Toward a critical study of boundaries in and around organizations: Introduction to the Special Issue

Laura Dobusch[*] (iD)
WU Vienna University of Economics and Business, Austria

Gazi Islam (iD)
Grenoble Ecole de Management and IREGE, France

Stephanie Schreven
University of Dundee School of Business, UK

Koen Van Laer (iD)
UHasselt, Belgium

Abstract

This introduction to the Special Issue makes the political implications of boundaries in and around organizations the central locus of inquiry. It explores the experiences and interests of those who encounter marginalization and exclusion through processes of boundary drawing. Next to introducing the individual papers of the Special Issue and identifying overlapping themes across them, we highlight opportunities to inspire future research on the ambivalence of the enabling and constraining effects of boundaries, the role of different power positions for negotiating boundaries, how boundaries are brought in and out of consciousness and how boundaries are connected with (inter)national boundary drawing.

Keywords

Boundaries, exclusion, inclusion, inequality, power, social justice

*Authos' names are listed alphabetically. All authors contributed equally to this work.

Corresponding author:
Laura Dobusch, Department of Management, WU Vienna University of Economics and Business, Vienna 1020, Austria.
Email: laura.dobusch@wu.ac.at

Introduction

Boundaries are central to the constitution of organizations and forms of organizing (Azambuja et al., 2023; Heracleous, 2004; Hernes, 2004; Langley et al., 2019; Santos and Eisenhardt, 2005). They can be understood as involving distinctions made to "categorize people, places, practices and even time and space" (Lamont and Molnár, 2002: 168). From an ontological perspective, organizations can even be said to *come into existence* via the establishment of (preliminary) "cuts"—distinctions—between inside and outside (Seidl and Becker, 2006). Hence, boundaries are performative in the sense that they are constitutive of organizations, actors and patterns of action (Gond et al., 2016; Sage et al., 2016).

The way boundaries are drawn impacts the core functioning of organizations, as boundaries allow organizations to construct themselves as distinct from the external environment and to internally set up divisions of labor (Hernes, 2004). For instance, boundaries are key in establishing professions and occupations (Allen, 2000; Budtz-Jørgensen et al., 2019), internal and external stakeholder groups (Bourlier-Bargues et al., 2025; Pouthier, 2017) or work and non-work activities (Kreiner et al., 2009; Von Bergen and Bressler, 2019). Recognizing their centrality for organizations and organizing work, a stream of organizational boundary scholarship has developed interest in fundamental questions such as how organizational boundaries emerge (e.g. Helfen, 2015; Xu and Ruef, 2007), what forms they take (e.g. Azambuja et al., 2023; Frederiksen and Grubb, 2023; Sturdy et al., 2009) and how they are made sense of (e.g. Cross et al., 2000; Farias, 2017; Heyden et al., 2017).

Precisely because of their foundational effects, the boundaries that constitute organizational life are perpetually subject to redrawing, negotiation and contestation (Hernes, 2004; Langley et al., 2019). This occurs as organizations aim to create internal change (Marrone, 2010; Oldenhof et al., 2016), try to become more "boundaryless" and to flexibly employ temporary or other non-traditional workers (Budtz-Jørgensen et al., 2019; Reissner et al., 2021; Theunissen et al., 2023), or span the globe by means of international supply chains (Soundararajan et al., 2018). Similarly, organizational members take on the role of "boundary workers" (Langley et al., 2019; Sage et al., 2016) as they construct identities through distinguishing themselves from others, try to reconcile seemingly contradictory roles or establish relations with different stakeholders (e.g. Ellis et al., 2010; Guston, 2001; Sturdy et al., 2009; Van Laer and Janssens, 2014; Ybema et al., 2012).

Overall, the growing boundary literature in Management and Organization Studies foregrounds that social and organizational life relies on boundary drawing, and at the same time highlights the fluid and provisional nature of boundaries. Building on that, the literature offers further conceptualizations of boundaries emphasizing how they can manifest in different ways such as affectively, discursively, spatially, and temporally (Bucher et al., 2016; Dahlman, 2024; Johansson and Lundgren, 2015; Sage et al., 2016) and show varying degrees of porosity (Barberio et al., 2018; Mikes, 2011), visibility and permeability (Azambuja et al., 2023; Kremser et al., 2019), or temporariness (Stjerne and Svejenova, 2016).

