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The When, Why, and How: Antecedents of Illegitimate Task Perceptions

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The When, Why, and How: Antecedents of Illegitimate Task Perceptions

by

Patricia Jewel Emily Morrison

A thesis submitted to the School of Psychology at
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Abstract

Title: The When, Why, and How: Antecedents of Illegitimate Task Perceptions

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Driven, satisfied, and motivated employees are crucial to an organization's long-term success. The purpose of this research study was to examine factors that may be affecting employee perceptions of tasks as illegitimate. Utilizing a purposive, convenience sampling approach, 14 employees were recruited to participate in this study. Participants completed an interview with the researcher that lasted approximately 30 minutes and was audio recorded and later transcribed. All data was analyzed in NVivo qualitative analysis software utilizing the grounded theory method and thematic analysis approach. The following three themes emerged from the data analysis: (1) Lack of Resources, Lack of Support, Repeat Occurrences, and Environmental Conditions Influence *WHEN* Employees Perceive Certain Tasks as Illegitimate; (2) Unlawfulness, Unfairness, Role Boundary Violations, and Time Violations Influence *HOW* Employees Perceive Certain Tasks as Illegitimate; and (3) Inexperience, Role Confusion, Professional Relationships, and Trust in Abilities Influence *WHY* Employees Perceive Certain Tasks as Illegitimate. These findings add novel information to the small body of literature currently available on illegitimate tasks. As well, these findings provide organizations with evidence of several different antecedents that may affect their employees' perceptions of certain work tasks as illegitimate.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Illegitimate tasks, broadly defined as assignments given to or requested of an employee that do not directly fall within the scope of that employee's main job duties (Semmer et al., 2007), are seen as a violation of the expectations that employees have for their role at work (Eatough, 2016). When employees receive an illegitimate task request or are told to complete one, they may view such a task as socially demeaning or “not within my pay grade”—regardless of the task's content or difficulty to execute (Schulte-Braucks et al., 2019). Essentially, illegitimate tasks are seen as potential threats to a person's professional identity and violate the psychological contract they have with their workplace (Eatough, 2013; Lopez & Fuiks, 2021; Pereira et al., 2014).

Consider the following example: You are an office employee who has finished all of your required assignments for that workday. Your supervisor then approaches you and asks you to attend a board of directors meeting as the designated note-taker, even though this is not a task that you typically complete as part of your job. In this scenario, you may not regard the requested task as very stressful or inappropriate because you do not have any other work that needs to be completed that day. However, what if the scenario was changed slightly? Instead of having already finished your work for the day, in this scenario you are in the middle of trying to meet an important end-of-day project deadline when your supervisor interrupts you with the same request to attend a board of directors meeting as the designated note-taker. How would you feel about the requested task in this new scenario?

Depending on your perception of the current circumstances surrounding the request, you may regard the same task as very stressful and inappropriate in the second scenario compared to the first (Eatough, 2013). You may even begin to wonder whether the work you usually do is valued by your supervisor at all considering the type of task that they asked you to help them with and the timing of their request. Furthermore, if you continue thinking that your usual work is not being appreciated—nor your role respected—then you may become dissatisfied with your job over time and be more likely to view any future task requests as illegitimate even when they might not necessarily be so (Muntz et al., 2019; Sias & Duncan, 2019).

Therefore, as illustrated in the example above, it is important to remember that illegitimate tasks have been conceptualized as those tasks that violate the organizational norms of what *can be reasonably expected* from a specific employee, in a specific job (Semmer et al., 2010). This means that a task in and of itself is not necessarily always considered to be “illegitimate”. Rather, circumstances can play a substantial role in whether or not a task is considered illegitimate by a specific employee, such as who is making the task request (e.g., a supervisor, coworker, or subordinate), who typically completes the task (e.g., an administrative assistant or custodial staff member), and potential resource-constraints that may affect an employee’s ability to complete the task (e.g., staff shortages, time pressures, etc.), for instance (Muntz et al., 2019).

Illegitimate task requests can come from a variety of sources; however, most of the research to date has centered on illegitimate tasks given to or requested of employees by their direct supervisors. While supervisors may assume that the tasks they assign to their employees do legitimately fall within the bounds of their employees’ job role, past research suggests that employees may view those very same tasks to be illegitimate in the context of their main responsibilities (Meier &

Semmer, 2018). What this means is that job roles not explicitly and adequately defined by the hiring personnel early on in the onboarding process may lead to confusion among employees as to what tasks they should (and should not) be doing as part of their job (Faupel et al., 2016). As a result, employees experiencing this role confusion may be heavily impacted by stressors that such a predicament can present, including increased anxiety, conflict, and burnout as well as both lowered self-esteem and job satisfaction over time (Eatough, 2013; Semmer et al., 2015).

The Research Gap

There is currently a dearth of information concerning why some employees view certain tasks as illegitimate, and under what circumstances. Most research to date has focused more so on establishing illegitimate tasks as its own unique construct and investigating the numerous negative outcomes associated with illegitimate task requests, such as job stress and strain and poorer psychosocial work outcomes (Anskar et al., 2019; Semmer et al., 2007; Semmer et al., 2010; Semmer et al., 2015). Furthermore, the Berne Illegitimate Tasks Scale (BITS) has been the primary measure used for gathering quantitative data to answer researchers' hypotheses about the associations between illegitimate tasks and different outcome variables (Semmer et al., 2010; Semmer et al., 2015). I believe, however, that additional qualitative data is needed to more comprehensively understand the construct of illegitimate tasks before researchers rely too heavily on quantitative measures like the BITS.

Most studies rely on the definition of illegitimate tasks posed by Semmer et al. (2010; 2015) which derives from the Stress-as-Offense-to-Self theoretical framework (SOS, Semmer et al., 2007; Semmer et al., 2016). SOS theory posits that developing and holding a positive self-view is a fundamental human need (Beehr and Glazer, 2005; Semmer et al., 2019). Experiencing threats to one's positive self-view tends to result in negative psychological, behavioral, and

physical reactions whereas boosts to one's positive self-view tends to foster greater well-being (Beehr and Glazer, 2005; Semmer et al., 2019). The term 'threats' is often described in SOS literature as any type of stressor that impedes one's chances of reaching their goals and maintaining their positive self-view (Semmer et al., 2019).

It remains unclear, though, what exactly these 'stressors' are that appear to threaten's one's positive self-view in relation to the tasks that they are asked or assigned to complete at work. Why do employees perceive certain work tasks as illegitimate relative to other tasks? How do they rationalize some work tasks to be illegitimate for them to complete but not other tasks? When might internal or external conditions affect these perceptions of task illegitimacy?

Questions like these cannot be adequately answered with quantitative data because of their subjective nature and breadth of scope. Therefore, qualitative grounded theory development is needed to more fully understand the circumstances that may be affecting employee perceptions of task illegitimacy. Grounded theory aims to systematically study social processes through an intense analysis of the data and how the data relates to both the participants' experience of the phenomenon of interest as well as the researchers' knowledge of the phenomenon being studied (Eaves, 2001; Mills et al., 2006). Following grounded theory methodology can help researchers generate new theory or expand upon existing theory (Chun Tie et al., 2019; Rennie et al., 1998). In the case of the present study, my goal is to examine employee perceptions of work task illegitimacy through qualitative interviews and thematic analysis driven by grounded theory methodology. I hope that this approach will further develop the SOS theory as it relates to the construct of illegitimate tasks. As well, I believe that by developing a taxonomy that illustrates antecedents of illegitimate task perceptions, researchers will be more aptly prepared to study illegitimate tasks in the future.

The following research questions are proposed based on the literature gaps concerning illegitimate task perceptions and the guiding theoretical framework. Due to the grounded theory methodology that will be utilized to guide the data collection and analysis process, the proposed research questions were purposely posed broadly so that the data would guide the research, rather than my preconceived hypotheses about the phenomenon of interest.

1. What factors influence *when* employees perceive certain tasks as illegitimate relative to other tasks (e.g., time constraints; resource constraints)?
2. What factors influence *how* employees perceive certain tasks as illegitimate relative to other tasks (e.g., As above or below their paygrade; as outside the scope of their responsibilities)?
3. What factors influence *why* employees perceive certain tasks as illegitimate relative to other tasks (e.g., LMX status; role confusion)?

Significance of the Study

The results of this research study could address the current literature gap by providing more detailed information about how different circumstances--including time constraints, resource deficits, and supervisor-supervisee relationships--might influence employee perceptions of task illegitimacy. The multi-dimensional nature of job roles, organizational design, and work cultures underscores the criticality of investigating perceptions of task illegitimacy more closely. At the organizational level, information gleaned from this study could help leaders improve the following work-related factors: (a) defining job roles more clearly to new employees to reduce their role confusion, (b) training supervisors on how to maximize productivity without sacrificing the well-being of their employees, and (3) encouraging a flexible role orientation in employees to decrease their perception of tasks as illegitimate when the assignment of extra-role tasks is unavoidable.

At the employee level, examining perceptions of task illegitimacy may also provide practical insights as to how such perceptions can impact the attraction and retention of top-performing employees. For example, in an age where technological skills are essential to optimal organizational performance, it is imperative that companies are able to keep up with these advancements so as to not saddle their employees with extra work due to inefficient processes and outdated systems. As well, multiple generations of employees are now working in similar positions across different job sectors. Due to the large age-range of today's workforce, organizations must critically evaluate their incentive and compensation systems in order maintain high work engagement among their staff members. Clearly defining job responsibilities, fostering a flexible role orientation among employees, and attending to generational differences in job-related values could help resolve perceptions of tasks as illegitimate (James et al., 2011). Overall, striving to create a supportive work culture between employees, their supervisors, and around the work they need to complete by reducing perceptions of task illegitimacy may help increase employee retention and work engagement.

Summary

This study contributes to the existing literature on illegitimate tasks in four ways. First, this research adds to the currently scant literature on possible antecedents to perceptions of certain work tasks as illegitimate. Second, this research provides an in-depth exploration of employees' personal experiences with illegitimate work tasks using a qualitative, grounded theory approach—a method that has not been common in illegitimate task research to date. Third, this research further develops SOS theory and the construct of illegitimate tasks. Fourth, a taxonomy depicting antecedents of illegitimate task perceptions serves to bolster future research on this topic. Findings from this study may also help organizations experiencing poor employee well-being, high turnover rates, and counterproductive

work behaviors to better understand the circumstances that lead to these negative outcomes as well as what steps can be taken to mitigate similar outcomes in the future.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Illegitimate tasks are currently defined as work tasks that violate norms about what an employee can reasonably be expected to do in their specific job role (Bjork et al., 2013). These task-related stressors can induce strain and threaten one's sense of professional identity due to the demeaning social messages that may be conveyed in the assignment of such tasks (Semmer et al., 2010; Semmer et al., 2015). Oftentimes, being given a task that lies outside of one's perceived job responsibilities imparts a sense of disrespect onto the employee who may then feel like they are not valued, nor their current work respected (Kottwitz et al., 2021; Semmer et al., 2015).

In this literature review, I will provide additional background on the research problem discussed in the first chapter. The first section provides additional information on the theoretical framework of the study, which is the Stress-as-Offense-to-Self Theory. The second section details possible drivers of illegitimate tasks, including supervisor-supervisee relationship status and fairness perceptions. The third section focuses on outcomes already shown in previous research to be related to illegitimate tasks, such as job dissatisfaction and anxiety. The fourth section outlines different methods to address the consequences of illegitimate tasks that have proven to be beneficial in previous studies. Following this discussion, the chapter will explore what is missing from the current literature on illegitimate tasks and explain how this study will attempt to address the missing elements in this topic area. Finally, the chapter ends with a short summary of the literature review.

