

Organizing and Strategizing in and for Extreme Contexts: Temporality, Emotions, and Embodiment

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ABSTRACT This special issue advances our understanding of organizing and strategizing in extreme contexts by focusing on temporality, emotions, and embodiment. Extreme contexts – marked by unpredictability, high stakes, and urgency – challenge organizational capacities and demand innovative responses. Drawing on the foundation of extreme context research, this introduction explores three perspectives: extreme as an event, a situational context, and a socially constructed practice. Together, these perspectives illuminate how organizations navigate, adapt to, and construct extremeness through temporal, emotional, and embodied processes. The contributions span diverse empirical settings and theoretical frameworks. By examining the contributions in the light of these dimensions, this introduction highlights the evolving and contested nature of extreme context research. The introduction concludes with a call for future studies to deepen engagement with materiality, relational dynamics, and methodological innovations, reinforcing the relevance of this field to broader management and organization studies.

Keywords: extreme contexts, temporality, embodiment, emotions

INTRODUCTION

Extreme contexts are often defined as settings where extreme events may occur and exceed an organization's capacity to prevent harm, leading to significant physical, psychological, or material consequences (Hannah et al., 2009). Extreme contexts are typically characterized by unexpected material and environmental conditions, the physical

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presence of heterogeneous actors, and intense time pressures. In drafting the call for this special issue we sought to advance research on organizing and strategizing processes for these types of conditions. In our call we focused particularly on three aspects: *temporality*, such as the need to accelerate or postpone decision-making under time pressure (Geiger et al., 2021; Kent and Granqvist, 2024); *embodiment*, which becomes crucial due to the physical demands of potentially life-threatening situations (Bouty and Godé, 2022; De Rond et al., 2019); and *materiality*, evident in how organizations and actors navigate and adapt to volatile environments (Cornelissen et al., 2014; Wright et al., 2021). Given the unpredictable, urgent, and materially demanding nature of extreme contexts, attention to these topics potentially offers both fresh and nuanced insights into how organizations navigate under extreme conditions (Bamberger and Pratt, 2010; Hällgren et al., 2018).

Our call for papers was received enthusiastically, showcasing a range of empirical phenomenon. A first glance at the submitted papers revealed a surprisingly strong scholarly interest in temporality, embodiment, and emotions in extreme contexts while the theme of materiality was far less popular. We wondered if it was by chance or simply a reflection of the literature produced on extreme contexts during the past decade. We also noticed and welcomed the variety of the theoretical and methodological approaches used by researchers to study the processes of organizing and strategizing in and for extreme contexts. Finally, we were intrigued by the ways in which management and organization scholars framed their extreme context work. Some scholars framed their contributions almost exclusively as a contribution to what has become to be known as the extreme context research instead of developing generative theorizing around the central paper's empirical object. More frequently, however, this framing was not central; in some cases it was criticized.

These observations invited us to reflect on the nature and scope of the extreme context research as described by Hällgren et al. (2018) that has become popular over the past decade. The extreme context literature is not a theory per se – nor do we believe that it should be. The notion of extreme context is an ‘umbrella construct’ (Floyd et al., 2011) that encompasses a diversity of existing approaches, empirical phenomena, and disciplines. Therefore, extreme contexts research can be seen as a perspective that defines and embraces knowledge produced in related domains (e.g., risk, emergency, and disruptive studies). With this in mind, we reviewed the recent literature and reflected on knowledge production in this growing area of research (Sharma et al., 2024; Wright et al., 2023). This led us to realize that this field is characterized by ‘contested knowledge’ through challenging conversations within which new contributions, as for example in this special issue, on temporality and emotion and embodiment, are developing. This reflection allowed us to identify and elaborate on three perspectives on the extreme – as an event, a situational context, or a practice – and how they can be applied.

Before presenting the papers composing this special issue, we first offer a quick recap and extension of extreme context research since its recent inception in management and organization studies. Second, we introduce three challenging debates related to the distinctiveness of the rationale domain (contested boundaries), the definitional knowledge claims (contested terrain) and the theoretical contributions (contested theorizing) constituting extreme context as contested knowledge. Third, we present and discuss the

selected contributions with a focus on temporality, emotions and embodiment. Finally, we end with brief directions for future research on extreme contexts.

RECAP AND EXTENSION

Since its inception in the middle of the last decade, extreme context research has gained increasing popularity in management and organization studies. Two interrelated phenomena have contributed to the development of a recognized and vibrant community of scholars that acknowledged and built upon each other's work on extreme contexts.

First, the need for scholars to be active in different forums to discuss their work on crisis and catastrophic situations certainly contributes to the institutionalization of a research community around extreme contexts. The process began with a series of small workshops (HEC Montréal, 2014; Paris Dauphine, 2017; Umeå University, 2015) which stimulated community building between scholars sharing similar research interests on risky, emergency and disruptive contexts. The publication of the 'A matter of life or death: How extreme context research matters for management and organization studies' (Hällgren et al., 2018) was a stepping stone for establishing the community by getting the support from the budding community to apply for, and finally getting the application approved for founding a standing working group at EGOS (from 2019 to 2026). Through the standing working group, the community was provided with a temporary home and structure. The literature on extreme contexts is currently gaining influence through symposiums and papers presentations at major conferences organized by international associations, including the Academy of Management (AOM) and the European Academy of Management (EURAM).^[1] With the special issue in International Journal of Project Management (Unterhitzenberger et al., 2024), this special issue certainly constitutes a step ahead towards the institutionalization of this nascent perspective as it will contribute to disseminate extreme contexts research.

Second, the growing numbers of publications on topics related to risk, emergencies and disasters in the last decade also explains the increasing popularity of extreme context research. To assess this expansion, we replicated the methodology used in the Annals paper (Hällgren et al., 2018, pp. 115–17). In short, we used the Web of Science database for access to 6453 articles published in nine top-tier journals between 2016 and 2024 (July 1). Drawing upon Hannah et al.'s (2009) definition of extreme contexts as settings 'where one or more extreme events are occurring or are likely to occur that may exceed the organization's capacity to prevent and result in an extensive and intolerable magnitude of physical, psychological, or material consequences to – or in close physical or psychosocial proximity to – organization members' (Hannah et al., 2009, p. 898) and Hällgren et al.'s operationalization thereof, we excluded articles that were not triggered by extreme events. For instance, research on a natural disaster would be included and research on extreme innovation pace would not. Second, we considered whether an extreme event is likely to occur or have occurred; and whether the response to an extreme event is part of the daily operations, or not. Finally, this allowed us to distinguish between

extreme contexts that are ‘disruptive’, contexts designed around extreme events – ‘emergency’, and contexts that are inherently ‘risky’.

