

#2 Critical Management Studies

Competitive Session

Social Identity and Extreme Work

Abstract: This paper aims to add to recent literature that has explored why workers might accommodate, accept, or even embrace extreme work. Most work in this vein has found that workers enjoy the psychological—constantly being challenged, working with highly competent peers—and financial benefits of extreme work. By contrast, this study focuses on how the social identity roles of workers influence their attitudes towards extreme work. Two aspects of social identity roles are examined here—membership in low status and marginalized groups, and identification with work as a calling. Findings suggest that willingness to take on extreme work has clear boundaries that arise from subjective value. Workers are sophisticated about assessing the conditions under which extreme work enables the pursuit of identity-motivated goals.

Keywords *extreme work, social identity, dirty work, work as calling*

Introduction

Extreme work has in recent years increasingly become the norm in management and the professions. Hewlett and Luce (2006) define extreme work as work involving longer than sixty hours a week, frequent travel, high levels of uncertainty in work content and structure, and high-stress decision-making (Hewlett & Luce, 2006; Porter, 2004). In recent decades, extreme work has become as familiar as forms of work involving less hours, such as part-time or flexible work, particularly in the managerial ranks of multinational companies. In a survey of individuals in the top 6% earnings bracket, Hewlett and Luce (2006: 51) found that 62% worked more than 50 hours a week, 35% more than 60 hours a week, and 10% worked more than 80 hours a week. In a burgeoning research stream examining extreme work, scholars have been puzzled by workers' responses professing high job satisfaction despite the demanding conditions. In fact, some workers talked about extreme work as "badges of honour" (Hewlett & Luce, 2006: 52). This paper aims to add to recent literature that has explored why workers might accommodate, accept, or even embrace extreme work. Most

work in this vein has found that workers enjoy the psychological—constantly being challenged, working with highly competent peers—and financial benefits of extreme work (Brett & Stroh, 2003; Hewlett & Luce, 2006). By contrast, this study focuses on how the social identity roles of workers influence their attitudes towards extreme work. Two aspects of social identity roles are examined here—membership in low status and marginalized groups, and identification with work as a calling. The author's own work on low-wage immigrant workers on the one hand and activists on the other is drawn upon in order to contribute to theorizing about the role of social identity in workers' acceptance of extreme work.

The paper makes two contributions to the literature. First, while most research examining extreme work has discussed it as a phenomenon characteristic of managerial and professional occupations, I seek to draw the focus back to the fact that most 'extreme' forms of work involving long hours and gruelling physical toil are done by a diverse array of workers including those who earn the lowest wages and those whose work is considered 'tainted' by society. Secondly, this study seeks to illuminate an area of research in extreme work that has hitherto been neglected: What are the boundary conditions of workers' willingness to take on extreme work? Extant literature has portrayed workers doing extreme work as attracted to and socialized into extreme work, as in paramedics who seek out trauma work over more mundane emergency cases (Boyle & Healy, 2003; Palmer, 1983) and managers who internalize the value of constantly re-organizing for better efficiency (McCann, Morris, & Hassard, 2008). The perspective taken here is that workers are sophisticated about delineating the limits to 'putting up' with extreme work—far from being cultural 'dopes' (Hirsch & Lounsbury, 1997), workers constantly assess and justify their work and its demands. When subjective conditions for fulfilling the work are not met, workers are likely to re-assess, oppose, or to leave their work. In the rest of the paper, I review relevant theories explaining workers' attitudes to their work, develop a series of propositions based on findings

from two empirical cases, and end with a discussion of social identity roles and extreme work.

Theoretical background: Identification and Disidentification with Work

A longstanding literature in organizational studies has examined meaning generation that impacts workers' perceptions of work. I draw on two strands of this literature that have respectively looked at workers' attitudes towards stigmatized work, and workers' perceptions of work as a calling. Kreiner, Ashforth and Sluss (2006) argued that most types of work are stigmatized in varying degrees, as even work entailing the highest social prestige, such as doctors' work, involves 'grunt work' and other 'dirty' aspects like the handling of bodily fluids. They argued that workers who faced compartmentalized stigma—with only some aspects considered to be tainted by society—would be more likely to disidentify with their occupation, whereas those who faced pervasive stigmas—such as embalmers or prison guards—were likely to be ambivalent towards their occupation, torn between wanting to defend their occupation and internalizing societal prejudice against their occupation. Occupations that face what Kreiner Ashforth and Sluss (2006) characterized as 'pervasive' stigma deal with 'dirty work', which Hughes (1951; 1962) and Douglas (1966) defined as work that society views as physically, socially, or morally tainted. Scholars have maintained that those engaging in dirty work cope with the stigma of their work by constructing positive identities for themselves (Dutton, Roberts, & Bednar, 2010), by ideologically reframing societal views about their occupation, and by confronting and discounting negative views about their occupation (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Ashforth, Kreiner, Clark, & Fugate, 2007).