Theoretical Framework

The Stress-as-Offense-to-Self theory (SOS) posits that people seek to maintain a positive image of themselves and that any potential threats to this

positive self-view are inherently stressful (Fila & Eatough, 2020; Ilyas et al., 2021). Concern for one's own self-esteem is a central facet of SOS theory; thus, it stands to reason that perceived threats which damage a person's perception of themselves relative to others could lower their self-esteem and result in undesirable behaviors (Semmer et al., 2019). The concept of illegitimate tasks relates to SOS theory in that it is derived from one of two pathways within the SOS theoretical framework, namely the Stress-as-Disrespect (SAD) pathway (Fila & Eatough, 2020). The basic tenet of the SAD pathway is that stressful experiences caused by others can manifest in negative outcomes—in turn reducing psychological well-being and hindering performance (Fila & Eatough, 2020; Mugayar-Baldocchi, 2021).

In a work context, for example, certain tasks may be perceived as illegitimate if employees interpret said tasks as stressors that convey a sense of devaluation of themselves and their work compared to their colleagues who do not also receive such tasks (Zhou et al., 2018; Semmer et al., 2019). This is because being assigned an illegitimate task can imply inconsideration or disrespect from others—especially from those who assigned the task to begin with—which in turn may be perceived by employees on the receiving end as a threat to their self-esteem and carefully constructed identity (Bjork et al., 2013). In other words, if an employee believes that having to complete a certain task would threaten their professional sense-of-self, then they be more likely to view the task as illegitimate because it does not align with the professional identity that they have created for themselves. Having to then perform the illegitimate task not only requires additional physical and emotional effort on the part of the performing employee in that moment (Thun et al., 2018), but often also results in a diminished sense of professional accomplishment and personal development after the task is completed (Meier et al., 2011; Apostel et al., 2018). Therefore, it is imperative that appropriate attention be paid to these hindrance stressors (Semmer et al., 2015) so researchers can determine when, why, and how people perceive certain tasks as illegitimate.

Unreasonable vs. Unnecessary Tasks

Confirmatory factor analyses conducted in past research studies have provided some support for a model of illegitimate tasks that consists of two distinct subtypes (Mäkikangas et al., 2021; Pindek et al., 2019). The first subtype of illegitimate task, termed the ‘unreasonable task’, is regarded as those work tasks that do not fall within an employee’s official job description and are not sufficiently justified by the “other duties as assigned” clause that accompanies many work agreements (Pindek et al., 2019). Unreasonable tasks are conceptualized as tasks that reside outside of an employee’s realm of responsibility and are an overextension of what they were originally hired to do, which leads employees to believe that such tasks should be completed by other people rather than themselves (Faupel et al., 2016).

The other type of illegitimate task, termed the ‘unnecessary task’, is regarded as those work tasks that seem to serve no real purpose (Pindek et al., 2019) and are typically considered to be pointless “busywork”. Unnecessary tasks are conceptualized as tasks that result from a lack of organizational detail or due to poor management, which leads employees to believe that such tasks should not have to be performed at all because they could have been avoided to begin with (Faupel et al., 2016). While both types of illegitimate tasks have been shown to elicit negative emotions from employees such as anger and resentment, unnecessary tasks are usually much less negatively influential than unreasonable tasks are according to previous research findings (Ilyas et al., 2021; Pindek et al., 2019).

Illegitimate tasks are now widely considered to consist of both unreasonable and unnecessary task subtypes (Ilyas et al., 2021; Mäkikangas et al., 2021; Pindek et al., 2019). While these subtypes of illegitimate tasks contain subtle differences in form and function, in the end they both ultimately lead to negative consequences

for employee well-being and organizational functioning overall (Pindek et al., 2019). The following section of this review will delve deeper into the intricacies of how illegitimate tasks affect employees and their working relationships.

Possible Drivers of Illegitimate Tasks

Employee Job Role Perceptions

Many supervisors tend to believe that the tasks they assign to their employees are legitimately situated within the bounds of their employees' specific job roles. However, prior research suggests that there may be a disconnect between supervisor-employee perceptions of what is considered a legitimate task in relation to a specific employees' main job responsibilities (Meier & Semmer, 2018). The Roles-as-Perspectives theory (RaP) provides some context as to why this disconnect may exist. Roles-as-Perspectives theory characterizes differences in job role perceptions as being the result of role-related patterns that influence people's view of reality depending on their relative positions to one another (Meier & Summer, 2018). That is to say, employees become accustomed to the typical role expectations that they have been experiencing since they started in their job position, and over time these expectations become more solidified and internalized to reflect employees' overall job identity (Stets & Serpe, 2016).

Employees who possess a broader perception of job role boundaries are considered to have a high flexible role orientation, meaning that they tend to work based on a mentality that completing tasks outside of their basic role expectations is generally acceptable (Parker, 2007). In contrast, employees who possess a narrower perception of job role boundaries are considered to have a low flexible role orientation, meaning that they tend to work based on a "that's not my job mentality" and prefer not to complete tasks outside of their basic role expectations (Parker, 2007). Past research has demonstrated that employees with a lower flexible

role orientation who have a narrower perception of job role boundaries are often more sensitive to identity-threatening stressors like illegitimate tasks (Ma & Peng, 2019; Schulte-Braucks et al., 2018). Thus, the narrower an employee perceives the boundaries of their job role, the more likely they are to perceive a task outside of perceived role boundaries as illegitimate—even if their supervisor does not (Ma & Peng, 2019).

Considering past research on flexible role orientation, it would be wise to more explicitly and comprehensively define job roles and responsibilities to employees during their onboarding process. Otherwise, confusion and strife may manifest between employees and higher-ups because neither party is aligned on what tasks are legitimate for employees in specific job roles. This confusion, in turn, may affect employees' perceptions about the boundaries of their job role and what should reasonably be expected of them in that role (Maden-Eyiusta, 2019).

To illustrate the above point, consider the results of a study conducted by Faupel and colleagues (2016) on German teacher trainees. Interview data gathered by the research team revealed that many of the teacher trainees had different beliefs about whether they should act more like a certified teacher (and take on more advanced responsibilities like those of certified teachers), or if they should act more like a trainee and remain in a subordinate status under certified teachers (only taking on lower-level responsibilities considered “beneath” the role of a certified teacher). The authors' results also revealed that even when evaluating the same set of tasks (i.e. seminar lectures, central examinations, teaching, counseling, etc.), teacher trainees differed in their reports of which tasks were role-confirming versus role-violating. Periphery tasks were more often seen as role-violating and illegitimate compared to tasks considered to be core to the teacher trainees' position, supporting the notion that supervisors should make clear to their subordinates early on the types of tasks to consider important and central to their

role (Parker et al., 1997). By clearly outlining expected role responsibilities and highlighting examples of when additional tasks may be assigned, supervisors could help broaden their employees' perceptions of their own job identity and foster a higher flexible role orientation in them that then could result in lower reports of illegitimate tasks.

Supervisor-Supervisee Relationship

As illegitimate tasks are commonly handed down to employees from their direct supervisors, researchers have begun studying different types of leader-subordinate relationship dynamics and how these differences affect employee perceptions of tasks as illegitimate. Leader-Member Exchange theory (LMX) is one such theoretical framework by which researchers are examining the effects of different supervisor-supervisee relationships on employees' illegitimate task perceptions. Essentially, LMX theory posits that supervisors establish and maintain different relationships with each of their employees, and that they distribute resources like salary bonuses or duties differently to their employees depending on the quality of their relationship with them (Lord et al., 2017). Sias and Duncan (2019), for example, found that supervisor-supervisee relationship quality was significantly related to perceptions of extra-role tasks (ERTs) as illegitimate. More specifically, employees with high quality supervisor-supervisee relationships reported less incidences where supervisors had made ERT requests from them and perceived ERTs as more legitimate than employees with low quality relationships.

Sias and Duncan (2019) attributed these findings, in part, to the fluidity of role boundaries between what supervisors and their subordinates consider to be appropriate tasks for a particular job role. Those subordinates who had a positive LMX relationship with their supervisor experienced more benefits and resources from this good standing (e.g., more frequent communication and support) compared to subordinates who did not have a positive LMX relationship with their

supervisor. As a result of these associated benefits and additional resources, subordinates in a positive LMX relationship interpreted more of the tasks assigned to them by their supervisor as appropriate and acceptable to expect of someone in their job role than subordinates in a negative LMX relationship did. As demonstrated by research findings such as these, it appears that relational context can greatly influence perceptions of role boundaries and the illegitimacy of tasks among employees depending on the quality of their LMX relationships.

Toxic Leadership

The *type* of leadership a supervisor displays can also contribute to the formation of high or low quality supervisor-supervisee relationships. Some supervisors may adopt a more passive leadership approach, characterized by avoiding conflict whenever possible and delaying taking necessary actions that would help promote team and departmental development (Barling & Frone, 2017). Passive leadership is considered to be a form of destructive leadership because lack of sufficient action or support from a supervisor can cause employees to perceive their supervisor as lazy, uncaring, and/or incompetent at their job (Harold & Holtz, 2014; Zhou et al., 2020). Leaders who are perceived as incompetent by their employees are often met with greater employee resistance to their ideas and they are less effective at influencing employee behavior (Darioly & Schmid Mast, 2011). This lack of supervisory support and functional leadership tends to result in employees viewing most tasks given to them by passive supervisors as illegitimate—even if the task itself would normally be perceived to fit within the confines of the employees' job responsibilities (Zhou et al., 2020).

Other supervisors may display actions and behaviors towards their employees that are perceived as abusive (e.g., rudeness, invading one's privacy, purposely withholding important information, etc.; Shoss et al., 2013). Research on the relationship between abusive supervision and illegitimate tasks has shown that

the more abusive tendencies a supervisor displays, the more illegitimate tasks their employees perceive they are being given by that abusive supervisor. This relationship was also found to be even stronger among lower-level, nonsupervisory employees when compared to employees situated higher in the organizational hierarchy (Stein et al., 2020). Perhaps abusive supervisors who oversee lower-level employees believe they can “get away with it” more so than supervisors of higher-ranked employees based on their supervisees’ work experience, age differences, or ability to connect with Human Resources for help resolving issues with potentially problematic supervisors. These findings illustrate the importance of why additional research is needed regarding illegitimate task perceptions. Discovering what measures could be taken to counteract abusive supervision may help reduce employee perceptions of tasks as illegitimate and/or the negative effects of actual illegitimate task experiences on the employees who experience them.

Job-Demands Resources

Another possible driver of illegitimate task perceptions concerns the adequate availability of resources needed to perform in a job role effectively. Job resources refer to the means that employees use to achieve work goals, reduce job-related stress, and stimulate professional learning and development (Fila & Eatough, 2020). Some examples of job resources include the amount of control one has over their work and the amount of support they receive from supervisors and colleagues. As stated by Fila and Eatough (2020), “[Job Demands-Resources theory, JD-R] postulates that resources directly reduce strain, as well as attenuate (i.e., buffer) the effects of job demands on these negative outcomes.” This theory explains that job resources diminish strain; so, having less resources available to complete job tasks leads to increased negative outcomes for employees, such as higher rates of anxiety and depression.

Resource constraints and time pressures are two main contributors of strain under the JD-R model. Resource constraints could be anything from insufficient personnel to distribute taskloads evenly to inadequate supplies needed to complete tasks efficiently (Bjork et al., 2013). And, time pressures are typically experienced when employees do not think that they have sufficient time to complete their main job-related responsibilities by stated deadlines (Zhou et al., 2018). Prior research has shown that employees who have to work under high resource deficit conditions are less satisfied with their work environment and are more likely to perceive tasks outside of their core job role responsibilities as illegitimate (Anskar et al., 2019). Additionally, previous research has also shown that employees who expressed greater time pressures in their day-to-day work reported more instances of illegitimate tasks—possibly because these employees were experiencing intense time conflict between the work-tasks they considered legitimate for their role and those that they did not (Zhou et al., 2018). Therefore, it is beneficial for organizations to consider how to prevent resource constraints and time pressures from occurring so that their employees remain productive and satisfied at work.

