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Literature Review on Illegitimate Task

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ABSTRACT

In organizations, individuals typically adhere to professional roles delineated by their occupation or direct supervisors, which establish clear behavior norms known as role expectations. However, when tasks assigned contradict these role expectations, they are deemed "illegitimate," posing a challenge to individuals' sense of professional identity. This literature review examines recent scholarship on illegitimate tasks, focusing on their definition, measurement methodologies, current research findings, and avenues for future investigation. By synthesizing existing knowledge, this review offers insights into the complexities surrounding illegitimate tasks in organizational contexts and identifies key areas for further exploration.

Introduction

In contemporary organizational settings, individuals are entrusted with distinct professional roles, typically shaped by the nature of their occupation and the guidance of direct supervisors. These roles delineate clear behavioral norms, termed as role expectations, which serve as guiding principles for individual conduct within the organizational framework. However, the interpretation and evaluation of these role expectations remain subjective, varying among individuals even within the same job role (Björk et al., 2013; Eatough et al., 2016). Consequently, tasks that align with individuals' subjective professional role expectations are generally perceived as legitimate.

Conversely, tasks that diverge from these expectations are deemed "illegitimate," posing a challenge to individuals' professional identity and organizational cohesion. Illegitimate tasks encompass activities that fall outside the anticipated scope of job responsibilities, thereby infringing upon individuals' sense of professional role congruence. Semmer et al. (2010) aptly define illegitimate tasks as those which individuals perceive as unnecessary or inappropriate for their role, highlighting the discordance between assigned duties and subjective role expectations. Understanding the concept of illegitimate tasks holds paramount importance in contemporary organizational research and practice. Not only do illegitimate tasks impinge upon individuals' psychological well-being and job satisfaction, but they also have ramifications for organizational effectiveness and employee performance. Consequently, a comprehensive literature review on illegitimate tasks is imperative to elucidate the nuanced dynamics underlying this phenomenon.

This paper endeavors to provide a comprehensive review of recent literature pertaining to illegitimate tasks, encompassing its conceptualization, measurement methodologies, empirical findings, and avenues for future research. By synthesizing existing scholarship, this review aims to enhance our understanding of illegitimate tasks' impact on individual behavior and organizational functioning, thereby informing strategies for mitigating their adverse effects and fostering a conducive work environment.

Concept of Illegitimate Task

Illegitimate task has two kinds of core characteristics. On one hand, illegitimate tasks are out of the range of self-role. In organizations, roles are considered as what the organization expects of individuals and whether such expectations are legitimate (Ilgen & Hollenbeck, 1991). Illegitimate tasks are often outside the scope of the roles defined by the organization and violate the normative role expectations. For example, when health care workers are assigned a cleaning task, they will see this task as an illegitimate task. On the other hand, illegitimate tasks offend employees' professional identities. An individual's professional identity reflects its own value and significance, and it is a crucial component of one's social identity (Schulte-Braucks, Baethge, Dormann, & Vahle-Hinz, 2019). A person's professional identity may be disrespected or offended by illegitimate tasks, which will bring tension and pressure to the individual and constitute the pressure source of threatening identity (Faupel, Otto, Krug, & Kottwitz, 2016).

Based on the aforementioned description, scholars identify two categories of illegitimate tasks: Unreasonable and unnecessary tasks (Semmer et al., 2015). Semmer et al. (2010) argue that unreasonable tasks mainly consist of the following four types: 1) Tasks are out of the scope of an individual's occupation, such as requiring security personnel to complete the lobby cleaning task; 2) Tasks that are in conflict with the professional status of individuals and should be completed by others, such as asking subordinates handle tasks that only leaders have the authority to handle; 3) The individual's professional identity is not reflected, excessive restrictions on the task. For example, back-office workers who do not have direct contact with customers are required to keep their desks clean at all times; 4) Tasks that put individuals in an awkward position, such as requiring employees to report absenteeism to their colleagues.

