# 'The happily overworked professional': Unpacking the autonomy paradox in excessive work regimes amongst construction site managers

Rikard Sandberg [a], Martin Löwstedt [b,*]

[a] Senior Consultant in Project Leadership, SEMCON AB, Lindholmsallén 2, Gothenburg, Sweden
[b] Associate Professor, Chalmers University of Technology, Vera Sandbergs Alle 6, Gothenburg, Sweden

## ARTICLE INFO

## ABSTRACT

Site managers have been said to perform one of the toughest jobs in the construction industry, which often requires them to work excessively long and irregular hours. Although previous research has reported on the detrimental effects of overwork on site managers' wellbeing, few studies have examined their subjective reasoning related to these work patterns. Drawing on in-depth interviews with site managers in a large construction firm in Sweden, this study identifies two dominant narratives through which they justify excessive overwork: the narrative of advancement (which is career-oriented) and the narrative of preservation (which is autonomy-oriented). An analysis elucidates how these narratives encapsulate an 'autonomy paradox' which entraps the site managers in an endless loop of overwork, whilst convincing themselves that they are acting autonomously.

These results offer novel insights into why and how individuals who perceive themselves as autonomous enthusiastically engage in processes where they end up becoming 'willing slaves' to overwork. In a concluding part, the paper elaborates on how these findings contribute to two major fields of studies. First, they offer theoretical contributions to the literature on overwork and stress in the construction industry as well as practical advices to mitigate overwork. Second, they point at some contextual dimensions which have broader implications for organisation studies on overwork and stress. Most notable how certain contextual dimensions of project-based organizing can be viewed as permeating features of contemporary work-lives that continually allure us into happily overworking ourselves.

## 1. Introduction

In recent decades, issues of stress and overwork have emerged as central concerns in organization studies. It is now evident that life in many contemporary workplaces is characterized by a regime of long working hours, constant availability, and an ever-increasing pace of work (Mazmanian et al., 2013; Wajcman, 2014; Blagoev et al., 2018). It has been suggested that the most extreme jobs in terms of overwork is occupied by high status 'knowledge workers' (Hewlett and Luce, 2006; Blagoev et al., 2018), such as management consultants (Bäcklander et al., 2021), accountants (Lupu and Empson, 2015), and bankers (Michel, 2011). However, it is possible to add to this a steady stream of reports of health-damaging stress and overwork within many other professional groups as well; such as, teachers (Salmela-Aro et al., 2019), physicians (Schaufeli et al., 2009), nurses (2008), project managers (Pinto et al., 2014), entrepreneurs (2018), athletic department staff (Huml et al., 2021), and academics (Kinman and Jones, 2008), to name just a few. The growing number – and breadth – of these examples indicate that detrimental overwork has systematically 'infiltrated' our contemporary work-lives.

Although it should be noted that some individuals genuinely enjoy high-intensity work (Alvesson and Einola, 2018), research show that the societal disadvantages overall by far surpass the benefits. Overwork has been linked to negative impacts on individuals, organizations, and society, including health problems (Michel, 2011), family life disruptions (Bailyn, 2006), gender inequality (Reid, 2015), reduced productivity (Peiperl and Jones, 2001), diminished creativity (Perlow and Porter, 2009), and occupational safety (Liang et al., 2022a; Liang et al., 2022b). In terms of financial figures, it has been estimated that health issues caused by excessive levels of work cost the US healthcare system approximately $37 billion annually (Goh et al., 2016).

Until quite recently, organizational studies related to stress,

overwork, and workaholism were still in their infancies (Burke 2000). However, a growing number of researchers have started to explore these issues; gradually uncovering more of their antecedents, mechanisms, and gaps in need of future studies. One line of research has suggested that the heightened use of information technologies like mobile phones and laptops has expanded accessibility and connectivity, leading to a surge in phone calls and email streams that follow employees beyond the office and therefore result in intensfied levels of work hours (Mazmanian et al., 2013; Blagoev et al., 2018). More dominant, however, are those studies that attribute intensified work regimes to shifting societal and cultural norms. While it is generally acknowledged that part of the "ideal worker" image is one that works hard to be eligible for a promotion (Acker, 1990; Kunda, 1992; Bailyn, 2006; Reid, 2015), more researchers have started to argue that overwork dynamics are far more complex than us merely being subjected to external expectations. Instead it should be viewed as new subtle and distributed forms of organizational control and power dynamics (Kärreman and Alvesson, 2009; Michel, 2011) that don't only exist 'out there' in external structures but also embodied by the workers themselves (Ekman, 2013; Michel, 2014; Lupu and Empson, 2015). Altogether this distorts and conceals the overwork mechanisms, having the workers believe that their overwork is 'self-chosen' (Blagoev et al., 2018). While many aspects of contemporary work-lives are becoming increasingly 'free' in terms of time allocation (e.g. flexible work hours) and location (e.g. working from home), we are simultaneous being subjugated by new forms of internalized control mechanisms that transform us into 'willing slaves' to overwork (Bunting, 2011).

Even with these recent findings, the research field still contains numerous blind spots and initiatives by companies to mitigate the negative impacts from stress and overwork keep failing at high frequencies (Putnam et al., 2014; Perlow and Kelly, 2014). In a recent special issue, Blagoev et al (2018) review the current state of overwork research and elaborate on the most promising future directions, including studies that increase our understanding of how individual work-life realities are intertwined with multiple contextual layers (e.g. group, organization, industry, society). One fruitful direction is therefore to gather in-depth experiences from various professional groups and link them to contextual differences and similarities. This could gradually enhance our understanding of how and why overwork is embodied and manifested so broadly amongst contemporary professionals.

The starting point of this paper was an interest in overwork amongst construction site managers in Sweden and rich data was collected in an interview study designed to capturé thick descriptións of their work-life realities. As it will be argued throughout the paper, this professional group provides a particularly intriguing case for exploring processes of overwork entrapment. Earlier studies have delivered alarming reports that show how these professionals are subjected to extreme levels of health detrimental overwork. Meanwhile, other studies show that the site manager role entails particularly high degrees of work-related autonomy and freedom linked to collective sensations of empowerment amongst the same group. The current literature has thus altogether treated these two discourses separately, offering only a partial and ambiguous understanding of how overwork can coexist with such positive identifications with the professional role.

The purpose of this paper is therefore to unpack the complex processes of overwork entrapment to offer an integrated understanding of how these professionals can endure extreme levels of prolonged overwork and stress while at the same time remaining empowered, resilient, and content. An interpretative approach based on narrative analysis was used to elicit the work-life stories, revealing two quite different narratives through which construction site managers rationalize and justify excessive overwork: a 'narrative of advancement' and a 'narrative of preservation'. These narratives encapsulate an 'autonomy paradox' which entraps the site managers in an endless loop of overwork, whilst convincing themselves that they are acting autonomously. The results also show how this autonomy paradox effectively conceals an unobtrusive control mechanism enmeshed into the management role at the building sites of construction projects that indirectly is exploited by the parent organization.

A concluding discussion outlines the contributions and implications of these findings. First, they offer a novel theoretical contribution to the literature on overwork and stress in the construction industry which also can be translated to practical interventions to mitigate the overwork. Second, it is explained how these case study results elucidate some particular.

contextual dimensions which have broader implications for organisation studies on overwork and stress. Most notable is how the decentralized design of the project-based organizing of construction processes constitute as a central mechanism for the managers embodiments of prolonged overwork patterns. Seeing that project-based organizing also is a permeating feature of contemporary work-lives overall (that also keeps growing in frequency), this study points at an urgent need to further explore how this specific organizing form relate to the steady increases of troublesome overwork and stress.

## 2. Theoretical background and framing

### 2.1. Construction site managers as overworked 'project kings'

The construction industry is described as a tough work environment where many employees are subjected to substantial stress, heavy workloads and long, often irregular, hours (Lingard and Francis, 2004; Watts, 2009; Lingard and Francis, 2009; Turner et al., 2009; Bowen et al., 2018; Bowen et al., 2020). A role that often has been labelled as particularly demanding in the industry is that of the construction site manager. Being situated between the strategic decision-making of construction firm and the daily production activities, site managers serve as the gatekeepers for the visions, designs, and plans that may or may not be translated into production of our built societies (Styhre and Josephson, 2006). Following this central role, they are formally responsible for delivering built projects according to multidimensional expectations (e. g. time, budget, quality, function, safety, legislation, sustainability, digitalization etcetera).