Fairness and Injustice

Previous research has demonstrated that an organization's actions—such as assigning illegitimate tasks to employees—can end up decreasing their employees' work engagement and intent to remain with the company long-term (van Schie et al., 2014). Employees who receive illegitimate tasks often become angry because they feel undervalued or betrayed by their organization for failing to see their worth as a hard-working employee. These perceived psychological contract violations between employees and the organization they work for can lead to a lack of trust and diminished cohesiveness that, in turn, can make accomplishing company goals much more onerous (van Schie et al., 2014).

Oftentimes, supervisors are seen by employees as an extension of the organization's top management—even if the supervisors themselves do not necessarily hold much authority in the overall company ranks (Ahmed et al., 2018). Due to this widely-held view, employees tend to react negatively to illegitimate task requests regardless of whether the task comes from their direct supervisor or someone higher up in the corporate hierarchy. In either case, employees perceive a lack of fairness and a sense of injustice as a result of being assigned a task they do not feel is legitimate for them (Ahmed et al., 2018).

The most common types of fairness associated with illegitimate tasks are procedural fairness, distributive fairness, and interactional fairness. Procedural fairness concerns the resource allocation process and the general way in which superiors reach work-related decisions (Boer et al., 2002). Distributive fairness concerns the evaluation of outcomes received in the exchange relationship between employees and the organization they work for (Boer et al., 2002). Lastly, interactional fairness concerns the extent to which employees are treated with respect and dignity and well as the quality of information conveyed to them by their superiors (Ahmed et al., 2018). When employees perceive low levels of fairness and justice in how their supervisors treat them compared to others, these employees often become envious and more likely to engage in workplace incivility (Koopman et al., 2020; Sliter et al., 2014). Engaging in low-intensity deviant behavior such as rudeness or sub-par attention to work assignment quality may be ways that some employees attempt to “get even” with their organization and restore a sense of justice within themselves when they feel that they have been treated unfairly (Schulte-Braucks et al., 2019). Others, in contrast, may choose to stay silent or “walk away” from such instances of unfairness or injustice in order to avoid conflict and preserve a harmonious work climate (Cortina & Magley, 2009; Cortina et al., 2021).

Indeed, the ease with which a person is inclined to feel unfairly or unjustly treated and how strongly they react to such perceptions of injustice (a.k.a. justice sensitivity) does appear to play a role in their reactions to receiving illegitimate tasks (Schulte-Braucks et al., 2019). For example, the results of a daily diary study by Schulte-Braucks and colleagues (2019) revealed that differences in participants' personalities, specifically how justice-sensitive they were, intensified their negative reactions towards having experienced illegitimate tasks throughout their work week. This "hypersensitivity" to possible injustices or unfair situations may be dependent on national context and culture as shown in a recent study by Ahmed and colleagues (2018). In their study, they utilized both a U.S. and an Indian sample of employees and assessed their study variables through a questionnaire at two different time points, separated by a three-month lag. The authors found that while both participant samples reported having to complete tasks that "they should not have to do", only the U.S. sample showed a decreased sense of justice as a result of being assigned illegitimate tasks. These findings are intriguing and support the case that more research should be done on illegitimate task perceptions among employees within the U.S. and in other countries around the world.

Outcomes of Illegitimate Tasks

It has now been established that supervisors often play a major role in the frequency of illegitimate tasks assigned to employees as well as how the distribution of such tasks affect the supervisor-supervisee relationship. We next turn our focus to how illegitimate tasks can affect overall well-being as both a professional and a regular person outside of work. After discussing stressors and strain as they relate to illegitimate tasks, we will then proceed to reviewing employee outcomes for those who experience the stresses and strains associated with illegitimate tasks.

Stressors and Strain

Although the concept of illegitimate tasks as a unique stressor is still relatively new, general research findings documenting stress resulting from tasks considered unnecessary for a specific job were documented in a study by Rizzo, House, and Lirtzman all the way back in 1970 (Munir et al., 2017). Their study on role ambiguity and role conflict in complex organizations showed increased role stress among employees who had to complete tasks that they did not feel matched well with the job they were originally hired for (Rizzo et al., 1970). It makes sense, then, that perceptions of unfairness and threats to one's professional identity resulting from illegitimate tasks would be stressful to employees (at least to some extent). Indeed, results from a study by Kottowitz et al. (2013) investigating the effects of illegitimate tasks on salivary cortisol release (e.g. a stress hormone) in employees seems to support this view. In their study, Kottowitz et al. (2013) administered questionnaires to employees and took samples of their saliva at three different timepoints (with a 6-month lag time in-between). Their analyses revealed that even after controlling for factors like work interruptions, social stressors, and emotional stability, employees who experienced more illegitimate tasks still had greater cortisol release - especially if their personal health was already impaired.

In addition to heightened levels of stress, illegitimate tasks have also been shown to increase the three main types of strain, namely time, family, and behavioral strain, due to employees' feelings of over-exertion and job insecurities at work. Often referred to as work-to-family conflict (WFC), time, family, and behavioral strain can impact one's ability to detach from work and commit adequate effort and resources to their non-work roles (e.g., as a partner, parent, athlete, etc.; Zhou et al., 2020). Over time, this can lead to many negative outcomes for employees experiencing such high amounts of stress and strain, including lowered self-esteem, increased job dissatisfaction, anger, CWBs, and signs of

burnout (Meier & Semmer, 2018; Sonnentag & Lischetzke, 2018). Discussing these various outcomes in more detail will help convey just how detrimental illegitimate tasks can be to employee well-being.

Low Self-Esteem

The overarching definition of ‘self-esteem’ entails how a person evaluates their total worth as an individual which, in turn, reflects how satisfied they are with themselves (Sonnentag & Lischetzke, 2018). Broken down further, self-esteem is explained as having two main components, namely trait- and state self-esteem. State self-esteem fluctuates day-to-day depending on environmental factors whereas trait self-esteem is more stable across time (Eatough et al., 2013). Some researchers also distinguish state self-esteem as consisting of personal- and social self-esteem. Personal self-esteem concerns how one views their own qualities like competence, attractiveness, and the amount of dignity they possess while social self-esteem concerns how much one feels acknowledged and appreciated by close others in their surrounding environment (Ali et al., 2018; Semmer et al., 2019).

Across several studies, illegitimate tasks have been shown to negatively affect employees’ self-esteem overall, and state self-esteem in particular (Eatough et al., 2013). For example, in a study by Sonnentag and Lischetzke (2018), the ill effects of experiencing illegitimate tasks—including negative affect and low psychological detachment from work—persisted through the employees’ workday and for the rest of their evening after they left their workplace for the day. Also shown in similar studies was that these negative effects are further exacerbated for employees with lower levels of trait self-esteem compared to their counterparts with higher trait self-esteem (Eatough et al., 2013; Eatough et al., 2016). Lowered self-esteem strains people’s psychological, physical, and behavioral adjustment both within and outside of work, so it is important to figure out the extent to which

illegitimate task experiences hinder self-esteem and employee well-being (Sonnentag & Lischetzke, 2018).

Job Dissatisfaction

Job satisfaction is commonly defined as the degree to which a person likes or dislikes their job; and, it is influenced by both intrinsic and extrinsic aspects such as receiving support from coworkers or supervisors and being paid an acceptable salary, respectively (Eatough et al., 2016; Ilyas et al., 2021). Dissatisfaction with one's job typically occurs in response to high stressors or poor working conditions that limit goal attainment and elicit frustration and other negative emotions while working (Muntz et al., 2019). On several occasions, illegitimate tasks were shown to decrease employee job satisfaction regardless of whether the tasks were considered unnecessary or unreasonable (Ilyas et al., 2021); and, these perceptions of lowered job satisfaction persisted for the remainder of the day even after employees had left their workplace and returned to their homes (Eatough et al., 2013; Eatough et al., 2016). Additionally, researchers suggest that illegitimate task experiences may threaten employee job satisfaction because they create the perception of an effort-reward imbalance (Omansky et al., 2016). If employees think that their work is not being appreciated, nor their role respected, then they may be more likely to become dissatisfied with their job as well as view a greater number of future task requests as illegitimate even when they may not necessarily be so (Muntz et al., 2019).

Anger

Anger, a common outcome of unfair treatment, is defined as a strong negative emotion characterized by extreme annoyance and hostility (Eatough, 2013). Illegitimate tasks are associated with the perception of unfair task assignment (Semmer et al., 2015). Viewed through this lens, it makes sense that

anger would emerge in response to experiencing such unfair tasks (Eatough et al., 2016). Similar to lowered self-esteem and job dissatisfaction, anger has also been found to remain elevated for the rest of the day in employees who experienced illegitimate tasks at work, although these elevated anger levels did dissipate overnight (Eatough, 2013; Eatough et al., 2016). Time pressure has also been demonstrated to influence the illegitimate task-anger relationship, as shown in a study by Zhou and colleagues (2018). Their results indicated that when there was greater time pressure to meet deadlines at work, employees' anger levels were higher in response to illegitimate task requests than when time pressure to meet deadlines was lower. The authors posit that this could be because "time pressure reflects more intense conflict between legitimate responsibilities and illegitimate task assignments," meaning that time pressure heightens the distinction employees make between what tasks they feel they should and should not have to complete as part of their work role (Zhou et al., 2018).

Counterproductive Work Behaviors

In addition to low self-esteem, job dissatisfaction, and anger, counterproductive work behaviors (CWBs) are another outcome of the stressors and strains associated with illegitimate task experiences. Counterproductive work behaviors are considered to be purposeful acts that violate workplace norms, consisting of negative behaviors such as sabotage, theft, and withdrawal that aim to harm organizations themselves or specific individuals within the organization (Zhou et al., 2018). Across several studies utilizing samples of employed college students and full-time administrative staff, illegitimate tasks were shown to elicit same-day, next-day, and next-week CWB in employees who experienced such tasks (Schulte-Braucks et al., 2019; Zhou et al., 2018). Another study by Semmer and colleagues (2010) also showed that CWB resulting from illegitimate task experiences were typically directed at one's coworkers (e.g., through harassment

and gossiping) as well as towards the organization they worked for (e.g., an employee intentionally working slower than they are able to in order to impede progress on an important project). As demonstrated, CWB can be detrimental to the well-being of both employees and organizations, which is why it is imperative to continue examining the associations between illegitimate tasks and outcomes like counterproductive work behaviors.

Burnout

Marked by disengagement, cynicism, and exhaustion, burnout is considered to be another outcome of the stress and strain that stems from illegitimate task experiences. When having to complete a task that one believes undermines their hard work and value as an employee, they end up using extra mental effort and emotional resources to complete said task as a compensating mechanism (Semmer et al., 2015). The following paragraphs detail various signs of burnout that can result from exposure to illegitimate tasks.

Resentment and Irritability

Resentment and irritability are two types of strain responses associated with illegitimate task experiences. Both are similar to anger in that (a) resentment reflects a persistent displeasure towards someone or something that is believed to have done wrong, and (b) irritability reflects a tendency to ruminate on work-related issues and display difficulty controlling negative emotions that are caused by being injured on some level, in some way (Semmer et al., 2015). Previous research has shown that illegitimate tasks are positively associated with feelings of resentment and irritability, even across a time period of two months—suggesting that illegitimate task experiences can have longer-term consequences (Munir et al., 2017; Semmer et al., 2015).

Anxiety

Receiving illegitimate tasks to complete may lead employees to feel a sense of job insecurity or nervousness. In response to such fears, these employees might end up succumbing to an unpleasant emotional state in which they persistently feel concerned, distressed, and restless—otherwise known as anxiousness (Fila & Eatough, 2018). Both unreasonable and unnecessary illegitimate tasks have been shown to positively correlate with anxiety—meaning that as employees experienced more illegitimate tasks, their feelings of anxiety also increased (Fila & Eatough, 2020). Results like these suggest that repeated experiences with illegitimate tasks could cause prolonged anxiety in employees and thereby hasten their rate of burnout.