In addition, as a new form of work stressor, illegitimate tasks usually elicit negative emotional responses, especially when an employee perceives that he or she is frequently exposed to such tasks. To date, a large number of previous studies have conceptually established a negative relationship between the structure of illegitimate tasks (unreasonable tasks and unnecessary tasks) and negative mental health status, such as the association of illegitimate tasks with perceived injustice and low well-being (Barsky & Kaplan, 2007).

Theoretical Perspectives on Illegitimate Task

1. Stress-As-Offense-To-Self Theory (SOS)

Drawing on the tents of SOS, illegitimate tasks are proposed (Semmer et al., 2015). This theory is based on the need of individuals to maintain and protect their own positive image, and regards threats to positive self-image as a source of stress. It takes self-threat as the starting point, emphasizing that individuals will feel pressure when their self-image is threatened (Lazarus, 2006), and pointing out that threats come from social information that others do not respect. Based on this, Semmer et al. (2015) find and point out that illegitimate tasks convey a social message to employees that organizations or leaders do not respect them, which will cause stress and threaten individuals' sense of self-worth and self-esteem.

2. Affective Events Theory

This theory indicates that working environment characteristics can cause negative or positive work events, it is worth noting that stressful work situations might lead to negative emotional reactions for individuals, and then affect individual attitudes and behaviors (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). Based on this theory, the main focus of this research is on how illegitimate tasks and negative emotions are positively correlated, as well as how these negative emotions affect employees' attitudes and behaviors at work.

3. Justice Theory

According to Folger and Cropanzano (2001), an individual would perceive an event as unfair if they believe it shouldn't have happened or that a different course of action could have resulted in a better outcome. Distributive justice, procedural justice, and interactive justice are all parts of organizational justice (Cropanzano, Byrne, Bobocel, & Rupp, 2001). When

employees are assigned to do unreasonable or unnecessary tasks, employees may perceive illegitimate as a sign of distributive injustice.

4. Cognitive-Affective Processing System Framework

According to this theory, situations trigger a variety of cognitive and affective responses, which lead to stable and significant behavioral patterns in individuals (Mischel & Shoda, 1995). As a situational factor in the workplace, the characteristics and attributes of illegitimate tasks will undoubtedly have an impact on the cognition and emotion of employees, and ultimately affect their behaviors. But existing researches on the effects of illegitimate tasks have been only examined from only one perspective, which makes it difficult to fully comprehend the explanatory mechanism of illegitimate tasks. In order to make up for this deficiency, scholars introduced employee cognition and emotion from the dual perspective to further explore the underlying mechanism of illegitimate tasks on employee behavior.

5. Job Demands-Resources Model

This model is a classical theoretical perspective to explain job burnout (Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, & Schaufeli, 2001), which divides job characteristics into job requirements and job resources and points out two core paths: Employees' stress and health problems are caused by job demands and job resources motivate employees to work and perform well. Illegitimate tasks are a type of job requirement in organization that drain employees' physical and mental resources to complete. The more resources employees have (e.g., job autonomy), the more effective they will be in dealing with illegitimacy. However, when there is a disparity between high demands and low resources, high job demands can lead to negative emotions (Bakker, Demerouti, & Schaufeli, 2003). The accumulation of these emotions will lead to job burnout and emotional exhaustion (Fila & Eatough, 2020) and further lead to negative work behaviors (e.g., sick presenteeism, Thun et al., 2018).

6. Job Characteristics Model

This model argues that the characteristics of tasks (such as the importance and diversity of tasks) affect the meaning of one's work (Hackman & Oldham, 1975). Due to its unreasonable or unnecessary characteristics, illegitimate tasks tend to distract employees from meaningful or challenging work and reduce their perception of the meaning of their work. In turn, the decreases in work significance will impede employees' work enthusiasm and negatively affect an individual's job satisfaction (Eatough et al., 2016).