Already in the 90 s, scholars warned that apart from being one of the most demanding jobs in the industry, requiring many complex tacit skills and long experience, job dissatisfaction and stress seemed to be higher among site managers than among projects managers in other industries (Davidson and Sutherland, 1992; Djebarni, 1996; Haynes and Love, 2004; Styhre, 2011a; Pinto et al., 2016). According to Davidson and Sutherland (1992, p. 31), 'long working hours' and 'time pressure' were among the most prevalent stressors in the everyday work of site managers. More recent studies have reported an escalated demand on site managers (Sandberg et al., 2021), including more areas of responsibilities, stricter accountability, and increased administrative duties (Edum-Fotwe and McCaffer, 2000; Styhre, 2006; Polesie, 2013; Löwstedt and Sandberg, 2020) and a prevalent trend is therefore that the site managers are trying to compensate for what they experience to be intensified work pressures by working even longer hours, often entailing regularly over 60 h per week as a normalized norm (Styhre, 2011a; Sandberg et al., 2016).

Research has reported on the detrimental effects of such overwork on site managers wellbeing, for instance in terms of stress, burnout, presenteeism, workaholism, sleeping disorder and work-family conflict (Yang et al., 2017; Lingard et al., 2007; Sandberg et al., 2016; Bowen et al., 2018). These are some alarming tendencies; and not only for site managers, but for all workers employed on construction sites. Being in an accentuated leadership position, negative consequences stemming from overly stressed and overworked site managers are likely to affect the well-being of others as well. One serious consequence that has been documented in research, is that poor occupational health correlates with reduced levels of safety (Leung et al., 2010; Seo et al., 2015; Wu et al., 2018; Liang et al., 2022a; Liang et al., 2022b) and that high levels of

stress among site managers negatively affect safety behavior on group levels (He et al., 2020).

A growing number of studies have tried to establish the antecedents of these stressful work situation. Many have pointed to several structural dimensions enmeshed to the construction sites. The most prevalent one is the accentuated project-based modes of working in building production where stress follows from high levels of unpredictability (e.g., Lingard et al., 2010) and the relentless flood of unplanned events that the site manager needs to react to (Styhre, 2012). While earlier studies pointed at relatively low degrees of bureaucratic work (Eccles 1981), construction projects have lately been subjected to a steep increase of traditional form of bureaucratic duties for which site managers need to attend to, with increase degrees of stress as a result (Styhre, 2006). More common tough, are more culturally mediated explanations of overwork on constructions sites. Overwork has often been described as an outcome of gendered norms and ideals (e.g., Watts, 2009; Styhre, 2011a; Sandberg et al., 2018). For example, Watts (2009) suggests that construction workers are caught up in a masculine 'long hours culture' in which the primary way to show commitment is to work long hours and be the last one to leave the site at the end of the workday (see also Turner et al., 2009). In a similar vein, site managers have been said to enact their role as a paternalist figure that upholds a 'virtue of overwork' (Styhre, 2011a).

In sum, the expanding body of literature on overwork foregrounds a grim outlook of a professional group subjected to various external circumstances succumbing them to detrimental levels of overwork and stress which are hard to cope with, mitigate, or control.

However, when these findings are considered alongside the broader literature on site management and building production emerges a substantially different view, especially from studies that have recorded the site managers own subjective reasoning related to their overall work experience. This shows instead a professional group that genuinely enjoys and identify positively with their job, referring specifically to the high degrees of freedom and autonomy that it offers (Applebaum, 1999; Thiel, 2007; Styhre and Josephson, 2006; Styhre, 2011b; Polesie, 2013; Löwstedt and Sandberg, 2020). Coming from this perspective, their own experiences are not that they are succumbed under and controlled by external pressures, but rather a feeling of accentuated empowerment stemming from high degrees of independence, responsibility, and personalized creativity; all enmeshed in a work role that has been described as being a "company CEO" (Styhre and Josephson, 2006), a "project baron" (Gann et al., 2012), a "project king" (Sauer et al., 2001), or a "rooster in a hen house" – that never would consider taking another job or work in another industry (Löwstedt and Sandberg, 2020).

Considering these two strands of literature reveals a paradoxical outlook related to a professional group that on the one hand is facing incontrollable levels of health detrimental stress but on the other identify as a significantly empowered and autonomous worker.

As it is argued in this paper, starting to unpack this paradox can contribute not only to the literature on stress in construction, but also more broadly to our understanding of how contemporary work-lives formally offers higher levels of freedom while at the same time entraps is into overwork. To support this, the next section introduces the "autonomy paradox" as a theoretical lens which elicits a more integrated understanding of overwork as something that is intricately enmeshed into the whole work-life experience, as opposed to a separate aspect of work.

## 3. The autonomy paradox in overwork: Towards an integrated perspective of site managers' work-lives

In organizational studies, research on overwork has frequently approached the topic from the perspective of autonomy and organizational control. In their seminal work, Mazmanian et al. (2013) conceptualized the tension between autonomy and control as "the autonomy paradox", denoting the ongoing navigation amongst professionals between their intrinsic interest in personal autonomy and freedom and their commitment to colleagues, clients, and organizations. The prominence of understanding this autonomy paradox in various context, is related to how it works as a central mechanism for how we gradually shift our norms for work, which oftentimes leads to detrimental levels of overwork amongst the actors that embody the work realities. This often follows from a vicious circle in which 'the more autonomy that employees have, the harder they work, the more hours they devote, and the more organizations control their lives' (Putnam et al., 2014, p. 427). Autonomy in a workplace setting refers to 'the ability to exercise a degree of control over the content, timing, location and performance of activities' (Mazmanian et al., 2013, p. 1337), whereas control refers to the processes by which organizations influence their members to behave in ways that lead to the attainment of organizational goals and objectives (Thompson, 1995).

Control can be either direct and visible, such as measurement of output, or unobtrusive and out of individual awareness, such as socialization and peer-pressure (Tompkins and Cheney, 1985).

Unobtrusive control is central for understanding the autonomy paradox, since it typically bypasses the awareness of the employees and influence their behavior indirectly. It has been shown that the distributed and less visible nature of such indirect control mechanisms make them difficult to recognize and resist, which makes them especially powerful (Kärreman and Alvesson, 2009; Michel, 2011). Employees might then internalize intensified pressures to overwork that are under organizational influence whilst believing themselves to be acting autonomously. For example, Michel (2011) showed in a study of investment bankers that embodied controls, such as timetables, office layout, free food and socialization, bypassed the minds of the employees, targeted their bodies, and unobtrusively encouraged indiscriminate overwork. The bankers ended up working up to 120 h per week, often beyond bodily breakdown, while experiencing these efforts as 'self-chosen', thus concealing the banks influence.

A consequence of the autonomy paradox is that it can trigger self-entrapment. In another study on investment bankers, Michel (2014) showed how they used autonomy granted by participative work practices in the firm to collectively design activity structures that unintentionally led to their own entrapment. They collectively established a practice that compelled habitual overwork, which proved highly resistant to change. Similar observations have been made by Lupu and Empson (2015) of accountants becoming 'caught up' in a relentless work pace which suspends their reflexivity, so they increasingly come to take the necessity of overwork for granted. Over time, their bodies become subjugated, and they lose their ability to recognize that they have a choice. In these examples, the employees end up feeling trapped and powerless although they paradoxically retain a self-image of being free and in control – a phenomenon that Bunting (2005) has referred to as becoming 'willing slaves' to overwork.

These studies are characterized by how they have gained an understanding of the embodied realities of overwork by means of adopting methodologies and study designs that captures a contextual understanding through ethnographic studies, observations studies, or rich open-ended interviews (e.g. Kärreman and Alvesson, 2009; Michel, 2011; Michel, 2014; Lupu and Empson, 2015). It is no coincidence that all these insights are generated from qualitative studies, as this methodological orientation is recognized for its sensitivity for contextual richness and understanding (Bryman, 2016). However, they also have in common the position that the paradoxical nature of autonomy and control that underlies stress and overwork in contemporary societies needs to be studied and understood as something that is integrated into the whole work-life experience, as opposed to a separated aspect of work.

Issues related to stress and overwork on construction sites have attracted considerable scholarly attention and generated rich understanding of the causes and effects of stress and overwork amongst construction workers. However, the research gap identified in this paper

related to the paradoxical nature of overwork, can be deducted from a methodological homogeneity in the current literature following a certain predilection for quantitative methods and statistical analysis of various causalities related to occupational health and safety *specifically*. While this indeed has supported a reliably and robust understanding of both the antecedents and coping strategies related to stress (e.g. Boschman et al., 2013; Leung et al., 2016; Kamardeen and Sunindijo, 2017; Langdon and Sawang, 2018; Liang et al., 2022a; Liang et al., 2022b; Zhang et al., 2023 Palaniappan et al., 2023), there is still a dearth of studies that capture how occupational health relates to *the broader work-life experiences* of construction workers. This is true also for site managers. The main bulk of studies that have examined site manageŕs work situation have generally been concerned with the antecedents of their intensified job pressures and overwork from a variety of perspectives (e.g., Styhre, 2011a, 2012; Polesie, 2013; Sandberg et al., 2018), as well as how they cope with their work situation (Djebarni, 1996; Haynes and Love, 2004; Sandberg et al., 2016; see also Bowen et al., 2020). A perspective that has been lacking is the site managers own detailed perceptions of their work-life realities. To date, little is still documented about site managers subjective reasoning concerning their professional lives, leaving us with a scarce understanding of how they endure – or thrive even – in work that subject them to critical levels of stress and overwork. The integrative understanding of overwork pursued in this paper is thus characterized by a curiosity for how overwork is enmeshed in all the daily work practices as well as the whole work-life experience.