Emotional Exhaustion and Fatigue

Two other markers of burnout include emotional exhaustion and fatigue, which are examined together in this section due to their similarity with one another. Emotional exhaustion is characterized by feelings of unenthusiasm and insufficient energy to face the day's work, and fatigue is characterized by extreme mental and physical tiredness due to overexertion (Fila & Eatough, 2018). Significant positive relationships between illegitimate tasks and both emotional exhaustion and fatigue have been demonstrated in several different studies. For instance, Eatough (2013) found that more illegitimate task experiences across the workday culminated in higher employee fatigue after work during the evening hours of that day.

Other interesting results were found in a study by Thun and colleagues (2018), who examined the effects of illegitimate tasks experienced by physicians. Their research revealed that unreasonable tasks were associated with higher levels of sickness presenteeism (i.e. attending work when ill) among physicians, even after controlling for other factors like gender, age, role conflict, control over work

pace, and administrative tasks. Conditions like sickness presenteeism may arise as a result of prolonged emotional exhaustion and fatigue resulting from repeated illegitimate task experiences; however, more research is needed to fully examine this possibility.

Low Motivation

In psychology, motivation is commonly delineated into two types, namely extrinsic and intrinsic motivation. Research on illegitimate tasks has thus far only assessed the effects of illegitimate tasks on intrinsic motivation, or, “The degree to which a person wants to work well in his or her job in order to achieve intrinsic satisfaction,” (Muntz & Dormann, 2020). This research demonstrated that perceptions of an effort-reward imbalance implied by illegitimate task assignments was negatively correlated with intrinsic motivation (Omansky et al., 2016). As well, low levels of intrinsic motivation among employees were found to be associated with an increase in perceptions of tasks as illegitimate, especially under conditions of low appreciation (Muntz & Dormann, 2020). In light of these results, it would be interesting to explore the effects of illegitimate tasks on extrinsic motivation as well. For example, perhaps employees would perceive tasks as more legitimate if they receive monetary compensation that they believe is reasonable to complete said task.

Depression Symptoms

Sadness, an affective reaction following negative events like failure or social exclusion, may be a depressive symptom experienced as a result of illegitimate tasks since such tasks are often perceived to convey disrespect or a lack of appreciation (Eatough, 2013). Indeed, both unreasonable and unnecessary tasks have been shown in past research to be positively associated with depressive symptoms; and, this association was intensified in response to higher task

unreasonableness (Fila & Eatough, 2020). Additionally, depressive symptoms were shown to increase throughout the workday in response to illegitimate tasks and also persist into the start of the following workday (Eatough, 2013; Eatough et al., 2016). Future research should explore how long depressive symptoms can persist in employees in response to one-time, and repeated, illegitimate task experiences.

Employee Turnover

The final sign of burnout discussed in this section pertains to how illegitimate tasks can affect an employee's intention to remain at their current workplace. If an employee is continually asked or told to do things that they do not believe matches with the job expectations they were originally hired to fulfill, then they may begin to pursue other employment opportunities. This line of reasoning is supported by the results of two different studies. Apostel et al. (2018), for example, found that illegitimate tasks were positively related to turnover intentions among a sample of German IT professionals even after controlling for job satisfaction, job control, and time pressures. In a different study by van Schie et al. (2014), the authors found that even among volunteers (who were not being paid for their labor), illegitimate task experiences decreased volunteers' intent to continue volunteering at a particular organization. Based on these results, it appears that the disrespect and unappreciation associated with illegitimate tasks goes beyond a simple "I'm not paid enough to do this," reaction. However, more research is needed to untangle the intricacies of exactly why, when, and how certain tasks are considered illegitimate by an organization's members.

Proposed Methods to Address Illegitimate Tasks

It is apparent from the research reviewed thus far that organizations should strive to limit the assignment of illegitimate tasks whenever possible. However, because organizations cannot always anticipate the factors that could disrupt

optimal functioning (ex: economic recessions, disastrous weather conditions, etc.), the assignment of illegitimate tasks may sometimes be unavoidable. When such situations do occur, organizations need to be aware of how they can reduce the negative effects associated with illegitimate tasks and be proactive in helping their employees combat these effects. Therefore, this section will highlight different approaches that have been shown to mitigate the less-than-desirable effects of illegitimate tasks on employee health and well-being.

Flexible Role Orientation

Firstly, one tactic that organizations could utilize—especially those organizations struggling with resource deficits and thus have little choice but to assign illegitimate tasks—is to try to foster a flexible role orientation in both their new and existing employees. By training and encouraging employees to define their job roles more broadly, they may become less likely to view tasks as illegitimate compared to other employees who have developed a more rigid role orientation (Ma & Peng, 2019). Even so, organizations should also still encourage and help their employees set proper work and non-work boundaries because doing so has been shown to reduce signs of burnout (Zhou et al., 2020). A balance should be found in each organization as to how broadly an employee needs to define their job role in order to be happy and successful in their workplace.

Appreciative Leadership

In contrast to passive leadership and abusive supervision—which have both been shown to intensify the negative consequences of illegitimate tasks—appreciative leadership has been shown to have the opposite effect. An appreciative leader is one who consistently acknowledges and praises their subordinates' qualities, efforts, and achievements (Apostel et al., 2018). This appreciative behavior from supervisors is viewed as a type of organizational

resource that can reduce the amount of stress employees feel at work, especially in response to identity-threatening stressors like illegitimate tasks (Apostel et al., 2018). Past research has revealed that appreciative leadership buffers the positive relationship between illegitimate tasks and factors like turnover intentions, anxiety, and emotional exhaustion (Apostel et al., 2018; Fila & Eatough, 2018), meaning that employees are less likely to become anxious, exhausted, or pursue other employment opportunities in response to receiving illegitimate tasks when they are supervised by an appreciative leader.

The findings from a study by Muntz and Dormann (2020) also bring up an important point organizations and supervisors should keep in mind. Their findings suggest that supervisors need to show appreciative behavior to all of their employees - not just the ones who appear to be distressed or unmotivated. As they conclude in their research, it is “particularly those who are intrinsically willing to work [who] suffer from not being appreciated - thus, it is important not to think about the motivated ones as ‘they are doing fine and going well’, because adverse perceptual biases might develop and [these] employees might withdraw from work.” Indeed, what should be gleaned from their study is that all employees can benefit from appreciative leadership regardless of whether or not they suffer from low motivation or illegitimate task experiences.

Explanation and Acknowledgement Behaviors

Even when supervisors adopt an appreciative leadership style, their employees may still question why they are being asked to complete tasks that they feel they should not have to do. This is precisely where two preventive facework strategies come into play, namely explanation and acknowledgement. Because illegitimate tasks can threaten one’s “face” (i.e. the positive social value a person has claimed for themselves), framing such tasks in a more positive light can reduce the negative effects on the employees who receive them. The explanation strategy

gives supervisors a way to facilitate sensegiving and position their request in a way that makes more sense to the employee (e.g., I'm really late for this important meeting, so could you please...). By doing so, their explanation might reassure the employee receiving the illegitimate task that this type of request is unlikely to become a regular occurrence. The acknowledgement strategy, on the other hand, functions by recognizing from the outset that the supervisor's request may present a threat to the employee's autonomy (e.g., I know that this isn't your job, but...). By establishing that the supervisor themselves is aware of the illegitimacy of their request, the employee may feel more validated as a result (Minei et al., 2018).

Past research by Minei et al. (2018) has shown support for the use of these tactics. In their study, they created hypothetical vignettes portraying situations where a supervisor made an illegitimate task request of their employee. The communicative language used to relay the illegitimate task request was altered between scenarios to include (a) neither explanation nor acknowledgement, (b) either explanation or acknowledgement, or (c) both explanation and acknowledgement together. Participants were asked to take the employee's point of view in the scenario that they were given to review. The results of analysing participants' questionnaire responses suggested that when only one strategy was present, explanations mitigated feelings of anger whereas acknowledgements mitigated perceptions of task illegitimacy. However, when both strategies were used simultaneously to make an illegitimate task request, levels of perceived illegitimacy and anger were the lowest among their entire participant sample. The results of this study suggest that using both strategies together could greatly reduce the negative effects employees experience as a result of illegitimate tasks.

Updating Organizational Practices

Current literature on how organizations can counteract the negative effects of illegitimate tasks is still in its infancy, though some promising research findings

do exist aside from the appreciative leadership approach and facework strategies discussed earlier. The first suggestion from research is that organizational protocols may need to be updated to reflect current workplace demands such as the integration of new technology into common office processes, greater diversity in the workplace (e.g., age, gender, race, etc.), and an increased desire among younger employees for benefits outside of higher pay (e.g., extended parental leave and flexible work schedules). By updating organizational protocols, organizations can create a better psychosocial work environment for employees that, in turn, reduces absenteeism and improves their overall well-being (Framke et al., 2017; Zhou et al., 2020).

Organizations could also implement a coaching program for supervisors to help them learn how to manage employees more effectively and hopefully reduce passive/abusive leadership tendencies (Zhou et al., 2020). One coaching tactic could be to train supervisors on relational transparency, which is defined as a clear and honest communication style aimed at facilitating mutual understanding of task objectives and desired outcomes (Muntz et al., 2019). Muntz et al. (2019), for example, found through their study that this transparent leadership behavior allowed supervisors to more effectively interrupt the vicious cycle between illegitimate tasks and resulting job dissatisfaction among employees. Having the ability to intervene and correct mishaps early on may enable supervisors to maintain better relationships with their employees, thereby promoting more beneficial working conditions for all involved.

What's Missing?

Previous research has focused almost exclusively on the outcomes of illegitimate tasks rather than on the circumstances affecting the interpretation of them as 'illegitimate'. Additionally, the main quantitative measure used to assess illegitimate tasks—that is, the Berne Illegitimate Tasks Scale (BITS)—has yet to

have its validation results published in any peer-reviewed journal. Lastly, because the timing of the present study coincides with the later phases of the COVID-19, pandemic, I have the unique opportunity to explore how the pandemic may have affected employee perceptions of task illegitimacy.

Validating the BITS

To my knowledge, the only research effort conducted to date that has attempted to validate the BITS was a thesis manuscript written by Nicola Jacobshagen in 2006, under the guidance of their supervisor, Norbert Semmer. As stated by Jacobshagen (2006), “Results are encouraging for the concept of illegitimate tasks and illegitimate stressors as independent predictors of psychological well-being and strain,” (p. 2). Despite these encouraging results, this thesis was never published in a peer-reviewed journal. Instead, Semmer and other researchers continue to just cite one another’s prior peer-reviewed journal articles as “evidence” of the Berne Illegitimate Tasks Scale’s validity—with the most commonly cited articles in these instances being Semmer et al. (2010) and Semmer et al. (2015).

The Berne Illegitimate Task Scale presents participants with eight items and asks them to indicate their agreement with each statement on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (frequently). Four questions aim to capture the *unnecessary* subfacet of illegitimate tasks while the other four questions aim to capture the *unreasonable* subfacet of illegitimate tasks (Semmer et al., 2010; Semmer et al., 2015). Although past researchers have found the BITS to have good reliability—typically falling in the $\alpha = .80-.90$ range according to their own statistical analyses (i.e., $\alpha = .87, .82,$ and $.80$ for the unnecessary subfacet, unreasonable subfacet, and overall scale, respectively; Davis, 2018)—no published, peer-reviewed journal article exists yet that assess the validation of this scale.

Lack of published, peer-reviewed results regarding the validity of the BITS is concerning for several reasons. Firstly, without quality research evidence demonstrating the scale's validity, it is difficult to determine how well the BITS is actually measuring the concepts it claims to measure (Gravetter & Forzano, 2018; Mohajan, 2017). Good reliability is not enough to argue the scale's merit either, because measures can be reliable without necessarily being valid. Moreover, disregarding validity not only calls into question the quality of a study, but doing so also diminishes the confidence readers have in the results of such research (Gravetter & Forzano, 2018; Mohajan, 2017). Therefore, more information is required prior to conducting additional studies utilizing the BITS to figure out if there is even a need for such a measure. Once a need for the BITS has been established through rigorous qualitative research, then validity studies should be conducted and published on the BITS for use in future quantitative and mixed-methods studies.

