**No time for Rest: An Exploration of Sleep and Social Harm amongst Migrant Workers in the North East Night-time Economy (NTE)**

**Abstract**

This article explores the problem of sleep deprivation amongst migrant workers in North East England’s night-time economy (NTE). After first outlining some of the physical and psychological effects of sleep loss, the narrative then focuses on primary accounts drawn from unstructured interviews (n=16) and short *vignettes* with migrant workers. The article uses a framework grounded in social harm to explicate the declining recognition afforded to sleep and recuperation among night workers, constructing this as a socially corrosive outcome of neoliberal economic relations and the cultural injunctions that accompany it. The forfeiture of sleep among workers can also form an important point of departure for exploring a nexus of harms that suffuse the nocturnal service industry for low-paid migrant workers. These can have far-reaching consequences for well-being, as they expose the fraying of labour relations in the NTE and act as an affront to the possibility of human flourishing.

**Introduction**

Sleep should matter to criminology. It is universally accepted that crime is a long-standing societal concern with wide ranging costs to us all – time spent off work, rising insurance premiums, home security solutions and other crime prevention measures. But what of the consequences of sleep loss for society?

Apart from our engagement with the language of sleep as a rhetorical device: ‘the sleep of reason’, ‘society is sleepwalking its way towards a surveillance state’ and so on, we rarely consider its importance within the criminological sphere. Perhaps in this way criminology risks becoming detached from the everyday realities of practice and lived experience, particularly across the contemporary labour market. Police officers fight against the drudgery of endless and challenging shifts, accident and emergency staff struggle with the nightly outcomes of interpersonal violence and drug use, and the highly charged, sleepless atmosphere of the young offenders’ institution tests the endurance of those tasked with the night shift. Sleep has become the rarest of commodities as labour demands continue to encroach on all modes of human action and cement themselves as the overarching force in our lives.

In the same way that the ‘machinery of boredom’ has been presented as an analytically overlooked theme that can offer insights into criminality and the study of modern criminology itself (Ferrell 2014), the neglected issue of sleep has much to reveal about labour relations and the harms they can exert on the exhausted worker. In academia and other sections of the professional classes, concerns around the burning of the midnight oil continue to persist. These nocturnal rituals have become bound up with the cultural imperatives that signal success, career opportunity, and individual prestige. Clearly, the material conditions faced by many low paid workers separate them from the privilege and renumeration awarded to those in the upper echelons of our public and private institutions. Nevertheless, sleep deprivation exists as a debilitating force that weaves its way through the entire occupational hierarchy. Perhaps we all know this as a tacit aspect of working life. However, such an acknowledgment should not act as a reason to disregard sleep as an active focus of critical criminological inquiry.

This article will begin by providing an overview of the political and economic landscape from which the post-industrial night-time leisure scene emerged. This is followed by a brief summary of the impact of sleep deprivation on health among shift workers. We then turn to an examination of primary narratives collected from respondents in North East England’s NTE, as part of a doctoral research project conducted between 2016 and 2020. The discussion employs a combination of interpretive tools from ultra-realist theory (Hall and Winlow 2015) and the wider gamut of social harm, as it seeks to make sense of workers’ experiences and their implications for contemporary labour relations. A social harm perspective allows us to ask how the imposition of sleep deprivation can negatively impact workers’ wider experiences of lived time, opportunity, security, family, and quality of life. As Pemberton (2015) notes, capitalism’s demand for long working hours compromises our ability to spend time on meaningful social relationships and caring for our mental and physical health, effectively depriving us of the potential to lead a more purposeful and fulfilling life. This article therefore takes a pluralistic position in treating sleep as an important point of departure for the discussion of a host of problems encountered by workers in the night-time economy, many of which emanate from workers’ attitudes towards rest and recuperation, and the importance that they ascribe to it.

**The Emergence of the Night-time Economy**

The 25-years following the end of the World War II saw a period of relative economic stability across the West. Successive governments sought to commit to the benefits of full employment, social welfare, and the regulation of market forces (Palley 2004; Harvey 2005). However, the global economic downturn of the mid 1970’s advanced an increasing discontent with the social democratic consensus of previous decades, culminating in an ideological shift and a reversal in the flow of capital. Neoliberalism became the dominant economic configuration on both sides of the Atlantic, with its proponents Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan espousing the virtues of global free trade and entrepreneurial freedom (Harvey 2005). A rapid process of deindustrialization ensued across the West, as production and manufacturing transitioned to the East and Southern Asia, where goods could be made far more cheaply. This exodus of capital left many parts of the former industrial heartland economically deprived and heavily dependent on an emerging service-economy (Lloyd 2018). The material consequences of this shift have been deeply problematic, particularly in many parts of North East England (Telford and Lloyd 2020) where increasing unemployment, job insecurity and the casualization of labour have become permanent features of regional decline (MacDonald and Marsh 2005; Shildrick 2012).