It should be noted that these arguments also are akin to recent studies published on safety on construction sites. For instance, Jeschke (2022a) argues for the urgent need for a more integrative understanding of safety culture and practices in construction; where safety is regarded as something that is inseparable from construction practices overall rather than added 'on top of it' (Uhrenholdt Madsen et al., 2019; Hasle et al., 2021). Such perspective posits that occupational health never can be fully captured as an isolated phenomenon, but only as something that is intrinsically enmeshed with the complex social interactions and relationships that make up the whole work-life experience of construction professionals (Gherardi and Nicolini, 2002; Sherratt, 2016, Lingard and Oswald, 2020). Following this,

there are now calls for more 'thick descriptions' (Geertz, 1973) of occupational health on construction sites (Jeschke, 2022b). 'Thick descriptions' relate to the integrative view by means of an accentuated attention for the contextual dimensions of all aspects of human social life (Ponterotto, 2006). While ethnographic studies traditionally have been the primary method for collecting such perspectives (Pink et al., 2010), it has also been highlighted how open-ended interviews offer a fruitful method for collecting 'thick descriptions' by means of allowing the storytellers to instill rich contextual details into their stories (Bryman, 2016). Sergeeva and Green (2019) note how we generally are missing such storytelling from construction professionals and thus also an understanding of how professional identities are shaped by construction work. Grounded in these perspectives, this paper collected and analyzed rich work-life stories of construction site managers to trace the mechanisms by which overwork has come to permeate their professional lives.

## 4. Research design

### 4.1. Collecting work-life stories

This paper draws on data from 37 in-depth interviews with construction site managers regarding their work-life experiences. While the overarching aim of the study was to explore overwork and stress, the study design drew heavily on the theoretical and methodological perspectives outlined in the previous section. Following this, it was assumed that in-depth understanding of overwork amongst construction site managers should be recorded, not as a separate theme, but as accounts drawn from rich stories about the broader work-life experiences of this specific professional group. The primary concern was therefore to

explicitly foreground the managers' own interpretations of these issues as they related to their broader work context, rather than testing any preexisting models, definitions, or hypotheses, which has been the dominant methodology in the occupational health and safety research in the construction industry. Following this, an open-ended interview study grounded in an explorative and inductive research methodology was designed. Open-ended interviews are considered particularly appropriate when trying to capture complex social realities of situated contexts (Cladinin and Connelly, 2000; Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2017) and was thus in our case a response to the study's purpose that sought an understanding of occupational health as something that is integrated in the whole work-life experience.

The interviews were performed by the first author between 2014–2020 as part of his PhD-studies that concluded in 2021. All the interviewed site managers worked in a construction company in Sweden, here referred to as 'ConstructED'. 'ConstructED' is one of the largest companies in the Nordic Region, employing over 20.000 persons with a yearly turnover of more than 50 billion (SEK). Most of the typical construction contexts and projects were represented by the sampled site managers, including infrastructure, residential and commercial development projects. The sample was randomly selected from a list of site managers provided by contact persons in the firm and included individuals with different experiences, career backgrounds, gender, age, and work-family situations.

The locations of the interviews were most often in a meeting room or the site managers' office located at the construction sites and the interview data was often complemented with field notes of the activities and interactions observed in relation to the site visits. Each interview lasted between 60–120 min and was audio recorded and then transcribed verbatim.

The respondents were ensured anonymity in that all information revealing identification would be omitted, and they were further offered the possibility to read the transcripts if they so wished. They were also informed that parts of the interview would be of more private nature concerning their work-life situation and wellbeing. None of the respondents expressed concern regarding this; instead, some even expressed gratitude for the opportunity to talk about these topics, which they deemed important, but usually kept for themselves.

In the beginning of the interviews the respondents were asked to provide the essential biographical data and to present their backgrounds and career trajectories to date. Subsequently, they were asked to talk freely about their work situations and were also encouraged to tell their life stories. The prompts used were open-ended, such as: 'describe your work', 'tell me about a typical day', 'what are your main challenges', 'what does your work mean to you', 'what are your ambitions', 'what do you enjoy/dislike most about your work', 'how does your working life effect your non-working life (and vice versa)'. Unexpected and interesting digressions were largely left uninterrupted. The interviewer only interrupted when further clarification or elaboration of their responses were needed.

Following this outline, the managers told us their rich personal stories following two reoccurring and permeating themes: 1) how they generally enjoyed their work; identified positively with it and felt empowered by the autonomy and freedom it offered – whilst at the same time 2) the vast majority of the interviewed managers experienced high levels of overwork and stress which affected their health and well-being in negative directions. These misaligned accounts triggered the researcheŕs curiosity and a series of frequent follow-up questions aimed at eliciting in-depth causes and meanings (Brinkmann, 2013). For instance: *Why* is it so hard to avoid overwork? *Why* do you come to work while being sick? *Why* do you keep risking your health for work? *Why* do you keep bringing work into your personal spheres? *Why* do you enjoy a work-life that is so apparently stressful? These sequences of tough follow-up questions clearly challenged the manageŕs self-reflections, leading to a variety of both clear and vague responses.

## 5. The analytical process

The interview transcripts were analyzed by both authors of this paper. This process followed an interpretative and inductive method for analysis of interview data (Czarniawska, 2004). In an initial phase, the interview transcripts were read and re-read multiple times by both authors. Following this early analytical phase, the authors focused primarily on trying to unpack and understand the overarching tension in the managers stories; on the one hand, they elaborated on a very rewarding work situation that instilled them with joy, meaning and empowerment, and on the other hand, almost all the stories were permeated by accounts of extreme overwork, stress, and in many cases severe work-life (im)balance.

To do so the next phase of the analysis was inspired by a grounded theory approach, but without strictly following all the steps outlined by Strauss and Corbin (1990). Instead, the aim was to create a coherent 'thick story' that captured the meaning of the situated events (Ponterotto, 2006), by means of tracing the underlying logics down to their more detailed descriptions and accounts. Through these readings, the interview excerpts were given code words. These code words where then sorted under themes that linked to an overall plot concerning the respondents' perceptions and reasoning concerning their root causes for overwork and its deeper meaning for their work-lives, including, for instance, 'striving towards a career', 'preserving autonomy', 'resisting interference', 'feeling trapped', 'resisting work situation'.

The analysis revealed that the respondent's feelings of being entrapped in overwork were embedded in tensions and contradictions that emerged in many different work-related themes. For example, respondents who strove to have a successful career could say that they had become 'stuck' in a relentless pattern of overwork. Although they were aware that they had themselves chosen this work mode, they also expressed strong frustration at not being able to change their situation even when they desired to do so. This gave rise to accounts in the interviews when the respondents expressed an urge to 'resist' their work situation but felt that they were unable to do so since they perceived that they had imposed this situation on themselves. Altogether, they felt entrapped in overwork. In the following section we present the main mechanisms of this entrapment, and a concluding discussion is then further conceptualizing these mechanisms as an ongoing paradoxical state of embodied autonomy and control.

## 6. Results

### 6.1. The overworked site manager

The results reaffirm one of the converging conclusions in previous research, showing that overwork is a widespread and serious problem among construction site managers. Many respondents in our study described their work as highly demanding implicating long working hours, often between 60 and 100 h per week; as well as being subjected to the pressure to always be available to manage 'their' projects. At an overarching level, these levels of overwork were primarily linked to the requirements embedded in the work role as such. That is, all the managers portrayed it as unrealistic, if not to say impossible, to be a successful site manager unless you accept to work far more than the standard 40 h. However, zooming in on their more detailed reasoning for accepting these work conditions, we found two different dominant logics, namely to: 1) overwork to be able to leave these work conditions and 2) to overwork to preserve them. The former relates to a logic of career advancement, one that is broadly recognized in society overall. Following this, the site managers perceive overwork as an investment for their career. This narrative was least surprising since it bears most resemblance to how the logic behind overwork often is described in organization studies (e.g., the 'ideal worker image'). The latter logic, however, that occupied the minds of the larger group of site managers not aspiring for any career step above site management, outlined a much

more surprising scenario, namely how some site managers seem to overwork as a means to validate and preserve their autonomy. In the following parts we outline the details of these two logics, followed by a third part that elaborates on the mechanisms of overwork entrapment, experienced gradually by those individuals that have worked in the site manager role for prolonged periods of time.

