Illegitimate Tasks and Negative Spillover: The Roles of Positive Work Reflection and Job Security

by

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Abstract

Workplace illegitimate tasks have been associated with a variety of negative consequences, but there is a need for a better understanding of the processes and contextual factors that influence these effects. This study investigates positive work reflection as a mechanism through which illegitimate tasks are related to negative spillover. Additionally, this research examines job security as a boundary condition of the illegitimate tasks – positive work reflection relationship, as well as the indirect relationship between illegitimate tasks and negative spillover via positive work reflection. To analyze these relationships, I used a daily diary design over a period of ten days. Using multilevel modeling, I explored whether positive work reflection acts as a mechanism in the relationship between illegitimate tasks and negative spillover, and whether job security moderates this pathway. Results confirmed that illegitimate tasks positively predict negative spillover, and that positive work reflection mediates the relationship between illegitimate tasks and negative spillover. Moreover, higher job security attenuates this relationship. These findings contribute to our understanding of the mechanisms and boundary conditions in the work home relationship.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) Use Disclosure Statement

In the preparation of this thesis, the following Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools were used: ChatGPT 4o (OpenAI, April 16, 2025). This tool was used primarily to adapt code for the simple slopes plotting. The author acknowledges full responsibility for the intellectual content of this work and has ensured that all AI-assisted sections have been reviewed and revised for accuracy and appropriate academic style. All AI-generated content was reviewed and validated for relevance, appropriateness, and accuracy before incorporation into the final document to maintain scholarly integrity of this research.

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Illegitimate Tasks and Negative Spillover: The Roles of Positive Work Reflection and Job Security

In the modern workplace, illegitimate tasks are a subtle yet pervasive phenomenon that plagues employees across industries. Illegitimate tasks refer to work duties that diverge from what an individual sees as reasonable or necessary within their professional role (Semmer et al., 2007). Illegitimate tasks occur with surprising frequency. In a study of Norwegian physicians, researchers found that over half of the sample reported that 11% of their workday consisted of tasks that could have been done by someone else, and 7% of participants believed illegitimate tasks filled 31% of their workday (Thun et al., 2018).

It is important to note illegitimate tasks are distinct from work hassles, which are obstacles that an individual encounters at work that hamper progress towards a work goal, such as equipment breakdowns or difficulties with colleagues (Zohar, 1999). Work hassles could be something like a slow software system for imputing grades, while an illegitimate task would be manually entering grades into multiple systems after management declined requests to merge (Semmer et al., 2007). Illegitimate tasks are specifically those that fall outside of expected work duties. Further, while some research suggests that employees and supervisors may have discrepancies in which tasks they consider illegitimate, reported illegitimate tasks still result in higher reported exhaustion and family strain (Meier & Semmer, 2018).

Illegitimate tasks contribute to a variety of negative work and psychological outcomes (Fila et al., 2020), including reduced job satisfaction and motivation (Omansky et al., 2016), lowered self-esteem (Eatough et al., 2016; Sonnentag & Lischetzke, 2018), counterproductive work behavior (Semmer et al., 2010; Zhou et al., 2018), burnout (Ouyang et al., 2022), and increased turnover intentions (Apostel et al., 2018; Zeng et al., 2021). Illegitimate tasks have also

been associated with contributing to negative outcomes at home. Characterized as the extent to which experiences from one domain, like work, carry over into another, such as their home life, thereby influencing their participation and experiences across domains (Edwards & Rothbard, 2000), negative spillover is known to have a wide variety of ramifications for both personal and professional life. This spillover can manifest in various ways, such as poor psychological detachment after work leading to work family conflict (Sonnentag & Lischetzke, 2018; Zhou et al., 2018), in addition to increased sleep fragmentation and later sleep-onset latency (Pereira et al., 2014). Thus, the effects of illegitimate tasks may persist or spillover even after the individual leaves work.