As post-industrial economic restructuring reached its zenith, local government authorities began to court the interests of entertainment and leisure entrepreneurship in an effort to breath new life into their struggling town centres. Local councils applied newly established powers under the Licensing Act (2003) to extend the opening hours of drinking venues, allowing a host of corporate entities to commodify the urban night as a space of pleasure seeking and indulgence (Chatterton and Hollands 2003). Rather than reinvigorating these locales however, this corporate insurgence has served to homogenise the night-time leisure market with a dominant portfolio of brands which place alcohol at the centre of a drive for short term profit making. The remoulding of these nocturnal environments has ushered in a range of social problems, not least for those who work within the NTE, as they face alcohol fuelled violence, social isolation, racism, and many other challenges (Burnett 2011; Norman 2011). The restorative resources of sleep have also suffered under this shift to a highly competitive consumer market, as ‘there has ceased to be any internal necessity for having rest and recuperation as components of economic growth and profitability’ (Crary 2014: 14).

**The Perils of Sleep Deprivation**

Sleep is a fundamental necessity for human life and a regular requirement for sustaining healthy levels of mental and physical functioning (Anderson and Tufik 2015). Even short periods of sleep loss can lead to a catalogue of negative effects including impaired breathing (Cooper and Phillips 1985), reduced core body temperature (Vaara et al 2009), disrupted glucose metabolism and a weakening in the function of the immune system (Martin 2002). Furthermore, physiological research on the health of shift-workers has indicated the presence of multiple long-term problems. For example, individuals who worked shifts for eleven years or longer have been found to be more than twice as likely to develop heart disease (Knutsson et al 1989). Several US studies also related that women who work night shifts over several years were 60% more likely to develop breast cancer (Davis et al 2001; Schernhammer et al 2001). We must be cautious in positing a direct causal relationship between long-term sleep deprivation through shift work and chronic health problems, as other factors might influence these outcomes. For instance, shift workers have been found to be more likely to smoke cigarettes (van Amelsvoort et al. 2004) and drink alcohol to excess (Dorrian et al 2017). Nevertheless, it is clear from these studies that some alarming associations exist between shift work, sleep deprivation and negative health outcomes.

Given the seriousness of the effects of sleep disruption on workers’ lives, it is curious that research seems be largely confined to the neurocognitive and physiological effects on the individual, gaining very little traction within work-life balance debates and sociology (Chatzitheochari and Arber 2009). The few studies in criminology that allude to the topic are limited to investigating a relationship between sleep deprivation, delinquency and poor self-control (see Meldrum, Barnes and Hay 2015; Clinkinbeard et al 2011; Kamphius et al 2012). Approaches to sleep loss that tend to valorise individualistic explanations risk detaching the problem from its socio-structural origins and overlooking its significance to labour relationships under 21st century capitalism. In exploring the relationship between sleep deprivation and mortality, Grandner et al (2010; 2017) introduced a *social-ecological* framework to describe how sleep can be mediated by factors such as globalisation and technology. Within this framework, sleep acts as a fulcrum between societal-individual influences and adverse health outcomes. Grandner et al’s (2010) model provides a helpful foundation in identifying some of the central issues at play. However, we must also seek to explore how workers’ relationships with sleep and recuperation are bound up with the political economy of urban nightlife and the reshaping of nocturnal spaces for corporate power and profit making, as discussed earlier (see Chatterton and Hollands 2003).

The past half century has seen an epochal shift away from the immemorial boundaries of night and day, light and darkness and a relatively stable collective circadian cycle[[1]](#footnote-1) that has been integrated into human routines for thousands of years. The shift towards a 24/7 service economy has ushered in a ‘cancellation of the periodicity that shaped the life of most cultures for several millennia’ (Crary 2014: 30). The psychosocial outcomes of these tectonic changes cannot be fully comprehended but as the physiological literature attests to, we are already beginning to see the scale of the damage that sleep deprivation is visiting on workers in the service industry. Having considered the importance of exploring sleep deprivation in the NTE, we will now go on to examine the methods that were employed in the data gathering process.

**Methodology**

The methodological approach in this study used a selection of critical ethnographic techniques to dig down beneath the empirical coalface and explore the underlying influences that shape migrant workers’ routines and experiences. Ethnographic research allows us to articulate credible connections between the subjective experiences reported by shift workers and their social structural origins (Rees and Gatenby 2014).

