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This is not my job! Non-compliant tasks and their impact on employees

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Abstract

Illegitimate tasks, as a novel workplace stressor, have gradually emerged as a frontier topic in organizational management research in recent years. Illegitimate tasks refer to tasks that fall outside individuals' expected scope of work, should not be performed by oneself, or are unnecessary to execute, encompassing both unreasonable tasks and unnecessary tasks. Illegitimate tasks exert negative effects on employees' emotions, cognition, motivation, work attitudes, work behaviors, physical and mental health, as well as work-family relationships; the nature and intensity of these effects depend on employees' individual characteristics and contextual features. The Stress-as-Offense-to-Self theory, Equity Theory, Job Demands-Resources Model, Job Characteristics Model, Affective Events Theory, and Self-Determination Theory constitute the primary theoretical frameworks for explaining the effects of illegitimate tasks. Future research may expand the conceptualization and levels of illegitimate tasks, explore and integrate underlying mechanisms, investigate contingency effects, examine antecedents of illegitimate tasks, and conduct studies on cultural contexts and cultural orientations.

Full Text

Preamble

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Abstract

Illegitimate tasks refer to work assignments that violate role expectations and threaten employees' professional identity. Drawing on the Stress-as-Offense-to-Self (SOS) theory, this paper reviews the construct, measurement, antecedents, and consequences of illegitimate tasks. We discuss the Bern Illegitimate Tasks Scale (BITS) and its psychometric properties, examine individual and organizational outcomes, and explore mediating mechanisms including self-esteem threat and justice perceptions. The review also addresses moderating factors such as core self-evaluations, cultural values, and leadership styles. We conclude with directions for future research, emphasizing the need for cross-cultural validation, longitudinal designs, and intervention studies.

1. Introduction

Illegitimate tasks represent a significant yet understudied workplace stressor that challenges employees' sense of professional identity and self-worth. First conceptualized by Semmer and colleagues (2005, 2007), illegitimate tasks are defined as work assignments that violate norms about what can reasonably be expected from an employee in a given role. These tasks are perceived as either unnecessary (wasting time and resources) or unreasonable (falling outside one's legitimate role responsibilities). The Stress-as-Offense-to-Self (SOS) theory posits that such tasks constitute an "offense to self," triggering negative emotional reactions and threatening core self-evaluations (Semmer et al., 2007, 2015).

The construct of illegitimate tasks extends traditional role stress theory by focusing not on the quantity of demands but on their qualitative appropriateness. While role conflict and role ambiguity have long been recognized as key stressors (Rizzo et al., 1970), illegitimate tasks uniquely capture the symbolic meaning of work: when organizations assign tasks that employees view as beneath their status, skills, or role boundaries, they communicate a lack of respect and appreciation. This paper synthesizes empirical evidence on illegitimate tasks, examining their measurement, theoretical mechanisms, boundary conditions, and practical implications.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Stress-as-Offense-to-Self (SOS) Theory

The SOS theory provides the foundational framework for understanding illegitimate tasks (Semmer et al., 2007). According to this perspective, individuals develop a self-image that includes their professional identity and expected role behaviors. Tasks that contradict this self-image—either by being unnecessary (lacking purpose) or unreasonable (violating role boundaries)—are perceived as an affront to one’s self-concept. This “offense to self” elicits immediate negative emotions such as resentment, anger, and feelings of being underappreciated (Eatough et al., 2016; Munir et al., 2017).

The theory distinguishes between two types of illegitimate tasks: **unreasonable tasks** that fall outside an employee’s role expectations (e.g., a manager being asked to clean the office), and **unnecessary tasks** that serve no meaningful purpose (e.g., redundant paperwork). Both types signal that the organization does not value the employee’s time or expertise, thereby threatening self-esteem and organizational-based self-esteem (Schulte-Braucks et al., 2019; Semmer et al., 2015).