To select the articles concerned with extreme contexts published between 2016 and 2024, we started with the title of the articles, followed by a review of the remaining abstracts. At this point, two of the editors reviewed the remaining articles to identify the final set of articles. As a result, in 35 years, 120 empirical papers and 18 conceptual papers related to extreme contexts (in total 138 articles) were published in these journals. Between 2016 and 2024 (July 1), we found 124 empirical papers and 60 conceptual papers for a total of 184 papers in less than 10 years only. This confirms the popularity and the expansion of extreme contexts research (see Table I).

Interestingly, the balance between the types of settings (i.e., risky, emergency, or disruptive) has shifted during the past seven and a half years. From being dominated by research on emergency contexts, risky contexts have slightly become more popular and the previously largely ignored disruptive contexts have received the most attention by far (e.g., World War I in 1914) (Wiedemann et al., 2021), the aftermath of the Haiti Earthquake in 2010 (Williams and Shepherd, 2021), or the fatal shooting of Trayvon Martin, a black teenager in 2012 that became the spark that ignited the Black Lives Matter movement (Kudesia, 2021). The significant increase in research on disruptive contexts reinforces the fact that we are truly living in an age of uncertainty and unpredictability (see Grint, 2022). Yet, across the empirical papers on risky and emergency contexts, we note that the types of settings studied and the theoretical frames used are broadly consistent with past research. For instance, police and healthcare organizations remain dominant while coordination, learning and sensemaking still figure prominently among the central topics discussed in these papers.

We do, however, note an increased attention to the themes of this special issue. Thus, temporality, in recent years, has become more and more important in extreme context research. For example, Geiger et al. (2021) explore how firefighters develop the temporal autonomy to coordination routines to deal with temporal contingencies. Examining storm chasing teams in Tornado Alley, Kent and Granqvist (2024) develop a temporal model of team engagement in temporally uncertain settings. In both urgent and uneventful situations, the unfolding temporality dictates the range of

Table I. Comparison of the number of extreme context papers published

<i>Type of papers</i>	<i>Contexts</i>	<i>Number of papers published in top-tiers journals 1980–2015</i>	<i>Number of papers published in top-tiers journals 2016–2024</i>
Empirical	Risky	45	40
	Emergency	60	32
	Disruptive	15	52
	Total	120	124
Conceptual (editorials, essays and methods)	Total	18	60 (mainly essays around Covid 19)
	Total	138 (in 35 years)	184 (in 7.5 years)

extreme context strategies and outcomes. In parallel, we observe a growing interest in highlighting the role played by emotions (Hartmann and Meier, 2023), subjectivity (Orr, 2023) and embodied live experiences (Bouty and Godé, 2022) on how organizing and strategizing are accomplished in extreme contexts. Drawing on carnal sociology, De Rond et al. (2019) examine the role of the body in sensemaking during the crossing over the Amazon, considered the world's most dangerous and most voluminous river.

Additionally, we observe that the number of conceptual papers has increased exponentially mainly from the essay genre testifying of the increased interest of management and organization scholars for research on extreme contexts. Most of them are related to topical themes during this period such as COVID-19 (e.g., Ancona et al., 2020; Seidl and Whittington, 2021), Australia's black summer (e.g., Danner-Schröder and Sele, 2024; Fourie et al., 2024), the Ebola epidemic (Geiger and Harborth, 2024), or war (e.g., Abdelnour, 2023; O'Quinn, 2023). Thus, we believe, the extreme contexts research is built to last as risky, emergency and disruptive situations are becoming paramount in contemporary societies (Hällgren et al., 2018; Rouleau et al., 2021).

EXTREME CONTEXT RESEARCH AS CONTESTED KNOWLEDGE

The extreme contexts literature has ignited vigorous discussions and debates among researchers from diverse traditions and perspectives (Danner-Schröder et al., 2025; Sharma et al., 2024). Extreme context research, in other words, revolves around 'contested knowledge' that emerges through these conversations that define intellectual boundaries while creating opportunities for developing new contributions. In this section, we focus on three of these conversations. The first conversation revolves around the distinctiveness or the blurred 'boundaries' of the domain rationale (contested boundaries); the second one concerns the knowledge claims or the 'terrain' covered by the phenomena studied (contested terrain); and the third conversation addresses the challenge of theorizing for contributing to management and organization studies (contested theorizing). We write this section with a reflexive attitude based on genuine respect and profound appreciation of the work accomplished by the researchers who identify with the different streams and research communities.

Contested Boundaries

Extreme context research faces blurred or contested boundaries with a diverse body of research related to different topics (e.g., crisis management, catastrophes, disasters, high reliability organizations and resilience) and including a diversity of perspectives. The last decade has witnessed repeated calls to systematize the extant literatures studying extreme situations (Bundy et al., 2017; Creed et al., 2022; Golden et al., 2018; Gregg et al., 2022; Maynard et al., 2018; Schmutz et al., 2023; Williams et al., 2017). Drawing from organizational research on crisis and crisis management, Bundy et al. (2017) identify two central perspectives — an internal perspective centred on the dynamics of crisis and an external perspective focusing on external stakeholders'

management of crises — and highlight opportunities for integration between them. Williams et al. (2017) review the literature on crisis management and resilience and discuss opportunities to both integrate and advance these streams of research by developing a dynamic and process-oriented framework on these perspectives. Drawing on a resource-based perspective, Gregg et al. (2022) offer an interdisciplinary literature review on disasters research providing a comprehensive understanding of the workplace implications and outcomes of disasters.

