Illegitimate Tasks Exacerbate the Undesirable

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Background

Organizations would benefit from implementing training sessions that heighten respective state

Theoretical framework

"Stress-as-offense-to-self " (SOS) theory (Semmer et al., 2007)

Maintaining a positive view of oneself – in terms of both personal self-esteem and in terms of social esteem – is a basic goal that people strive for.

Illegitimate tasks may contain social messages that signal devaluation to employees, which can threaten their social esteem and their professional identity.

Research Question

Can illegitimate tasks "bring out the worst” in employees?

Hypotheses

J) Within individuals, illegitimate tasks will be positively associated with (a) state anger and (b) depressive mood.

J) Within individuals, neuroticism will moderate the relationships between illegitimate tasks and (a) state anger and (b) depressive mood, such that high levels of neuroticism will exacerbate these relationships.

J) Within individuals, trait depression will moderate the relationships between illegitimate tasks and (a) state anger and (b) depressive mood, that high levels of trait depression will exacerbate these relationships.

Method

Participants and Procedure

100 participants working in a variety of occupations were recruited via advertisements posted around 1 university in the US.

Inclusion criteria: being 18 years or older, working 35 or more hours per week, being fluent and literate in English, and having tenure of at least 1 year at their current job.

For two workweeks, daily diaries were collected in the morning, at mid-day, and at the end of each workday (N=1355).

Measures

Illegitimate tasks: 8-item Bern Illegitimate Task Scale; 5-point scale. Example item: “Today, did you have work tasks to take care of which kept you wondering if they should be done by someone else?”

State and depressive mood: 3 items each from the Strain Symptom Inventory

Neuroticism: 10 item Bern Illegitimate Task Scale; 5-item CES-D scale

Trait Depression: 20-item CES-D scale

Hierarchical Linear Modeling was used (HLM) with daily predictors group mean centered.

Results

Main Effects

Illegitimate tasks in the morning predicted mid-day anger (γ = .22, p < .05).

Illegitimate tasks in the afternoon predicted evening anger (γ = .32, p < .05) and depressive mood (γ = .08, p < .05).

Cross-Moderation Effects

For employees with neuroticism, illegitimate tasks in the afternoon had an exacerbated effect on evening anger (γ = .18, p < .05).

For employees with trait depression, illegitimate tasks mid-day (γ = .15, p < .05) and in the afternoon (γ = .15, p < .01) had an exacerbated effect on evening depressive mood.

Discussion

Illegitimate tasks can exacerbate already undesirable traits, in a sense bringing out the worst in people.

These tasks appear particularly problematic for individuals prone to negative emotional reactions.

Neuroticism and trait depression exacerbated the effects of illegitimate tasks on employee state anger and depressive mood, respectively.

Confirms previous research demonstrating that individual difference buffers and exacerbates of illegitimate tasks appear to function quite specifically on their respective state-level outcomes.

Organizations would benefit from implementing training sessions that heighten awareness regarding these effects on vulnerable employees.

*References available upon request.

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