It is precisely this focus on the performative, fluid and provisional quality of boundaries that may obscure the fact that they often also appear unchangeable and solid. Being aware of their constructed nature and the fact that—in principle—they can always be drawn differently, might lead academic debates to overlook that boundaries can and do unfold severe and detrimental consequences for those caught on the "wrong side" of them. Moreover, the ability to redraw, challenge or resist boundaries is unequally distributed, with some groups disproportionally facing boundaries that others have drawn for, against, or around them. In other words, being able to effectively work on boundaries might be a privilege afforded to some but not to others (e.g. Johansson and Lundgren, 2015; Van Eck et al., 2024; Van Laer and Janssens, 2014).

This Special Issue (SI) aims to explore the elusive manifestations of boundaries as alternately firm and malleable by foregrounding the experiences and interests of those who encounter marginalization and exclusion through processes of boundary drawing; who find themselves (re-)defined in ways that collide with their self-views; who demand entrance at closed borders; and for whom boundaries are the focal point for critique, contestation and resistance. Thereby, we specifically strive to make the political implications of boundaries in and around organizations the central locus of inquiry. That is, how boundary drawing is tied up with manifestations of power and domination, inclusion and exclusion, resistance, structural inequality, and other issues connected to social justice concerns.

Critical scholarship has already emphasized the political relevance of boundaries in and around organizations. For example, Fraser (2014) has identified "boundary struggles" regarding state and market, human and nonhuman, and public and private as core to contemporary capitalism. Similarly, the political implications of boundaries in and around organizations have been discussed in the fields of critical diversity research (e.g. Dobusch, 2021; Kalonaityte, 2010; Schreven, 2020; Van Eck et al., 2024; Van Laer et al., 2021), critical environmental studies (e.g. Williams et al., 2025), critical migration studies (e.g. Andrijasevic et al., 2019; Segarra et al., 2024), or critical border studies (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013; Parker and Vaughan-Williams, 2009). However, these critical accounts remain situated at the periphery of the vast organizational scholarship that has emerged on boundaries.

Against this background, we believe it is important that the growing canon of organizational boundary scholarship becomes enriched and diversified by studies explicitly focusing on the political consequences of boundaries in terms of intersecting inequalities and social justice. Hence, this SI sought submissions that could empirically, methodologically and theoretically advance understandings of boundaries in and around organizations from a critical perspective. We use "critical" acknowledging the diversity of interpretations of this term and the varied and plural boundaries drawn around it in the social sciences (e.g. Hammersley, 2005). Our own understanding of a critical perspective implies epistemological and historical (self-)reflexivity, a sensitivity to the destructive and exploitative features of the currently dominant orderings of societies, an orientation toward social justice issues as well as the identification of avenues for emancipatory practice (Islam and Sanderson, 2022; Zanoni et al., 2025). Setting up a "wide boundary" around what a critical examination of boundaries in and around organizations might look like, our goal was to challenge and expand as well as simultaneously sharpen the boundaries of our thinking thereby aiming to move the conversation closer to the threshold of new critical ways of approaching boundaries and their political implications.

In a next step, we discuss what such a critical approach toward boundaries and their political implications could look like and what analytical potential it entails for advancing a social justice agenda. We then summarize the contributions of the papers that are part of the SI and identify latent themes across them. Finally, we expand on these themes to outline research avenues that strive to advance the critical study of boundaries in and around organizations.

Boundaries in and around organizations: Sketching a critical perspective

Critical analyses of boundaries are based on two foundational components. First, in line with the ideas outlined above, a critical perspective on boundaries recognizes them as *constitutive* of organizations and organizing. Boundaries are fundamental for the emergence and maintenance of organizations and organizational processes. Being aware of the dynamic tension between their firmness

and malleability is important for a critical perspective because it challenges the idea of organizations and organizational processes as fixed and objective entities and reveals them as the contingent and contextual outcome of boundary drawing practices, and thus always—in principle—open to change.