In general, many theoretical perspectives can offer an explanation for the mechanisms through which illegitimate tasks affect employees' feelings, attitudes and behavioral outcomes. However, the single theoretical explanation is still limited in the existing research. On the one side, the simultaneous existence of multiple effects cannot be accounted for. On the other side, it cannot reflect the influence of the interaction between various factors. Therefore, the multiple theoretical perspectives should be fully considered when explaining the influencing mechanism of the effects of illegitimate tasks. Based on that, it is essential to combine two or more theoretical perspectives in order to investigate how illegitimate tasks affect employees' work performance. This study integrates conversation of resource theory and self-determination theory to examine how illegitimate tasks affect employees' innovative work behavior through ego depletion (self-control resources as an explanatory path of resource)

and thriving at work (self-determination motivation as an explanatory path of motivation). By doing so, this study makes up for the above deficiency of explanatory power from a single theoretical perspective.

7. How to Measure Illegitimate Tasks

The first to methodically create measurement tools is Jacobshagen (2006), this study develops items for evaluating illegitimate tasks and confirmed their existence through 11 separate investigations (totaling more than 3,000 samples). The two-dimensional structure of illegitimate tasks and its assessment items are determined in this study using both exploratory factor analysis and confirmatory factor analysis: unreasonable tasks (4 items, $\alpha = 0.79-0.82$) and unnecessary tasks (5 items, $\alpha = 0.76-0.86$). This tool is called the Bern Illegitimate Tasks Scale (BITS). Jacobshagen (2006) examined BITS for internal consistency, re-test reliability and validity, and the results showed that the scale had good psychometric properties. Then, Semmer et al. (2010) analyzed and deleted the fourth item from the dimension of unnecessary task according to the load value of confirmatory factor analysis, and finally got 8-item BITS. An example of unreasonable tasks is “Do you have work tasks to take care of, which keep you questioning if they even need to be done at all?”, an example of unnecessary tasks is “Do you have work tasks to take care of that you believe are going too far and should not be expected of you” (Björk et al., 2013).

At present, the most used scale in studies on illegitimate task is an 8-item version. First, the scale is highly consistent with Semmer and his colleagues’ definition of illegitimate tasks. Secondly, the scale has good reliability and stable factor structure. Finally, recent studies have tested the reliability and validity of BITS scale in countries other than Europe and America, such as China and India (Ma & Peng, 2019). This study also employed the 8-item BITS (Semmer et al., 2010). Measurement subjects. This refers to the reporting source of illegitimate tasks. According to the literatures already in existence, the study mostly emphasizes employee self-report (Minei, Eatough, & Cohen-Charash, 2018), only a few studies combined self-assessment with other form of assessment to rate the perception of illegitimate tasks (Meier & Semmer, 2018).

8. Empirical Research

Since the construct of illegitimate tasks was proposed, scholars have conducted a number of studies to investigate the antecedents and outcomes of illegitimate tasks as well as related moderators and mediators. Ding and Kuvaas (2022) review the literature on illegitimate tasks to help us to understand what we have known about it and what critical research questions need to be explored in future. Given that the current study tends to examine how illegitimate tasks affect employees’ innovative work behaviors and pay more attention to the mediators and moderators, we review the empirical researches on outcomes and moderators of illegitimate tasks.

The Outcomes of Illegitimate Tasks

First, as a kind of negative work event, illegitimate task will trigger an individual’s negative emotional response. According to previous studies, resentment and anger will occur when employees think the task is not legitimate to arouse negative emotions (Eatough et al.,

2016; Zhou et al., 2018). For example, Semmer et al. (2015) conduct three surveys on employees in various industries in Switzerland, all of which found that illegitimate tasks would trigger resentment among employees.

Second, illegitimate tasks can affect employees’ cognitive response, especially lowering their perception of self-esteem and organizational justice. No matter at the individual level or at the daily level, studies have found that illegitimate tasks will reduce individuals’ self-esteem (Schulte-Braucks et al., 2019).