Although the stigmatized work literature provides critical conceptual tools to understand how workers doing extreme work might relate to their work, implicit assumptions it makes presents a drawback. One assumption is that workers are relatively free to choose their occupations (Kreiner, et al., 2006: 620), which most immigrants I interviewed contradicted. Another is the assumption that work-based identity is the primary source of

identification in an individual's life (Dutton, et al., 2010: 266). Lastly, both the stigmatized work literature and literature on extreme work assume that workers' attitudes to their work are relatively static. Recent work, however, has shown that occupations provide a site in which what is moral and what is 'dirty' are constantly negotiated by workers (Dick, 2005). Meaning construction was also socially situated and dependent on context. For example, Dick (2005) found that members of the police force justified the use of coercive force invoking judgements on situation and that factors such as interactional justice and power dynamics were used in the determination of a 'moral' use of force.

Another body of literature examining identification with one's work has studied workers who view their work as a 'calling'. The meaning of 'calling' is derived from the Lutheran concept of work as a moral duty and destiny (Wrzesniewski, Dekas, & Rosso, 2009; Wrzesniewski, McCauley, Rozin, & Schwartz, 1997). Scholars have distinguished work as a calling from views of work as a 'job'—means to economic rewards—or as a 'career'—means for self-advancement (Wrzesniewski, et al., 1997). Empirical studies of workers who view their work as a calling have found that they deeply identify with their work (Dobrow, 2004), deriving intrinsic rewards from fulfilling their calling (Hall & Chandler, 2005) and undertaking personal costs such as sacrifices in pay and acceptance of extreme working conditions (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009). Importantly, this literature has recently addressed the relationship that individuals viewing their work as a calling have with their organizations. The central idea rising from this inquiry has been that workers' commitment to and satisfaction with their organization will hinge on whether the organization is deemed to be an effective vehicle for their calling, for example, through the provision of resources and opportunities or through the organization's own ideological commitment to the same cause (Cardador, Dane, & Pratt, 2011; Thompson & Bunderson, 2003). Scholars have posited that the relegation of an organization's commitment to values perceived as critical to the calling will constitute a 'violation of principle' that is likely to result in workers protesting the violation (Thompson & Bunderson, 2003). Hence, the work-as-calling literature provides a

useful backdrop to understanding why workers who identify with a cause greater than themselves might taken on extreme work. It also provides clues to the conditions under which such workers might question or problematize organizational influences on their work.

Together, the literatures on dirty work and on work as a calling provide a starting point to theorizing identity-based reasons for the performance of extreme work as an alternative to the current focus on individual rewards.

Method

Data from three previous studies carried out by the author are drawn upon in order to derive theoretical propositions to the research questions posed here: Why do workers accommodate, accept or embrace extreme work, and what are the limits to worker acceptance? Two studies examined the jobs and attitudes to work of immigrant workers in janitorial work and nursing assistant work, respectively. In both studies, narrated biographies (cite) were obtained, where workers were asked to tell the story of how they came into their work, what their work was about, and how their work affected their lives. The first study interviewed eighteen Haitian nursing assistants in the Greater Boston area of the USA during 2003-2004. The second study interviewed 37 janitorial workers who cleaned office buildings in four urban areas of the USA, Los Angeles, Boston, Washington DC, and Houston, during 2006 as part of a six-month fieldwork for a doctoral dissertation. The janitorial workers were members and former members of a service sector union. The vast majority of janitors interviewed were from Mexico and Central American countries, including El Salvador and Nicaragua. The author was introduced to the workers as a PhD student at the time studying immigrant workers and union organizing practices that sought to mobilize immigrant workers.

The third study interviewed 77 activists who were working for or had formerly worked for the union representing janitorial workers in the second study above. Most activists

were recruited from outside the union's membership. 74 per cent of the activists had a tertiary education and the vast majority (71 out of 77) viewed their work as a calling. That is, in interviews, 71 activists described their work as a moral duty to advance social justice instead of a means for economic rewards or personal advancement (reference removed for anonymity). 53 per cent of activists came from an immigrant family where either themselves or their parents were first generation immigrants to the USA. Interviews with activists focused on how they came to work for the union and for the low-wage immigrant movement, their views of their work and their career plans.