Second, boundaries are approached as *inherently political* and therefore central to the (re)production of intersecting inequalities. While current studies on boundary work (Gieryn, 1983) strongly highlight the constitutive nature of the (re)drawing of boundaries as well as their provisionality and fluidity, they rarely put their connections to enduring—structural—inequalities front and center (cf., Dahlman, 2024; Sage et al., 2016; Van Eck et al., 2024; Van Laer and Janssens, 2014). To fully grasp the inherently political nature of boundary drawing it is necessary to unpack the relationship between difference, power and intersecting inequalities and the role boundaries play therein. A difference is not rooted in a substantial essence, but rather emerges as boundaries are drawn, which distinguish two or more elements according to socially constructed, contingently relevant criteria (Abbott, 1995; West and Fenstermaker, 1995; West and Zimmerman, 2009). Although in principle an infinite number of boundaries can be drawn to make sense of our lives, in a specific socio-historic context there is a readily available repertoire of taken-for-granted boundaries commonly seen as meaningful. In other words, each instance of boundary drawing does not start with a clean slate, but builds on and interacts with a range of boundaries that have become naturalized, taken for granted, and part of the structuring of societies and organizations.

Boundaries are powerful as they order the world in ways that establish relations of inclusion and exclusion, give meaning to human and nonhuman actors, and provide the basis for the allocation of or access to different types of material and symbolic resources. Drawing boundaries is thus not only a reflection of, but also core to establishing and maintaining, relations of privilege and disadvantage that make up forms of domination and enduring inequality.

The current SI focuses on the political implications of boundaries, with special emphasis on the (re)production of intersecting inequalities between historically marginalized and privileged groups. The establishment of these unequal relations relies on historically naturalized boundaries that represent the basis of categories such as class, disability, ethnicity, gender, race, sex, or sexuality, and that are reinforced by *follow-up* boundary drawing. Therefore, it is impossible to empirically disentangle the drawing of boundaries from the emergence of intersectional inequalities. However, it can be analytically investigated which kind of boundaries (e.g. relying on the construction of racial or cultural differences; or the construction of gender differences as biological or nurtured) participate in the (re)production of asymmetrical power relations and which effects a specific type of boundary drawing has on the persistence of intersecting inequalities.

Importantly, taking this political nature seriously also entails recognizing that boundary drawing is *inherently ambivalent* in the sense that it can be used both to enact, and to counteract the (re)production of intersecting inequalities and power asymmetries. Boundaries can do both: protect as well as keep out (Ferrera, 2005), enable as well as constrain (Hernes, 2003; Quick and Feldman, 2014). For example, boundary drawing can open up "third spaces" for alternative ways of being, establishing a context of difference or alterity that can maintain multiplicity (Islam, 2015). It can also offer protection by creating spaces of safety for those in marginalized positions (Cuomo and Massaro, 2016). Attempts to promote organizational inclusion may depend on firm boundaries to parry diversity-hostility (Dobusch et al., 2025), as "boundarylessness" might perpetuate an "identity-blind" approach that cynically disavows existing inequalities (Apfelbaum et al., 2012). Yet, scholars have also noted that the tendency to reify boundaries may lead to essentializing group differences (Van Laer and Janssens, 2017; Wilton et al., 2019), trapping subjects in categories that deny them agency (Dobusch et al., 2021).

Faced with the devil's bargain of ignoring versus essentializing differences, promoting social justice might not simply mean abolishing boundaries, but also navigating, (re)drawing and potentially reinforcing them (Bridges et al., 2023; Plotnikof et al., 2022). Such navigations require sensitivity to the different and potentially ambiguous political effects of boundaries for historically marginalized groups, so that boundary work can become emancipatory.

Contributions to the special issue

With the above considerations in mind, our call for papers laid out a series of questions related to the divergent and potentially contradictory effects of boundaries and boundary drawing for the constitution of organizational power dynamics, intersecting inequalities and marginalized groups. Specifically, we sought research that examined how boundaries were used to discipline or resist; to include and exclude; to homogenize or pluralize organizational actors. When making decisions on which submissions to include in the SI, we were guided by two key considerations. First, we evaluated the extent to which they centered boundaries and boundary drawing as the core subject of analysis. The editorial process revealed that investigations of issues related to intersecting inequalities and social justice often referred to boundaries, but did not put them to the fore. Second, we considered their critical approach, meaning the extent to which they engaged with the subject of (intersecting) inequalities in their analyses of boundaries and boundary work. Hence, the papers that were selected for the SI represent studies situated at the interface of theorizing boundaries and their role in the (re)production of (intersecting) inequalities. Below, we briefly introduce the contributions to the present volume.