Empirical research was gathered as part of a funded doctoral research project, with fieldwork taking place across three urban locations in North East England over twelve months, starting in summer 2018. As a harm-based study of migrant workers in the NTE, the project examined the many ways in which violence manifests in the nocturnal service industry (see also Winlow and Hall 2006). Violence can be far reaching and complex, driven subjectively by consumers and workers, but also systemically through the structures of the post-industrial market economy (see Žižek 2007). The project also explored some of the wider issues that can be situated within the purview of social harm, one of which was the relationship that night workers maintain with sleep.

Detailed unstructured interviews (n=16) were conducted with migrant shift workers from a range of occupations in North East England’s NTE. Respondents included fast-food take away workers, security staff and taxi drivers. Access to respondents was achieved through social networks as well as contact with various gatekeepers across several multi-ethic communities in the region. This method of recruitment has been deployed locally in the past and has been proven as an effective means of contacting respondents to seek their engagement in social research (see for example Lloyd et al 2020). The ethnicity of respondents was fairly diverse and reflected the multi-ethic demographic make-up of the area. The sample included Pakistani and Bangladeshi workers as well as more recent arrivals from EU countries such as Poland and Romania.

A secondary ethnographically informed approach was also employed in the form of shorter informal opportunistic encounters with migrant workers, often in the course of their shifts. This latter approach resulted in a series of *vignettes* or short summaries (n=35) which served to augment the data collected in the primary interview phase.

The project gained ethical approval from the host institution with the anonymisation of all respondent’s names and locations. From the interview and vignette data, a series of themes was identified through a process of coding and thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006). These themes were then subjected to a detailed contextual examination that sought to link the subjective narratives of workers to the socio-economic and cultural drivers that have come to influence their lifeworld.

**A Harm-based Approach**

A social harm approach (see Pemberton 2015; Boukli and Kotzé 2018) provides us with a range of useful instruments with which to examine the many regular, and often perfectly legal practices that have become normalised under neoliberalism and are now embedded into the structure of our contemporary labour markets (Davies 2018; Scott 2017). In this way, the approach can facilitate the expansion of criminology’s analytical reach well beyond the scope of criminal wrongdoing and the administration of justice (Hillyard et al 2004).

Despite constructive attempts to define social harm (see for example, Hillyard and Tombs 2007; Yar 2012), a lack of consensus around the parameters needed to adequately capture a useful definition continues to persist. The difficulty in reaching such a consensus is suggestive of a deeper set of dilemmas about the type of society that we should be striving for. It has become clear that many of society’s ills rest upon the token provision of negative rights and a view of freedom that sees the sovereign individual in an aggressive pursuit of their personal interests and desires, often at the other’s expense. It is this mainstay of liberal individualism, coupled with postmodernism’s scepticism towards any authoritative framework of ethical values that has left us at something of an impasse (Raymen 2019). Nevertheless, as Raymen (2019) suggests, the notion of ‘human flourishing’ may well provide a central pillar around which a renewed system of ethics and values might be structured. Human flourishing - shorn of the encumberments that advanced capitalism incurs on wellbeing and security - can allow us to lead fuller lives, realise our potential and forge stronger social relationships (Pemberton 2015). Such a vison allows us to form ‘a guiding reference point for social harm to transcend postmodern liberal individualism’s culture of emotivism’ and move towards a collective conception of ‘the good’ (Raymen 2019: 148). If we are serious about gaining insights into the promise that this shift might offer us in our search for a good life in a revitalized society (MacIntrye 2011), then it is crucial that we seek out an understanding of the barriers that impede its realisation. It is this ontological position that offers true potential for a multidisciplinary harm-based approach.

Turning to the study of social harm in the service industry specifically, research conducted in recent years (see for example Anderson and Anderson 2000; Pollert and Charlwood 2009; Burnett and Whyte 2010; Lloyd 2018; Lloyd 2019) employed various elements of a harm approach to expose many of the *everyday* problems that can negatively impact low-paid workers’ well-being and quality of life. These include (but are not limited to) bullying, unfair competition, discrimination, social atomisation, and economic insecurity. Through a combination of immigration controls, restricted employment opportunities and a continuous demand for cheap labour, it has become clear that some migrant groups have become particularly vulnerable to the precarious nature of work at the base of the UK service industry (Fudge 2012; Anderson 2010; Anderson and Ruhs 2010). There are clear variations in the economic positioning of these migrant groups, with workers born in India and EU-14 countries holding the higher paid and more highly skilled positions. However, regardless of their country of origin, foreign born workers are more likely to work in non-permanent, shift-based jobs than UK workers, with many of these roles involving night work and the commitments of 24-hour service economy (Fernández-Reino and Rienzo 2021). The disproportionate nature of insecure migrant labour in the service industry has created an urgent need to catalogue the harms that this predicament has invoked, placing these harms within the wider context of free market competition and the cultural imperatives that have accompanied it.

