

# Illegitimate Tasks Exacerbate the Undesirable



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## Background

Illegitimate Tasks (Semmer et al., 2015)

- Work one feels they “should not have to do”
- Unreasonable or unnecessary tasks that are in violation of what can reasonably be expected from a given person.
- Related to low self-esteem, high negative emotions, burnout and more counterproductive work behavior.

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

- 1) Within individuals, illegitimate tasks will be positively associated with (a) state anger and (b) depressive mood.
- 1) 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.
- 1) Within individuals, trait depression will moderate the relationships between illegitimate tasks and (a) state anger and (b) depressive mood, such 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 anger and depressive mood: 3 items each from the Strain Symptom Inventory
- Neuroticism: 10-item broad-bandwidth scale
- Trait Depression: 20-item CES-D scale

Analytic Strategy

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

## Results

Main Effects

- Illegitimate tasks in the morning predicted mid-day anger ( $\gamma = .22$ ;  $p < .05$ )
- Illegitimate tasks in the afternoon predicted evening anger ( $\gamma = .32$ ;  $p < .05$ ) and depressive mood ( $\gamma = .08$ ;  $p < .05$ )

Cross-Moderation Effects

- For employees with neuroticism, illegitimate tasks in the afternoon had an exacerbated effect on evening anger ( $\gamma = .18$ ,  $p < .05$ ).
- For employees with trait depression, illegitimate tasks mid-day ( $\gamma = -.15$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and in the afternoon ( $\gamma = .15$ ,  $p < .01$ ) 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 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.

**Table 1. Hierarchical Linear Modeling Results for Predictive Depressive Mood**

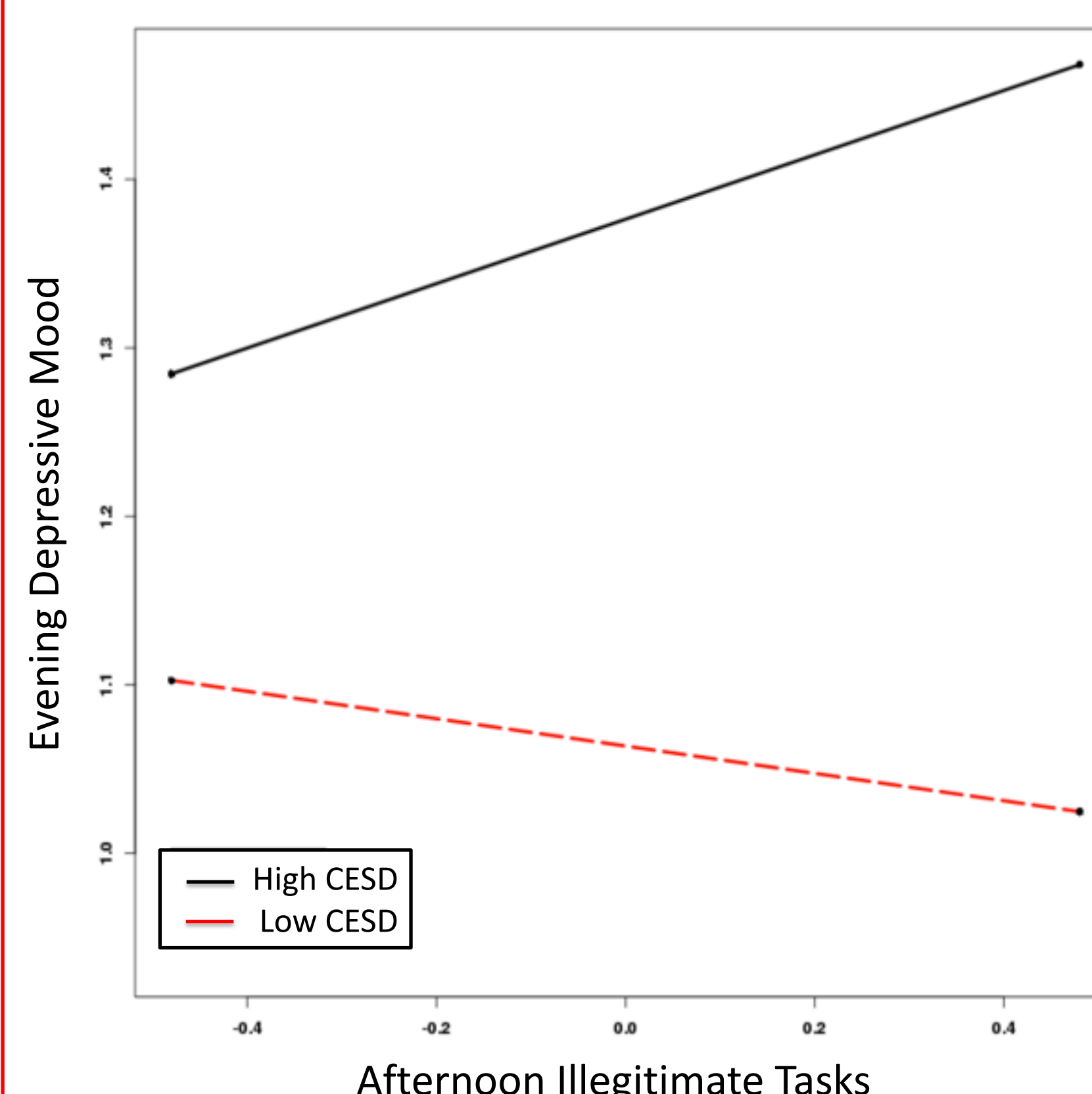
Mid-day Depressive Mood			
	Fixed Effects	Coefficient	SE
Intercept ( $\gamma_{00}$ )		1.18*	.04
Morning Depressive Mood ( $\gamma_{01}$ )		.20*	.05
IT Lunch ( $\gamma_{10}$ )		.03	.02
-----			
	Fixed Effects	Coefficient	SE
Intercept ( $\gamma_{00}$ )		1.19*	.04
Morning Depressive Mood ( $\gamma_{01}$ )		.30*	.08
IT Lunch ( $\gamma_{10}$ )		.05	.04
N*IT Lunch ( $\gamma_{20}$ )		-.02	.06
-----			
	Fixed Effects	Coefficient	SE
Intercept ( $\gamma_{00}$ )		1.19*	.04
Morning Depressive Mood ( $\gamma_{01}$ )		.30*	.07
IT Lunch ( $\gamma_{10}$ )		.04	.03
CESD*IT Lunch ( $\gamma_{20}$ )		.08	.07
-----			
Evening Depressive Mood			
	Fixed Effects	Coefficient	SE
Intercept ( $\gamma_{00}$ )		1.24*	.05
Morning Depressive Mood ( $\gamma_{01}$ )		.18*	.06
IT Evening ( $\gamma_{10}$ )		.08*	.03
-----			
	Fixed Effects	Coefficient	SE
Intercept ( $\gamma_{00}$ )		1.22*	.05
Morning Depressive Mood ( $\gamma_{01}$ )		.18	.10
IT Day ( $\gamma_{10}$ )		.05	.04
N*IT Evening ( $\gamma_{20}$ )		.07	.05
-----			
	Fixed Effects	Coefficient	SE
Intercept ( $\gamma_{00}$ )		1.22*	.05
Morning Depressive Mood ( $\gamma_{01}$ )		.17	.13
IT Day ( $\gamma_{10}$ )		.06	.04
CESD*IT Evening ( $\gamma_{20}$ )		.15*	.04

