



## Relationships between illegitimate tasks and change in work-family outcomes via interactional justice and negative emotions



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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Keywords:

Illegitimate tasks  
Work-family conflict  
Work-family enrichment  
Negative emotions  
Cross-national

### ABSTRACT

This study examines how illegitimate tasks in the workplace relate to changes in work-to-family conflict and enrichment. We explore a serial mediation model where illegitimate tasks degrade interactional justice perceptions and heighten employee negative emotions, which relates to work-to-family outcomes. Cross-national differences in this process were examined to test how national context moderates these linkages. Three hundred and twenty-one subjects from the US and India reported on focal variables at two time points, separated by a three-month lag. Results from multi-group structural equation modeling indicated that the links between illegitimate tasks and work-to-family outcomes vary by nation, with only the US sample supporting the theoretical model. Results from latent change score modeling suggest that changes in illegitimate tasks were associated with changes in WIF and WFE through changes in interactional justice.

As the nature of work continues to change, researchers are beginning to identify novel workplace stressors that have been largely overlooked in the past. In particular, as technology and economic global pressures grow, so do increases in workforce demands, likely increasing the chance of employees being asked to do work outside of their formal job roles.

Illegitimate tasks are work stressors that refer to tasks in violation of what is reasonably expected from a given person (Semmer, Tschan, Meier, Facchin, & Jacobshagen, 2010). These unnecessary and unreasonable tasks are characterized by a sense of disrespect, degradation, and carelessness, and thus are thought to create a sense of unfairness and negative emotions in the recipient. Having to conform to unnecessary rules such as wearing a uniform in a call center or unreasonable requests such as a hotel administrator being asked to clean rooms are examples of illegitimate tasks. Illegitimate tasks can occur several times within a workday, with average frequencies reported between 2 and 3 such tasks per week (Eatough et al., 2016). Furthermore, in an interview study, 10% of primary tasks and almost 65% of secondary tasks were reported as “illegitimate” (Semmer, Jacobshagen, & Meier, 2006).

Unfortunately, illegitimate tasks have pervasive detrimental impacts on employee well-being (Semmer et al., 2015) above and beyond work stressors such as organizational justice (Semmer et al., 2010), and role conflict (Semmer et al., 2015). However, because such tasks have only been studied within the silo of workplace experiences, it is largely unknown if and how the chronic experience of such tasks at work could spill over into other domains such as family life. It is important to understand how illegitimate tasks are linked to family life for both theoretical (in what domains do illegitimate tasks operate?) and pragmatic (how much attention does this stressor deserve in terms of prevention and intervention?) reasons. Further, although cultural characteristics likely shape the manner in which such tasks are perceived (e.g. Eatough et al., 2016; Semmer et al., 2015), we know little about how this stressor operates in collectivistic and high power distance cultures, as research has primarily focused on western nations. Thus, the purpose of

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this study is to examine 1) whether illegitimate tasks relate to an increased level work interference with family (WIF) and/or a degraded level of work to family enrichment (WFE), 2) the mechanisms by which these relationships occur, and 3) if these processes differ between a western and eastern nation: the US and India.

This work contributes to the literature in three main ways. First, almost every previous study on illegitimate tasks explores how such experiences affect the employee within the work domain, with one recent exception exploring detachment in the evening hours (Sonnentag & Lischetzke, 2017). No work has specifically focused on how illegitimate tasks could relate to increased work family conflict. We further suggest it is deficient to ignore that illegitimate tasks may not only create more WIF but also degrade the level at which work is enriching employees' lives. The link between illegitimate tasks and WFE has remained completely unexplored. Thus, we address this gap by including both WIF and WFE as focal outcomes.

Second, this work expands upon our understanding of the *process* by which these relationships unfold. Drawing from job-demand resources model (JD-R; Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, & Schaufeli, 2001) and WFE theory (Greenhaus & Powell, 2006), we explore a serial mediation model where illegitimate tasks degrade interactional justice perceptions and heighten employee negative emotions, which in turn explains the linkage between illegitimate tasks and work-to-family outcomes. Additionally, we directly consider the relationships among *baseline levels* and *change* in illegitimate tasks, interactional justice, negative emotions, and work-family outcomes over a three-month period.