Although some research has demonstrated that illegitimate tasks can have consequences beyond work (Sonnentag & Lischetzke, 2018; Zhou et al., 2020), the processes through which illegitimate tasks are related to such outcomes remain underexplored. For instance, Sonnentag and Lischetzke (2018) found that end-of-work self-esteem, negative affect, and psychological detachment mediated the impact of illegitimate tasks on bed-time self-esteem and negative affect. Ahmed et al. (2018) showed that illegitimate tasks influence work-family outcomes through interactional justice and negative emotions. Similarly, Zhou et al. (2020) demonstrated that psychological detachment mediated the link between illegitimate tasks and work family conflict. However, more research is needed to capture the range of mechanisms at play. Extending prior research that establishes that effects of work events transmit to the home domain through positive work reflection (Kim & Beehr, 2022), this study explores reflection as the mechanism linking illegitimate tasks and negative spillover.

Job characteristics may also play a key role in mitigating the influences of illegitimate tasks (Ding & Kuvaas, 2023). Recent research has found those with high job insecurity are more

likely to perform illegitimate tasks due to a felt obligation to avoid jeopardizing their position (Ye et al., 2024). In this context, job security may influence how employees process and experience illegitimate tasks, with high job security potentially buffering against their negative impact. This study assesses the moderating role of job security, exploring how it may mitigate the effects of illegitimate tasks.

This study makes three contributions to the literature on illegitimate tasks. First, this study seeks to extend the literature by directly analyzing whether illegitimate tasks experienced during the workday spillover into the home domain during the evening. While existing studies have looked at some aspects of the after-work effects of illegitimate tasks, to our knowledge, the link specifically between illegitimate tasks and negative spillover has not been analyzed. Work spillover into the home domain has been linked to long term health outcomes (Tsukerman et al., 2020), suggesting that work-related stressors can have lasting effects. Hence, this relationship extends to broader implications beyond the day-level incidence of illegitimate tasks. By increasing understanding of the negative effects of illegitimate tasks on outcomes outside of work, our research also paves a path for intervention research where organizations can be more deliberate in removing or limiting illegitimate tasks in the workplace.

Second, this research explores positive work reflection as a mechanism through which illegitimate tasks are related to negative spillover. There has been a call for research expanding on the mechanisms related to illegitimate tasks (Ding & Kuvaas, 2023), and further identifying the modifiable processes that may diminish negative spillover (Kuo et al., 2023). However, the relationship between illegitimate tasks and positive work reflection has not yet been established in the literature. While a handful of studies have explored the mechanisms related to illegitimate tasks (Chen et al., 2021; Ma & Peng, 2019; Mauno et al., 2021; Zhao et al., 2021; Zhou et al.,

2018), few have analyzed the mechanisms that assess the relationship to illegitimate tasks with outcomes in the home domain (Ahmed et al., 2018; Sonnentag & Lischetzke, 2018; Zhou et al., 2020). Further, conceptualizing positive work reflection as a mechanism within the cognitive appraisal framework (Xu et al., 2021) may help elucidate the process by which positively appraising work experiences can yield favorable outcomes. By analyzing the role of positive work reflection on the relationship between illegitimate tasks and negative spillover, this study will expand the literature on the mechanisms associated with illegitimate tasks.

Third, this study examines job security as a potential moderator on the relationship between illegitimate tasks and positive work reflection. More research is needed on the moderators related to illegitimate tasks. Specifically, aspects of employment as a resource have yet to be analyzed in this context. By exploring how job security influences the mediating role of positive work reflection in the context of illegitimate tasks, this research expands our understanding of the boundary conditions that shape these relationships. Particularly given the mixed findings regarding the moderating effects of job resources on illegitimate tasks (Ding & Kuvaas, 2023), this study's focus on job security provides a nuanced perspective that expands on the existing literature and can inform future research directions. The hypothesized model appears in Figure 1.