Affective boundary-drawing practices and the operation of whiteness in academia

The paper by Zakia Essanhaji and Seda Müftügil-Yalcin addresses the role of whiteness as an affective orientation in drawing and maintaining boundaries in Dutch academia. By centering the experiences of women academics of color, the study identifies three key boundary-making mechanisms—epistemic evaluation, white incredulity, and racial surveillance—through which whiteness operates, and which contribute to normalizing inequality and to disorienting women of color. Epistemic evaluation positions women of color as "bodies to be known" rather than legitimate knowers, subjecting their knowledge to scrutiny, questioning, and dismissal, which reinforces racialized and gendered hierarchies. White incredulity functions as a boundary-restoring mechanism, where the presence and achievements of women of color are met with skepticism, disbelief, and shock, reinforcing their status as outsiders. Racial surveillance further consolidates these boundaries by monitoring and disciplining the behavior, expressions, and movements of women academics of color, aiming to ensure their conformity to dominant norms. These boundary-drawing mechanisms that maintain racialized and gendered boundaries are not just structural but deeply affective, operating through producing emotional responses such as discomfort, self-doubt, and fear.

Indigenous perspectives on boundary drawing in home-based care work

The paper by Amber Nicholson, Katherine Ravenswood, and Fiona Hurd sheds light on the marginalization of home-based care work in Aotearoa New Zealand. It zooms in on how Māori care workers experience and deal with Western constructions of boundaries between assumingly professional and unprofessional forms of social interactions of caregivers and receivers. Following principles of community-based participatory research, the interview-based data was collected in tandems of Māori researchers and Māori participants. The paper highlights that boundaries are

ambivalent and need to be judged by their actual unfolding political consequences. In the context of home-based care work, the drawing by organizations of "professional" care boundaries aims to protect employees from becoming overburdened by clients' emotional needs. However, this Western commodified approach of care work stands in contrast to Māori understandings of care (work) based on interconnection and relationality, reciprocity, and trust. Hence, Māori home-based care workers experience the "professional" boundary drawing as hindering holistic care and ultimately denying them fulfillment in their work.

Line managers' boundary work in Indian micro-finance institutions

The paper by Nidhi S. Bisht, Arun Kumar Tripathy, and Juliana Siwale focuses on the employment of women field officers in micro-finance institutions providing collateral-free loans to rural women clients in India. Field officers have limited education and come from less privileged socio-economic backgrounds, similar to the clients they are meant to serve. Given line managers' strategic ability to translate policies into operational reality and diversity goals into day-to-day practices, the study focuses on the effects of how they, as gatekeepers, actively engage in boundary drawing between the home and the workplace. By constructing working outside the home as unsafe and too demanding in terms of working hours and travel, a gendered home-work boundary is constructed that keeps women captive in the home. This demonstrates how a boundary can cut two ways simultaneously, as it not only prevents access to resources or the workplace, but also constrains women inside the home.

Spatial tactics as critical boundary work of early career scholars

The paper by Dounia Bourabain elaborates on the enacted nature of organizational boundaries through the notion of "spatial tactics" in the context of gendered and racialized identities of early career scholars. Through an examination of early career academics in Dutch speaking universities in Belgium, the author describes how they move between "innerspace" tactics—those involving entering privileged spaces within the organization—and "outerspace" tactics—those involving finding spaces outside of domination for support and reprieve. Moreover, the academics describe blended "inner-outer" tactics to construct new symbolic-material boundaries that allow them to resignify space and occupy parts of the organization in which they would otherwise have been marginalized. This paper demonstrates the ways in which members of marginalized groups actively interpret and redraw organizational boundaries, both internal and external, to contest dominant power structures that are spatially manifested.

Suspended boundaries in the collaboration between human and nonhuman workers

The paper by Katherine Dashper and Helen Wadham focuses on organizations where nonhuman animals—in this case horses employed in forestry and trekking tourism—are recognized as collaborative co-workers. Collaboration creates a contact zone between human and nonhuman workers that entangles them relationally, as co-dependent and cooperative, suspending the boundary between human and nonhuman animals. Yet in their treatment, nonhuman animals are also still differentiated as other than humans. For instance, the horses are approached with true care, compassion and respect and being treated better by their human co-workers compared to the conditions many humans are facing in conventional ("human exclusive") workplaces. Thus, collaboration

between humans and horses produces a third space that, like a bridge, suspends their differences, in favor of their relationship or relationality, while ethical considerations regarding work practices reveal how horses benefit from being treated differently. Hence, the encounter between humans and nonhumans creates opportunities for change, namely, to envision improved working conditions for humans in other organizations by being (non-pejoratively) "treated like an animal."