## 7. Logic of advancement: Overworking oneself into a better future

Previous studies have found that there exists, at least in large construction companies in Sweden, a widespread career praxis of having worked successfully as a site manager to be eligible for promotions to higher organizational levels (see e.g., Löwstedt and Räisänen, 2014). Our findings readily confirm this, and these situated expectations were indeed a concern of especially the younger and more junior cohort of site managers included in our study – those that typically had a recent university degree and generally aspired for positions higher up in construction companies. This group of respondents thus justified their overwork as a temporary sacrifice that would pay off with a better and more rewarding position in a foreseeable future. Respondents who justified overwork in this particular way often perceived their work situation as unsustainable. They were often stressed and exhausted and felt that they had little time and energy over for life outside work. Simultaneously, they described this situation as a temporary and necessary stepping-stone towards a better future. The strained situation was seen as a transitory sacrifice that they had to endure to obtain promotion and climb the career ladder. Some of them referred to this as 'doing their dog years'. In the following example, Marcus, a junior site manager, describes a hectic period when he was put in charge of his first project.

> **Marcus:** *I remember lying awake all nights, thinking about work. Since I couldn't go back to sleep, I sat in my car and went off to work. If I was thinking about work all the time, I might as well go there and actually get some work done.* **Interviewer:** *What were you thinking when you sat in the car?*
> **Marcus:** *I remember thinking "what the hell am I doing? Why do I put up with this?" I also remember that I was trying to convince myself that it would only last for a little while longer. "Give it two months, then everything will get calmer". I was trying to endure.*
> **Interviewer:** *But why did you put up with the situation if it was so distressing? Why didn't you do anything about it?*
> **Marcus:** *My ambition is to find a more strategic role in the firm that I am satisfied with. You know, reach for the stars… perhaps becoming division manager […] I reckon that I have to do a few dog years now, just to struggle on. I probably need to do two more projects like this one before I can get a better role in the firm. I realize that it won't be like this forever. But if I wouldn't get a promotion I would probably move on.*

Throughout this dialogue, we see how Marcus is very instrumental and calculative regarding how he rationalizes the negative wellbeing consequences of his overwork. Although he sees the distressing features of his work as detrimental to his wellbeing, he also sees it as an investment for the future. He expects that if he only endures the strained work situation for a couple of more projects, he will receive a promotion that will allow him to advance in his career. As previously stated, this instrumental way of justifying overwork seemed to be more common among younger individuals who often had a higher university degree. Oftentimes, just like Marcus, they had high career ambitions. They had often become attracted to work in the construction industry since it seemed adventurous and offered opportunities for personal development. Many of these individuals saw the site manager role as a natural gateway to start their career. Being an operative manager in smaller projects for a few years allowed them to gain experience to either work as project managers for larger and more exiting projects or, just like Marcus, try to obtain promotion to more strategic managerial positions.

In either case, they strove to advance beyond their current position. However, it was also clear that this category of workers, just like Marcus, have conditioned their sacrifice; if they don't see a return of investment (i.e., a promotion) within the next couple of projects, they indicated that they would consider leaving the company and search for another more beneficial position elsewhere.

## 8. Logic of preservation: Overworking to safeguard autonomy

Not all respondents justified overwork through a future-oriented desire to advance in their careers. In fact, stories about career advancements were altogether less common than those describing site management as the end stop of their careers. This category of voices frequently portrayed site manager work as very rewarding, and even a self-fulfilling 'personal calling'. However, as their storytelling continued, these positive aspects seemed to be enmeshed with several serious drawbacks. Many of these individuals had become attracted to the site manager role since it offers an exceptionally free and challenging type of work. They are granted the full responsibility and control over the production process in construction projects which in practice means that they are in charge of the firm's most important value-adding activities. They talked about their role as being a 'CEO' for the *real* building process. This view differs sharply from perceptions of more senior managerial jobs in the firm (including that of the actual CEO) that condescendingly were described as 'desk jobs', with limited insight into what it actually takes to produce a building.

Site managers found the feeling of working autonomously with full control immensely rewarding, and at times even addictive. One respondent compared the feeling of being responsible for finalizing a critical stage in a project with making a football goal in the World Cup: *'You get such a rush! It's addictive, you only want more'* [Jonathan]. It was thus not surprising that many of these managers were reluctant to advance hierarchically in their careers. Gaining a promotion would imply that they would move further away from the core operations in the building process, and they would lose much of the autonomy, power and 'thrills' associated with being a site manager. These perceptions were reflected in the story of Eric, a site manager with 12 years of experience, who participated in a career workshop.

> Eric: I was in this career workshop with a consultant in ConstructED a few years ago. I remember she asked me: 'Where do you see yourself in five years?" So, I answered: "I'm not going anywhere! I'm satisfied" It was so funny to see her [the consultants'] reaction because it was so clear that my answer did not make sense to her [laughing]. I guess that she had not met many site managers before.
> Interviewer: Haha, ok… What do you mean? Why do you think that she hadn't met site managers before?
> Eric: I guess most people who take on a managerial job have some kind of career ambition. So, she probably expected us to talk about our dream jobs, how to reach them and so on. But it is difficult to find a freer and more rewarding job than being a site manager. You are your own boss. No one tells you what to do. So, for me this is the dream job.
> Later in the same interview:
> Interviewer: You mentioned that you are your own boss. Is it important for you to be free?
> Eric: I believe that it is important for all site managers. From the moment you start you realize that you can only do a good job if don't have someone breathing down your neck

Just like Eric, many site managers perceived autonomous work as fundamental to their job satisfaction. The reasons were abundant: autonomy offers them ample opportunities to shape their role in directions which they personally prefer; it offers them opportunities to influence the projects in line with their personal preferences (e.g., establishing idiosyncratic routines and procedures); it allows them to establish a 'society-within-society' on site, i.e., a social community characterized by a free lifestyle and comradery (e.g., barbecues, soccer tournaments, bringing dogs to work, beer in fridge); to exploit organizational resources (e.g., tools, machines, 'gadgets') and benefits (e.g., discount in the local hardware store, going to a ski trip at the clients treat); to take considerable pride in the buildings that *they* are responsible for producing, among many things. Some of these sentiments related to the freedom that follows from their autonomy are expressed in the following quote.

> It is a special way of life. It is shitty and rainy sometimes… but it is also very stimulating. The culture of free and independent work is the reason why we are here. Otherwise we would have chosen another profession, perhaps with less commuting, and with a fancier title and better salary. But we are here for a reason, and that is because we enjoy it. [Jonathan]

For many site managers, freedom and autonomy symbolize what is most desirable in a 'dream job'. Paradoxically, however, the desire to remain autonomous also seemed to contribute to intensify their work and increase their working hours. Common for site managers who idealized autonomy was that they deferred from asking for support and delegating responsibilities even when they know that they ought to do so. An important reason seems to be that it disrupts the image of themselves as being independent, self-reliant and strong, something that they deem essential in order to safeguard their autonomy. A consequence of this reluctance to seek aid is an escalation of demands to the extent that it becomes impossible to limit workweeks to anywhere near 40 h as prescribed by Swedish law. Instead, they work longer days.

> You [a site manager] don't want to look weak […] If a problem arises in the project, and I have to choose between asking for support and working late evenings, I usually prefer the latter. I admit that I work from 5 am to 10 pm during these periods. [John]

These managers were (more or less) constantly stressed and exhausted, and they complained about various health and family problems caused by excessive overwork. What is interesting to note is that these problems caused by overwork were not seen as something entirely negative from their point of view. An important reason for this was that it validated their autonomy. Although they abused their bodies by excessive overwork, the physical and social manifestations of this abuse – stress, overweight, high blood pressure, divorces etc. – symbolized embodied proof of their independence and self-sufficiency. One of the most salient manifestations of this phenomenon was when they continued to overwork when ill, even with severe health conditions, as expressed in the following quote.

**9. Can say this much, I had my second blood clot last year and contracted salmonella at the same time. I had a bucket with me on my round of the site and had to run off into the woods for privacy … that's the way it works! So, I go to work, and I have a bucket. It functions. I'm not that ill! [mona] .**

Episodes like this one were satisfying for many site managers since it sends a powerful message (both to themselves and the environment) that they are in full control and able to manage their projects regardless of the circumstances. From the site managers point-of-view, they do not only perform work under strenuous conditions, they manage to perform it *despite* the strain. In this sense, being overworked is not (only) seen as a weakness. It is displayed as a symbol of their strength, and the ultimate token of their autonomy, i.e., they have *proven* themselves to be independent and self-sufficient.