Other scholars have focused on literatures on emerging sub-streams related to research in extreme conditions. For example, Maynard et al. (2018) conduct a literature review on teamwork in extreme environments. Golden et al. (2018) achieve a similar integrative exercise on teams in ‘isolated, confined, and extreme environments’ (ICE) such as space-, polar-, deep sea expeditions and high-altitude teams. Interested in ‘grand challenges’, Creed et al. (2022) propose a temporal framework on how organizations and institutions respond to jarring manifestations of disruption, division, and displacement (DDD) that are affecting our organizations, communities and societies.

These reviews help to make sense of related bodies of research based on unexpected events, crises, and extreme situations to provide new rationales for ordering them. Ultimately, the aims are to offer possibilities to advance research on these phenomena and to make the knowledge cumulation process more rigorous. To reframe the boundaries of competing streams of research, two complementary strategies are used: establishing new frameworks to reduce the ambiguity and provide a shared understanding of the research domains and objectives (Bundy et al., 2017; Gregg et al., 2022; Williams et al., 2017) or creating new conceptual boundary objects (e.g., DDD, Creed et al., 2022; ICE, Golden et al., 2018; RED for risky, emergency and disruptive, Hällgren et al., 2018) that are flexible enough to be interpreted differently by researchers interested in different aspects of a phenomenon, yet robust enough to create and maintain a common identity.

Importantly, extreme contexts research does not exist in isolation. It shares commonalities but is also distinct from other domains, particularly studies on resilience (Linnenluecke, 2017; Sutcliffe and Vogus, 2003) and grand challenges research (Gehman et al., 2022; George et al., 2016; van der Giessen et al., 2022). Resilience research is concerned with understanding ‘how organizations can resist adversity or proactively deal with uncertainty and change’ (Williams et al., 2017, p. 740). Extreme context and resilience scholars are both interested in better understanding the ability or the capacity to cope with and respond to adversity and crisis situations. However, they often differ on the types of extreme adversity investigated and the levels of analysis they tend to privilege. Resilience research is interested in any case of extreme adversity including financial and reputational firm crises and examines resilience at individual, organizational and systemic levels. Extreme context research in contrast focuses on situations which pose a direct risk to life and death and commonly emphasize the (inter) organizational level in which extreme adversity is potentially or actually happening. Therefore, firm crisis and radical organizational change are frequently not considered as belonging to extreme context research.

The distinctions between extreme context and grand challenges research are far more complex. Grand challenges research is generally defined in terms of wicked problems having a global impact (Gehman et al., 2022; George et al., 2016) and is often

operationalized through the universal framework of the Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations. Extreme contexts scholars are interested in the actual occurrence of an extreme event such as the bushfire episode, whereas grand challenge researchers would focus on the underlying climate change as root cause as the larger societal issue. Despite these attempts to distinguish the two domains, the problem of establishing clear boundaries between them remains. In the last instance, the contested boundaries between these domains hold on a heuristic problem of adopting a perspective for knowledge contribution in one domain or another.

Contested Terrain

The formation of a research community and its institutionalization have contributed to establishment of broad knowledge claims that constitute the shared ‘terrain’ covered by extreme contexts research. First, extreme context research revolves around the potential for extreme events – ‘a discrete episode or occurrence that may result in an extensive and intolerable magnitude of physical, psychological, or material consequences to organization members’ (Hannah et al., 2009, p. 898) – implying that an organizational crisis prompted by a radical organizational change such as a merger or a hostile takeover does not constitute an extreme context. Put differently, situations that might look like ‘extreme’ at specific moments (e.g., rush hour in a restaurant, implementation of a new way of working, extreme innovation pace) are not considered extreme contexts. Second, extreme contexts however comprise settings in which one or several extreme events have occurred or are likely to occur. In the latter, organizations that are organized around the possibility that an extreme event is likely to occur are included (e.g., high-reliability organizations such as chemical plants and air traffic control). Third, it is the setting itself that makes the context as extreme. This context can be the result of ‘disruptions’ (e.g., a business school shooting, a natural disaster), be designed around ‘emergencies’ (e.g., a police unit dealing with a terrorist attack, hospital emergencies and rescues), and contexts that are inherently ‘risky’ (e.g., nuclear power plants and defence forces).

These knowledge claims contribute to delineating what an extreme context is and is not. This is central for building a coherent research community and addressing the fragmentation in the literature that it was conceived to reduce. At the same time there remains significant ambiguity around the literature which has engaged scholars in challenging discussions (Dixon et al., 2017; Lièvre et al., 2020; Stern, 2017). Therefore, extreme contexts research not surprisingly remains a contested terrain in several aspects.

Creating a typology of extreme contexts (risky, emergency or disruptive) helps to organize the literature around common features at the same time as it creates artificial epistemic boundaries. Still, it is important to remember that the three types of extreme contexts are ideal types and should be viewed and used as an analytical tool for helping the formulation of theoretical explanations. In our experience, it is often difficult to delineate if the context in which an extreme event has happened is actually a risky, an emergency or a disruptive one as it depends on the vantage point. For example, a pandemic (e.g., Ebola and COVID-19) involves the three types of contexts at the same time.

A pandemic context is risky if an organization is working to prevent the fatal outcomes a potential pandemic may cause; it is also an emergency context as healthcare institutions are mobilized to fight the immediate consequence of the disease; and it is disruptive in the sense that a pandemic compromises the normal flow of activities in society in general. Building on previous point, a situation may evolve from being a risky context to becoming an emergency setting and so on, so it also depends on when in time the context is explored.

Whilst much effort has focused on defining what ‘context’ means (e.g., Johns, 2006), the notion of ‘extreme’ has still not been subject to an in-depth reflection. In the empirical literature examining an extreme event, the word ‘extreme’ is used rather inconsistently. The notion of extreme is often used as a catchword to qualify a diversity of phenomena other than the context in which an extreme event has occurred (e.g., ‘extreme practices’ in de Rond et al., 2022; ‘extreme constraints’ in Alkhaled and Sasaki, 2022; Ruebottom and Toubiana, 2021; ‘extreme emotional dirty work’ in Mikkelsen, 2022). Moreover, how the extreme plays out depends on the cultural, social and political perspectives of the person who is qualifying a situation as extreme. This relates to whether it is an emic or etic perspective that is taken to conceptualize the context as extreme. Irrespective of the perspective, it remains a subjective issue in the eyes of the beholder – those experiencing a specific context or researchers studying and qualifying a certain context as extreme. This subjective categorization may exacerbate variable interpretations and inconsistent findings. A better grasp of these issues and possible solutions is necessary if we are to advance the theorizing and build a more coherent body of knowledge.