2.2 Justice Theory Perspectives

Illegitimate tasks also align with organizational justice theory (Folger & Cropanzano, 2001). From a justice perspective, assigning illegitimate tasks represents a violation of interactional and procedural justice norms. When employees perceive task assignments as unfair or disrespectful, they question the organization’s fairness climate and their own standing within it. This perception of injustice mediates the relationship between illegitimate tasks and outcomes such as counterproductive work behavior and reduced job satisfaction (Semmer et al., 2015).

2.3 Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) Model

The JD-R model (Demerouti et al., 2001) positions illegitimate tasks as a specific type of job demand that depletes employees’ resources. Unlike challenging demands that may promote growth, illegitimate tasks represent “hindrance demands” that drain energy without offering compensatory benefits. The model suggests that such demands lead to health impairment (e.g., burnout, emotional exhaustion) and reduced motivation, particularly when job resources (e.g., autonomy, social support) are insufficient to buffer their negative effects (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Schmitt et al., 2015).

3. Measurement of Illegitimate Tasks

3.1 The Bern Illegitimate Tasks Scale (BITS)

Jacobshagen (2006) developed the Bern Illegitimate Tasks Scale (BITS) to operationalize the construct. The BITS comprises two subscales: **unreasonable tasks** (4 items) and **unnecessary tasks** (4 items). Sample items include “I have to do tasks that should be done by someone else” (unreasonable) and “I have to do tasks that are unnecessary” (unnecessary). The scale demonstrates strong psychometric properties across multiple studies, with internal consistency coefficients () ranging from 0.76 to 0.86 (Jacobshagen, 2006; Semmer et al., 2010).

The BITS has been validated in diverse occupational samples, including health-care workers, teachers, and service employees (Kottwitz et al., 2013; Pereira et al., 2014). Confirmatory factor analyses consistently support the two-factor structure, though a higher-order factor representing overall illegitimate tasks is often used in practice. The scale correlates moderately with related constructs such as role conflict ($r = 0.45-0.55$) and organizational injustice ($r = 0.50-0.60$), while demonstrating discriminant validity from general workload measures.

3.2 Cross-Cultural Validation

Recent research has extended BITS validation to non-Western contexts. Studies in China (Ma & Peng, 2019) and Pakistan (Munir et al., 2017) have found similar factor structures, though cultural nuances emerge in what constitutes “unreasonable” versus “unnecessary” tasks. For instance, in high power-distance cultures, tasks that might seem unreasonable in Western contexts may be accepted as legitimate due to hierarchical norms. This highlights the importance of emic-etic considerations in cross-cultural research (Ahmed et al., 2018).

4. Outcomes of Illegitimate Tasks

4.1 Psychological and Emotional Reactions

Illegitimate tasks trigger strong negative emotional responses. Meta-analytic evidence shows robust relationships with resentment ($\rho = 0.52$), anger ($\rho = 0.48$), and feelings of being underappreciated ($\rho = 0.61$) (Eatough et al., 2016; Semmer et al., 2015). These emotions mediate the path to more distal outcomes, operating as the proximal affective response to self-threat.

4.2 Attitudinal Outcomes

Job Satisfaction and Engagement: Illegitimate tasks consistently predict reduced job satisfaction ($\rho = -0.35$ to -0.45) and work engagement ($\rho = -0.28$ to -0.38) across studies (Stocker et al., 2010; Van Schie et al., 2014). The effect is stronger when tasks are perceived as both unreasonable and unnecessary, suggesting additive negative effects.

Turnover Intentions: Through their impact on organizational-based self-esteem and perceived respect, illegitimate tasks increase turnover intentions ($r = 0.42$) and actual turnover behavior (Apostel et al., 2018). This relationship is partially mediated by reduced affective commitment and increased job search behaviors.

4.3 Behavioral Outcomes

Counterproductive Work Behavior (CWB): Employees who experience illegitimate tasks report higher levels of CWB, particularly directed at the organization (CWB-O) rather than individuals (CWB-I) (Schulte-Braucks et al., 2019). This represents a retaliatory response to perceived disrespect.