Findings and Propositions

Attitudes to extreme work: Identification with a social group

Janitorial work is physically and socially extreme. Janitors often worked part-time shifts, mostly at night after building occupants had gone home. The toil was exacerbated by the fact that most janitors worked two to three jobs, either in cleaning or in other industries such as the food or retail. Unionized janitors earned between nine and thirteen dollars an hour, sometimes without health care benefits, and thus faced high economic uncertainty. Socially, janitors complained about being invisible to the occupants of the spaces they cleaned and of abuses from supervisors who regularly threatened to fire them (reference removed for anonymity). Nursing assistant work posed similar challenges although the specific conditions differed. Nursing assistants worked in rehabilitation and aged care facilities where they grappled mentally with the proximity of death and chronic illness. Many complained of back pains from lifting and moving patients. Interviewees were aware that the occupation was socially tainted, calling it a "domestic job" that consisted of "cleaning and feeding" patients and handling their bodily fluids (reference removed for anonymity). Nursing assistants, who were technically not on a career ladder to becoming nurses unless they obtained a nursing degree, had limited clinical training and experienced constant fear of becoming inadvertently involved in medical accidents and being found liable. They often

stated, “There is no future, there is no career here.” Socially, nursing assistants reported that they were discouraged to speak in their native language and were subject to harsh treatment from patients and their relatives.

The main mechanism by which immigrant workers in both occupations accepted the extreme conditions at work was to think of their current jobs as a necessary step to a better life in the USA. An anticipation that life will be better once they saved enough money, improved their English, or educated their children so they would not have to be “stuck” in the low wage occupations their parents worked in was a recurring theme in interviews. Hence, current jobs were viewed as a temporary sojourn. Milestones such as ‘promotions’ to supervising positions or a child’s graduation were viewed as signs of progress and enthusiastically celebrated. Immigrant workers also cultivated supportive relationships in their community that offered practical and moral support in enduring status downgrading at work. These relationships rendered childcare when workers could not afford it, and significant financial help in the case of one janitor who was diagnosed with breast cancer. Ethnic community institutions such as churches affirmed the identities of immigrant workers as parents, citizens of the world (if undocumented in the USA), and valued members of the community. One Haitian pastor spoke of the church as a place where immigrant workers could just be themselves and not feel ashamed:

There is not necessarily a job that boosts their self image, yet in the church they can be themselves. [...] It [the occupational identity of churchgoers] was discussed, but not in an open way until recently. Now we talk about it and we say, you don’t have to be ashamed of what you’re doing, you have rights.

Based on these findings, I posit that members of marginalized or minority social groups who consider occupational selection to be a product at least in part of societal inequities, such as immigrants, may not identify with a strong occupational culture hitherto theorized as the main mechanism for coping with stigmas. These workers are not likely to confront negative opinion about their occupation (Ashforth et al, 2007: 162) or try to

normalize the traits of their work (Ashforth & Kreiner, 2002). Instead, they are likely to draw on social identities outside of work to strengthen their self-esteem and *raison d'être*, as well as to seek social and economic mobility out of the occupation which they prefer to see as temporary (Kreiner, et al., 2006: 624). However, should social and economic mobility prove to be elusive over time as many of my interviewees attested, workers are likely to begin to identify more with their work. Then, consistent with conventional predictions of dirty work (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999) and existing empirical studies of immigrant workers' work attitudes (Krau, 1981, 1984), workers are likely to exhibit deep ambivalence towards the conditions of their work, since they wish to defend their occupation and deny that it is 'tainted', yet struggle with their own negative feelings about the work. In the above-mentioned studies, workers who experienced stunted social mobility, either in terms of depressed opportunities for themselves or their children, were likely to develop an injustice frame (Gamson, Fireman, & Rytina, 1982), becoming candidates for mobilization into the labour movement. Propositions 1 through 2-1 refer to these reasons for accommodating extreme work.

Proposition 1 Workers who believe extreme work to be a consequence of structural inequities are likely to accommodate it in anticipation of future social and economic mobility.

Proposition 1-1 Workers whose expectations of individual mobility go unmet are likely to develop injustice frames and seek to oppose or change their conditions of work.

Proposition 2 Workers who have strong social identities based on membership in a group outside the workplace are likely to employ disidentification as a strategy for coping with the stigma of extreme work.

Proposition 2-1 Workers whose expectations that extreme work will be a transitional phase are violated are likely to employ ambivalence as a coping strategy.