Contested Theorizing

Addressing the challenges of theorizing from the observation of extreme contexts, requires some reflection on the notion of extremeness from different theoretical stances. Reflection is critical not only because the notion of ‘extremeness’ is central to the debate, but also because what is considered to be extreme differs both phenomenologically (as outlined above) and theoretically. Whether we define extreme context as an actual or potential event, a situational context, or a practice has important implications for our theorizing. Each of these perspectives (see Table II) has its own merits and explanatory power, advancing from distinct theoretical foundations, methodologies, and implications. We do not consider any perspective superior but being knowledgeable about which perspective one starts with helps develop distinct theoretical underpinning and contributions for understanding of extremeness. We also show how each perspective has a distinct way of addressing time and emotions (embodiment), the specific themes of this Special Issue.

Extreme as event. When viewing the extreme as event, researchers often qualify these actual or potential events as external and disruptive to emphasize the objective character of these occurrences. The primary aim is to understand and explore the contingencies and outcomes before, during and after an extreme event happens. This perspective is rooted in realism, where the extreme event is considered an external fact that can be objectively observed and

Table II. Three perspectives on extreme contexts

	<i>Extreme as event</i>	<i>Extreme as situational context</i>	<i>Extreme as practice</i>
Description (not in the table)	Researching contingencies and outcomes before, during or after an extreme event	Researching the underlying organizational and strategic dynamic related to a potential or an actual extreme event	Researching the constructed nature of extremeness
Research question	How groups, organizations and societies respond to an extreme event? What is the impact on an extreme event on groups, organizations and societies?	How groups, organizations and societies are prepared for or cope with an extreme event?	How is extremeness practically constructed by groups, organizations and societies?
Perspective	Extreme as objective event	Extreme as unfolding over time (weak process)	Extreme as practical accomplishment (strong process)
Positioning of extreme	Extreme as objective category	Extreme as a representation of reality	Extreme as social construction
Onto-epistemological position	Realism (explaining structural mechanisms for managerial ends)	Scientific/critical realism (understanding the underlying processual patterns of an observed reality)	Constructionist (revealing)
Goal orientation in research	Consequentiality	Contextuality	Knowledgeability
Methodological approach	Quantitative – confirmative	Qualitative – descriptive	Qualitative – interpretive
Researcher position	Outside	Outside-inside	Inside
Level of analysis	Macro	Meso	Micro (or flat ontology, that is, no micro–macro distinction)
Implications	Managerial	Organizational	Reflexive
Examples	Perrow (1984), Starbuck and Milliken (1988), Goh et al. (2012), Ballesteros and Magelssen (2022), Ogbonnaya et al. (2025)	Weick (1993), Pérez-Nordtvedt et al. (2023), Roulet and Bothello (2023), Haunschild et al. (2015), Klein and Amis (2021)	Barton and Sutcliffe (2009), Bechky and Okhuysen (2011), Leuridan and Demil (2022), Hultin and Mähring (2017), Hartmann and Meier (2023)

quantified. The research questions from this perspective often focus on identifying specific response strategies of societies, organizations and groups to the disruptions caused by these events and to understand the impact these events have. It seeks to uncover the extent of the damage or the consequences imposed by the event and how existing organizations are altered as a result. Methodologically, this approach is largely quantitative, relying on data collection through surveys, statistical analysis, and mathematical modelling to predict outcomes and establish causal relationships. Researchers largely maintain an ‘outside’ perspective to ensure objectivity. The level of analysis is typically macro, focusing on explaining structural patterns for managerial ends to understand the consequences of extreme events. The primary objective is to derive managerial, practical implications for preparing for and managing in case of disruptions caused by extreme events and provide managers and policymakers with practical insights that can support in planning and crisis management. Classic examples include crisis management literature such as the work of Charles Perrow (1984) and Starbuck and Milliken (1988), which provide frameworks for understanding the anatomy of crises and the mechanisms of response to organizational accidents (Goh et al., 2012).

Extreme as situational context. The second perspective, which has gained much momentum in recent years, emphasizes the dynamics within and between organizations as they prepare for or cope with potential or actual events. In this perspective, the notion of extreme is not seen as a singular event but rather as a processual pattern that unfolds over time, allowing researchers to explore how situations evolve and how organizations prepare for, adapt to and cope within these evolving environments. With the focus on how extreme events, adaptation and response strategies evolve over time, this perspective builds on a weak process understanding (Langley and Tsoukas, 2016), with an interest in capturing extreme events from a longitudinal perspective. In contrast to the ‘event’ perspective, the extreme is not associated with an objective event, but what is extreme evolves from the situational and subjective understanding of actors and how they collectively make sense out of specific events (Weick, 1993). Hence, the onto-epistemological position of this perspective often reflects a scientific realism or critical realist understanding in the sense that they provide a representation of this reality while they are looking for the existence of deeper processual patterns underlying their empirical observations. The aim is to understand how these patterns unfold, how they differ within groups and how they emerge and develop over time. Research is oriented towards understanding contextuality and making it explicit by examining how boundary conditions influence organizations’ abilities to prepare for, withstand, and recover from extreme events. As such, qualitative descriptive methodologies are often employed, capturing the richness of an extreme situation through case studies, interviews, and public inquiries. In this perspective, researchers adopt an ‘outside-inside’ position, engaging with organizations and actors to gain deeper insights while maintaining an analytic distance. Privileging a meso level of analysis, researchers focus on understanding the processual patterns within and across organizations or groups to identify how they play out, and how they are altered over the course of time.

