

## Extreme work

The concept of extreme work focuses on distinguishing extremity from normality in relation to the nature of work and work activities. What constitutes extremity at work remains contingent to the environment in which work is carried out, but some shared characteristics can be observed across different contexts (Bozkurt, 2015; Granter et al, 2015). These characteristics primarily concern the intensification of work and work conditions associated with professional roles that usually involve excessive hours or organisational changes that temporarily heighten labour demand.

Extreme work is conceptualised based on the notion of edgework and extreme jobs. Edgework (Lyng, 1990) denotes inherently challenging activities such as extreme sports that expose individuals to both physical and mental risks, whereas extreme jobs (Hewlett and Luce, 2006) focus on managerial roles with high performance pressure. Both notions focus on the intrinsic motivation of being high achievers, suggesting that extremity at work is produced and reproduced through self-imposition. Some scholars have raised concerns with this narrative, pointing to the social and organisational factors that facilitate extreme work intensification and the potential consequences of normalising extreme work (Granter et al., 2019).

These concerns have paramount implications for understanding work in the contemporary context given the rise of on-demand productivity pressure and the decline of collective bargaining power in many countries. Extreme work is often foisted on temporary workers with limited agency and structural support, especially those on precarious employment contracts (Ekman, 2015). The practices of portraying extreme work as stimulating and rewarding challenges could further inhibit employee voice and resistance to exploitative conditions (Peticca-Harris et al., 2015).

These issues have prompted a recent call for further investigations into extreme work at a time of crisis (Cai et al., 2021), which reiterates the argument of that extreme work derives from the interactions between micro settings and macro contexts (Wankhade et al., 2020). On the one hand, extreme work in emergency contexts often predate the crisis. On the other hand, a crisis could be deployed as a pretext for legitimising extreme work and limiting resources for mitigating extreme conditions (Turnbull and Wass, 2015). The exacerbating impact of crisis on extreme work implies a need to identify and address the role of institutional, organisational, and managerial practices in shaping labour demand and conditions.

### Selected further readings

Bozkurt, Ö. (2015). The punctuation of mundane jobs with extreme work: Christmas at the supermarket deli counter. *Organization*, 22(4), 476–492.

Cai, M., Tindal, S., Tartanoglu Bennett, S. and Velu, J. (2021) 'It's Like a War Zone': Jay's Liminal Experience of Normal and Extreme Work in a UK Supermarket during the COVID-19 Pandemic, *Work, Employment and Society*, 35(2), pp. 386–395.

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Granter, E., McCann, L., & Boyle, M. (2015). Extreme work/normal work: Intensification, storytelling and hypermediation in the (re)construction of 'the New Normal.' *Organization*, 22(4), 443–456.

Granter, E., Wankhade, P., McCann, L., Hassard, J., & Hyde, P. (2019). Multiple Dimensions of Work Intensity: Ambulance Work as Edgework. *Work, Employment and Society*, 33(2), 280–297.

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Lyng, S. (1990). Edgework: A social psychological analysis of voluntary risk taking. *American Journal of Sociology*, 95(4), 851–886.

Peticca-Harris, A., Weststar, J. and McKenna, S. (2015) The perils of project-based work: Attempting resistance to extreme work practices in video game development, *Organization*, 22(4), pp. 570–587.

Turnbull, P. J. and Wass, V. (2015) Normalizing extreme work in the Police Service? Austerity and the inspecting ranks, *Organization*, 22(4), pp. 512–529.

Wankhade, P., Stokes, P., Tarba, S. and Rodgers, P. (2020) Work intensification and ambidexterity - the notions of extreme and 'everyday' experiences in emergency contexts: surfacing dynamics in the ambulance service, *Public Management Review*, 22(1), pp. 48–74.

Suggested cross references

Edgework, extreme job, work intensification