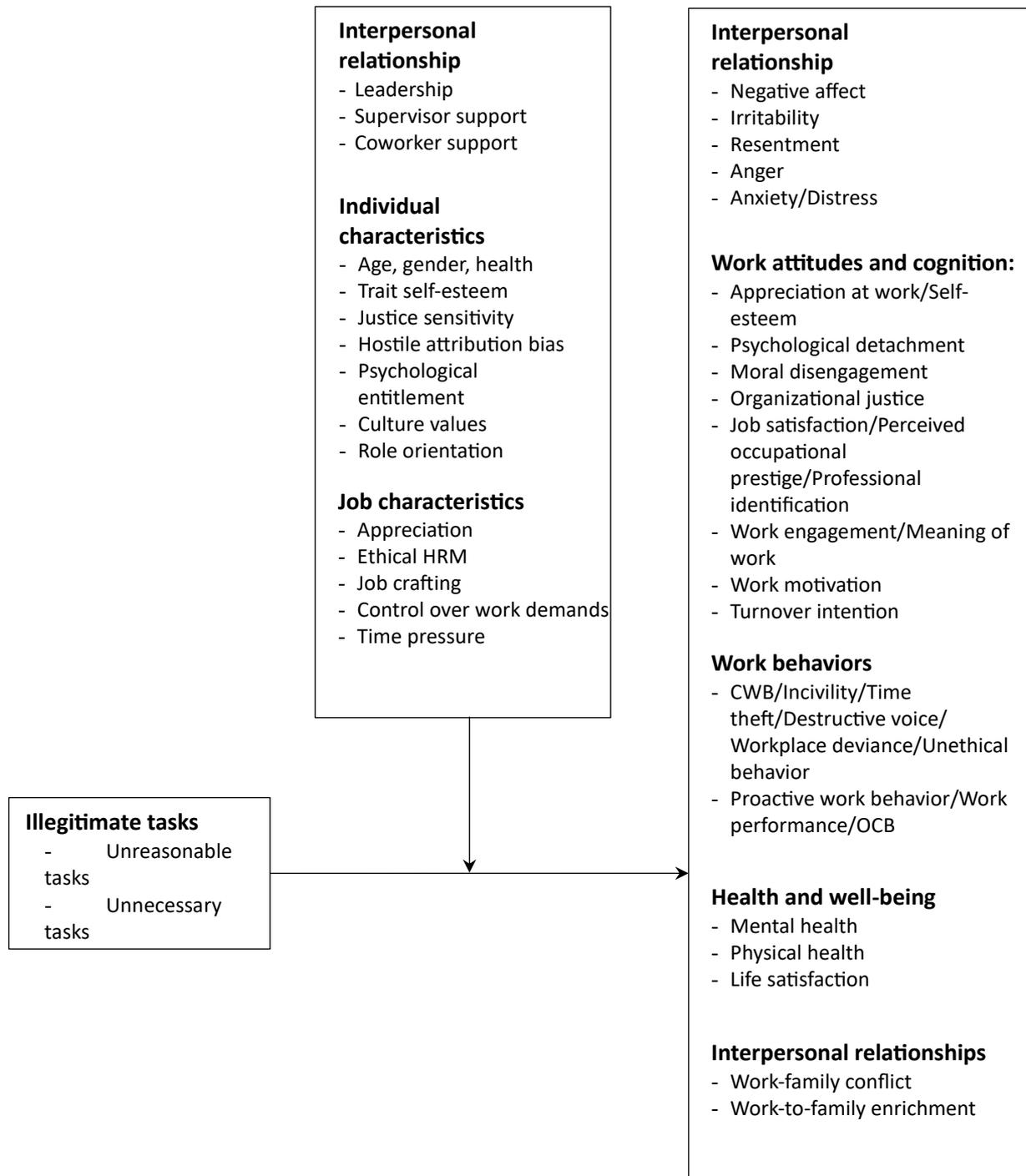


Figure 1. Empirical Research Involving Illegitimate Tasks

Source: Adapted from Ding and Kuvaas (2022)