As their autonomy is validated, they are enabled to exploit the rich plethora of resources and opportunities associated to being a self-sufficient 'project CEO'. But this is also risky business for the site managers. How do they know that they are not becoming 'that ill' so that their bodies break down, they run out of energy to (over)work and the house of cards they have carefully built collapses?

## 10. Mechanisms of overwork entrapment

A common theme in many site managers' stories, especially for those who had worked in the role for a long time, was that they increasingly had started to feel trapped in their role. Many of these individuals had started out either with the ambition to work with ever more adventurous and challenging projects in their current role or gaining promotion to higher positions. Either way, after working under pressure for several years, many respondents expressed that their lives and identities increasingly had come to revolve around work. This is something that they felt eroded their non-working lives. For example, several witnessed that their long working hours and strong commitment to work had led them to lose many of their friends outside work. They had given up many of their hobbies and recreational activities. Some had undergone divorces and lost contact with their children. Others abstained from having children due to their strong career ambitions, which they later regretted. A common tendency was that these managers increasingly overworked since they felt that work is all they have left in their lives.

Here, we return to the life-story of Mona, who we briefly cached a glimpse of in the previous section. Mona is a senior site manager who has worked in this position in the company for nearly 30 years. She portrays a reality where she seems to work almost every part of here awaken time, from early mornings to late evenings, during weekends and vacations.

Have been getting up at 4.30 am and leaving work at 7 pm and going to bed at 9 pm. How does one count work time with such a schedule! during the weekend, I sit with the budget. I easily work a 100-hour work week

Mona confesses that during the most hectic work periods, she spends the night sleeping in her office to 'save time' that she otherwise would have spent commuting. Sleeping in the office allows Mona to work exceptionally long hours. What is interesting is that she feels that sleeping at work is a good way for her to 'calm down' and to attenuate some of the stress that accumulates during periods of intensive overwork. She jokes about this behavior as if it sometimes feels like she is married to her job. Mona explains during the interview that she has always been very committed to her job and she perceives the day-to-day work of managing her projects as free and very rewarding. But she also says that the reason for why she has been able to work at such a high pace is because she has neglected her family, friends, and her own wellbeing. She refers to these parts of life as the 'collateral damage' of her working life.

don't have any alone time. I definitely don't have time to meet my friends. My family I hardly see at all… so these bits are the collateral damage. I never go to the cinema; I don't have time for such things.

Mona does not openly regret her strong career focus. But the affectual undertone in her story 'loudly' expresses that she has compunctions regarding how work has come to dominate her life. An example of this is that she has lost most of her friends outside work and that she has started to feel increasingly lonely.

*Of course, it would be possible for me to call some of my old friends. Maybe we could go and see a movie or something… But it feels weird to call a person that you have not talked to in 20 years. I wouldn't really know what to say.*

Mona's compunctions become especially salient when she talks about her family being reduced to a 'collateral damage' of work. Mona is married and has a teenage daughter at home, having made the conscious decision not to have more children. She is quick to state that her family is important to her. She says that she *tries* to be present and that she has a good relationship with her daughter. However, she also has a constant guilty conscience for working too much. She is aware that the long hours spent at work implies a neglect of her daughter. A sadness is detected in her voice when she says that she has missed out on important occasions during her daughter's childhood. Even when Mona is present in body at home, she admits that her mind is absent; either she is too exhausted to

participate in family activities or she is preoccupied thinking about work. For example, Mona says that she spends most evenings sitting with her daughter in the sofa watching children's cartoons. But rather than watching together, Mona is busy working on her laptop dealing with work issues.

Mona admits that her work pace has taken a toll on her health. She constantly feels exhausted and suffers from stress-related symptoms, such as anxiety. She rarely exercises and says that her stressful and sedentary lifestyle has caused her to develop overweight and high blood pressure. With age, Mona has come to realize that she needs to start taking care of her health in order to last an entire working life. However, she continues to repeat that she has 'no time' for training or recreational activities. Her job consumes too much of her time and energy to combine with a healthy lifestyle. She laughingly talks about her overweight as yet another price that she has to pay for her work commitment.

*I'm really tired. Time to train… I never bloody well have time for physical training. That is why I don't lose weight. Now though I have to get started because I have developed a bad hip due to my overweight.*

Mona's life-story is a reflection of how work has come to take over her life. Work is the reason for why she has lost contact with her friends and why she neglects her family and her bodily health. Her pattern of excessive overwork seems to prevent her from creating alternative identities (e.g., being a friend, being a good mother) and change the way she lives outside work even when she desires to do so. So, why does not site managers like Mona take measures to resist and escape from this 'live-to-work' trap? There appears to be several different, yet interrelated reasons why they continue to endure excessive overwork despite feeling trapped by it.

Although overwork erodes aspects of autonomy outside work, it simultaneously serves to enhance other aspects of autonomy inside the work sphere. The respondents thus felt that they were able to compensate for emptiness in their lives with the responsibilities and social rewards they felt at work. A good example was that some respondents took on a paternalistic role in which they cared for, and were looked up to, by young subordinates. As one divorced (and involuntarily childless) respondent expressed: *'If you're not a dad at home, you can be one at work!'* [Viktor]. The respondents typically seemed to find this role rewarding since it generated meaningfulness in their lives. It further confirmed their self-image as being an influential figure at work. A paradoxical outcome, however, was that the role seemed to generate even more overwork since their caring was not only restricted to work, but would often entail helping subordinates to deal with various life crises after hours (e.g., marriage problems, alcoholism, gambling addictions).

*If something happens to a colleague, it doesn't matter if it is Saturday or Sunday. Then it demands… it can be a conflict, or something might have happened in the family… it demands a commitment [Harry].*

Another reason why it is difficult to 'break the shackles' of overwork is because the forces that ensnare the site managers seem to evolve stepwise and largely beyond their awareness. Few of the respondents were able to pinpoint specific situations that triggered entrapment. Instead, the causes were described as 'vicious circles' or 'deteriorating patterns'. One respondent expressed that he had become chocked when his spouse one day asked for a divorce: *'I was no longer fun to live with, she said […] I didn't realize that it had gone so far'* [John]. The stepwise nature of entrapment contributed to a feeling of normalcy of an increasingly deteriorating life situation. It made it difficult for the respondents to identify specific aspects of their work to resist. In the seeming absence of external forces that influenced their behavior, they turned instead to their own work commitment and search for control as a source of the problem: *'I have only myself to blame, for I let go of nothing!'* [John]. In other words, they internalized the problem.

Although overwork seemed self-imposed, many respondents had a hard time explaining why they found it so difficult to choose an

alternative way of working when they so wished. Yet, there was a small group of respondents who had increasingly started to reflect over why it was so difficult for them to change their behavior. They had come to the insight that their autonomy is indirectly exploited by the firm to sustain their pattern of overwork.

> *It's true, we [site managers] enjoy the freedom that we have. But I have realized that people who have this type of freedom we end up in a position where we don't use it anymore. In the long run it's constantly the employer who benefits from our work. I cannot think of a single individual who benefits from working oneself into a burnout […] It would mean a lot to me if my boss checked in and told me 'it's OK, you can go home', but that has never happened [Thomas].*

These respondents seemed to have realized that the more they worked the more they ended up in a position where they curtailed their own autonomy at the benefit of the firm. They started to behave *as if* they were controlled, which had the peculiar effect that they *became* controlled by the firm, albeit indirectly. The only thing the firm had to do was to not interfere with the site managers' internalized pressures to overwork.

Perhaps it would have been possible for site managers to change their behavior if they became more reflexive regarding the firm's influence on their behavior, and consequently offered some sort of resistance. However, a respondent, Thomas, answer tells of a much darker scenario, namely that site managers are not that averse to the idea of being stuck and exploited in detrimental patterns of overwork. After all, it is because they become ensnared in this position that they themselves can continue to exploit the wide array of benefits afforded in their work, and to preserve their autonomous way of life.

> Guess we site managers are a little bit stupid, because we want it this way. It's through the challenges and pressures that we find satisfaction in our job […] even though the job itself is stressful there are moments when it is extremely satisfying. As I see it, these moments come sufficiently often. Otherwise, I probably couldn't survive in this job

So, is overwork a road to freedom and autonomy, or is it a road to control and domination? The stories outlined in this study suggest that the answer to this question might be much more complex than has been previously recognized.