Core themes underlying the SI contributions

By comparing the findings and contributions of the papers, we identified core themes related to the topic of boundaries: that boundaries are multiple and multidimensional, subject of ongoing contestation, and constraining as well as enabling in their workings. In the next section we further articulate why and how these features matter to a critical study of boundaries.

Boundaries as multiple and multidimensional

A first core theme that emerged from the SI papers is the multiple manifestations of boundaries that are drawn in and around organizations. In line with the boundary literature, the studies acknowledge the common distinction between symbolic and social boundaries to describe the nature of boundaries (Lamont and Molnár, 2002). However, the SI papers also go beyond this distinction as they bring out additional manifestations of boundaries and their political implications. For example, the paper by Essanhaji and Müftügil-Yalcin illustrates the affective nature of boundaries, as they are maintained through evoking the feeling of being "out of place," and the epistemic qualities of boundaries, creating racialized boundaries around "legitimate" knowledge and knowers. Epistemic boundaries are similarly core to the paper by Nicholson and colleagues, where boundaries are drawn and contested between "professional" (Western) and "unprofessional" (Māori) understandings of care (work). The paper by Bourabain further points to the spatial and material nature of boundaries, shedding light on the ways office locations, stairways and corridors are used in the reinforcing and challenging of academic norms. The paper by Bisht and colleagues highlights the interconnection between symbolic and spatial boundary drawing, which unfolds detrimental consequences for rural women by keeping them "in their place." Furthermore, the SI papers illustrate the multidimensional or intersectional nature of boundaries. For instance, the work of Bourabain as well as of Essanhaji and Müftügil-Yalcin show boundaries as simultaneously gendered and racialized, or involved in gendering and racializing.

    Together, the papers of the SI show that to fully grasp the political implications of boundaries, a critical perspective needs to recognize their multidimensionality and the entanglements of these different dimensions. In particular, the papers emphasize the relevance and interconnectedness of epistemic and spatial boundary drawing in reinforcing or counteracting intersecting inequalities. This reminds us that while boundaries are socially constructed, their construction can actually involve bricks and mortar, meaning that certain boundaries might—quite literally—become set in stone. This can contribute to giving epistemic boundaries a "material face," making them potentially less fluid and more enduring.

Boundaries as contested

A second theme throughout the SI papers that can inform critical studies of boundaries is their contested nature. This explicitly indicates that they are part of extant political struggles. On the one hand, boundaries can become the focus of ongoing contestation as organizational actors, more or less politically motivated, engage with and participate in boundary struggles to change who or

what matters and how. For example, in the paper by Daspher and Wadham the conventional, ontologized human-animal boundary is contested and suspended in the process of collaboration, which creates a contact zone where subject positions of human and nonhuman animals can become differentiated, reinterpreted and remade. These entangled encounters show the importance of boundaries even in their contestation and confounding.

On the other hand, once boundaries have been drawn, holding them in place requires ongoing effort such as forms of surveillance and boundary-policing. This is demonstrated in the paper by Essanhaji and Müftügil-Yalcin, which discusses how racial surveillance involves the ongoing monitoring of boundaries. At the same time, such surveillance can again be contested by actively interpreting and redrawing boundaries, as the paper by Bourabain reveals, or by simply (occasionally) ignoring and overstepping them, as in the case of Māori care workers. Combined, these papers point to the importance for critical studies of boundaries to recognize that boundaries cannot be drawn once and for all. Hence, they necessarily are the focus of ongoing political activities aimed at maintaining, redrawing, challenging or resisting them.

Boundaries as constraining

A third theme to inform critical boundary studies that emerged from the SI papers revolves around the constraining effects of boundaries and how they reproduce relations of power and reinforce intersecting inequalities. Whether they are drawn intentionally by management, or manifest in the design of architecture, professions, or work activities, boundaries marginalize certain groups and constrain them in accessing material and symbolic resources.