Affects of the COVID-19 Pandemic

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic due to its rapid spread throughout many countries across the world (Cucinotta & Vanelli, 2020). The fear of infection and the social distancing mandates that followed this declaration led to mass layoffs, organization shutdowns, supply-chain slow-downs, and contentious debate regarding the 'true value' of workers deemed "essential" to the public's well-being during the pandemic (e.g., healthcare workers, grocery store employees, etc.; Haleem et al., 2020). Since then, perceptions regarding what work is, where work is done, and how work is completed has gained mass attention; for example, many organizations now view remote and hybrid work situations as viable options for their employees to pursue (Barrero et al., 2021).

The goal of the current study was to investigate the when, why, and how surrounding employee perceptions of work tasks as illegitimate. I aimed to explore the circumstances that commonly affect employee perceptions of task illegitimacy, including the potential effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on these perceptions. By utilizing a grounded theory methodology in tandem with a research-backed thematic analysis technique, I hope to provide a foundation for future qualitative and quantitative research on antecedents of illegitimate task perceptions.

Grounded Theory

Grounded theory was the primary methodology used to approach data collection and analysis in this qualitative research study. Sociologists Anselm Strauss and Barney Glaser developed the grounded theory approach in order to advance the opinion of qualitative research as more than just a precursor to quantitative research (Eaves, 2001). Because the grounded theory approach has not been frequently utilized or cited in I/O research to date, I felt it necessary to detail the intent of—and possible insights that can result from—the grounded theory method as part of this literature review.

The central premise of grounded theory is that theory advancements or analytical schemas must be developed from the systematic analysis of empirical data (Jorgensen, 2001). As well, the phenomenon of interest should be analyzed as it relates to a specific situation that is “grounded” in the perceptions and experiences of the participant sample (Komives et al., 2005). Following grounded theory methodology entails the simultaneous process of data collection and analysis, back-and-forth comparisons, and deriving analytic categories directly from the data as they organically arise during the data analysis (Charmaz, 1996).

In following this methodology—often referred to as a practice of “constant comparison”—researchers begin by “open coding” (Harry et al., 2005). Open coding refers to the process through which researchers name actions and events

found within the data and continuously compare them with each other to determine which ones fit best together (Harry et al., 2005). This comparative process continues as more data is collected so that researchers are able to start grouping discrete codes into more coherent, conceptual categories (Harry et al., 2005). In addition, the iterative, inductive processes of simultaneously collecting and analyzing data helps keep the emerging analyses focused and keen (Charmaz, 2008).

After developing several conceptual categories, researchers can then engage in “selective coding”. Selective coding requires researchers to assess the different conceptual categories they developed and decide how each relate to one another in order to explain what is going on in terms of the central issue being examined (Harry et al., 2005). This abductive process of the grounded theory method is commonly referred to as the “thematic” level because of how researchers utilize the conceptual categories to account for emergent findings that help answer the main research questions (Charmaz, 2008; Harry et al., 2005).

As eloquently stated by Nolas (2011), “Grounded theory is an approach used to study action and interaction and their meaning... Grounded theory makes invisible work visible,”—meaning that through an iterative process of data collection, surface-level analysis, and deeper-level analysis, existing theories can be updated according to information that is uncovered from the data. For my research study in particular, taking this grounded theory approach could lead to novel insights regarding the antecedents of illegitimate task perceptions. These insights, in turn, could then be incorporated into the broader illegitimate tasks literature and used to enhance SOS theory as well as the construct of illegitimate tasks.

Summary

This literature review chapter covered the origins of the illegitimate task concept, the stress-as-offense-to-self framework, responses to illegitimate tasks,

effects of such tasks on employee well-being, and ways that organizations help lessen the effects of such tasks. Also discussed was what is currently missing from existing research on illegitimate tasks and how the grounded theory method will help answer the research questions posed in this study. The following chapter details the methods that were used to recruit participants, collect participant data, and then analyze the data appropriately.

Chapter 3

Methods

The purpose of this qualitative interview study was to explore the circumstances that affect employee perceptions of tasks as illegitimate within the context of their work. By examining this phenomenon in greater depth, this study further informs the literature regarding antecedents of illegitimate tasks. Additionally, the results of this research may help organizations reduce instances of illegitimate tasks and encourage a flexible role orientation in employees as a method to reduce illegitimate task perceptions. In the following sections, I will explain all parts of the study's design and implementation as well as my role in the research and ethical considerations to keep in mind.

Study Design

A qualitative grounded theory research method was chosen for this study for two reasons: (1) utilizing a qualitative method enabled me to explore the phenomenon of illegitimate task perceptions more thoroughly from a purposive sample of employees who have had such experiences, and (2) utilizing grounded theory helped me to further develop the theory of illegitimate tasks based on an inductive examination of the data collected (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Chapman et al., 2015). In contrast, a quantitative research method would not be as suitable for this study because such a method relies on quantifiable data that can be assessed based on statistical relationships between sets of variables (Queirós et al., 2017). A quantitative research method does not typically allow for an explorative interpretation of collected data; thus, a qualitative method was deemed most appropriate for the current study.

A semi-structured interview research design was chosen to explore the research questions posed in this study. Semi-structured interviews allow for

positive rapport building with participants during the interview session so that the participants feel comfortable discussing potentially sensitive work-related illegitimate task experiences in greater detail (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). Due to lingering concerns of the COVID-19 pandemic at the time of this study's data collection phase, interviews with participants were conducted via Zoom, a technology software company specializing in videotelephony and online chat services. Zoom video interviews were chosen over other interview method—such as telephone interviews—because past research has demonstrated that participants often provide less breadth and depth of detail in telephone interviews compared to face-to-face interviews (Irvine, 2011).

Research Questions

1. What factors influence *when* employees perceive certain tasks as illegitimate relative to other tasks (e.g., time constraints; resource constraints)?
2. What factors influence *how* employees perceive certain tasks as illegitimate relative to other tasks (e.g., As above or below their paygrade; as outside the scope of their responsibilities)?
3. What factors influence *why* employees perceive certain tasks as illegitimate relative to other tasks (e.g., LMX status; role confusion)?

Setting

This study included participants from across the United States depending on where they were located when they completed their face-to-face Zoom interview. I was located in central Florida at the time of all interviews. This flexible setting was chosen in order to allow employees outside of my immediate area to participate in the research if they are interested and meet the inclusion requirements. Having a flexible setting also allowed both myself and the participants to abide by any

COVID-related regulations that may still be in effect in their geographical area or at their place of work during the time that data was collected.

Participants

In total, 14 adult employees participated in this study. A purposive, convenience sampling approach was utilized to recruit participants because it allowed for participant selection based on those who met the following criteria: (a) are at least 18 years of age or older, (b) live and work within the United States, and (c) have indicated that they have had at least one experience with illegitimate tasks at work. Other sampling techniques would not have been as appropriate for this research study. For example, random sampling, as the name suggests, means that all people in a population theoretically have an equal chance of being chosen to participate in a study (Sharma, 2017). In this study, however, I will select participants based on their similar characteristics—which means that some people are more likely to be recruited to participate than others. Therefore, purposive convenience sampling, rather than random sampling, was deemed the more appropriate approach in this research study.

A minimum sample size of 12 participants was deemed sufficient to facilitate data saturation in this research. Data saturation occurs when new information is no longer being obtained from additional participant responses (Nascimento et al., 2018). When current participant responses to interview questions start becoming repetitive, recruiting additional participants is considered unnecessary and tends to result in redundant data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). I was able to collect data from 14 participants for this study; thus, I surpassed the minimum number of participants recommended to proceed with data analysis.

The final study sample consisted of 14 adult employees who were working part-time or full-time in the U.S. at the time of data collection. Employees averaged

33.50 years of age ($SD = 11.15$), of which 57.14% identified as male and 42.86% identified as female. Additional work-related demographic data was also gathered from participants—including the number of years they had been working in general ($M = 13.43$, $SD = 10.94$), the number of years that they had been working at the workplace they referenced when discussing their illegitimate task experience ($M = 5.83$, $SD = 6.28$), the number of years that they had been working in the job role they referenced when discussing their illegitimate task experience ($M = 5.37$, $SD = 5.65$), and the number of hours that they worked each week in the job role they referenced regarding their illegitimate task experience ($M = 32.46$, $SD = 12.15$). Table 1 provides an overview of the job roles held by the employees who participated in this study.

Procedure

Before recruiting participants, I first obtained permission to conduct this study from the institutional review board (IRB) at Florida Institute of Technology. After approval was obtained, I posted a recruitment announcement on LinkedIn, which is an employment-oriented online service that helps connect professionals with one another. The recruitment announcement described the purpose and goals of this research study and also detailed instructions on how sign up for an interview if someone was interested in participating (see Appendix A). Once a prospective participant signed up to participate through the Google Form link (see Appendix B) included in my LinkedIn recruitment message, I then reached out to them via email to schedule a date and time to conduct their interview. During this initial contact, I also sent participants the informed consent document to read, sign and date, and return to me prior to their interview session.

Before each interview began, I verbally reviewed my study's purpose, possible benefits and risks associated with participation, and the procedures in place to safeguard the confidentiality of participants' information. I also gave

participants a chance to ask me any questions pertaining to my study before we began their interview. Once the interview had begun, I started to record audio through through Otter.ai, a Zoom-compatible audio transcription service, and proceed through my interview protocol. Upon concluding each interview session, I thanked participants for their time and participation. As well, I also explained how the raffle for a chance to win a \$50 Amazon giftcard would take place if they indicated that they wanted to enter. Lastly, participants were sent a follow-up email after completing their interview that contained a list of mental health resources just in case they had experienced any negative emotional arousal from discussing their illegitimate task experiences.

Data Collection

A semi-structured interview protocol was utilized to collect the data for this study. Semi-structured interviews are guided, to an extent, by the way in which participants answer each question. This allows for some leeway to probe for elaboration on answers and to gather additional data that may end up being useful in answering the study's main research questions once analyzed (Adhabi & Anozie, 2017). However, semi-structured interviews do maintain a degree of consistency across interviews because they elicit answers from all participants on the same set of core questions (Qu & Dumay, 2011). My interview protocol was as follows:

“Hello, my name is Jewel Morrison, and I will be your interviewer for this session. Thank you again for agreeing to participate in this research. To reiterate what was on the consent form, you can choose to stop this interview at any time without penalty. You also have the option to opt-out of answering any questions that you feel uncomfortable with. As a reminder, this interview will be audio recorded for transcription purposes; however, any identifying information that you mention in this interview will be replaced with pseudonyms during the transcription process to ensure confidentiality of your information.

“This interview is about illegitimate tasks. During the interview, I would like to talk with you about two things: your job as a [their occupation] and your own experience with illegitimate tasks. By illegitimate tasks, I mean tasks that you feel either: (a) should have been assigned to someone else or (b) should not have been assigned to anyone at all. For example, a nurse may consider being asked to clean toilets or mop hospital floors as illegitimate tasks because such tasks are typically performed by trained custodial staff members—not nurses.

“The interview will take approximately 30 - 45 minutes to complete. Do you have any questions? Then, let us begin.”

Question List:

1. How would you define your role as a [their occupation]?
2. What are tasks that you complete in your role as a [their occupation]?
3. Have the tasks that you complete in your role as a [their occupation] changed at all as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic?
 - a. If they answer ‘yes’, ask them to elaborate
4. Have you ever felt unappreciated in your role as a [their occupation]?
 - a. If they answer ‘yes’, ask them to describe the situation
5. What could have been done to improve the situation in which you felt unappreciated?
6. Have you ever been given or asked to complete a task in your role as a [their occupation] that you would consider to be “illegitimate”?
 - a. If they answer ‘yes’, ask them to describe the task
 - b. Probe circumstances surrounding the IT request/assignment using supplemental questions (if needed)
7. How would you define your relationship with your coworkers?
8. How would you define your relationship with your supervisor?
9. What gender do you identify with?