Attitudes to extreme work: Identification with a calling

Activists in the low-wage workers' labour movement also faced physical duress, danger of retribution from employers, and psychological pressure. Their jobs required constant travel to areas of the country where mobilizations were ongoing, and they felt personally accountable for the livelihood of hundreds and thousands of non-union workers that would benefit from unionization. Earning \$20,000-30,000 per annum starting salaries, activists slept very little and sacrificed personal lives. For example, having little time to socialize outside of the labour movement, many activists I interviewed had married someone they met in the labour movement. Activists who saw their work as a calling for social change were more likely than those who did not to have had politicizing experiences which helped them see societal problems in terms of structural injustices. These activists' perceptions of working in the labour movement were influenced by 'injustice frames', which Gamson (1992; 1982) pointed out often makes things that formerly appeared immutable to appear mutable. Activists were motivated to engage in the extreme work of mobilization not for personal advancement but because it allowed them to serve a cause greater than themselves. Typically, deep identification with the goals of the movement ensued, and activists drew personal satisfaction from positive events in the movement as well as strong and personal disappointments from negative incidences. For example, many activists expressed personal gratification in doing their work:

I go down to the field and see the workers and see them obtain their benefits, so rewarding. Because I see them and I see my parents. I don't think I'm working for a union. When I go out there and I see the workers it could be my Aunt or my Mom, their livelihood.

Similarly, they were likely to feel personally wronged by general wrongdoing in the union because of their commitment to movement goals. For example, when the union they worked for underwent restructuring for financial efficiency and it had the effect of reducing representation structures for janitorial members of the union, activists strongly protested the

change. All eight interviewees who had left the union cited dissatisfaction with the union's ability to fulfil the goals of the movement as reasons for leaving. This is consistent with the literature on work as a calling which has stipulated that those who view their work as a calling are likely to experience generalized wrong in organizations as a personal affront (Thompson & Bunderson, 2003: 571).

These findings imply that workers who view work as a calling are likely not merely to accept or accommodate extreme work; instead, they are likely to embrace it as a vehicle for fulfilling their cause. However, strong identification with their work may prove to be a 'double-edged sword' (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009), because upon experiencing a violation of principle in the organization, workers are likely to resist business-as-usual and demand changes or exit the organization. Propositions 3 and 3-1 posit the reasons why workers who identify with a calling may embrace extreme work.

Proposition 3. Workers who deeply identify with their work and view it as a calling are likely to embrace extreme work.

Proposition 3-1. When faced with violations of principle, workers who view work as a calling are likely to question or resist the conditions of their work or exit the organization.

Discussion

This paper contributes to understanding the agentic parameters of extreme work by examining social identity roles that interact with willingness to perform extreme work. Empirically it examined two groups of workers, one whose social identity resided in a purposefully separated sphere from the work they carried out, and the other whose identity was centered on their work. While both groups accepted extreme work, the former merely accommodated it, thinking of it as transitory, while the latter embraced it as part of commitment towards a greater cause. Both groups of workers assessed extreme work in terms

of who they were rather than in terms of its instrumental use for personal advancement as hitherto theorized (Hewlett & Luce, 2006). The findings suggest that social identity roles are the window through which workers interpret the meaning of their work and determine its subjective value.

Extant literature on agency in extreme work has focused on determining why workers might willingly perform dangerous, uncertain, and difficult work. While this is an important question, the decision to participate in extreme work has hitherto been treated as somewhat static. The two cases presented here demonstrate that workers are sophisticated about evaluating the value of extreme work and suggest that scholars should endeavour to delineate the parameters of agency in extreme work by asking under what conditions workers would be more or less likely to commit to extreme work. The beginnings of such a research agenda already exist in the form of scholarship on gender variations in attitudes to extreme work (Hewlett & Luce, 2006). While studies have found that women were equally enthusiastic about performing extreme work, reasons why women enjoyed extreme work were different from men's, having less to do with financial rewards and more to do with being recognized at work and obtaining power and status (Hewlett & Luce 2006: 52). Women were also more concerned than men about the impact of having an extreme job on the relationship with their children (Hewlett & Luce 2006: 53). This study adds to our understanding of how values accorded to work can vary across identity groups, creating varying attitudes to extreme work.

Extreme work is a consequence of changes in markets and workplaces, and should be understood in conjunction with structural factors that may impact groups of workers differently (Granter, 2009; Hewlett & Luce, 2006; McCann, et al., 2008). Future research should examine the extent to which social identity provides an interface between workers and the structural forces that impinge on their work, as well as how this affects workers' assessments of working conditions. For example, do African-American workers, women, immigrant workers, and men have the same level of consciousness about the factors that have led to extreme working conditions? What leads some groups to develop injustice frames at

work and others to acquiesce? In short, more research is needed that socially situates extreme work, both in context as well as in demographic diversity.

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