Illegitimate Tasks and Negative Spillover

As highlighted in the Work-Home Resources (W-HR) model, illegitimate tasks represent job demands that not only consume personal resources but also pose a threat to an individual's fundamental sense of self-worth (Omansky et al., 2016; Wendsche & Lohmann-Haislah, 2017). In the W-HR model, personal resources, specifically time, mood, and energy, can be enriched or depleted, occurring consistently across both home and work domains (Ten Brummelhuis &

Bakker, 2012). Time, cognitive energy, and physical energy are limited, and job demands can deplete these resources (Ahmed et al., 2018). So, if a person has a particularly great day at work and accrues more personal resources, they will have more resources available in the home domain. Conversely, if personal resources are drained at work, the individual will have fewer resources available after work as well. This can cause lingering effects that leave individuals feeling more emotionally exhausted (Fila & Eatough, 2018). Thus, the adverse effects of depleting resources in one domain may lead to increased adverse spillover effects into the other domain (Rivkin et al., 2023). Extant research has demonstrated that illegitimate tasks can exhibit afterwork consequences, specifically by increasing negative affect and lowering self-esteem (Sonnentag & Lischetzke, 2018), and increasing work interference with family and family strain (Ahmed et al., 2018; Meier & Semmer, 2018). Additionally, Zeng et al. (2021) identified illegitimate tasks as a significant predictor of work family conflict. Employees spending time and energy engaging in illegitimate tasks on top of their actual work may ultimately have fewer resources at their disposal and may be left feeling considerably more depleted and with little to no energy after work. The depletion of resources from dealing with the psychological stress imposed by illegitimate tasks can thus make it difficult to have sufficient resources in the home domain, resulting in spillover.

Previous research has successfully employed daily diary studies to support the relationship between illegitimate tasks and after work effects, specifically capturing the day level impact of illegitimate tasks on delayed and fragmented sleep (Pereira et al., 2014), increased resentment, effects on self-esteem and “desire for revenge” (Semmer et al., 2020). This approach is best suited to analyze the day-to-day variability in experiences of illegitimate tasks and their

effects, and to help shed light on how day level occurrence of illegitimate tasks affects the individual in the evening after work.

Hypothesis 1: Illegitimate tasks during the workday will positively predict negative spillover after work.

Illegitimate Tasks and Positive Work Reflection

The transactional model of stress suggests that a person will evaluate the extent to which they perceive an event to be stressful, and if they perceive the stress from the event to cause "harm or loss" (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 32). For example, employees may spend time thinking about specific events that happened during their workday (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Through this process, they may decide whether to conceptualize these events, or their work tasks, as illegitimate or outside the scope of their anticipated work. Individuals may then spend time thinking about whether these tasks cause them stress and/or harm. This model can help explain the relationship between illegitimate tasks and how people reflect on work. Within occupational stress, the transactional model suggests that stress can occur even from an isolated event and does not require recurring or multiple situations to have harmful effects (Harris, 1995). These events may be perceived to surpass an individual's conception of their available resources, which may then incur a stress response. Thus, an individual may determine to what extent work tasks threaten their resources through reflection.

I argue that positive work reflection is a potential mechanism through which illegitimate tasks are related to negative spillover. As noted by Semmer et al. (2020), when the right conditions are met, illegitimate tasks may become stressors. This occurs through the appraisal process, in which an individual determines the level of which they find the tasks are draining. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) discussed cognitive appraisal as a way for individuals to assess the

transactions they have with the world around them (Hanton et al., 2012). More recently, Xu et al. (2021) established positive work reflection specifically as a cognitive mechanism within the framework of cognitive appraisal theory. Cognitive appraisal is the psychological process in which an individual determines whether an event is related to their well-being or not, and to what degree it affects them (Folkman et al., 1986). Nestled in this framework, work reflection is the process of intentionally examining one's work experiences (Kross et al., 2023), while positive work reflection is the act of intentionally examining the positive aspects of work experiences (Binnewies et al., 2009). After the appraisal of the stressor (illegitimate tasks in this case), an individual may determine they have insufficient resources to effectively deal with the stressor. This would affect the extent to which they engage in positive work reflection. In this way, the Lazarus transactional model of stress lends support to the relationship between illegitimate tasks and positive work reflection. Focusing on positive work reflection rather than negative work reflection allows for a more direct examination of how individuals' appraisal processes influence their ability to maintain or restore psychological resources, aligning with the resource evaluation process described in the transactional model of stress.