**Table 2. Hierarchical Linear Modeling Results for Predictive Anger**

Mid-day Anger			
	Fixed Effects	Coefficient	SE
Intercept ( $\gamma_{00}$ )		1.34*	.04
Morning Anger ( $\gamma_{01}$ )		.13*	.05
IT Lunch ( $\gamma_{10}$ )		.22*	.04
-----			
	Fixed Effects	Coefficient	SE
Intercept ( $\gamma_{00}$ )		1.36*	.05
Morning Anger ( $\gamma_{01}$ )		.13	.10
IT Lunch ( $\gamma_{10}$ )		.28*	.05
N*IT Lunch ( $\gamma_{20}$ )		-.00	.09
-----			
	Fixed Effects	Coefficient	SE
Intercept ( $\gamma_{00}$ )		1.36*	.05
Morning Anger ( $\gamma_{01}$ )		.12	.10
IT Lunch ( $\gamma_{10}$ )		.29*	.05
CESD*IT Lunch ( $\gamma_{20}$ )		-.15	.10
-----			
Evening Anger			
	Fixed Effects	Coefficient	SE
Intercept ( $\gamma_{00}$ )		1.36*	.05
Morning Anger ( $\gamma_{01}$ )		.03	.05
IT Evening ( $\gamma_{10}$ )		.32*	.05
-----			
	Fixed Effects	Coefficient	SE
Intercept ( $\gamma_{00}$ )		1.37*	.05
Morning Anger ( $\gamma_{01}$ )		-.01	.08
IT Day ( $\gamma_{10}$ )		.24*	.06
N*IT Evening ( $\gamma_{20}$ )		.18*	.09
-----			
	Fixed Effects	Coefficient	SE
Intercept ( $\gamma_{00}$ )		1.37*	.05
Morning Anger ( $\gamma_{01}$ )		.01	.08
IT Day ( $\gamma_{10}$ )		.26*	.07
CESD*IT Evening ( $\gamma_{20}$ )		.04	.11

Note. N = 100; \* < .05; IT Mid-day= IT at lunch, IT Evening= IT in the afternoon.

**Figure 1. Afternoon Illegitimate Tasks Predicting Evening Depressive Mood.**



**Figure 2. Afternoon Illegitimate Tasks Predicting Evening Anger.**