10. What is your age?
 11. How many years have you been working, in general?
 12. How many years have you been working at your current workplace?
 13. How many years have you been working in your current role?
 14. How many hours are you working each week, on average?
-

Supplemental Questions:

- How did you feel when you were given/asked to complete a task that you felt was illegitimate?
- Why do you think you were given/asked to complete the illegitimate task you described?
- What could have been done to improve the situation in which you were given/asked to complete a task that you perceived as illegitimate?
- After being given/asked to complete the illegitimate task, what did you do?

“Thank you again for agreeing to participate in this research and taking the time to complete this interview.”

The first three questions in the interview protocol served as an introduction to the general topic that was discussed in the rest of the interview. The next three questions prompted participants to think about and describe instances at work when they felt unappreciated as well as when they had experienced an illegitimate task. Additional subquestions related to participants' illegitimate task experience were included in case I wanted them to elaborate on their experience in more detail. Questions 7-8 served as a wrap up to the main topic of interest in this interview. Lastly, questions 9-14 serve to conclude the interview by asking the participants some study-related demographic questions.

Data Analysis

I utilized Braun and Clarke's (2014) six-step thematic analysis approach to analyze the data I collected. This six-step process entailed first listening to all 14 of the digitally recorded interviews, then transcribing each interview verbatim, and then transferring all 14 interview transcripts into NVivo, a popular qualitative analysis software. After completing that initial preparation, I then proceeded with the six-step thematic analysis approach, which entailed: (a) familiarizing myself intently with the data; (b) using the data to create initial codes; (c) searching the data and initial codes for common themes; (d) reviewing initially generated themes; (e) naming and defining probable themes; and (f) drafting up the results of my findings (Braun & Clarke, 2014). The following paragraphs will elaborate on the general procedure followed for Braun and Clarke's (2014) thematic analysis.

In order to gain a deeper familiarization of the information within the data, I reviewed each interview transcript multiple times after verifying that the audio recording matched up with the written transcriptions. I then began the second step which involved coding the transcript data. I coded the data based on its basic, face-value meanings first and then on deeper, more interpretive meanings in order to increase the breadth and depth of the data analysis.

Once all interview transcripts were reviewed and coded, I then proceeded to the third step of the thematic analysis process which involved comparing and combining codes that appeared to be similar in their meanings across the transcripts. Assessing how these codes related to one another enabled me to start developing more sophisticated themes that contained multiple codes grouped together. Then, in the fourth step, I carefully reviewed each initial theme that I had developed in the third step. The fourth step is important because of how subjective the third step often is (Clarke & Braun, 2014). Evaluating each possible theme involved examining which ones consolidated the largest pieces of coded material.

As well, each theme needed to relate back to the proposed research questions and the theoretical framework. Final themes were then selected based on these various criteria.

Next, the fifth step of the thematic analysis entailed appropriately naming and defining every theme that was selected in the fourth step. Again, names and definitions of each theme needed to be relevant to my research questions and the theoretical framework. Finally, I proceeded with the sixth step of the thematic analysis (i.e., the write-up phase). This step required me to draft up a results section in which I discussed how my selected set of themes addressed my proposed research questions.

This section outlined the general procedure followed by researchers utilizing Braun & Clarke's (2014) six-step thematic analysis procedure. Chapter 4 will provide a more detailed explanation of how I utilized Braun and Clarke's (2014) thematic analysis procedure to analyze the specific interview data that I collected from participants in the present study.

Trustworthiness

Essentially, trustworthiness is to qualitative research what reliability and validity are to quantitative research. The concept of trustworthiness portrays a sense of methodological rigor, quality, and confidence in the research findings to readers of qualitative studies (Daniel, 2019). Trustworthiness is comprised of four dimensions, namely credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferrability.

Credibility in qualitative research is similar to internal validity in quantitative research. Credibility conveys the relevancy and dependability of research findings determined from data provided by participants' discussion of their past experiences (Daniel, 2019). Dependability in qualitative research is

similar to reliability in quantitative research and refers to how stable the research findings are over time (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Confirmability in qualitative research is similar to objectivity in quantitative research. Confirmability portrays how accurately participants' perspectives and experiences were analyzed during the analysis phase of the research (Abdalla et al., 2017). Lastly, transferability in qualitative research is similar to external validity in quantitative research. Transferrability refers to the usefulness and applicability of research findings to conditions beyond those that were assessed in the current study (Daniel, 2019). Reaching data saturation, utilizing a rigorous data analysis technique, and relating my research findings to previous literature will all help to promote the trustworthiness of the current qualitative research study.

Ethical Considerations

Before any data collection occurred, I first obtained approval from the IRB at Florida Institute of Technology. After obtaining approval from the IRB, but before starting the semi-structured interviews, I reviewed the informed consent form with participants that each participant had signed prior to setting up the interview. Involved in this review was a verbal discussion of the study's purpose and procedures, possible benefits and risks associated with participation in the study, a reminder that their participation was completely voluntary, and a description of how I would keep participants' information confidential (Davies, 2021).

I did not anticipate that participants' involvement in the semi-structured interviews would result in any serious emotional or psychological harm. However, it was possible that participants could experience a slight negative emotional arousal from discussing sensitive information concerning their work-related illegitimate task experiences. Therefore, to support participants who may have

experienced some negative emotions during their interview session, I provided them with a list of information for national mental health resources.

To help ensure participant confidentiality, I assigned a code to each participant that consisted of the letter ITP (Illegitimate Task Participant) and a number between 1-14. This was done to help me organize participant transcripts and also prevent any readers of this study from being able to identify a particular participant who may be quoted in the research write-up. If quoted in the research write-up, an ITP code was used in place of the participant's name to again preserve confidentiality. To help protect participants' confidential data, I stored all interview files, transcript files, and data analysis files in a secure, password-protected location. These files were also copied to thumb drive used solely for this study and stored in a secure location known only to me in order to comply with IRB data storage rules.

Summary

This chapter detailed the methodology that was utilized in the current study. Specific elements discussed included the qualitative grounded theory research method and semi-structured interview research design, the setting of this research and the type of participants that were recruited, the data collection and analysis process utilizing thematic analysis, and issues of trustworthiness and ethical considerations. The next chapter discusses the data analysis results and how the findings address my proposed research questions.

Chapter 4

Results

This chapter presents the results revealed during the thematic analysis process. In total, data that was collected from 14 participants was audio recorded, transcribed, and then analyzed. The first subsection of this chapter recaps the qualitative data analysis procedure that was used in this study. The second subsection details the study findings in-depth.

Qualitative Data Analysis

Qualitative data was recorded from the sample of 14 participants through 14 semi-structured interview questions asked during each participant's interview session. The audio recordings were compiled, reviewed, and then transcribed in Otter.ai. After each transcription was completed, it was then downloaded as a pdf document and uploaded into NVivo. Utilizing Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step thematic analysis and following a grounded theory methodological approach, I began analyzing the data iteratively as the interview process continued.

Step one of the thematic analysis process required me to familiarize myself intently with the data by reading and rereading each interview transcript (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Step two of the thematic analysis process involved an open, surface-level coding of the data. Open, surface-level coding of the data was conducted by examining each line of text and labelling them with a few descriptive words. For example, one line of text from ITP9 read, "So it felt like I was being saddled with it," and was coded as 'feelings about task'. After open, surface-level coding was completed for each transcript, I then proceeded to review the data again—trying to code each line for deeper-level meanings this time. For example, after analyzing the word choice used by ITP9 to describe their feelings about the task they were given (i.e., "...being saddled with it")—in addition to the context of the sentences

surrounding that line (i.e., them knowing that people working their shift were the only ones ever asked to complete the task)—I ended up coding the line as “It’s not fair”. Table 2 illustrates the codes identified during the deeper-level analysis of Step 2 as well as the number of data excerpts that were assigned to each.

Step 3 of the thematic analysis process involved clustering related codes I had created in Step 2 into initial themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This was completed by thinking about how the deeper-level codes I had developed might logically relate to one another. Additionally, I considered how these codes may align and provide insight into my three proposed research questions. In NVivo, I created four initial themes by assigning the deeper-level related codes to the same overarching ‘parent’ code. At this stage in the thematic analysis, these themes were simply termed: COVID-19, How, When, Why.

Step 4 of the thematic analysis involved reviewing my four initial themes and then refining them further (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Refining these themes resulted in three final themes, with the initial theme ‘COVID-19’ being removed due to a lack of richness in the data provided by participants. That is to say, 21.43% of my sample stated that the tasks they completed in their role did not change at all as a result of the pandemic, 28.57% stated that they were not in their job role during the pandemic but that the work they completed might have changed as a result of the pandemic, and 42.86% of my sample stated that their work did change as a result of the pandemic; however, these employees commented more on how the way their work was completed had changed (e.g., remotely instead of in-office) rather than how the tasks that they completed in their role had changed. Only one participant (7.14%) stated explicitly that tasks outside of their job description were added to their role during the pandemic (i.e., managing social media accounts) because they were no longer able to work in-office on their typical tasks.

The three final themes were reviewed and compared to each other to ensure that: (a) they were all sufficiently distinct enough to constitute being their own separate themes, and (b) that they accurately reflected the patterns that were coded in participants' responses. Step 5 of the thematic analysis process entailed assigning more descriptive names to each of the three final themes. Table 3 illustrates how the deeper-level codes were grouped together to form these themes. Finally, Step 6 involved writing up the findings that are detailed in the following subsection.

Qualitative Analysis Findings

This section presents the qualitative findings and is organized under the three major themes that emerged from the data analysis. The first theme was: Lack of resources, lack of support, repeat occurrences, and environmental conditions influence *WHEN* employees perceive certain tasks as illegitimate. The second theme was: Unlawfulness, unfairness, role boundary violations, and time violations influence *HOW* employees perceive certain tasks as illegitimate. And, the third theme was: Inexperience, role confusion, professional relationships, and trust in abilities influence *WHY* employees perceive certain tasks as illegitimate.

Figure 1 illustrates a taxonomy of antecedents of illegitimate task perceptions that was developed based on these findings. This organizing framework visually portrays how each theme presented below relates to antecedents of illegitimate task perceptions. The taxonomy starts with the broad theme categories "When," "How," and "Why." Then, it branches off into the subcategories housed under each of the three broad categories. Finally, the taxonomy includes branches of example items that reflect each subcategory of antecedents of illegitimate task perceptions. These themes, subcategories, and example items are detailed in the following paragraphs.

Theme 1: Lack of Resources, Lack of Support, Repeat Occurrences, and Environmental Conditions Influence *WHEN* Employees Perceive Certain Tasks as Illegitimate. Participants attributed their receipt of a task that they perceived to be illegitimate as potentially resulting from a lack of resources. Resources mentioned by the participants included staff shortages, time constraints, insufficient pay, and faulty equipment. ITP10, for example, discussed how they were given a little heater to keep them warm while they covered an 8-hour shift alone outside in 30-degree weather; however, the heater “was barely working... so that just made it worse.” ITP10 then explained that their employer should have let them leave early due to the freezing weather, broken heater, and lack of customers, but they didn’t—and that perceived illegitimate task experience resulted in ITP10 having “a minor resentment in the back of my mind” for the remainder of their tenure in that job role. Additionally, other participants expressed that they had to complete the tasks they thought were illegitimate for them because even though their department was lacking personnel, the work still needed to get done on time.