A crucial aspect of adopting a harm-based approach is that it allows us to consider the issue of *absence*. An under-recognised driver of harm across post-industrial Western societies, absence has become a powerful function of market logic, stripping away the insulators that protect workers from social and economic peril. The absence of political and union representation, labour and shift regulation, reciprocal recognition between employer and employee, welfare support and other layers of protection, has left many workers in today’s service industry facing a range of harmful outcomes (see Lloyd 2018).

As will become clear later, the social harm approach deployed in this article also incorporates several conceptual tools borrowed from ultra-realist theory (Hall and Winlow 2015) and its underlying transcendental materialist ontology (see Johnston 2008). These concepts afford us a novel perspective for exploring the waning recognition of sleep as a central feature of the nocturnal service economy. Having summarised the methodological and theoretical frameworks chosen in relation to this research, we will now turn to a detailed examination of the primary data narratives.

**Permanent Alert**

A central and persistent theme that emerged from discussions and interviews with respondents was the need and willingness to be ‘switched on’ for much, or all of the time, even during periods where rest would clearly be advantageous and a welcome respite from the brutality of permanent night work.

One respondent, Benjy, a 50-year-old Greek-Cypriot owner of a pizza and kebab take-away shop that is open until 2am, looked shattered and aged beyond his years. He remarks:

*“even on my night off, the phone is ringing all the time! problems with machinery, problems with customers, suppliers, problems with drivers…sometimes I just drop everything and come in or the orders won’t get done…home is just where I sleep, this (the take-away shop) is my home!”*

Benjy spoke of a series of pressures including relentless competition between food vendors in the locale (there are six take-aways on the high street) and highly transient staff, that occupy much of his time. His home - rather than representing a site of family life (Benjy has a wife and daughter), belongingness and security - is relegated to a place where he sleeps when he can and nothing more. His take-away business has become a surrogate home and a place of stress, pressure, and dissatisfaction:

*“this work, it just sucks you in and at the moment it’s all I have going. My daughter is at that age and I want to treat her, get her the decent stuff that her friends have got or take Marie (his wife) away for the weekend but how can I? I can’t even leave the place for more than a night!”*

Benjy’s experiences seem typical of the realities of life in the nocturnal service industry and point to the erosion of temporal autonomy or the freedom to manage at least some elements of subjective time. Periods that might have been spent with family and friends have now been all but banished under the pressures of a move towards 24/7 market activity for shift-workers. Benjy resigns himself to the constant pressure of staving off debt but the sacrifices he makes around sleep and rest reap little in the way of economic reward. He described the profit from his take-away business as having become so meagre that he has been going to the job centre seeking part-time work to supplement his income. Workers can also be thrust into unprecedented situations that all but destroy work-life balance, the importance of which has long since been replaced by the hyper-competitive ethos that now dominates post-industrial commercial spaces.

Shazad, a 28-year-old Pakistani security business owner also reflected on his life on full alert:

*“I am on it basically 24/7, I can get calls at half past midnight - someone rings in and says they cannot be there, I need to change the whole rota with no notice so I need to go in and sort it out…I’ll get probably five hours (sleep) a night”*

Sometimes during live music and dance festivals for which he also provides security services, Shazad spoke of doing 18-hour shifts followed by one day of rest and then back to the local security scene. I ask him whether he worries about becoming burnt out:

*“I’m young mate, gonna do the whole family and kids thing one day but that’s way off yet, the work comes first for now”*

Here, we see not only Shazad’s obligation to defer rest and sleep in favour of commercial opportunities but also the disassembling of established paths of family life, in favour of the pursuit of individual success. Presented in a way reminiscent of the ‘bucket list’ or something to be ticked off, the ‘doing’ of the ‘family and kids thing’ is given little thought in the present and demoted only to a future possibility. The pressures of working culture under neoliberalism have forced long-standing conceptions of adulthood and domestic life into retreat. As Smith (2014: 30) notes, the ‘needs of capital long ago seeped over traditional demarcations and began to pollute elements of social life that were previously free from its influence’. This has clear implications for shift workers and their relationship with sleep and rest. Labour markets are now invested in suspending the traditional trajectories of adulthood and family life, specifically because they have become incongruous to market needs and a sluggish impairment in the streamlined just-in-time environment (see Odih 2003) of a 24/7 service-economy.