While it is possible for boundaries to lock people in and/or keep them out completely, the SI papers show that boundaries do not always result in these extreme effects. Rather than creating obvious exclusion, they often make certain possibilities more difficult and attaining certain outcomes more challenging. In doing so, they burden marginalized groups with additional work to circumvent them or to lessen the boundary effects. In other words, their potential malleability allows boundaries to appear inclusive while less visibly continuing to contribute to inequalities. This does not make them less pressing. We speculate that their malleability could even make boundaries more enduring, as they might mainly be discernible to those who run up against them, and therefore might not become an urgent target for collective contestation.

For instance, boundaries that maintain the dominant order of organizations may become less visible or obvious over time. This is seen in the paper by Nicholson and colleagues, where boundaries delineating professionalism marginalize Māori understandings of care (work), ultimately denying Māori care workers fulfilment in their task. Similarly, when universities claim to value diversity, as in the cases discussed by Essanhaji and Müftügil-Yalcin, and women of color are joining these organizations, the continued enactment of boundaries might be more easily denied. The fact that some individuals are allowed to cross a boundary might even legitimize and perpetuate its maintenance, while shifting the burden of overcoming its constraining effects onto marginalized groups. A similar example can be found in the Indian micro-finance institutions discussed by Bisht and colleagues. While workplace policies explicitly welcome women employees, men line managers continue to deny women access by drawing boundaries between gender-appropriate and -inappropriate work "behind the scenes," disappearing their constraining effect largely from view. This allows dominant actors to deny the existence of boundaries while they continue to be maintained. Further, the "jokes," "compliments," and "curious questions" discussed by Bourabain might appear innocuous yet contribute to drawing boundaries that constitute the workplace as a gendered and racialized space. While the way such boundaries are maintained can and is resisted, their ambivalence makes them less obvious and potentially more lasting and less contestable.

Thus, the more clearly articulated, visible or tangible a boundary is, the easier a target it might become for resistance or deconstruction. Therefore, contributing to critical studies on boundaries can imply making hidden boundaries more visible and thereby enhancing the possibilities for their contestation.

Boundaries as enabling

A fourth theme that emerged from the SI papers and that is relevant for critical boundary studies, is the emancipatory potential of boundaries and the way their effects can be enabling and contribute to redressing intersecting inequalities. Drawing boundaries can allow for establishing alternative modes of solidarity or create safe(r) spaces that protect ways of life that are otherwise marginalized or undermined. For example, Bourabain shows the potential of boundary (re)drawing as a foundation of workplace political action with a self-consciously emancipatory intent. Specifically, the academics in this study are clearly reflexive about the power ramifications of spatial boundaries and use them explicitly to challenge academic hierarchies. Dashper and Wadham also highlight the emancipatory effects of boundary drawing in their study on human-horse collaboration. Their reflection on human-animal boundaries feeds back into ideas about what it means to be human in view of what it means to be treated "like an animal," opening up possibilities for multispecies politics and bringing workplace injustices to light.

At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that there are also potentially unintended political consequences of boundaries drawn with emancipatory intentions. Boundaries, like a double-edged sword, can cut both ways. What is enabling for one group can be constraining for another, and this political truism is further complicated by the fact that the constitution of groups themselves is dependent on how boundaries are drawn. Thus, rather than a simple political tactic among pre-existing parties, boundary drawing reconfigures the political playing field, changing both the players and their relative positions.

Moreover, the boundaries that protect certain groups can at the same time expose them to intersecting inequalities. The same boundary can simultaneously place one group outside one space and inside another, transcending the dichotomy of being either outside or inside. This also tangibly shows the relational logic of boundary drawing. Boundaries emerge through the repetition of a cut, divide or separation that depends on the establishment of two sides, thereby including and unifying certain elements (e.g. labeling some activities as professional) while excluding or alienating others (e.g. labeling other activities as private/non-work). Importantly, the included side is as much structured by the excluded side as vice versa (Goodin, 1996), revealing that the political consequences of boundaries always concern both privileged and disadvantaged groups.

