the reproduction of symbolic domination – even within Sweden's highly regulated industrial relations system.

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