## 11. Concluding discussion

The findings identified two different logics through which construction site managers justify excessive overwork and simultaneously rationalizing its detrimental effects on their health and wellbeing. The 'logic of advancement' constitutes a future-oriented form of justification in which overwork is seen as a temporary sacrifice and investment toward a career advancement and a vision of a work-life that is *changing* for the better. The 'logic of preservation', on the other hand, constitutes a sustaining form of justification in which overwork is seen as a means to *preserve* the high levels of freedom and autonomy that so frequently is portrayed as the prominent positive dimensions of site manager work. However, by means of in-depth and personal storytelling, this study has elucidated how these positive dimensions are tightly enmeshed with entrapment in prolonged overwork, distress, and personal sacrifices – following the dynamics of an 'autonomy paradox' (Mazmanian et al., 2013). While previous debates in construction research have tended to take the form of 'either-or', i.e., construction work as essentially autonomous (e.g., Steiger and Form, 1991; Applebaum, 1999; Thiel, 2007), or essentially controlled (e.g., Reckman, 1979; Silver, 1986; Styhre, 2006; Styhre, 2012), the findings in this study illustrate how prolonged overwork amongst the managers of construction work can be understood as a work-life reality that is interwoven by a complex blend of both autonomy and control – one that is hard to oversee by the subjects themselves, and, not the least; seemingly hard to break free from.

Seen from the perspective of the group that are using site manager work merely as a steppingstone for career advancement (in our study mainly consisting of the younger and more junior site managers, typically with a fresh university degree), the logic of overwork in construction is not much different from the broader and well-recognized societal discourse of being rewarded with a promotion to higher organizational levels based on hard work and/or documented performance in lower organizational levels. However, seeing that the accounts of a salient autonomy paradox emerged mainly in the stories told by those managers that had devoted themselves to a more permanent (as it appears, more or less willingly) work-life of site management, suggests that the antecedents of the overwork entrapment is to be found specifically in the situated context of construction work.

While it generally has been assumed that overwork is a normative behavior that validates promotability and career advancement (Kunda, 1992; Grey, 1994; Bailyn, 2006; Reid, 2015; Lupu and Empson, 2015), the group of site managers that have stayed in the role for prolonged period of times are instead entrapped in overwork as they are trying to preserve the work role as it is, i.e., a somewhat contrary outcome. A key-finding here is that site managers display an image of themselves as overworked in order to preserve their autonomy. It shows that site managers to some extent are aware of the norms and ideals associated with their role, and they are able to manipulate the image of themselves to increase their influence. In some respects, these finding align with Kunda's (1992, p. 188) description of professionals exerting a 'controlled display' of their overworked selves to show commitment. His description of how professionals wear and display the scars of burnout 'almost as one would a purple heart' (p. 39) are especially apt. The findings further align with Jackall's (1988) description of corporate managers as 'dexterous symbol manipulators', i.e., managerial survival depends on the ability to 'read between the lines' of corporate symbols and to manipulate these for the managers own benefits (p. 144). A main difference here from most previous studies, however, is that site managers behave in this way with an entirely different motive than those that have so far been emphasized. While the image of a successful professional self generally has been equated with someone who is upward-looking, career-hungry and 'promotable', the ideal for many site managers was to distance themselves further from the organization and to protect their autonomous way of life. In other words, what they try to *accomplish* through overwork differs quite a bit from these previous descriptions.

The mechanisms of the site managers' 'overwork entrapment' suggest that a considerable number of site managers have internalized the pressure to overwork and tend to experience it is self-chosen; yet they seem to lack the ability to change this behavior even if they wish to do so, in line with Michel (2011) and Mazmanian et al. (2013). This tendency was widespread among managers who justified overwork as a means of ensuring broader autonomy. This intricate tension reveals the paradoxicality of the phenomenon of entrapment. An explanation can be traced back to the validating mechanism itself, especially its long-term unintended consequences. Even though overwork can have autonomy-enhancing effects in the short-term, the site managers were less aware or seemed to underestimate its paradoxical autonomy-diminishing in the long term, not only the detrimental effects on their physical health, but also the more subtle psychological interpersonal effects. A reason seems to be that these effects emerge gradually over time and largely out of their awareness, which is shown to contribute to its gradual normalization. Altogether, the findings indicate that autonomy-validation through overwork conceals an unobtrusive control mechanism that is both consciously and unconsciously exploited by the organization yet sustains the impression that site managers are *increasing* their autonomy. This is the essence of the autonomy paradox (Mazmanian et al., 2013). From the firm's point-of-view, it is reasonable to give the site managers power and autonomy: The more autonomy they have, the more they seem to work, the more their lives come to revolve around work, the more work comes to control their lives

(Putnam et al., 2014). Direct control then becomes unnecessary since they have already internalized what Cederstrom and Fleming (2012) refer to as the 'boss function', i.e., the organizational mechanism that surveils and disciplines them. This is manifested in how they talk about themselves as sovereign and responsible 'CEOs' and how they are prone to prioritize work above all other aspects of life, including health and family life. Indirect exploitation is enabled by the fact that the forces that ensnare and discipline them emerge (slowly) out their awareness, which makes them difficult to recognize and resist (Kärreman and Alvesson, 2009).

## 12. Contributions and implications to the construction field

This study has examined site managers perceptions and reasoning concerning a work-life reality characterized by excessive overwork. The study reveals a tendency for site managers, a professional group who are known to benefit from generous autonomy, to willingly engage in processes that lead to their entrapment from which they find it almost impossible to resist overwork. These findings contribute to the emerging literature on overwork amongst construction professional by revealing the existence of an unobtrusive, yet powerful, control mechanism that previously has been unaccounted for. The 'autonomy paradox' that is entrapping the site manager in prolonged overwork is a complex and paradoxical interplay between autonomy and organizational control where these seemingly opposite poles 'impose on and begin to define each other' (Putnam et al., 204, p 428). Seen from another perspective, it is also a complex interplay from which individual (and very personal) work-life identities are being embedded in broader industry work structures.

Only by recognizing that overwork and stress on construction sites is a multifaceted and interwoven phenomenon can we find clues for solutions and fruitful future studies. In terms of practice, the study highlights a need for practitioners to address the issue of overwork from an overall organizational systemic perspective. The findings reveal that the mechanisms that drive overwork cannot easily be reduced to an individual (*agential*) concern. Although individual site managers seem to instrumentally make use of overwork to increase their influence, we have also seen that they become constrained by an organizational control mechanism that operates largely out of their awareness. Yet at the same time, we have seen the problem of overwork cannot easily be reduced to an organizational (*structural*) concern either. Even if organizations benefit from certain aspects of the overwork pattern, this study shows that site managers themselves many times are eager to preserve it in spite of its detrimental effects on their wellbeing. Both the organization and the individuals thus appear to be sending 'mixed messages' contributing to an extra-organizational/individual dynamic that perpetuates the problem.

It should be a prioritized concern for both construction practitioners and researchers to address this problem; not the least because the overwork and autonomy regime amongst site managers seem to be linked to broader organizational challenges in construction. Previous studies have shown, for instance, that the autonomy ideal amongst site managers is affecting operation strategizing in construction companies (Sandberg et al., 2021), hindering the uptake of standardized processes, concepts, and technologies that ultimately seek to improve the performance of the construction process (Polesie, 2013; Löwstedt and Sandberg, 2020). Unpacking the details of these hinders, Löwstedt and Sandberg (2020) show that site managers unwillingness to have their autonomy curtailed was directly linked to the high burden of responsibility that they had for the end results of the building process. That is, as long as they needed to carry the full burden for the end results (a successful building project), they demanded full control on how to get to these end results. Collectively their message was loud and clear: if management in construction companies want to redistribute away the site control from the site managers, they need also to redistribute away the responsibility. It can therefore be concluded that the 'autonomy

paradox' that is entrapping site managers in prolonged overwork also is closely related to the overall distribution of control across organization- and project-levels in construction companies. Herein lies the important reminder to also consider the distribution of responsibilities, whenever top management is seeking to implement new processes, concepts, technologies on construction sites. In such considerations lies clues of how to share the burdens of the entrapped autonomous worker.

### 12.1. Contributions and implications to organizational studies on stress and overwork in a project-based society

The case study design adopted in this study favors in-depth meaning and contextual understanding over broader generalizability. However, the findings indicate that some of the contextual dimensions linked to overwork amongst construction site manager could have broader implications for organizational studies on overwork and stress. Some of the respondents – in our case mostly the younger recent graduates – submit to the contemporary societal discourse of the 'ideal worker' that overworks in the name of a career advancement. This shows that also in an industry that oftentimes have been labeled conservative and backwards (Löwstedt and Räisänen, 2012), workers are willing to trade their well-being in the present for the vision of a better future.