Third, illegitimate tasks have an impact on employees' intrinsic motivation and self-determined motivation. Gagné and Deci (2005) argue that self-determination motivation is closely related to individual perceived task autonomy. Illegitimate tasks interfere with employees' demand for autonomy and weaken their incentive for self-determination. van Schie, Güntert and Wehner (2014) take Red Cross volunteers as research subjects and find that illegitimate tasks would reduce volunteers' self-willingness and choice in volunteer activities, resulting in hindering employees' autonomy and thus reducing self-determination motivation.

Fourth, illegitimate tasks usually have a detrimental effect on employees' positive work attitude. Stocker et al. (2010) find that illegitimate tasks make them feel unappreciated and job dissatisfaction with a survey of 228 Swiss male military officers. Numerous studies have supported this conclusion (Eatough et al., 2016; Kottwitz, Pfister, Elfering, Schummer, Igic, & Otto, 2019; Omansky et al., 2016).

Fifth, one cannot disregard how illegitimate tasks affect individuals' work behaviors, in particular, such as negative behaviors. A 5-workday diary study conducted by Schulte-Braucks et al. (2019) find that illegitimate tasks are positively correlated with employees' counterproductive work behaviors. The unfairness and pressure of illegitimate tasks will cause employees' negative emotions, such as anger and resentment, in turn affecting ones' behavior patterns and promoting their negative behaviors, involving counterproductive behavior, sick attendance, and workplace deviant behavior and so on (Thun et al., 2018).

Sixth, negative emotions caused by illegitimate tasks are difficult to vent immediately, and will accumulate and evolve into pressure, which is detrimental to the emotional and physical well-being of employees. With a survey of 1351 Danish human resource service workers, Madsen, Tripathi, Borritz and Rugulies (2014) discovered that unnecessary tasks have a detrimental effect on employees' mental.

Seventh, illegitimate tasks also have spillover effect, which is particularly bad for employees' work-family relationship. According to Meier and Semmer (2018), based on 166 matched samples (supervisors, employees and partners), illegitimate tasks may result in work-family conflict, because illegitimate tasks can cause employees' resource loss, in turn making it difficult for them to meet their family responsibilities. Similarly, in general, illegitimate tasks will not only have a negative impact on an employee's emotion, cognition, but also can further affect employees' work attitudes, behavior, physical and mental health, and the interaction between their work and family lives, and ultimately damage the normal operation and overall performance of the organization. According to studies that have been done on the topic of how illegitimate tasks affect employees' work behaviors, the majority of these studies concentrate on how illegitimate tasks have a positive impact on employees' negative work behaviors, such as incivility against supervisor (Meier & Semmer, 2018), counterproductive behavior (Zhou et al., 2018), unethical behavior (Chen et al., 2022), destructive voice and time theft (Zhao et al., 2022) and so on.

The moderators of illegitimate tasks. Recent studies have started to look at the boundary conditions of the effect of illegitimate tasks as study on these tasks has developed. These researches attempt to reveal who and under what circumstances illegitimate tasks are

more harmful, and what methods and means can reduce or avoid the destructive effect of illegitimate tasks. There are two types of moderators: reinforcing factors and weakening factors.

1) Reinforcing factors. First, men are more likely to have a stronger negative response when facing with illegitimate tasks. Due to differences in the social division of labor, women in the workplace are often vulnerable to career ceilings or workplace prejudices. Therefore, female employees expect to obtain resources, recognition and status by being given more work tasks, so as to have less negative perception of illegitimate tasks. Conversely, men are often seen as active, assertive, and dominant (Eagly, Wood, & Diekmann, 2000), and when they are treated unfairly or disrespected, their dominant gender roles are threatened, and imbalances are triggered. Based on this, Omansky et al. (2016) proposed that individuals with different genders have different perceptions of illegitimate tasks. male employees are more likely to have negative outcomes than female employees (Omansky et al., 2016).