A classical illustrative example for this perspective is Karl Weick’s (1993) analysis of the Mann Gulch disaster where several firefighters died as they were unable to challenge their existing ways of viewing the situation. The case demonstrates how

breakdowns in communication and perception contributed to the tragedy, highlighting the importance of collective sensemaking process within extreme contexts. Drawing on qualitative data from Challenger and Columbia accidents, (Haunschild et al., 2015, p. 1682) develop a process model of organizational oscillation ‘that explains why firms cycle through periods of learning and periods of forgetting’. Instead of seeing disruption and crisis as the outcome of a singular event, Roulet and Bothello (2023) reconceptualize how they occur from an event chain. Revisiting narratives of past pandemics and historical and fictional texts related to the Black Death and the plague, they identify four experiences generated by disruptive event chains: stagnation, disorientation, polarization, and repudiation that are at the root of broader organizational and institutional arrangements transformations.

Extreme as practice. The third perspective, arguably the most recent, emphasizes the relational and constructed nature of extremeness, focusing on how these events are actually becoming and made as extreme. Extremeness, in this view, is not an inherent quality of an event but is socially constructed through interactions and interpretations. Research questions culminate around understanding how extremeness is socially constructed and enacted by groups, organizations and societies. This also allows us to take differences and conflicts that emanate from the construction of the extreme into account, explaining why for example urgency is a contested construct (see Skade et al. in this SI). This perspective follows a strong process-orientation (Langley and Tsoukas, 2016) emphasizing that the meaning and significance of extreme events are continuously in a process of becoming through the enactment and re-enactment of specific practices. This perspective adopts a constructionist onto-epistemological position which involves interpreting and revealing how extremeness is contextually created through specific practices. Following this orientation, research is geared towards knowledgeability, seeking to understand the tacit ways of doing and being that group members learn through participation and lived experiences. Qualitative interpretive methodologies mainly based on ethnographic research or observation to uncover how the practices of building an event as extreme comes into being. Therefore, researchers take an ‘inside’ position, studying the construction and interpretation of extremeness from within. Given the strong process orientation research tends to follow a ‘flat’ ontology to eschew the micro–macro distinctions (De Rond et al., 2019; Seidl and Whittington, 2014), highlighting the relationality of entities that only take shape in relation to each other. What is extreme can hence only be understood in relation to other constructed events. Overall, this perspective aims at increasing the reflexivity of our understanding of the extreme, since it directs our scholarly attention towards the question of how and why the extreme is coming into being.

Barton and Sutcliffe’s (2009) work on wildland firefighters and Bechky and Okhuysen’s (2011) on a SWAT team in action constitute classical illustrative examples of this perspective. According to Barton and Sutcliffe, the process of redirecting action during an extreme event relies on two practices: giving voice to concerns and actively seeking alternative perspectives. Bechky and Okhuysen (2011), in turn, highlight diverse forms of organizational bricolage (shifting roles, reorganizing routines, and reassembling the work) accomplished by police officers when being surprised by dangerous obstacles

and situations. Chia-Yu and Harvey (2022) examine the dialogic interactions in which experts designing and building nuclear power plant safety systems are managing their knowledge differences. Focusing on the fine-grained analysis of episodes in which experts interact to solve a particular problem situation, they show how their engagement in traversing and transcending knowledge practices shapes the trajectory of integrating expertise in different ways.

PAPERS IN THE SPECIAL ISSUE

We now turn to the seven articles included in this special issue. Each in its own unique way focuses on organizing and strategizing in an extreme context. Moreover, these articles involve a variety of contexts, are grounded in a range of theoretical traditions, and lead to many interesting and important insights. In particular, they highlight key aspects of temporality, emotions and embodiment thereby advancing the processes of organizing and strategizing such as sensemaking, learning, coordinating routines and communicating in significant ways. Table III offers a summary of the papers.

One critical aspect of extreme contexts scholarship is *temporality* since extreme events are often framed as ‘surprises’ or ‘unexpected events’ that befall a society or an organization. From an event perspective, time is considered to be an objective category that allows us to understand the sequence and duration of events over time. For instance, Ballesteros and Magelssen (2022) use time as a control variable in their study of the philanthropy of multinationals after major institutional disruptions. The situational context and the practice perspectives conceptualize time both as linear and subjective, typically differentiating between event- and clock-time in their analysis allowing for the consideration of individual and collective experiences and perceptions of time as they shape the unfolding event (Pérez-Nordtvedt et al., 2023). Extreme as practice perspective takes an agentic view on time as socially and subjectively constructed reflecting how different groups create, negotiate and synchronize multiple temporalities simultaneously. This allows for example to understand that the urgency of a crisis is not its inherent property, but a crisis needs to be constructed as urgent to attract attention.

Skade, Lehrer, Hamdali and Koch focus on the concept of urgency asking: how and under what conditions do organizations construct urgency during prolonged extreme events (i.e., crises)? The authors draw on multiple sources of data including video data, daily situation reports, and various other online publications gathered from RKI, a federal institution of the German government that assessed the risk level of the Covid 19 pandemic and advised the German government on concrete actions to address the risk. RKI in effect was responsible for creating urgency about the crisis while also engaging in risk evaluations and recommendations regarding the need for speedy counter-responses to the pandemic. Based on their findings the authors developed a process model of the construction and modulation of urgency during prolonged crises. Construction and modulation of urgency is portrayed as an ongoing process enacted through the central mechanisms of speeding up and slowing down activities over time.

Table III. An overview of the papers

<i>Paper</i>	<i>Type of extreme context</i>	<i>Theoretical underpinnings</i>	<i>Key problem/RQ</i>	<i>Key findings</i>	<i>Implications for enriching/expanding extreme context research or practice</i>
Skade, Lehrer, Hamdali and Koch: The temporality of crisis and the crisis of temporality: On the construction and modulation of urgency during prolonged crises	Construction of urgency in the pandemic	Extant crisis management research Practice theory Temporal work	How and under what conditions do organizations construct urgency during prolonged crises?	Urgency is not constant or stable during prolonged crises. Rather, urgency waxes and wanes; it is constructed and modulated through time as a means to speed up or slow down action towards crisis management Urgency is not an objective contextual feature; it is constructed and an organizational accomplishment	Extends understanding of the criticality of modulating urgency (speeding up or slowing down) under some conditions in various extreme contexts. Provides possible insight into why 'grand challenges' fail to get resolved over time. Findings have analytical generalizability and crucial theoretical implications for research on extreme contexts, crises, and issues of temporality
Del Rio, Fernández, Martí and Willi: Constructing a world for compassion: How temporal work can preserve compassion in extreme contexts	End-of-life hospice care	Temporal work Compassion Heidegger's phenomenology	How can temporal work preserve compassion in extreme contexts?	A 'world' sustaining compassion can be constructed by discursive, material and relational practices In being with the guest, compassion-givers experience time as kairos (the ecstatic present)	Extends our understanding of how compassion is sustained for people at the end of life Adds to phenomenological analysis of how extreme contexts are constructed and experienced