Abbas, an Indian restaurant worker and delivery driver who has a wife and young child tended to support the notion of disappearing temporal freedoms. When asked about how often he gets to spend good quality time with his wife and son, he replied:

*‘spend time with them? I don’t have the chance to even think about them most times. When I get home early morning, all I want to do is sleep! So it will only be a hour or so in the afternoon (seeing his family), then back to work again, around and around like that’*

Not only are the commitments of work placing severe temporal constraints on Abbas’ ability to see his family, but they are also disrupting his capacity to consider them in his own thoughts. One form of disempowerment within 24/7 labour environments is the ‘incapacitation of daydream or absent-minded introspection that would otherwise occur in intervals of slow or vacant time’ (Crary 2014: 88). Daydreaming, as a source of experience allows us to travel away from our current place/situation to a more positive or aspirational mental destination, forming a ‘potential foil if not resistance to systems of routinisation, rationalisation, coercion or control’ (Williams 2011: 85). However, opportunities for reverie, looking forward to future plans or anything outside of the confines of the immediate present have become increasingly scarce, the wider effect of which is the uncoupling of emotion and sensibility from the machinic worker. If anything, emotionality (like sleep and rest) has become another barrier to productivity under a 24/7 market philosophy and something that should be minimised.

Shazad’s absence of trust towards his co-workers also perpetuate a need to remain in full control and ready to act at a moment’s notice:

*“yeah I could get someone to step in now and again and just chill but if I go in and sort it, I know no one’s going to fuck up and end up costing me a job or whatever”*

Shazad acknowledges here that he has some latitude over whether to bring other staff in to help relieve some of the pressure on him, but he reasons that their performance cannot always be relied upon relative to his own efficiency. In identifying the threat of economic risk to himself and his business, Shazad is not prepared to place any responsibility for his economic prosperity into someone else’s hands. Not only do these behaviours reflect a subjective hardening under 24/7 economic arrangements, but they also see the post-social subject (see Winlow and Hall 2013) as an arbiter of risk. This example provides us with an insight into how the micromanagement of risk has come to dictate our relationships with fellow workers, foregrounded in a corporate logic that erodes the social bonds of trust and reliance on the Other as a means of support and relief.

The constant need to be in some state of readiness reported amongst migrant workers in the NTE also has significant parallels with automation and technology under advanced capitalism. Crary notes the prevalence of the machinic designation of ‘sleep mode’ where:

‘The notion of an apparatus in a state of low-power readiness remakes the larger sense of sleep into simply a deferred or diminished condition of operationality and access…there is never an actual state of rest’ (Crary 2014: 13).

In a service industry where workers are increasingly compelled to perform like electronic devices and where the market sees little qualitative difference between human and machinic labour, sleep continues to retire from the picture. Benjy and Shazad’s accounts of the NTE demonstrate that they seem permanently in some state of alertness, in the event that their services are needed or an opportunity for instrumental advantage arises. This is not a state of true rest but one more akin to Crary’s ‘low power readiness’. However, any notion that workers need significant uninterrupted periods of sleep is met with derision under neoliberal labour relations. For the workers in today’s service industry, sleep is for the non-committed and anathema to progress and success. It is seen as a millstone around the neck of the service industry worker, a thief of time that could be spent forging economic connections or new occupational identities. Remaining with the concept of time and its uses, we will now examine how shift work has affected a deregulation of mind and body. This has come to represent a core yet problematic feature of the labour experience in the NTE.

**Mind and Body: A Battleground**

In the 21st century service economy, workers are increasingly ceding to demands that they sacrifice their physical and mental well-being for the good of the market and individual wealth accumulation, to the extent that they have become *deregulated*:

‘The deregulated body is one that goes without enough sleep, rest, proper food – taking prescribed drugs to silence its chronic illnesses...’ (Brennan 2003: 22)

Since the process of deregulation has formed a key feature of government policy under neoliberalism and has long been an accepted form of ‘good governance’ (Leitner et al 2007), it comes as no surprise that labour markets are experiencing a similar psychosocial deregulation of their workers’ core subjectivities. We see a widening chasm between mind and body across the NTE as workers become increasingly exposed to deregulatory forces, leading to chronic sleep loss as well as the dietary and sustenance issues that Brennan alludes to. For nocturnal workers, this is often due to the lack of quality food available during the night. Deepal, a Bangladeshi taxi driver who looked to be in his early thirties quipped:

*“there’s no wonder so many taxi drivers are fat bastards! most nights it’ll just be chips or McDonalds, wherever’s open”.*