Finally, this work contributes to the larger work-family and well-being literatures by examining how illegitimate tasks relate to work-family and well-being outcomes such as negative emotions in contexts outside of the US. Recent calls for cross-national work in the occupational health psychology field (Chang & Spector, 2011) underscore the need for additional research that expands our understanding of phenomena beyond Anglo-Saxon nations. Moreover, scholars (Semmer et al., 2015) have mentioned that as cultures are described by shared beliefs, experiences of illegitimate tasks may vary by culture or contexts. Even when employees equally acknowledge a task as illegitimate across contexts, this role violation may be more acceptable in some cultures based on values such as personal sacrifice for group benefit. Thus, examining this stressor and its relation to theorized outcomes in varying cultural contexts is needed because the posited links may be constrained by the cultural setting. Thus, we test our model in the US and India, offering a first attempt at identifying cross-national differences that may be driven by western versus eastern cultural values.

Notably, this work also offers a methodological contribution as few studies on chronic experience of illegitimate tasks have included more than one-time point. In this work, we use structural equation modeling (SEM) and latent change score modeling (LCSM) to examine correlations among baseline levels and change in the variables in question over a three-month period, as noted earlier.

## 1. Illegitimate tasks

Illegitimate tasks are assigned work tasks that are misaligned with the expectations of an employee, and threaten one's professional and self-identity (Semmer et al., 2010). There are two underlying types of illegitimate tasks: unreasonable or unnecessary tasks. Unreasonable tasks are those that are perceived by the recipient to fall outside reasonable job role expectations. For example, a cashier at a grocery store being asked to go fetch a forgotten grocery item may be seen as unreasonable. Unnecessary tasks are those that do not need to be performed at all. These tasks could have been avoided or conducted with reduced effort if the procedures were organized in a more efficient manner (Semmer et al., 2010). For example, an employee having to use his or her personal credit card to front business expenses and then wait lengthy amounts of time for reimbursement may be seen as unnecessary. The basic problem with illegitimate tasks is the undesirable psychological and behavioral responses to them. For example, once an illegitimate task is perceived, feelings of unfairness and mistreatment are likely to result (Semmer et al., 2015). Further, empirical work supports that illegitimate tasks are related to reduced self-esteem, (Semmer et al., 2015), anger (Eatough et al., 2016), and heightened cortisol (Kottwitz et al., 2013).

Yet, how these undesirable psychological responses in turn cascade to non-work domains have been left unexplored until now. In particular, a primary aim of the current work is to explore how illegitimate tasks and work-to-family outcomes are connected through a serial mediation pathway of proximal psychological reactions that then influence the non-work domain. Specifically, we expect that illegitimate tasks first ignite lower perceptions of interactional justice which is then followed by negative emotional states. It is this emotional degradation that drives undesirable spillover. Thus, the first aspect of this chain of events centers on justice-based reactions to illegitimate tasks.

## 2. Illegitimate tasks and interactional justice

Fairness theory (Folger & Cropanzano, 2001) states that an event will be perceived as unfair if the individual thinks 1) they would be better off had the event not occurred, 2) the person responsible could have and/or should have acted differently. Due to the nature of illegitimate tasks, there is a high likelihood all three conditions are met. Within the larger organizational justice domain, there are three major forms of justice: distributive, procedural, and interactional justice. Interactional justice (which of the justice domains is a focus of this study) is represented by the degree to which people are treated with dignity and respect (i.e., interpersonal) and the quality of information conveyed to people (i.e., informational) regarding relevant outcomes (Bies & Moag, 1986). Procedural justice although related, refers to the perceived fairness of decision-making processes, which involves the degree of process control (being able to voice views during a process), how consistently and accurately the outcomes are applied, and decision control (being able to influence the outcome; Thibaut & Walker, 1975). Distributive justice exists to the degree that the distributions of an outcome is constant with the goals of a situation, such as maximizing productivity (Leventhal, 1976).

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