Research agenda to advance the critical study of boundaries in and around organizations

The SI started from the observation that the growing organizational scholarship on the boundary concept is missing a critical engagement with the political implications of boundaries in terms of intersecting inequalities and social justice. The studies in this SI focus on a range of boundaries in divergent empirical sites and draw on a variety of conceptual lenses and levers, thereby revealing the potential of a critical research agenda on boundaries in and around organizations. However, as any collection is partial, this final section highlights important openings and opportunities to inspire future critical research on boundaries. Because once one starts looking for them, boundaries are unavoidable, and their effects seem ubiquitous. Both omnipresent and often invisible, as well

as disrupting and stabilizing, boundaries shape relations of power and resistance in organizations. We hope the current volume inspires scholarship to redraw the boundaries of the boundary concept within its field of vision.

How to understand the enabling and constraining effects of boundaries?

A first promising direction relates to the ambivalence of boundaries as enabling and constraining. While boundaries tend to be seen as excluding marginalized groups (Van Laer et al., 2021), drawing boundaries can also protect or support (Dobusch et al., 2025; Quick and Feldman, 2014). This is not only shown in attempts to create safe spaces in organizations (e.g. Kulkarni et al., 2025) but also, for instance, in the debate on "safe and just Earth system boundaries" (Rockström et al., 2023). Here, scientists propose drawing strict boundaries to safeguard the global commons to preserve a habitable planet and thus establish boundaries for and around particularly marginalized beings or relational phenomena such as nonhuman animals, biodiversity or Earth's climate system.

Exploring this emancipatory potential of boundaries is a promising, yet underdeveloped area of interest. However, future critical boundary studies also need to be attentive to the potentially contradictory effects of boundaries, and to the fact that boundaries drawn with the "best intent" can nevertheless lead to unexpected exclusions and deny marginalized groups resources and regard. Similarly, marginalized actors' attempts to challenge boundaries to attain access or equality can lead to the reproduction of dominant discourses or the legitimation of hegemonic institutions (Van Laer and Janssens, 2017). Given the two-sided, contradictory effects of boundaries, future research can examine how both organizational and individual choices are made regarding drawing boundaries to challenge intersecting inequalities. For example, this can involve exploring when individuals or groups seek to create niche communities or use integrative strategies toward mainstream contexts, and how the nature and malleability of the boundaries they create relate to strategies of navigating the inherent ambivalence of boundary drawing.

How do actors in different power positions negotiate boundaries?

A second direction for future research involves exploring how positions of privilege and marginalization affect boundary drawing. This is important because the ways in which powerful groups set up boundaries to differentiate or insulate themselves from marginalized groups may take different forms than those used by marginalized groups to differentiate or protect themselves from the powerful. In line with the arguments in the previous section, disadvantaged groups may need to simultaneously draw boundaries to protect themselves and create "holes" in them to still access important resources. Meanwhile, privileged groups may need to create such holes to maintain the view of them as open and to diffuse resentment (Bogaers et al., 2024). These mixed strategies may lead to distinct "boundary drawing repertoires" based on a group's position in the social order. Further research should also pay particular attention to gatekeepers. They might also play a unique role, as they can potentially give rise to entry points and holes, manifesting a "porosity" that temporarily suspends closure. In other words, future research might go beyond generic conceptions of boundary work by examining how boundary drawing repertoires relate to power relations among groups.

How are boundaries brought in and out of consciousness?

A third direction for future research involves addressing the questions of how meaning is conferred upon, or withdrawn from boundaries, and of when and why boundaries are rendered visible or

invisible. When palpable and imbued with meaning, boundaries can take on strong affective investments and become markers for activism, group solidarity, or political activity. When invisible and subterranean, they might have less obvious power effects but might be particularly recalcitrant to change. We need to further explore whether boundaries unfold more political consequences when they are consciously noticed or when they escape attention. Similarly, a fruitful avenue for research is examining how being conscious or unconscious of boundaries changes how they are deployed and adhered to, and what their organizational effects are.

In addition to whether we are consciously aware of boundaries, examining their properties can shed light on how they are sensuously experienced, and how this shapes their meaning and the scope or room for change. Given that boundaries are not always readily visible or equally experienced by all actors, research may seek further understanding of the ways people sense boundaries and are thus able to locate them. In other words, it would be useful to better understand how boundaries' presence is signaled and experienced in tactile and affective ways, and how this affects the space for contestation, resistance and emancipation.

How are boundaries in and around organizations connected with (inter)national boundary drawing?