Karim, a 43-year-old Pakistani hack[[2]](#footnote-2) echoes these sentiments:

*“it might just be a sausage roll and crisps or McDonalds, sometimes nothing…I use the all-night garage, use the toilets, get a coffee and a pasty, it’s the only place really, at three in the morning.”*

Deregulatory forces also manifest themselves through a ritualistic commitment to other activities that contribute to the harmful diminution of sleep and rest. For instance, several respondents commented on their gym and exercise regimes impinging significantly onto time that could be spend resting or sleeping during the day. Shazad told me:

*“I’ll do the gym four, five days a week so I need to work that in as well. Need to stay in shape in this game so it just never stops (laughs)”*

Implicit in this response is that Shazad self-brokers a need to retain his imposing physique against the time spent recuperating from the brutality of night work. Kotze and Antonopoulos (2019) reported on the growing importance of bodily capital that has accompanied deindustrialization and the shift to a consumer-oriented service economy. Shazad sees his intensive workout regime as an instrumental part of maintaining his position within the security sector as he puts his physique to use as a form of capital that can be exchanged, much like other commodities in the NTE. Ellis (2015) expands on this point by noting that the instrumentality of brute strength and physical prowess have shifted in the move away from their traditional role in supporting manual labour under industrial capitalism. He goes on to state that violent potential now represents a form of cultural capital that ‘when fused with entrepreneurial acumen, creates masculinities suited to a highly competitive globalised marketplace’ (Ellis 2015: 31; also see Winlow 2001). There is also an expressive dimension at work here in that Shazad’s sacrifice of sleep and rest in favour of gym time forms part of his persona of hyper-masculinity, fitting perfectly alongside his favoured designer brands and jewellery, completing his image as the ‘postmodern stylish hard man’ (Kotze and Antonopoulos 2019: 4). A photo of Shazad on his social media profile standing in a doorway of a club wearing a Burberry waistcoat and designer sunglasses captures the projection of this identity.

**Sleep and Absence**

The psychosocial costs of the battle between body and mind in the NTE provide an important narrative in the ongoing debate around social harm. Here, we see the parasuicidal subject (see Smith and Raymen 2016) who is ready to inflict harm on themselves, with the devaluation of rest and sleep in favour of market-driven imperatives and their own financial survival. The readiness of respondents to shelve concerns around long-term health denotes the replacement of bodily self-preservation with one of economic self-preservation, amounting to an extreme variant of chronic self-harm.

Sri Lankan mini market owner Pamu, reported his descent into confusion and virtual delirium after his family returned to Sri Lanka to support relatives in the wake of severe flooding in 2017, leaving him to run his shop alone.

*“It was very bad, I try to work 6am till 10pm every day and handling deliveries, stock take and paperwork. I finish one night, go home and couldn’t remember if I had locked up, although I know I had. Came back down here to check. Also kept thinking the till was down (in money) even though I was the only one who was here all day… Just hell.”*

Pamu’s experiences suggest that absence can be cumulative in perpetuating social harm. Not only is he faced with an absence of protections to support him while his family is away (he cannot afford to employ more staff) but he also endures the absence of sleep, in an effort to plug the gaps that the other absences have exposed in his working life. Sleep and rest form part of a host of harm-bearing absences that litter the service economy. In addition to the ‘absence of stability, an ethical responsibility for the other, and protection’, the absence of recuperation can also be seen to be an integral part of this set of ‘problematic conditions and experiences that demonstrate the impact of neoliberal ideology and market capitalism.’ (Lloyd 2018: 145). These absences are also linked to the abdication of responsibility on the part of the employer or manager, who strips sleep of its importance relative to performance and efficiency. Instead, the responsibility for managing recuperation is passed onto the individual worker.

The absence of employers’ concerns over their workers punishing schedules effectively means that if mistakes are made, or the worker is not performing to expectations because they are becoming burnt out, it is their own fault, and they should expect to be censured for such transgressions. This argument highlights sleep as an example of a dual negation in the positive motivation to harm (see Lloyd 2018). Not only are employers ready to relegate the importance of sleep to a minor footnote in the disappearing list of obligations to their workers, parasuicidal workers themselves accept the absence of rest as a vital prerequisite for their economic survival. In both ways, the market reigns supreme, encouraging these positive motivations to act, despite the paradoxical notion that the sleep deprived can be ‘less productive, less motivated, less creative’ and ‘more emotionally volatile and rash in their choices and decision-making’ (Walker 2018: 301).