Task Crafting and Performance: Paradoxically, some employees respond to illegitimate tasks by engaging in task crafting—reframing or redistributing tasks to restore meaning (Muntz & Dormann, in press). However, this coping mechanism is less available in highly regulated jobs, leading to performance decrements and increased error rates (Semmer et al., 2010).

4.4 Health and Well-Being

Illegitimate tasks predict both psychological and physical health outcomes. Longitudinal studies link illegitimate tasks to increased emotional exhaustion ($r = 0.31$), sleep problems ($r = 0.22$), and elevated cortisol levels (Kottwitz et al., 2013; Pereira et al., 2014). The relationship with burnout is particularly strong when employees have low recovery opportunities (Sonnentag & Lischetzke, 2018).

4.5 Spillover Effects

Research demonstrates cross-domain spillover from illegitimate tasks to work-family conflict (Meier & Semmer, 2018). Employees who experience illegitimate tasks at work report higher work-family conflict ($r = 0.38$) and lower work-family enrichment ($r = -0.24$). This occurs because negative emotions and rumination about unfair treatment deplete resources needed for family engagement.

5. Mediators and Moderators

5.1 Mediating Mechanisms

Self-Esteem Threat: The SOS theory posits that self-esteem threat is the core mediator. Illegitimate tasks undermine organizational-based self-esteem, which in turn predicts negative outcomes (Semmer et al., 2015). This mediation is stronger for employees with high work centrality, for whom professional identity is more salient.

Justice Perceptions: Perceived interactional injustice explains approximately 40% of the relationship between illegitimate tasks and retaliation behaviors (Schulte-Braucks et al., 2019). Employees interpret illegitimate tasks as evidence that the organization does not value their contributions.

Motivational Processes: Illegitimate tasks reduce intrinsic motivation and self-determined motivation (Gagné & Deci, 2005). When tasks lack meaning or violate role boundaries, employees experience reduced autonomy and competence satisfaction, leading to amotivation and disengagement.

5.2 Moderating Factors

Individual Differences: Core self-evaluations (CSE) buffer the negative effects of illegitimate tasks (Kammeyer-Mueller et al., 2009). Employees with high CSE (high self-esteem, self-efficacy, emotional stability, and internal locus of control) show weaker relationships between illegitimate tasks and strain. Conversely, those with high justice sensitivity show stronger reactions (Schmitt et al., 1995).

Leadership Factors: Transformational leadership attenuates the relationship between illegitimate tasks and negative outcomes by providing meaning and support (Van Schie et al., 2014). In contrast, abusive supervision exacerbates effects, as employees have fewer resources to cope with self-threat (Muntz & Dormann, in press).

Cultural Values: Power distance moderates the illegitimate tasks-outcome relationship (Liu et al., 2013). In high power-distance cultures, employees are more likely to accept hierarchical task assignments as legitimate, reducing the perceived “illegitimacy” of unreasonable requests. However, when tasks violate strongly held cultural values (e.g., “face” in East Asian cultures), reactions may be even stronger (Farh & Cheng, 2000).

6. Cross-Cultural and Contextual Considerations

6.1 Cultural Boundary Conditions

Individualism-Collectivism: In collectivistic cultures, group harmony concerns may suppress immediate negative reactions to illegitimate tasks, but the underlying self-threat may manifest in passive resistance or long-term withdrawal (Grossmann & Na, 2014). The very definition of what constitutes “unreasonable” may differ, with collective-oriented employees more accepting of tasks that benefit the group.

Power Distance: High power-distance cultures show weaker direct relationships between illegitimate tasks and voice behavior, as employees are less likely to challenge authority (Lian et al., 2012). However, the psychological toll may

be greater due to suppressed expression, leading to more pronounced health effects over time.

“Face” Concerns: In East Asian contexts, illegitimate tasks that cause “loss of face” (e.g., a senior employee being assigned menial tasks) trigger particularly strong reactions (Ting-Toomey, 2005). The concept of “face” amplifies the self-threat mechanism posited by SOS theory, as public role violations damage both self- and other-evaluations of status.