However, our case also reveals that many of the construction site managers had no such career aspirations. This group portrayed the current work role as an ideal state and the core of their stories was not only to reject to climb upwards the hierarchies in the organization but also to actively distance themselves from the organization altogether by means of strong integration with the work on the construction site. This finding indicates that the *project-based organizing* that is one of the core characteristics of construction processes (Winch 2012) serve as a principal contextual dimension for how overwork entrapment is embodied by these workers. The site managers expressed that the operations in the construction projects were subjected to few control mechanisms from the 'permanent organization'. However, even without such external control they testified to strong emotional attachments and almost pathological levels of responsibilities for 'their' projects which then altogether served as a relentless intrinsic motor for overwork. It was thus in the organized separation between the organization and the project that the central mechanics for overwork were discerned. The managers not only embraced this separation but actively drew on it to uphold the distance across multiple dimensions, including professional identity ("I am different than the 'suits' from headquarters"), control ("they will not and cannot tell me how to run my project"), and support ("I never ask for any help"). These processes translated to an embodied paradoxical state of autonomy and control; even though they kept praising this distance as the central ingredient for their 'freedom' and 'autonomy', it was through this same distance that the managers remained under the control of the immense burden of "their projects".

To organize temporal projects that are separated from the permanent organization is a well-established strategy for companies to mitigate risk, enhance flexible and innovative, and integrate specialized recourses and expertise (Sydow et al., 2004). Their proven efficiencies for addressing contemporary challenges have resulted in a fast increasing use of project-based organizing, not only for companies, but also related to an increased 'projectification' of our lives more broadly (Jensen et al., 2016). Pointing to a relation between overwork and project-based organizing the findings in this paper therefore points to an important implication for the growing literature on the overwork and stress in our contemporary societies.

Researchers has now already begun to pay attention to overwork and stress amongst project workers, including, for instance, the linkages between project complexities and stress (Turner et al., 2008; Styhre, 2011b Huemann et al., 2018), project challenges and stress (Pinto et al., 2014; Xia et al., 2022), different types of projects and different kinds of stressors (Pinto et al., 2016), or how multiple projects in project portfolios result in excessive work (Deslie, 2020). This paper adds an

important complementary insight to these studies by showing that overwork in project contexts is not a one-sided dynamic. The project workers are not merely passive recipients of this new kinds of external pressures, but also entrapped by the embodiments of their allusive forms of autonomy and freedom. For a concluding note, it is worthwhile to reiterate the premises of our case study design and call for future studies that focus specifically on capturing the comprehensive and integrated experiences of various categories of project workers. This could gradually enhance our understanding of how contemporary work-life conditions continually allure us into 'happily overworking ourselves'.

## CRediT authorship contribution statement

**Rikard Sandberg:** Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Martin Löwstedt:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Formal analysis, Conceptualization.

## Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

## Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

## References

Acker, J., 1990. Hierarchies, jobs, bodies: A theory of gendered organizations. Gend. Soc. 4 (2), 139–158.

Alvesson, M., Einola, K., 2018. Excessive work regimes and functional stupidity. German Journal of Human Resource Management 32 (3–4), 283–296.

Alvesson, M., Sköldberg, K., 2017. Reflexive Methodology: New Vistas for Qualitative Research. Sage Publications.

Bäcklander, G., Rosengren, C., Kaulio, M., 2021. Managing intensity in knowledge work: Self-leadership practices among Danish management consultants. J. Manag. Organ. 27 (2), 342–360.

Bailyn, L., 2006. Breaking the mold: Redesigning work for productive and satisfying lives. Cornell University Press.

Blagoev, B., Muhr, S.L., Ortlieb, R., Schreyögg, G., 2018. Organizational working time regimes: Drivers, consequences and attempts to change patterns of excessive working hours. German Journal of Human Resource Management 32 (3–4), 155–167.

Bowen, P., Govender, R., Edwards, P., Cattell, K., 2018. Work-related contact, work–family conflict, psychological distress and sleep problems experienced by construction professionals: An integrated explanatory model. Constr. Manag. Econ. 36 (3), 153–174.

Bowen, P., Peihua Zhang, R., Edwards, P., 2020. An investigation of work-related strain effects and coping mechanisms among South African construction professionals. Constr. Manag. Econ. 1–25.

Brinkmann, S., 2013. Qualitative interviewing. Oxford University Press.

Bryman, A., 2016. Social research methods. Oxford University Press.

Bunting, M., 2011. Willing slaves: How the overwork culture is ruling our lives. HarperCollins UK.

Burke, R.J., 2000. Workaholism in organizations: Concepts, results and future research directions. Int. J. Manag. Rev. 2 (1), 1–16.

Cederstrom, C., Fleming, P., 2012. Dead man working. John Hunt Publishing.

Cladinin, D. J. and Connelly, F. M. (2000). Narrative Inquiry: Experience and Story in Qualitative Research. Jossey-Bass.

Czarniawska, B., 2004. Narratives in social science research. Sage.

Davidson, M.J., Sutherland, V.J., 1992. Stress and construction site managers: Issues for Europe 1992. Empl. Relat.

Deslie, A., 2020. Handling multiple projects and its impact on stress in project-based environments. Manage. Rev. 12 (3), 199–210.

Djebarni, R., 1996. The impact of stress on site management effectiveness. Constr. Manag. Econ. 14 (4), 281–293.

Edum-Fotwe, F.T., McCaffer, R., 2000. Developing project management competency: Perspectives from the construction industry. Int. J. Proj. Manag. 18 (2), 111–124.

Ekman, S., 2013. Fantasies about work as limitless potential: How managers and employees seduce each other through dynamics of mutual recognition. Hum. Relat. 66 (9), 1159–1181.

Geertz, C., 1973. Thick description: Toward an interpretive theory of culture. In Interpretation of Cultures.

Gherardi, S., Nicolini, D., 2002. Learning the trade: A culture of safety in practice. Organization 9 (2), 191–223.

Goh, J., Pfeffer, J., Zenios, S.A., 2016. The relationship between workplace stressors and mortality and health costs in the United States. Manag. Sci. 62, 608–662.

Grey, C., 1994. Career as a project of the self and labour process discipline. Sociology 28 (2), 479–497.

Hasle, P., Uhrenholdt Madsen, C., Hansen, D., 2021. Integrating operations management and occupational health and safety: A necessary part of safety science! Saf. Sci. 120, 139.

Haynes, N.S., Love, P.E., 2004. Psychological adjustment and coping among construction project managers. Constr. Manag. Econ. 22 (2), 129–140.

He, C., McCabe, B., Jia, G., Sun, J., 2020. Effects of safety climate and safety behavior on safety outcomes between supervisors and construction workers. J. Constr. Eng. Manag. 146 (1).

Hewlett, S.A., Luce, C.B., 2006. Extreme jobs: The dangerous allure of the 70-hour workweek. Harv. Bus. Rev. 84 (12), 49–59.

Huemann, M., Keegan, A., Turner, R., 2018. September). Human resource management in the project-oriented organization, Project Management Institute.

Huml, M.R., Taylor, E.A., Dixon, M.A., 2021. From engaged worker to workaholic: A mediated model of athletic department employees. Eur. Sport Manag. Q. 21 (4), 583–604.

Jackall, R., 1988. Moral mazes: The world of corporate managers. International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society 1 (4), 598–614.

Jensen, A., Thuesen, C., Geraldi, J., 2016. The projectification of everything: Projects as a human condition. Proj. Manag. J. 47 (3), 21–34.

Jeschke, K.N., 2022. Understanding how managers balance the paradoxical nature of occupational safety through a practice-driven institutional lens. Saf. Sci. 147.

Jeschke, K. N. (2022b). Balancing Safety in Everyday Work: A Case Study of Construction Managers' Dynamic Safety Practices. Copenhagen Business School [Phd Thesis].

Kamardeen, I., Sunindijo, R.Y., 2017. Personal characteristics moderate work stress in construction professionals. J. Constr. Eng. Manag. 143 (10).

Kärreman, D., Alvesson, M., 2009. Resisting resistance: Counter-resistance, consent and compliance in a consultancy firm. Hum. Relat. 62 (8), 1115–1144.

Kinman, G., Jones, F., 2008. A life beyond work? Job demands, work-life balance, and wellbeing in UK academics. J. Hum. Behav. Soc. Environ. 17 (1–2), 41–60.

Kunda, G., 1992. Engineering culture: Control and commitment in a high-tech corporation. Temple University Press.

Langdon, R.R., Sawang, S., 2018. Construction workers' well-being: What leads to depression, anxiety, and stress? J. Constr. Eng. Manag. 144 (2).

Leung, M.Y., Chan, Y.S., Yuen, K.W., 2010. Impacts of stressors and stress on the injury incidents of construction workers in Hong Kong. J. Constr. Eng. Manag. 136 (10), 1093–1103.

Leung, M.Y., Liang, Q., Yu, J., 2016. Development of a mindfulness–stress–performance model for construction workers. Constr. Manag. Econ. 34 (2), 110–128.

Liang, Q., Zhou, Z., Ye, G., Shen, L., 2022a. Unveiling the mechanism of construction workers' unsafe behaviors from an occupational stress perspective: A qualitative and quantitative examination of a stress–cognition–safety model. Saf. Sci. 145.