**Time and Rest: Gendered Commodities?**

Elena, a 36-year -old Romanian PHV[[3]](#footnote-3) driver who has since left the industry, noted her anxiety about taking even the shortest periods of sleep in public places, whilst waiting for jobs to come through:

*“I know some other drivers that get a bit of sleep on their shift in car parks or wherever, but I just didn’t feel safe with this, you don’t know who is hanging around”*

Already worried about her personal security, Elena also felt the need to stave off rest, due to her concerns about the potential for attack whilst she was working alone at night. Kern (2020: 124) discusses fear and the ways in which it can restrict women’s use of urban spaces, limiting their ‘choices around work and other economic opportunities’ and leaving them dependent on men as protectors. Problems also continued for Elena on completion of her shift, as she struggled to find time to rest whilst looking after her young daughter:

*“God it was chaos when Julia (her daughter) came over, it would be looking after her during the day, couple of hours sleep after Daniel (her husband and also a PHV driver) got home then I would go and work from about 8pm to 4 or 5 in the morning depending….”.*

Elena commented on her preference to look after her daughter during the day saying: "Romanian men are not the same as British men with parenting” ", indicating that they are not as invested as caregivers. Although Elena was making the choice to work night shifts to be with her daughter at home during the day whist Daniel worked his shift, this was still a difficult predicament for her as she attempts to broker a balance between work, sleep and family life.

There is a clear gendered dimension to Elena’s account in that the unpaid workload or second shift (Hochschild 1997) involved in childcare imposes an even greater risk of burnout for working mothers. Since she does not have the money needed to pay for babysitters every day, she must try to manage this time-squeeze as she works an invisible day shift in addition to her commitments in the NTE. This impediment leaves Elena no time at all for other pursuits as she attempts to negotiate the dual spheres of parenthood and night work. As Wattis and James (2013: 265) point out:

‘neoliberal imperatives, which emphasize the individualized ‘adult-worker’ (Lewis et al., 2008b), mean that women with children or other caring responsibilities are drawn into a deregulated labour market where the model of ‘the worker’ in many sectors remains masculine, in the sense of being ‘unencumbered’ (Crompton et al., 2003).’

The modest sample in this paper suggests that the above analysis bears some weight amongst migrant workers in the North East NTE. Male workers (who made up almost the entire sample) were virtually silent on the issue of balancing domestic commitments with night work. References to domestic life amongst the male respondents were usually limited to not being able to spend time with partners/children, rather than dual caring responsibilities and the pressures that come with it. This is not to suggest that male workers in the NTE have no such responsibilities but research into the dimensions of paid work and domestic care suggest that most of the duties in balancing these competing pressures fall to women (Wattis and James 2013).

Kamenou (2008) also points out that there are significant cultural variations in the work-life balance with some mothers from ethnic minority backgrounds ceding to additional community or cultural demands. She argues that this research area needs unpacking further to better understand the diversity between these groups and avoid essentializing their experiences.

**Deaptation and Change**

As a source of personal fulfilment and reward, work has the capacity for bringing us closer to the notion of ‘human flourishing’. However, labour done for its own sake and at the exclusion of allowing us ways to seek contentment does not have the capacity to achieve this aim. An Aristotelian view sees the purpose of labour as providing us with the means by which we can go on to fulfil higher objectives, such as the forging of strong relationships with others and time to spend on projects that deliver a collective sense of purpose. It is these pursuits that embody the potential for building better societies and an objective vision of the good life (Arendt 1998). The narratives described in this paper suggest that for some, work has become nothing more than a bare means of basic sustenance under increasingly difficult material conditions. It does not provide workers with the necessary resources to pursue other aspects of their lives that might bring them some sense of happiness or relief. Instead, the pressures of the contemporary service industry have left them burnt out and exposed to a host of chronic health issues, of which sleep deprivation is a primary concern.

Žižek’s ‘transcendental materialist’ ontology (Johnson 2008) is a valuable but underused means of framing the ideological shift towards the types of harmful working environments that respondents have reflected on above. Essentially, this perspective argues that without a functioning symbolic order that can bring meaning to our world, and at our most fundamental pre-symbolic state of being, we are essentially a mass of conflicting drives; an ‘unknown that exists at the limit of this socio-symbolic universe and is in constant tension with it’ (Homer 2005: 81). Jacques Lacan referred to this realm as *the Real*. As we look to escape this terrifying spectre, we must seek out a functioning memetic blueprint to bring order and collective understanding to our lives. Memes are immaterial replicators that act in a similar way to genes but crucially, they function to connect the biological being with the socio-symbolic world (Dawkins 1989). However, as with genes, some memes are more efficient replicators of messages than others. Consequently, our memetic blueprints can be markedly resistant to change, stubbornly continuing to feed us maladaptive cultural information, even after the material conditions that precipitated their creation have shifted or vanished entirely (Hall 2012).