Participants also indicated that feeling unsupported at work contributed to their perception of the specific task they were given as illegitimate. For example, ITP13 talked about how they were told to complete a difficult coding task without any prior experience working on such tasks in their job role. Not only that, but ITP13 stated that no guidance was provided to them by their supervisor so they had to spend even more time teaching themselves how to complete the task and just “assume that I had learned it correctly, because I had no one teaching me.” Other participants shared similar experiences where they wished their coworkers or supervisors would have offered to help them complete a complicated task or handle demands from unsatisfied clients rather than just leave them to figure it all out on their own.

In addition to a lack of resources and support, participants also cited that having to complete an unexpected task multiple times in a row influenced their perception of the task as illegitimate. ITP2, for instance, shared that they seem to always be the employee who's asked to take on additional tasks—not just in their current job role, but in past jobs as well. Similarly, ITP9 explained how at first they were okay with taking on the task of folding laundry because they were under the impression that it would be a one-time thing. However, when it became apparent that they were going to have to complete this task repeatedly almost every shift from then on, ITP9 started working on the task towards the end of their shift whenever they could so that someone else would have to finish folding the laundry once ITP9's shift had ended for the day.

Lastly, environmental conditions were also cited by participants as contributing to their perceptions of certain tasks as illegitimate. These conditions included bad weather, having to stay overnight at the office, and being afraid to lose their job. For example, ITP3 described having to work late and sleep at the office overnight on several occasions just to be able to finish all the tasks they were told to complete that day, and that having to do so took a toll on them and their family. In another case, ITP4 described having to refuse an illegitimate task request from a customer because it was against their workplace's policy. ITP4 remarked that, "If I lose my job I'm down financially;" so, they were trying to give the customer reasons why it was not allowed and was not a task that ITP4 or any other staff member could help them complete.

Overall, participants expressed feeling stressed, slighted, and that they lacked assistance when they needed it the most. Some participants tried to rationalize being asked to complete a task that they perceived to be illegitimate by saying that it could have potentially been a resource-saving attempt on the part of the company or that the task may have actually been an opportunity for them to

improve their skills. When asked their thoughts on what—if anything—could have been done to improve the situation in which they perceived a task given to them as illegitimate, participants provided the following suggestions for improvement: ideally, companies should (a) increase the number of staff members in each department, (b) have more employees cross-train so that they can cover for each other more easily when necessary, (c) supply employees with functioning work equipment so they can stay safe on the job, (d) improve communication at all levels of the organization, (e) provide employees with more support and guidance during the learning process, (f) hire skilled temporary workers when needed, (g) pay extra money to employees who complete tasks outside of their job description, (h) and help employees try to plan and prepare more adequately for unforeseen events.

Theme 2: Unlawfulness, Unfairness, Role Boundary Violations, and Time Violations Influence *HOW* Employees Perceive Certain Tasks as Illegitimate.

A few participants perceived the task they talked about during their interview session as illegitimate because the task they were asked to complete was against the law. Illegal requests were made to these participants from customers and company executives. For example, ITP6 discussed being asked by the CEO of their company to smuggle something illegal. ITP6 considered this to be an illegitimate task that they had to refuse to complete because smuggling illegal products was against their religious faith and they were just “not ready to get myself involved.”

Participants also described tasks that they perceived to be illegitimate as having been unfair for them to complete in their job role. They discussed being assigned ‘menial’ tasks that anyone else could have been asked to do, so they questioned why they were the only one being asked to complete such tasks. Further, they wondered what real value they were adding to the organization if they kept having to complete these extra-role tasks rather than being able to focus on the tasks they were actually hired to complete. ITP2, for instance, viewed themselves

as “very low, low man on the totem pole, you know? Instead of... somebody with legitimate... and equal responsibilities as the other sales staff.”

In addition to unlawfulness and unfairness, participants also cited role boundary violations as contributing to their perception of certain tasks as illegitimate. For example, ITP3 stated that their supervisor had, on several occasions, directly asked ITP3 to take over their tasks while they were away on vacation. ITP3 felt that having to complete their supervisor’s tasks (e.g., interviewing job candidates or working on securing new clients) in addition to their own tasks (i.e., video editing) exceeded what they would consider legitimate for their job role. Other participants such as ITP11 explicitly stated that someone else (i.e., a member of the information technology department) should have completed the task that had been assigned to them (i.e., setting up their office computer and phone equipment) because ITP11 was not “a tech person” and was not hired to install or set-up office equipment.

Lastly, participants cited time violations as contributing to their perceptions of certain tasks as illegitimate. They expressed that the task they were asked to complete was a waste of their time and “shouldn’t have been done by anyone.” For example, ITP12 compared the task that they were assigned to complete to pointless busy work given out by their teachers back in high school. Participants felt that having to complete these trivial tasks was a waste of an opportunity to learn relevant job skills and took valuable time away from them being able to devote to their “actual tasks.”

Overall, participants expressed feeling overwhelmed, uncomfortable, and pressured into being a “team player”. Some stated that they thought about quitting their job or were reluctant to work overtime after having to complete a task that they considered to be illegitimate. When asked their thoughts on what—if anything—could have been done to improve the situation in which they perceived a

task given to them as illegitimate, participants provided the following suggestions for improvement: ideally, companies should (a) ask “the right people” to complete tasks, (b) make sure that employees asked to complete certain tasks have enough expertise in that area, (c) balance in-person and online trainings, (d) automate tasks when able to to make things more efficient for employees, and (e) update job descriptions so that they more accurately reflect one’s duties in their job role; and ideally, employees should (a) reach out for help more often when they feel they need it, (b) confront their supervisor when given tasks that they do not think they should have to complete, and (c) simply refuse to complete illegitimate tasks the next time they are asked to complete one.

Theme 3: Inexperience, Role Confusion, Professional Relationships, and Trust in Abilities Influence *WHY* Employees Perceive Certain Tasks as Illegitimate.

Participants explained that their own inexperience contributed to their perception of the task they discussed in their interview session as illegitimate. ITP12, for example, expressed wanting to be productive at work but not really knowing what to do or how to help. Similarly, ITP11 expressed being surprised after being asked to complete the specific task they discussed in their interview session “since it’s not like I have any experience with it anyway.” While participants cited that it was their supervisor’s choice of who completed a certain task, they believed that other people who already had knowledge about the task would have been able to complete it more efficiently compared to themselves.

Participants also cited role confusion as a factor that contributed to why they felt a certain task was illegitimate for them to complete. Some participants who were new to their job role felt unsure of what all of their job responsibilities actually were or how certain tasks were relevant to their position. These participants believed that more role clarity as to what their new job entailed would have helped them be able to differentiate what legitimate versus illegitimate tasks

were for them. And other participants, like ITP9, had additional tasks added to their position mid-tenure (e.g., folding clothes and attending to social media accounts)—tasks that they felt “just did not make sense” for them to complete in their office job role.

Professional relationships were another reason participants cited for why they believed the task they discussed during their interview session was illegitimate for them to complete. ITP11, for instance, was new to their job role and expressed that not having a strong relationship with their supervisor yet made them feel like they were just being given tasks to complete without their supervisor having any regard for whether the tasks actually aligned with the position that ITP11 was hired for. Some participants stated that they did not have a very good relationship with their supervisor at the time and that that tension between the two of them often made them view some tasks they were given by their supervisor to be illegitimate. Other participants, in contrast, believed that having a positive relationship with their supervisor and clients was what contributed to them being asked to complete illegitimate tasks. For example, ITP6 explained that their supervisor would just “try their luck” because they knew that ITP6 was a “man of principle” and, similarly, ITP5 explained that their clients “just felt safe” relying on them for help.

Lastly, participants explained that others’ trust in their abilities contributed to why they believed they were assigned illegitimate tasks to complete. This trust in abilities was framed negatively from some participants but positively from others. On the negative side, some participants believed that because they were still new to their job role, their supervisors were probably unsure of their competencies and capacity to take on the tasks they were hired for; so instead, these participants were being assigned lower-level tasks rather than more difficult tasks that they had expressed interest in completing. On the positive side, some participants cited their more senior status as being the reason why they were sometimes asked to complete

illegitimate tasks—because their supervisors “know I could do the job... and then [they] wouldn’t have to follow up [with me]” to make sure that the task was completed properly.

Overall, some participants expressed feeling aggravated, distracted, and emotionally drained from having to complete tasks that they believed were illegitimate. Other participants, however, felt assured in their position and enjoyed having the chance to confirm their supervisor’s trust in their skills. When asked their thoughts on what—if anything—could have been done to improve the situation in which they perceived a task given to them as illegitimate, participants provided the following suggestions for improvement: ideally, companies should (a) provide some accommodations to make tasks more enjoyable and comfortable for employees to complete, (b) outline job expectations more clearly to employees during the hiring process, and (c) spend more time evaluating the type of candidate they want to fill the job role to make sure that the benefits (e.g., pay) match up with expected responsibilities; and ideally, employees should (a) try to build strong, positive relationships with their supervisors and colleagues, and (b) try to be more direct about their knowledge areas and about the types of tasks they want to complete in their job role.

Summary

This chapter recapped the thematic analysis process used to assess the data as well as detailed what the results of the data analysis were. In total, three final themes emerged and were discussed in succession. Participants’ general feelings and suggestions for improvement were also discussed under each theme. The next chapter explains how my findings tie into previous literature on the topic of illegitimate tasks. Implications, limitations, and directions for future research are also discussed.

Chapter 5

Discussion

Prior research indicates that illegitimate tasks threaten employees' professional identity and positive self-view (Beehr and Glazer, 2005; 2013; Lopez & Fuiks, 2021; Pereira et al., 2014; Semmer et al., 2019); and, that having to complete illegitimate tasks is associated with negative outcomes for both employees and the organizations they work for, such as job dissatisfaction, burnout, counter productive work behaviors, and turnover intentions (Apostel et al., 2018; Ilyas et al., 2021; Schulte-Brauks et al., 2019; Semmer et al., 2015; Zhou et al., 2018). However, much less information is currently known about the factors that may contribute to perceptions of tasks as illegitimate. Therefore, the present study was conducted to investigate these potential antecedents further. The goal of this study was to explore the circumstances influencing *when* employees perceive certain tasks as illegitimate, *how* employees perceive certain tasks as illegitimate, and *why* employees perceive certain tasks as illegitimate. This study added to the literature on illegitimate tasks by (a) utilizing a qualitative, grounded theory approach to explore employees' personal experiences with illegitimate tasks, (b) expanding SOS theory and the construct of illegitimate tasks to include antecedents of such task perceptions, and (c) creating a taxonomy of potential antecedents of illegitimate tasks perceptions that was developed from my research study findings. Overall, the results of this study may help inform future research efforts and organizational practices related to reducing and addressing antecedents of illegitimate task perceptions.

Findings and Implications

This study found three main themes associated with the *when*, *why*, and *how* of illegitimate task perceptions. Housed under the first theme were circumstances that affected *when* participants viewed the tasks that they were asked

or assigned to complete as illegitimate. These circumstances were (a) lack of resources, (b) lack of support, (c) repeat occurrences, and (d) environmental conditions. Resource constraints and insufficient support from others at work have been demonstrated in previous literature to increase stress levels and negative outcomes for employees such as depression and anxiety (Bjork et al., 2013; Fila & Eatough, 2020; Zhou et al., 2018). It is possible that a lack of resources and support could lead to poorer environmental conditions and an increase in the assignment of extra-role tasks which, in turn, then influence employee perceptions of such tasks as illegitimate. However, additional research is needed to explore the viability of this proposition.

Housed under the second theme were circumstances that affected *how* participants viewed the tasks that they were asked or assigned to complete as illegitimate. These circumstances were (a) unlawfulness, (b) unfairness, (c) role boundary violations, and (d) time violations. Notions of unfairness, role boundary violations, and time violations related to illegitimate tasks and their negative outcomes for employees have already been examined in previous research (Cortina et al., 2021; Ma & Peng, 2019; Parker, 2007; Schulte-Braucks et al., 2019; Zhou et al., 2018). However, my results build on the findings of previous research by providing evidence that these circumstances may well indeed be antecedents that can affect employee perceptions of task illegitimacy. It was also interesting that some participants chose to discuss tasks that violate U.S. laws despite having been provided with examples beforehand to illustrate that ‘illegitimate’ does not necessarily mean ‘illegal’ in this research study. Regardless, though, illegal tasks do still fall within the category of illegitimate tasks because illegal tasks are definitely not tasks that should be asked of any employee in any job role.

