Illegitimate Tasks and Psychological Strain: The Role of Appreciation by Supervisor

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Symposium: Appreciation at work – relationships, causes, and consequences

Illegitimate tasks as a new stressor
Theoretical background

Two facets of illegitimate tasks:

- **unnecessary tasks**: are tasks that should not have to be carried out at all, because
  - they do not make sense,
  - they could have been avoided,
  - they could be carried out with less effort, if things were organized more efficiently.

- **unreasonable tasks**: are tasks that are not appropriate to ask from a specific person, because
  - they may be outside of the range of one’s occupation,
  - they may also be incompatible with one’s occupational status.

- **unnecessary tasks**: the lack of legitimacy does not refer to who is responsible for executing them, but rather to the way they came into existence
  - they are illegitimate for just everyone

- **unreasonable tasks**: exist legitimately as such, but are part of someone else’s specific role
  - they are illegitimate for specific employees

Previous research has shown illegitimate tasks to be related to several indicators of strain, controlling for other stressors.


Illegitimate tasks and appreciation by supervisor
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Appreciation at work as a resource
Theoretical background

Appreciation at work

- refers to specific behaviors that explicitly signal acknowledgment and recognition of one’s work behavior.
- Experiencing appreciation increases job satisfaction and decreases feelings of resentments, over and above the effects of job control, social support, and interactional justice.

→ The effort-reward theory suggests that appreciation is one of the reward-factors, and is therefore regarded as an important resource in the context of psychological strain.

→ Does the appreciation by supervisor buffer the association between illegitimate tasks and psychological strain?


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Illegitimate tasks and appreciation by supervisor: Sample and measures

Sample
- $N = 266$ employees of five information technology (IT) organizations
- Age: range 15-66 years, with an average age of 37 years (SD = 10)
- 57% male and 39% female

Measures (self-report questionnaires)

Illegitimate tasks
- BITS – Bern Illegitimate Task Scale (Semmer et al., u.r.): 8 Items
  - unnecessary tasks ($M = 2.56; SD = .77; \alpha = .85$):
    “Do you have to carry out tasks where you keep wondering if they have to be done at all?” (1 = never, 5 = frequently).
  - unreasonable tasks ($M = 2.12; SD = .72; \alpha = .82$):
    “Do you have to carry out tasks of which you believe they are going too far, and should not be expected from you?” (1 = never, 5 = frequently).

Appreciation by supervisor
- Personal Recognition Scale (Rafferty & Griffin, 2004; 2006): 3 Items ($M = 3.92; SD = 1.36; \alpha = .93$):
  “My supervisor acknowledges improvement in my quality of work”
  (1 = strongly disagree, 6 = strongly agree)

Psychological strain
- Emotional Irritation Scale (Mohr, Rigotti & Müller, 2005): 5 Items ($M = 2.48; SD = 1.19; \alpha = .85$):
  “From time to time I feel like a bundle of nerves “ (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree)
Illegitimate tasks and appreciation by supervisor: Results I

Illegitimate tasks: two facets or one?

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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>χ²</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>p</th>
<th>χ²/df</th>
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Scherp, Syrek & Antoni
## Illegitimate tasks and appreciation by supervisor: Results II

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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>$M$</th>
<th>$SD$</th>
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<td>1. Unnecessary Tasks</td>
<td>2.56</td>
<td>.77</td>
<td>1-5</td>
<td>(.85)</td>
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<td>2. Unreasonable Tasks</td>
<td>2.12</td>
<td>.72</td>
<td>1-4.7</td>
<td>.63***</td>
<td>(.82)</td>
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<td>3. Appreciation by Supervisor</td>
<td>3.92</td>
<td>1.36</td>
<td>1-6</td>
<td>-.28***</td>
<td>-.31***</td>
<td>(.93)</td>
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<td>4. Emotional Irritation</td>
<td>2.48</td>
<td>1.19</td>
<td>1-6.8</td>
<td>.34***</td>
<td>.44***</td>
<td>-.24***</td>
<td>(.85)</td>
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Note: $N = 265$; *** $p < .001$ (one-tailed); internal consistencies in the diagonal (Cronbach's alpha)
Does the appreciation by supervisor buffer the association between illegitimate tasks and psychological strain?

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<th>β</th>
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<tr>
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<td><strong>Step 2</strong></td>
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<td>0.15***</td>
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<td>Appreciation by Supervisor</td>
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<td>0.01*</td>
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<td>Interaction: $z_{\text{unnecessary tasks}}$ and $z_{\text{appreciation by supervisor}}$</td>
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*Note: $N = 240-266$; all coefficients are taken from the final step. *$p < .05$ (one-tailed); **$p < .01$ (one-tailed); ***$p < .001$ (one-tailed).
Appreciation by supervisor as a buffer

**simple slope** (Aiken & West, 1991):
- Appreciation by Supervisor $-1SD$ $t_{EI} = 3.05, p < .01$
- Appreciation by Supervisor $+1SD$ $t_{EI} = .61, p > .05$

Unnecessary tasks vs. Emotional Irritation

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## Unreasonable tasks and appreciation by supervisor: αllwiss

### Results IV

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* *p < .05 (one-tailed); ** p < .01 (one-tailed); *** p < .001 (one-tailed).
Illegitimate tasks and appreciation by supervisor: Theoretical and practical implications

- Illegitimate tasks are two facets, representing tasks that are unnecessary and unreasonable.
- They are differentially associated with psychological strain, if appreciation by supervisor considered.
  ➔ It is not an unidimensional construct.
- Conceptually, unnecessary tasks violate almost everyone’s professional roles, whereas unreasonable tasks can be seen as more specific, referring to tasks that belong to other people’s professional roles (Semmer et al. u.r.).
- Appreciation and recognition are important for the employee and buffer the association between unnecessary task and psychological strain
  ➔ Communicate appreciation and recognition in daily interactions!
- The present study concentrates on more affective measures of psychological strain
  ➔ Future studies should consider other outcomes as well (cognitive measures of psychological strain, motivation, performance etc.)
Thank you!

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