The rigid neoliberal ideology that shapes and sustains the conditions in today’s service industries fails to offer up adequate solutions that support workers’ social and economic survival (Hall and Winlow 2018). In this sense, the building blocks – rest, recuperation, personal fulfilment, family time, and so on – that might pave the path to human flourishing have become *deapted* (Johnson 2008). In other words, they no longer represent a coherent framework through which workers can derive security and insulation from harm. Renumeration is poor, job satisfaction and security are largely absent and collective unity amongst workers has been replaced with the relentless pressures of remaining individually competitive and staying ‘ahead of the game’. As Lloyd (2019: 144) suggests, ‘The limit of a deaptive ideology (Johnston, 2008) which lingers long after its symbolic efficiency has waned becomes clear and undeniably points towards harmful conditions.’ This predicament marks the crumbling of a functioning symbolic order that could help bring stability and respite to the lives of those in precarious working arrangements.

It is clear from the themes visited throughout this paper that tiredness can be a consequence of self-exploitation. However, the extent to which these acts are truly voluntary in the sense that the working subject possesses autonomy and an ability to change things for the better is problematic. Of course, we can act for ourselves and are not passive automatons simply awaiting a series of prescribed instructions from our immediate social world. Nevertheless, our inherent plasticity for change can be dysfunctional for us in that ‘when subjectivity changes, it changes in line with the real world and the forms of ideology that seek to represent it’ (Winlow 2019: 59). Our capacity to act is predicated on the function of ideology supplying us with meaningful narratives within a symbolic order that is governed by the rule of the *big other*: the network of ‘social institutions, customs, ethical codes and laws into which the individual is socialised’ (Raymen 2019: 5). The harms alluded to throughout this paper tend to suggest that we have experienced the virtual death of the big other under neoliberalism. Without its guiding role in weaving together the fabric of a coherent symbolic order, ‘more people live in the shadow of the Real. They subjectively retreat and face problems alone’ (Lloyd 2018: 144). The outcomes of this retreat will undoubtedly result in psychological distress and profound mental health problems for many workers across our labour markets, continuing to hinder the possibility of a 'Good life' (Raymen, 2019).

**Conclusion**

Although the limited sample utilised in this article cannot allow us to make large scale generalizations about the current state of Western labour markets, the primary narratives do point to a series of potentially harmful conditions around sleep and rest among workers. As migrant workers tend to occupy a disproportionately significant presence in the nocturnal service industry, their exposure to these conditions may be particularly pronounced. Conceptual tools borrowed from ultra-realist theory have allowed us to construct some useful arguments around the impact of a neoliberal ideology that continues to dominate labour relations in the NTE. Respondents spoke of the need to be switched on for much of their lives, both inside and outside of work. The imperatives to remain competitive and create opportunities for economic gain are forever present, as workers continue to attenuate the sustaining resources of rest and sleep. The COVID-19 pandemic placed further pressure on many workers in the NTE as the demand for food delivery increased. Consumer use of take-away apps such as Deliveroo, Just Eat and Uber Eats has proliferated and the use of ‘ghost kitchens’[[4]](#footnote-4) also accelerated during the pandemic as an increasingly popular means by which businesses meet demand (UKTN, 2021). Although ghost kitchens have been hailed as a low-cost option where restaurants can share kitchen space, their occupation of a grey regulatory area that relies almost exclusively on flexible labour (Shapiro 2022) may well exacerbate some of the existing problems discussed throughout this article.

Only with a wholesale reorganisation of working culture and its underlying ideology can we hope to bring about some change and relief for burnt-out workers in the night-time service industry. We must continue to probe these as affronts to human flourishing in our labour markets, together with the social and cultural contexts in which they occur, as this constitutes a vital ongoing project for scholars of social harm and critical criminology.

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1. Circadian cycles adopt a 24-hr pattern that affect the physical, mental, and behavioural equilibrium of most living things (National Institute of General Medical Sciences, 2021). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. ‘hack’ is a colloquial term used to refer to drivers of licensed Hackney cabs, which can pick fares up directly off the street as opposed to Private Hire Vehicles (PHVs) which would usually be pre-booked. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Private hire vehicle (PHV) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ghost kitchens (also known as dark or cloud kitchens) are spaces where several businesses can share premises to prepare and cook food with the sole purpose of fulfilling online orders, usually via third party delivery apps. They are often located on industrial estates and shipping containers outside of town/city centres in order to keep costs low. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)