Housed under the third theme were circumstances that affected *why* participants viewed the tasks that they were asked or assigned to complete as

illegitimate. These circumstances were (a) inexperience, (b) role confusion, (c) professional relationships, and (d) trust in abilities. Prior research on role confusion and Leader-Member-Exchange theory (LMX status) provide support related to how these factors contribute to employee perceptions of task illegitimacy that can increase employees' stress levels and decrease their willingness to complete tasks that they are unsure fit within the confines of the job they were hired for (Faupel et al., 2016; Maden-Eyiusta, 2019; Sias & Duncan, 2019). To my knowledge, my study is the first to find evidence of how trust in employees' abilities and employees' inexperience in their job role are related to perceptions of task illegitimacy. It is possible that these two factors may be intertwined with role confusion and/professional relationships; however, quantitative research would need to be conducted to assess this possibility.

Limitations and Future Research

Some limitations of this research were anticipated due to the novelty and qualitative nature of this study. Specifically, the chosen research design, demographic information, data collection method, and data analysis procedure will be discussed as limitations of this study in the subsequent paragraphs. Ideas regarding how these limitations could be addressed in future research will also be presented.

First, choosing a qualitative research design for this study allowed for an in-depth exploration and analysis of participants' perceptions and experiences concerning illegitimate tasks. This design choice resulted in the development of three themes that help address the open-ended research questions posed regarding the circumstances affecting employee illegitimate task perceptions. A basis has now been established from my qualitative data analysis results to suggest that several different antecedents of illegitimate task perceptions may be affecting employees across various job sectors within the United States. Therefore, a logical

next step would be to utilize a mixed-methods approach in future studies to gather both qualitative and quantitative data. Examining qualitative data (e.g., focus groups, archival documents) and quantitative data (e.g., surveys, polls) together in the same study could help strengthen our understanding of the phenomenon of interest above and beyond what can be learned from qualitative data alone. As well, utilizing both approaches could also reduce the possibility of researcher bias affecting the data analysis process or the interpretations of the results—thus promoting greater reliability and trustworthiness (Sahin & Öztürk, 2019).

Second, the main focus of this study was about the circumstances that affect illegitimate task perceptions in general for employees in the United States. I collected some demographic data on participants' age, gender, and work information; however, I did not investigate potential differences in illegitimate task perceptions according to any of these demographics. Furthermore, I did not collect any demographic data on participants' race/ethnicity, pay, religious affiliation, or more specific geographic location (e.g., southwest U.S. vs. northeast U.S.). It is possible that the circumstances affecting perceptions of tasks as illegitimate may differ among U.S. employees according to one or more of these demographic variables. Researchers could address this limitation in future studies by gathering additional demographic data from participants and cross-examining their data accordingly to the antecedents found in the present study.

Third, only one semi-structured interview was completed with each participant regarding their illegitimate task experiences; and, all data that was analyzed in this study was generated from the answers provided in these one-time interviews. I generated the interview questions myself based on the following: (a) research literature I had previously read on illegitimate tasks, (b) the recency of the COVID-19 pandemic, (c) feedback from two I/O psychology graduate students and my three thesis committee members, and (d) wanting to keep the questions broad in

order to embrace the grounded theory approach to my data collection and analysis process. Because the interview questions utilized in this study were researcher-generated, it is possible that the wording of some questions could have been improved for additional clarity or that I did not think to include certain questions that may have helped enrich the data I collected. Researchers attempting to replicate or expand upon this study in the future may benefit from supplementing or comparing the interview questions I created with their own set of developed interview questions in order to determine what novel information might be collected from participants concerning their illegitimate task perceptions.

Finally, the affective reactions of participants were not analyzed in-depth in the current study. Affective reactions are different feeling states that a person can experience, such as one's mood (e.g., being frustrated or cheerful), emotions (e.g., feeling happiness or sadness), and traits (i.e., positive vs. negative affect) (Netz et al., 2020). Prior research has demonstrated that the affective reactions employees have to stressful workplace conditions can significantly impact their health status (e.g., increase inflammation), general well-being (e.g., exchanges of helpful or hurtful information), and workplace outcomes (e.g., CWBs; turnover intentions) (Netz et al., 2020; Sin et al., 2015; Zhang et al., 2022). It is possible that the affective reactions my participants may have had to the illegitimate task experience that they discussed during their interview session could have provided further insight into their perceptions of when, how, and why they regard certain tasks as illegitimate compared to other tasks. Therefore, researchers conducting similar studies on illegitimate task perceptions in the future should attempt to collect—and analyze in greater detail—data concerning participants' affective reactions to being asked or assigned to complete a task that they believed to be illegitimate for them.

Conclusion

This study explored the circumstances affecting employee perceptions of task illegitimacy. My research questions were answered through the three themes that emerged from the thematic data analysis. These themes provided insight into *when* employees perceive certain tasks as illegitimate, *how* employees perceive certain tasks as illegitimate, and *why* employees perceive certain tasks as illegitimate in the context of their job role. Additional research should build on these findings by examining the circumstances affecting employee perceptions of task illegitimacy through utilizing different research designs, data collection methods, and participant samples. Overall, the key takeaway from this research is that employees do appear to view tasks differently depending on a variety of circumstantial factors, and these factors provide insight into several likely antecedents of illegitimate task perceptions.

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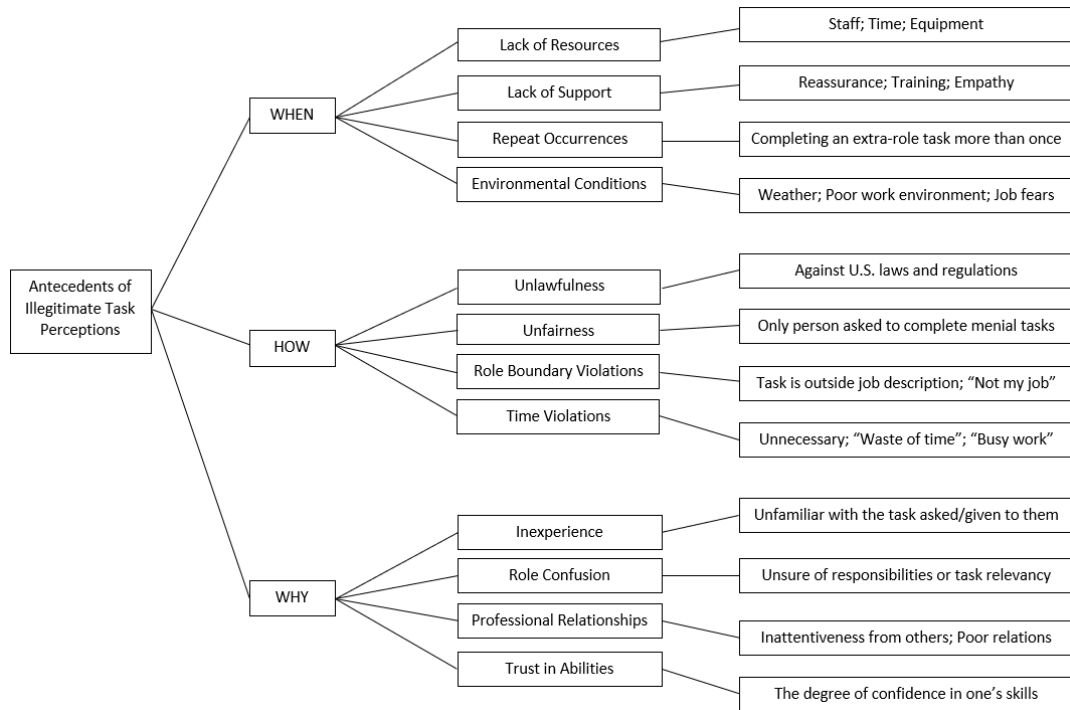
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Figure 1

A taxonomy of Antecedents of Illegitimate Task Perceptions



List of Tables

Table 1

Job Roles Held by Participants

Job Title	Type of Position
Music Producer	Senior-Level
Maintenance Attendant	Entry-Level
HR Intern	Internship
Admin Intern	Internship
Inventory Control Supervisor	Management
IT Manager	Management
Sales Support Admin	Senior-Level
Video Editor	Senior-Level
Bank Manager	Management
Caregiver	Senior-Level
Director	Management
Manager	Management
HR Co-Op	Entry-Level
Office Assistant	Entry-Level

Table 2

Data Analysis Deeper-Level Codes

Codes	<i>n</i> of response excerpts included
COVID No Changes	4
COVID Possible Changes	10
COVID Task Changes	5
COVID Workplace Changes	29
It's Against the Law	8
Waste of Time	14
Environmental Conditions	8
It's Not Fair	16
Lack of Experience	8
Not My Job	24
Lack of Resources	10
Lack of Support	12
LMX Status	17
Role Confusion	15
Repeat Occurrences	7
Trust in Ability	17

Table 3

Grouping of Deeper-Level Codes into Major Themes

Theme Deeper-level codes grouped to form theme	<i>n</i> of response excerpts included
Lack of Resources, Lack of Support, Repeat Occurrences, and Environmental Conditions Influence <i>WHEN</i> Employees Perceive Certain Tasks as Illegitimate	37
Lack of Resources	
Lack of Support	
Repeat Occurrences	
Environmental Conditions	
Unlawfulness, Unfairness, Role Boundary Violations, and Time Violations Influence <i>HOW</i> Employees Perceive Certain Tasks as Illegitimate	62
Waste of Time	
Not My Job	
It's Against the Law	
It's Not Fair	
Inexperience, Role Confusion, Professional Relationships, and Trust in Abilities Influence <i>WHY</i> Employees Perceive Certain Tasks as Illegitimate	57
Lack of Experience	
LMX Status	
Role Confusion	
Trust in Ability	

Appendix A

Recruitment Announcement

Hello! I am currently conducting a research study on Illegitimate Task Perceptions. This study seeks to explore when and why employees may view certain tasks as illegitimate in the context of their specific job role. ‘Illegitimate’ in this research refers to tasks that you feel either: (a) should have been assigned to someone else to complete, or (b) should not have been assigned to anyone at all. I will be conducting research interviews with participants via Zoom, and the interview itself should take approximately 30 minutes to complete. To participate, you must meet the following criteria:

- You are at least 18 years old
- You live and work in the U.S. (part- or full-time work)
- You believe you have had at least one experience with illegitimate tasks (either in a current or previous job role).

If you or someone you know may be interested in participating, then please complete the following short Google form linked below. I will reach out to you within 1-3 business days so we can schedule an interview date and time that works best for your schedule. Thank you!

Google Contact Form: <https://lnkd.in/gEDaXvHm>

****Participants can choose to enter into a raffle for a chance to win a \$50 Amazon gift card!**

Appendix B

Google Contact Form

Hello! Thank you for your interest in participating in this research study. As mentioned in the recruiting message, this research requires that participants complete one interview session with the primary researcher regarding their experiences with illegitimate tasks at work.

Please complete the form below so that the primary researcher can contact you in the next 2-3 business days. During this initial contact, the primary researcher will ask that you read over and sign an informed consent form before proceeding with setting up an interview date.

Email: [short answer]

What is your preferred name?

- [short answer]

What is your preferred phone number?

- [short answer]

What is your preferred method of contact?

- Email
- Phone
- No preference

What is your current job titled?

- [short answer]

Is your current job title the one that you would like to reference when discussing your illegitimate task experiences?

- Yes
- No

If you answered "No" to the previous question, then please list the job title of a role you have held that you would like to reference when discussing your illegitimate task experiences; otherwise, write "N/A".

- [short answer]