In line with critical border studies (e.g. Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013), we want to highlight the importance of investigating the way boundaries in and around organizations are entangled with national and international boundary drawing. This brings to the fore the connections between boundary drawing, forms of migration, and legacies as well as continued varieties of colonialism and imperialism. Currently, many nation states draw, legislate and police internal and external boundaries in ways that marginalize immigrants as not belonging, aim at expelling them and prevent others from coming in. Importantly, nation states are themselves bounded articulations of "world-making" as opposed to realities representing an already divided world (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013). This drawing and policing of national borders not only affects immigrants' dignity, well-being and life opportunities, but also has implications for organizations, as it impacts employers' access to precarious ("cheap") types of labor to exploit (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013; Theunissen et al., 2023). At the same time, national boundaries can provide protection as they can allow for the creation of a space for self-determination, democratic governance, solidarity, and refuge (Goodin, 1996). Nevertheless, these borders can also have the effect of distinguishing "the worthy" of public goods and services and the "other"—the "unworthy"—who needs to be kept out.

Importantly, (inter)national boundaries not only have implications for organizations, but they are also themselves organized. This includes border policing and the disciplining of those considered on the "wrong" side of the border (e.g. Fassin, 2011), often determining who gets to live and who does not. A crucial avenue for critical research is therefore also an exploration of the way "hard" boundaries such as militarized borders are set up and protected and how they relate to the "softer" appearing boundaries that structure social categories. For example, epistemic boundaries constructing race can have life or death consequences, and some scholars have compared these to internal militarized borders (Mbembe, 2019). Moreover, the Russian war against Ukraine or the Israeli genocide in Gaza show that territorial borders might not be as hard as they seem and that epistemic boundaries between ethnic or national groups drawn through military force can cause unspeakable human suffering.

We believe that in times of increasing geopolitical aggression and violent internal policing, paying attention to (inter)national boundaries, especially in their militarized manifestations or when they are redrawn through violence and death, are of direct relevance to everyone interested in

social justice. Despite their intertwinement, building on the analytic distinction between "hard" and "soft" boundaries can lead to insightful questions such as: When do actors resort to militarized, coercive or physical policing of boundaries rather than—or in addition to—"only" drawing epistemic boundaries? And how do the entanglements between these different types of boundaries unfold?

Which boundaries to draw around the boundary concept?

As we stated before, this SI aims to sharpen our thinking on boundaries to arrive at a threshold, a transitional boundary-spanning space from which to approach the study of boundaries in and around organizations differently. We aimed to push the boundaries around boundaries, redrawing a wider and politically attentive boundary around what it means to study boundary drawing and the stakes involved. However, we should note that the very potential of the boundary concept can make it tempting to apply it across a wide range of organizational phenomena. This raises the question of what the "boundaries of the boundary concept" (Langley et al., 2019) should be. Our own work on the SI confronted us with the temptation to inflate the boundary concept, potentially reducing its analytical usefulness. Future research might consider what boundaries to draw around the concept, and in the spirit of Star's (2010: 612) question "what is not a boundary object?," to find conditions under which "this is not a boundary."

ORCID iDs

Laura Dobusch [iD] https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5773-0854
Gazi Islam [iD] https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6503-6018
Koen Van Laer [iD] https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0945-3685

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Author biographies

Laura Dobusch is Assistant Professor at the Department of Management at WU Vienna University of Economics and Business. Her research focuses on how organizations can become both more inclusive/open and sustainable and which transformative potential can emerge from cross-organizational and cross-sectoral collaborations (e.g., open social innovation) to address major socio-ecological emergencies (e.g., climate crisis).

Gazi Islam is Professor of People, Organizations and Society at Grenoble Ecole de Management, and member of the research laboratory IREGE at University of Savoie Mont-Blanc. His research interests revolve around business ethics and contemporary meanings of work, including the relations between identity, power and the production of group and organizational cultures.

Stephanie Schreven is Senior Lecturer at the University of Dundee School of Business. Her research revolves around equality and sustainability at the intersection with virtue ethics, feminist and Marxist praxis. Her current projects focus on misrecognition, waste, and disgust in the case of unwanted others, clothes, and smells respectively.

Koen Van Laer is Associate Professor at UHasselt (Belgium), where he leads the research group SEIN. Drawing on critical perspectives, his work explores equity, diversity and inclusion, the way workplace experiences and careers are connected to power inequalities, and the way 'difference' is managed and constructed in organizations.