(Continues)

Table III. (Continued)

<i>Paper</i>	<i>Type of extreme context</i>	<i>Theoretical underpinnings</i>	<i>Key problem/RQ</i>	<i>Key findings</i>	<i>Implications for enriching/expanding extreme context research or practice</i>
				In being by the guest, tasks are performed at a distance and time is experienced as chronos (the mundane and passing by time)	
Chaudhry, Amis: Desperate journeys to Europe: Sensebreaking in extreme contexts	Irregular migrants undertaking perilous journeys from Pakistan to Europe	Sensebreaking Interpretative temporal lens (agency of time as opposed to time as resource)	How sensebreaking unfolds over time in extreme contexts?	Theorizes the triggers and mechanisms driving different temporal modes of sensebreaking; delineates the role of liminal spaces in exacerbating sensebreaking; develops insights into how emotional and physical disruptions trigger the sensebreaking process over time in extreme contexts	Theorizes a processual understanding of sensebreaking in extreme contexts; Extends our understanding of temporal modes and temporal irregularities in extreme contexts; Deepens our understanding of the role of physical and emotional disruptions in prompting sensebreaking
Rauch and Ansari: Reframing silence as purposeful: Emotions in extreme contexts	Médecins Sans Frontières personnel's experiences in war	Emotion regulation Goffman's theory of frontstage and backstage behaviour	How can individuals immersed in human tragedy cope with the emotional distress they suffer while masking their turmoil?	Dealing with emotional complexity involves control, which involves silence in different forms in public and private spaces	Extends understanding of emotion regulation by illustrating how it may take place with others or in private Adds to research on silence and silencing

(Continues)

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<i>Paper</i>	<i>Type of extreme context</i>	<i>Theoretical underpinnings</i>	<i>Key problem/RQ</i>	<i>Key findings</i>	<i>Implications for enriching/expanding extreme context research or practice</i>
Lübcke, Steigenberger, Wilhelm and Maurer: Multimodal collective sensemaking in extreme contexts: Evidence from maritime search and rescue	Maritime rescue mission in the Aegean Sea	Collective sensemaking Multimodal communication	How do actors overcome distracting emotions and cognitive disparities in collective sensemaking in extreme contexts?	Emotive framing relies on para-verbal and non-verbal communication to minimize distracting emotions Task framing involves simple verbal cues, bridging cognitive disparity and providing guidance necessary for joint action	Advances understanding of multimodal communication in collective sensemaking Adds to research on emotions in sensemaking
Bharatan, Oborn and Swan: Finding your sea legs: Exploring newcomer embodied learning in an extreme context	Risky contexts of seafaring	Organizational body work Embodied learning Practice-based theories of learning a la Merleau-Ponty and phenomenology	How do newcomers develop the bodily capacity to participate in high-risk (extreme context) situations?	Newcomers facing various felt experiences of threat engage in different kinds of body work so as to adjust their bodies to better cope with challenging situations and develop their capacities to participate	Extends extreme context literature on embodied sensemaking by demonstrating that sense is made not only through cognition but also through feelings and bodily sensations Adds to body work literature by showing that body work both constitutes and is constituted by the experience of threat

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Table III. (Continued)

<i>Paper</i>	<i>Type of extreme context</i>	<i>Theoretical underpinnings</i>	<i>Key problem/RQ</i>	<i>Key findings</i>	<i>Implications for enriching/expanding extreme context research or practice</i>
Sele, Danner-Schröder and Mahringer: Embodied connection work: The role of the lived body in routine recreation in extreme contexts	Fine-dining restaurant during the early days of the Covid 19 pandemic	Routines creation and recreation perspective Merleau-Ponty and phenomenology	What happens when for some reason or another it is no longer possible to perform or adjust a routine?	When routines are entirely disrupted as can be the case in extreme contexts, the lived body, particularly connection work, is essential to their recreation. This study has important implications for how we understand routine recreation	Extends our understanding of how the lived body matters for the recreation of routines in an extreme context Adds also to clearer understanding of role reconfiguration in extreme contexts and how role making and role taking are inherently collective and relational processes

Del Rio, Fernández, Marì and Willi examine how to preserve compassion in the extreme situational context of hospice care, focusing particularly on the experience of time as practiced. Through their two-year ethnographic study of a particular hospice organization that supports poor, terminally ill patients, whom carers refer to as guests, the authors show how temporal work sustains compassion by treating end-of-life as a time of agency – a liminal phase that emphasizes present actions over an inevitable future. Using a Heideggerian perspective, the authors elaborate how hospice practices are shaped by existential spatiality, being both with and by the guest. They demonstrate how encountering end-of-life reframes time in compassion practices, experienced as ‘kairos’ (sacred, connected moments) and ‘chronos’ (structured tasks that help restore caregivers’ capacity for compassion).

Chaudhry and Amis examine how individual-level sensebreaking – breakdowns in prevailing meanings and assumptions – in extreme contexts unfolds over time. Drawing on interviews with irregular migrants undertaking perilous journeys from Pakistan to Europe, the authors examine the temporal dimensions of the lived experiences of multiple extreme events in close proximity. They found that irregular migrants experience two temporal modes of sensebreaking: sensebreaking with the past and sensebreaking with the future. The authors explore how these temporal modes are initiated, fueled, and maintained through the ongoing disruptions migrants experienced during their journeys. Triggered by emotional and physical disruptions,

sensebreaking momentum appears to be driven by the mechanisms of derealization (breakdown in perception) and disorientation (extreme confusion) which create some temporal irregularities (time appropriation and time contortions) that influence the protracted sensebreaking process.