Second, justice sensitivity is a stable personality trait, which describes the degree of difficulty in perceiving injustice and the intensity of response to injustice (Schmitt, Neumann, & Montada, 1995). According to social comparison theory, individuals acquire cognition of their own tasks by comparing their own tasks with reference individuals. Compared with individuals with weak justice sensitivity, individuals with strong justice sensitivity will be more sensitive to the difference when comparing the illegitimate task with their own role range, and thus have stronger reactions.

Third, situational characteristics also affect the effect of illegitimate tasks. Researchers have looked at the detrimental effects of illegitimate tasks in terms of time pressures. Research has shown that time pressure plays a crucial role in the connection between illegitimate tasks and anger because time pressure reflects a stronger conflict or inconsistency between legitimate responsibilities and illegitimate tasks. For instance, when employees are required to complete the tasks, they are supposed to complete within a limited time, the assigned illegitimate tasks will cause conflicts between legitimate and illegitimate tasks, and consume the resources required for the work (Kronenwett & Rigotti, 2019), As a result, time pressure positively moderates the association between illegitimate tasks and anger as well as the indirect impact of illegitimate tasks on counterproductive work behaviors via anger. This relationship is particularly significant when the time pressure is greater.

2) Weakening factors. Firstly, individual personality traits can moderate the relationship between work events and emotional responses, work attitudes such as job satisfaction (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). Based on this, Eatough et al. (2016) reveal the buffering effect of trait self-esteem on the relationship between illegitimate tasks, anger and job satisfaction, that is, illegitimate tasks provide less of a threat to individuals with a high trait self-esteem.

Secondly, flexible role orientation describes the degree that individuals understand their job roles broadly (Parker, Wall, & Jackson, 1997). Employees with highly flexible role orientation tend to consider broader goals and responsibilities as part of their job roles, and are able to deliver on each goal and work task, not only achieving in-role work performance, but also benefiting the team and organization through out-of-role work performance.

Employees with low flexible role orientation are less likely to accept tasks outside of their job obligations and are even less likely to devote time and effort to extra-role behaviors. This is because they have a tendency to define their job roles and responsibilities narrowly (Parker et al., 1997).

Thirdly, leaders are usually the direct assigner of tasks in organizations, and leadership style can moderate the detrimental effects of illegitimate tasks. For example, appreciative leadership can effectively alleviate the threat of illegitimate tasks to subordinates' self-esteem by praising and recognizing their achievements and qualities and appreciating their subordinates' efforts (Semmer et al., 2007). The existing studies also confirm that the positive appreciation of the leader can offset the "disrespected" caused by illegitimate tasks, and put it into a meaningful work context through appreciation, thus reducing the positive relationship between unreasonable task and resignation intention and as well as internal motivation. Therefore, under high appreciation leadership, the association between illegitimate tasks and turnover intention as well as internal motivation will be effectively inhibited (Muntz & Dormann, 2020).

Conclusion

To sum up, the effect of illegitimate tasks will be affected by individuals and situations. At present, researches on the boundary conditions of illegitimate tasks are still in infancy, there is a lack of the discussion on other moderating factors. Future work might examine the joint impact of individual factors and situational factors and show when and how illegitimate tasks have particular effects on certain types of employees. From a practical point of view, it will also help organizations better carry out job design and human resource management. In general, existing studies have shown that illegitimate tasks attract more attention from scholars. Illegitimate tasks will have a significant influence on employees' job and personal lives as a new source of stress. Although illegitimate tasks exist widely in the workplace, it has only been concerned as an independent concept for more than ten years, and there are still many problems to be further promoted and improved in future research.

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