Liang, Q., Zhou, Z., Li, X., Hu, Q., Ye, G., 2022b. Revealing the mechanism of stress generation for construction frontline professionals through development of structural stressors–coping–stress models. Saf. Sci. 150.

Lingard, H., Francis, V., Fulu, E., Cartwright, S., and Turner, M. (2007). Work-Life Balance at the West Gate Freeway Alliance – Stage 1: Employee Perceptions, September, 51 pp., Melbourne.

Lingard, H., Francis, V., 2009. Managing work-life balance in construction. Routledge.

Lingard, H.C., Francis, V., Turner, M., 2010. The rhythms of project life: a longitudinal analysis of work hours and work–life experiences in construction. Constr. Manag. Econ. 28 (10), 1085–1098.

Lingard, H., Oswald, D., 2020. Safety at the Front Line: Social Negotiation of Work and Safety at the Principal Contractor–Subcontractor Interface. J. Constr. Eng. Manag. 146 (4).

Löwstedt, M., Räisänen, C., 2012. 'Playing back-spin balls': narrating organizational change in construction. Constr. Manag. Econ. 30 (9), 795–806.

Löwstedt, M., Sandberg, R., 2020. Standardizing the free and independent professional. Eng. Constr. Archit. Manag. 27 (6), 1337–1355.

Lupu, I., Empson, L., 2015. Illusio and overwork: playing the game in the accounting field. Accounting, Auditing & Accountability Journal 28 (8), 1310–1340.

Mazmanian, M., Orlikowski, W.J., Yates, J., 2013. The autonomy paradox: The implications of mobile email devices for knowledge professionals. Organ. Sci. 24 (5), 1337–1357.

Michel, A., 2011. Transcending socialization: A nine-year ethnography of the body's role in organizational control and knowledge workers' transformation. Adm. Sci. Q. 56 (3), 325–368.

Michel, A., 2014. Participation and self-entrapment a 12-year ethnography of wall street participation practices' diffusion and evolving consequences. Sociol. Q. 55 (3), 514–536.

Palaniappan, K., Natarajan, R., Dasgupta, C., 2023. Prevalence and risk factors for depression, anxiety and stress among foreign construction workers in Singapore–a cross-sectional study. Int. J. Constr. Manag. 23 (14), 2479–2487.

Peiperl, M., Jones, B., 2001. Workaholics and overworkers: Productivity or pathology? Group Org. Manag. 26 (3), 369–393.

Perlow, L.A., Kelly, E.L., 2014. Toward a model of work redesign for better work and better life. Work. Occup. 41 (1), 111–134.

Perlow, L.A., Porter, J.L., 2009. Making time off predictable-and required. Harv. Bus. Rev. 87 (10), 102–109.

Pinto, J.K., Dawood, S., Pinto, M.B., 2014. Project management and burnout: Implications of the Demand–Control–Support model on project-based work. Int. J. Proj. Manag. 32 (4), 578–589.

Pinto, J.K., Patanakul, P., Pinto, M.B., 2016. Project personnel, job demands, and workplace burnout: the differential effects of job title and project type. IEEE Trans. Eng. Manag. 63 (1), 91–100.

Polesie, P., 2013. The view of freedom and standardisation among managers in Swedish construction contractor projects. Int. J. Proj. Manag. 31 (2), 299–306.

Ponterotto, J.G., 2006. Brief note on the origins, evolution, and meaning of the qualitative research concept thick description. Qual. Rep. 11 (3), 538–549.

Putnam, L.L., Myers, K.K., Gailliard, B.M., 2014. Examining the tensions in workplace flexibility and exploring options for new directions. Hum. Relat. 67 (4), 413–440.

Reckman, B. (1979). Carpentry: The craft and trade. In: case studies on the labor process (pp. 73-102).

Reid, E., 2015. Embracing, passing, revealing, and the ideal worker image: How people navigate expected and experienced professional identities. Organ. Sci. 26 (4), 997–1017.

Salmela-Aro, K., Hietajärvi, L., Lonka, K., 2019. Work burnout and engagement profiles among teachers. Front. Psychol. 10, 2254.

Sandberg, R., Löwstedt, M., Räisänen, C., 2021. Working in a loosely coupled system: exploring practices and implications of coupling work on construction sites. Construction Management and Economics 39 (3), 212–226.

Sandberg, R., Raiden, A., Räisänen, C., 2016. Workaholics on site! Sustainability of site managers' work situations? In the proceedings of the 21th WBC16 Congress. Tampere, Finland.

Sandberg, R., Räisänen, C., Löwstedt, M., Raiden, A., 2018. In: Liberating the Semantics: Embodied Work (man) Ship in Construction. Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 115–149.

Sauer, C., Liu, L., Johnston, K., 2001. Where project managers are kings. Proj. Manag. J. 32 (4), 39–49.

Schaufeli, W.B., Bakker, A.B., Van der Heijden, F.M., Prins, J.T., 2009. Workaholism, burnout and well-being among junior doctors: The mediating role of role conflict. Work Stress. 23 (2), 155–172.

Seo, H.C., Lee, Y.S., Kim, J.J., Jee, N.Y., 2015. Analyzing safety behaviors of temporary construction workers using structural equation modeling. Saf. Sci. 77, 160–168.

Sherratt, F., 2016. Unpacking Construction Site Safety. Wiley Blackwell.

Silver, M.L., 1986. Under construction: work and alienation in the building trades. Suny Press.

Steiger, T.L., Form, W., 1991. The labor process in construction: Control without bureaucratic and technological means? Work. Occup. 18 (3), 251–270.

Strauss, A.L., Corbin, J.M., 1990. Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures and techniques. SAGE, Thousand Oaks, CA.

Styhre, A., 2006. The bureaucratization of the project manager function: The case of the construction industry. Int. J. Proj. Manag. 24 (3), 271–276.

Styhre, A., 2011a. The overworked site manager: gendered ideologies in the construction industry. Constr. Manag. Econ. 29 (9), 943–955.

Styhre, A., 2011b. In the circuit of credibility: construction workers and the norms of 'a good job'. Constr. Manag. Econ. 29 (2), 199–209.

Styhre, A., Josephson, P.E., 2006. Revisiting site manager work: stuck in the middle? Constr. Manag. Econ. 24 (5), 521–528.

Styhre, A. (2012). Leadership as muddling through: site man-agers in the construction industry. In:S. Tengblad, ed.The work of managers: towards a practice theory of manage-ment. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 131–145.

Sydow, J., Lindkvist, L., DeFillippi, R., 2004. Project-based organizations, embeddedness and repositories of knowledge. Organ. Stud. 25 (9), 1475–1489.

Thiel, D., 2007. Class in construction: London building workers,dirty work and physical cultures. Br. J. Sociol. 58 (2), 227–251.

Thompson, P., 1995. Work organisations: a critical introduction. Macmillan International Higher Education.

Tompkins, P.K., Cheney, G., 1985. Communication and unobtrusive control in contemporary organizations. Organizational Communication: Traditional Themes and New Directions 13, 179–210.

Turner, R., Huemann, M., Keegan, A., 2008. Human resource management in the project-oriented organization: Employee well-being and ethical treatment. Int. J. Proj. Manag. 26 (5), 577–585.

Turner, M., Lingard, H., Francis, V., 2009. Work-life balance: an exploratory study of supports and barriers in a construction project. Int. J. Manag. Proj. Bus. 2 (1), 94–111.

Uhrenholdt Madsen, C., Hasle, P., Limborg, H.J., 2019. Professionals without a profession: Occupational safety and health professionals in Denmark. Saf. Sci. 113, 356–361.

Watts, J.H., 2009. 'Allowed into a man's world'meanings of work–life balance: Perspectives of women civil engineers as 'minority'workers in construction. Gend. Work. Organ. 16 (1), 37–57.

Winch, G.M., 2012. Managing construction projects. John Wiley & Sons.

Wu, X., Li, Y., Yao, Y., Luo, X., He, X., Yin, W., 2018. Development of construction workers job stress scale to study and the relationship between job stress and safety behavior: An empirical study in Beijing. Int. J. Environ. Res. Public Health 15 (11), 2409.

Xia, N., Ding, S., Yuan, J., 2022. The impact of a challenging work environment: Do job stressors benefit citizenship behavior of project managers? Int. J. Proj. Manag. 40 (3), 205–217.

Yang, F., Li, X., Zhu, Y., Li, Y., Wu, C., 2017. Job burnout of construction project managers in China: A cross-sectional analysis. Int. J. Proj. Manag. 35 (7), 1272–1287.

Zhang, S., Sunindijo, R.Y., Frimpong, S., Su, Z., 2023. Work stressors, coping strategies, and poor mental health in the Chinese construction industry. Saf. Sci. 159.