Extreme context scholars unsurprisingly have typically focused on stress or anxiety caused by extreme events. But, *emotions* have not necessarily played a major role particularly in the event perspective. Rather, emotions have been seen as a consequence triggered by an extreme event (Ogbonnaya et al., 2025). In contrast, in a situational context and practice perspectives, emotions are viewed as crucial to understanding how individuals and groups cope with extreme contexts. This allows extreme context scholars to explore emotions as social constructs that shape and, are shaped by, the understanding of the extreme.

Rauch and Ansari focus on the influential role silence plays in enabling medical professionals to deal with emotions arising from the extreme situational context of war. The authors explore how individuals cope with emotional distress in warzones, where they must mask their turmoil despite exposure to intense suffering. Based on an in-depth analysis of 53 personal diaries, non-participant observations, and interviews with Médecins Sans Frontières personnel, they elaborate on how medical professionals manage their emotions in extreme contexts. Using Goffman's (1959) concepts of frontstage and backstage, they reveal that silence acts as an emotional defence, chosen deliberately to maintain focus under pressure. Rather than indicating an absence of emotion, silence protects against emotional breakdowns, while journaling offers a private space for self-expression.

Lübcke, Steigenberger, Wilhelm and Maurer explore multimodal communication practices in the extreme context of maritime search and rescue missions. These tightly coupled and interactively complex situations characterized by cognitive disparities and emotional distractions necessitate that actors engage in collective sensemaking to coordinate their actions. Using video and archival data from a maritime rescue mission in the Aegean Sea, the authors explore how rescue crews and refugees, despite differing expertise and heightened emotions, coordinate actions for a successful evacuation. The authors propose a collective sensemaking model, showing how multimodal communication practices (verbal, para-verbal, and non-verbal cues) enable actors to manage heightened emotions and to share task-related information in unique ways. This model adds an emotive and bodily dimension to sensemaking theory and has practical implications for extreme work environments.

The exposure of victims, rescuers, and sometimes researchers to extreme contexts clearly involves intense physical experiences that underscore the key role of *embodiment* in extreme contexts. In an event perspective, the mind dominates the body and its performances are generally assessed as potential concrete coping resources. In a situational context and a practice perspective, mind and body are not separate as the body is viewed as inextricably intertwined with the studied practices (de Rond et al., 2019; de Rond and Lok, 2016; Hartmann and Meier, 2023). According to these perspectives, there is a need to pay attention to which kind of work the body is enacting in the process of organizing and strategizing in risky, emergency and disruptive environments and how the lived experience of the body or the embodiment shapes and is shaped by extreme settings.

Bharatan, Oborn and Swan explore how newcomers develop the bodily capacity to participate in high-risk situations (i.e., extreme situational contexts). The authors draw on ethnographic data (observations and interviews) gathered over seven months from novices working in the risky contexts of seafaring. Their findings reveal that newcomers to risky contexts encounter a range of threat experiences, which trigger novices' engagement in three types of body work: priming, battling, and enduring, from which they develop the capacity to participate. In addition to demonstrating the mutually constitutive relationship between body work and threat experiences and how body work is directed at the capacity to participate, the findings extend theory on embodied learning in extreme contexts by highlighting the temporal complexity of embodied learning as it is anchored in the body work and threat experiences.

Sele, Danner-Schröder and Mahringer acknowledge that existing research on routines in extreme contexts importantly has explored how bodily preparedness and readiness enables routine participants such as firefighters, SWAT teams, or health care workers to handle unexpected extreme events by sticking to their trained routines, or by performing routines flexibly. Yet, as they ask, what happens when for some reason or another it is no longer possible to perform or adjust an existing routine? Drawing on data gathered through an ethnographic study of a fine-dining restaurant during the early months of the Covid 19 pandemic the authors investigate how the lived body matters in the re-creation of routines. Specifically, the findings show how the connections between actors and actions were re-established through the lived body. Two practices – embodied imagining and embodied protecting – were crucial to routine recreation/ the ability to perform essential organizational routines in an integrated and collective way.

WHERE TO NEXT?

The exponential increase in attention to extreme contexts, both in practice and theory, suggests that extreme contexts research is not only a compelling but also a distinctive domain for organizational scholars seeking to understand, explain, and ultimately contribute to the body of knowledge of critical and sometimes unusual contexts in management and organization studies. The increase in interest also suggests that extreme context research has something to offer not only to such settings, but to management and organization theorizing more generally. To these ends, each of the articles included here offers suggestions for future research related to the theories and themes the authors have explored (temporality, emotions and embodiment), and we encourage readers to consider these varied and important insights. Yet, we also think it is important to reiterate to researchers currently or potentially interested in extreme contexts research that much work remains to be done. Several avenues stand out.

First, this special issue call for papers invited scholarship on processes of organizing and strategizing highlighting, in particular, themes of temporality, embodiment, and materiality. Temporality, embodiment, and emotions were foregrounded, but, unexpectedly, few papers dealt specifically with materiality. Yet, when we take a closer look at the research included here, various elements of materiality seem to be in play (see e.g., Bharatan et al., 2025; Del

Rio et al., 2025 and Sele et al., 2025). Studies foregrounding materiality, perhaps linking it with embodiment as well as temporality as other scholars have done (e.g., de Rond, 2017; Hernes et al., 2021), are needed to shed light on the interconnectedness of these matters and underlying complexity of organizing and strategizing in extreme contexts. In extreme contexts, technical systems, procedures, tools and artefacts play a crucial role as Weick (1996) demonstrated years ago with the famous ‘drop your tools’ allegory. Future research that foregrounds the ever-present aspect of materiality could, for example, fruitfully explore the role of safety devices in reducing risks, the role of artificial intelligence in anticipating risks (i.e., forecasts), and the modelling of crises scenarios, to name just a few. Moreover, a socio-materiality lens can also help extreme context researchers to better take into account both the agentic role that the natural environment (e.g., fires, flooding, or volcanic eruption) plays in disruptive contexts as well as the different interpretations and actions around such catastrophic natural events.