6.2 Occupational Contexts

The effects of illegitimate tasks vary by occupation. In professional roles with clear status hierarchies (e.g., medicine, law), illegitimate tasks produce stronger reactions than in more fluid roles (e.g., creative industries). Healthcare workers, for instance, show particularly strong associations between illegitimate tasks and burnout (Muntz et al., 2019), as such tasks interfere with their core helping identity.

7. Future Research Directions

7.1 Methodological Advances

Future research should employ experience sampling methodology (ESM) to capture dynamic, within-person fluctuations in illegitimate task perceptions and immediate emotional reactions (Ohly & Schmitt, 2015). Longitudinal designs are needed to establish temporal precedence and examine lagged effects on health outcomes. Additionally, multi-source data (combining self-reports with supervisor ratings and objective health indicators) would reduce common method bias.

7.2 Theoretical Integration

Integrating SOS theory with identity theory (Stryker, 1980) could illuminate how illegitimate tasks threaten specific role identities (e.g., professional, gender, or cultural identities). Similarly, combining SOS with conservation of resources theory (Hobfoll, 1989) would clarify resource loss spirals initiated by illegitimate tasks.

7.3 Intervention Research

Despite growing evidence, intervention research remains scarce. Potential interventions include: - **Task redesign** to eliminate unnecessary tasks (Semmer, 2010) - **Leadership training** to improve interactional justice in task assignment (Muntz & Dormann, in press) - **Cognitive reappraisal** training to help employees reframe unavoidable illegitimate tasks (Eatough et al., 2016) - **Or-**

ganizational climate change to foster appreciation and respect (Kottwitz et al., 2019)

7.4 Expanding the Nomological Network

Research should examine understudied outcomes such as creativity (likely inhibited by illegitimate tasks), proactive behavior (reduced when employees feel devalued), and customer satisfaction (affected by employee emotional exhaustion). Additionally, team-level effects remain unexplored—do shared perceptions of illegitimate tasks create collective cynicism?

7.5 Cultural Validation

More emic research is needed to understand how illegitimate tasks manifest in non-Western contexts. Indigenous constructs like “face” in China, “amae” in Japan, or “ubuntu” in South Africa may shape both the experience of and reactions to illegitimate tasks. Comparative studies across cultures should test measurement invariance of BITS and examine culture-specific moderators.

8. Conclusion

Illegitimate tasks represent a qualitatively distinct workplace stressor that threatens employees’ self-concept and professional identity. Robust evidence links illegitimate tasks to negative emotional, attitudinal, behavioral, and health outcomes, with self-esteem threat and justice perceptions as key mechanisms. The effects are moderated by individual differences, leadership, and cultural values. Future research should address methodological limitations, develop interventions, and expand cross-cultural understanding. Organizations can mitigate these effects by fostering respectful task assignment practices, clarifying role boundaries, and building supportive leadership climates that affirm employee value.

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Note: The reference list was corrupted in the original text. Below are the reconstructed citations mentioned throughout the paper.

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That Is Not My Job! Illegitimate Tasks and Their Impact on Employees

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Abstract

Illegitimate tasks, as a new type of workplace stressor, have gradually become a frontier topic in organizational and management research. Illegitimate tasks refer to tasks that are inconsistent with employees' expected work scope, are unnecessarily performed, or do not belong to one's role. They include both unreasonable and unnecessary tasks. This article introduces the concept and measurement of illegitimate tasks and systematically reviews their influences on employees' emotions, cognition, motivation, work attitudes, work behaviors, physical and mental health, and work-family relationships. The review also indicates that the nature and magnitude of these influences depend on employee characteristics and situational factors. Stress-as-offense-to-self theory, justice theory, job demands-resources model, job characteristics model, affective event theory, and self-determination theory provide the primary theoretical explanations for these effects. Future research should expand the concept and levels of analysis of illegitimate tasks, unpack and integrate the underlying mechanisms of its impact, investigate its contingent effects, and identify antecedents of illegitimate tasks. Additionally, developing research on illegitimate tasks in different cultural contexts and orientations is needed.

Keywords: illegitimate tasks; unnecessary tasks; unreasonable tasks; stressor; strain

Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.

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