Second, the articles included here naturally direct attention towards understanding various phenomena as they exist or unfold in actual extreme events or contexts. What is largely missing from the extreme context literature, but which some work in this special issue has started to explore (see e.g., Bharatan et al., 2025; Del Rio et al., 2025; Rauch and Ansari, 2025; Skade et al., 2025) are the relational dynamics of the ongoing construction of the extreme and the everyday in these settings. Building on the extreme as practice perspective elaborated earlier, future studies could explore the processes and practices that construct a potential or actual event as extreme, how this changes over time (normalization) and how the ‘everyday’ is practiced within the extreme. The practices that constitute everyday life have implications for anything from noticing small disruptions in time (or too late) to the practical drift of rules or the ability to cope with emotionally demanding conditions. By exploring the dynamics of the everyday life, we, therefore, gain additional perspectives (e.g., phenomenology, dramaturgical analysis, and multimodal communication) on what constitute practices in extreme contexts beyond acute activities.

This would also provide a deeper understanding of how temporality and emotions matter. Connecting extreme context research with latest thinking on time and temporality, particularly the idea of diachronicity and temporal complexity (Blagoev, 2024), would help better understand how different crises trajectories overlap, amplify or lessen each other, allowing exploration of phenomena such as poly-crises and other more wicked developments. Based on our conceptualization of extreme contexts as contested knowledge, we propose that an ‘extreme as practice’ lens would be particularly promising to uncover the construction of extreme and everyday dynamics since they are often taken for granted and hidden in plain sight. This, we see, carries promises for future management and organization studies theorizing as it moves beyond the notion of the extreme and ventures into more common behaviours – such as boredom and power.

Third, perhaps it isn’t surprising that emotions appear as prominent themes throughout this special issue and provide new insights on what matters researchers might pursue next. Three examples stand out from the various papers included here: exploring the temporal dynamics of emotions (Del Rio et al., 2025); developing a better understanding of how emotional and physical disruptions affect individual and collective sensemaking (Chaudhry and Amis, 2025; Lübcke et al., 2025); and deepening our knowledge of how emotional complexity and regulation shape the multiple facets of individual and collective

coping strategies when intervening in extreme contexts (Rauch and Ansari, 2025). Relatedly, we also need to know more about the challenges of experiencing and/or dealing with the ‘body work’ in emergency and disruptive contexts (Bharatan et al., 2025; Sele et al., 2025). Exploring bodily sensations, affects, and capacities certainly constitutes a fruitful avenue for advancing our knowledge of central topics in extreme contexts research such as coordination, routines, sensemaking, resilience, to name a few.

Fourth, in our review of the extreme context literature from 2016 until July 2024, we noted a shift from emergency and risky settings towards disruptive contexts (see also e.g., Chaudhry and Amis, 2025; Lübcke et al., 2025; Sele et al., 2025). This represents a move from prepared organizations to unprepared organizations or unprepared aspects of society dealing with significant disruptions. Considering the challenges that we are recently or currently experiencing, such as pandemics, climate change, political politization and war mongering, this turn is important and promising for highlighting critical contemporary issues. However, research on extreme contexts has more to offer. Much attention is devoted to how life is disrupted by, for example, bushfires, war or pandemics, but what happens before? An important avenue for future research includes, for instance, how ordinary citizens participate or are excluded from the formal and informal process of constructing the extreme before, during and after a disrupted situation. We need to start focusing on how individuals and communities prepare for potential challenges and their consequences as part of living their lives, and how this impact their ability to cope with disruption. Here we see that either of the three perspectives on extreme would offer different, but valuable, insights for society and management and organization scholarship more generally.

Fifth, although the original submissions to this special issue included greater methodological variety relative to the papers that were ultimately accepted, we propose that extreme contexts research would benefit from such variety. A greater variety could, for instance, allow for different insights and the identification of broader patterns across populations during acute situations and beyond. In particular, methodological innovations, with maintained scholarly rigour, could potentially help to advance management and organization studies scholarship, and extreme contexts research, alike. For instance, for ethical, safety or security reasons extreme contexts may be inaccessible to most (see Lübcke et al. (2025) for a reflection on ethics). Social media could be one way to access disaster zones or war zones without putting researchers or informants in harm’s way; fiction could be used to reflect upon an unknown future; court reports could be used to access the inner workings of criminal networks.

It is, however, important to note that ethical reflections play a crucial role in extreme context research. We have a responsibility as scholars to not expose us or the participants of our research to unnecessary risks and we need to be aware that institutional pressures to ‘go for the extreme’ to collect ‘interesting data sets’ may be particularly problematic. Moreover, we do not see a value in seeking increasingly extreme phenomena for the sake of extremeness. The choice of the empirical contexts should, always, be informed by the research questions, respect for the researcher, as well as informants. Thus, we encourage extreme context researchers to reflect upon these ethical decisions (Chaudhry and Amis, 2025).

Sixth, regardless of where researchers head next, we propose that the greatest challenge facing extreme contexts research presently is to continue contributing to a body of contested knowledge nurturing fruitful debates and conversations. We need to be mindful about the theoretical and methodological choices that are made as well as the balance of rigour and relevance (i.e., considering the possible consequences not only on management and organization studies theorizing but also practice). Indeed, given the development of the vibrant extreme context research community and that the extreme is becoming more of the everyday, there is a need to be inclusive and appreciate different theoretical as well as methodological alternatives.

Finally, as Grint (2022) argues, we currently live in a time of great uncertainty and unpredictability. This special issue is dominated by papers focusing on specific issues and contexts, which is very important to understand particular phenomena. However, extreme events are becoming increasingly interconnected, creating a situation of poly-crises. To successfully cope with such dynamics where organizations may, for instance, experience fatigue or a lack of resources, we encourage extreme contexts researchers to pay more attention to the future and the ways in which society, organizations, and individuals can cope with poly-crises and other complex situations.

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NOTE

- [1] In parallel, a website (www.organizingextremecontexts.org), a virtual seminar series, a YouTube channel (<http://www.youtube.com/@extremecontexts4105>) and more recently a newsletter were supporting the community building efforts. Nowadays, scholars identifying with the community have started a LinkedIn-group (<https://www.linkedin.com/groups/14245317/>) and initiated mentoring activities and publication workshops..

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