A recent review by Ding and Kuvaas (2023) identified several mediators that play a role in understanding the negative effects of illegitimate tasks. Some of these mediators highlight ways in which the perception of illegitimate tasks affects various outcomes. For example, illegitimate tasks have been shown to contribute to effort-reward imbalance stemming from a lack of perceived respect, resulting in an increase in turnover intentions (Zeng et al., 2021). Several studies have further identified mediators within the work domain that result in after work outcomes, including the mediating roles of end-of work self-esteem and negative affect on bedtime self-esteem and negative affect (Sonnentag & Lischetzke, 2018), and both interactional

justice and psychological detachment on the work-to-family dynamic (Ahmed et al., 2018; Zhou et al., 2018). Weigelt et al. (2019) highlight that in contrast to resource drains such as psychological detachment, positive work reflection has the potential to restore resources. Thus, I seek to expand on this existing research by analyzing the role of workday positive work reflection on end of day negative spillover.

The way people reflect on work experiences could help explain the connection between illegitimate tasks and negative spillover. Positive reflection involves deliberately contemplating the positive aspects of one's work (Fitz & Sonnentag, 2006; Xu et al., 2021). Research has shown that individuals often reflect on stressors from their organization, contemplating the relevance and meaning of the stressors and the personal resources they have to handle them (Hanton et al., (2012). In other words, people take time to think about whether they have the resources, like time and energy, to handle certain work stressors like illegitimate tasks. If a person does not feel they possess adequate resources, they are left feeling more drained and less able to handle after-work stressors (ten Brummelhuis & Bakker, 2012).

Given that reflection involves evaluating one's work experiences, it can influence how tasks are perceived. Thinking about the positive aspects of work experiences through positive work reflection may serve as the cognitive mechanism through which individuals evaluate the detrimental nature of illegitimate work tasks. Employees may reflect on their experiences with work demands and make evaluations to determine if the tasks at work are affecting their well-being, and to what extent these tasks may be unreasonable or unnecessary (Semmer et al., 2007, p. 47). When individuals are required to engage in tasks they perceive as illegitimate, their resulting resource loss can make it more difficult to view their work in a positive light. As a result, illegitimate tasks may shape the degree to which they engage in positive reflection.

Reflection has been linked to both well-being and job performance (Fritz & Sonnentag, 2006), suggesting that the benefits of reflection extend to both personal and professional domains. The appraisal of work tasks is a key factor in shaping perceptions of illegitimate tasks (Ding & Kuvaas, 2023). Given the conceptualization of positive work reflection as a mechanism for cognitive appraisal (Xu et al., 2021), this suggests that positive work reflection could influence this process.

While the way people reflect on work may be affected by the type of work, i.e., illegitimate tasks, the reflection process on work may influence how they feel after work as well. When an individual reflects positively on their work experiences, it reduces the likelihood of experiencing negative effects on health and stress levels after work (Bono et al., 2013). Specifically, positive reflection at work has been associated with reducing effects of workplace stressors on exhaustion (Clauss et al., 2018), stress and health (Bono et al., 2013), and facilitating both formal and informal learning at work (Ellström, 2005; Høyrup, 2005). In particular, Clauss et al. (2018) conducted a positive reflection intervention study where participants engaged in positive work reflection for a few minutes during the second half of their workday, which resulted in reduced fatigue for all participants and higher hope and optimism for those who were low on resources. Across three daily diary studies, Meier et al., (2016) found evidence for both within-person and between-person effects for positive work reflection, demonstrating that positively reflecting on work during leisure time was associated with increased affective well-being the following morning. Bono et al. (2013) similarly found that engaging in positive work reflection at the end of the work day significantly reduced reported stress, physical and mental health symptoms. Positive work reflection during the evening has also been linked to improved next day psychological availability, co-worker support, and perceived work meaningfulness

(Sonnentag et al., 2021). Moreover, positive work reflection can assist in resource recovery and resource gains (Fritz & Sonnentag, 2006). It is thus especially important to consider reflection, as it has been associated with mitigating effects of stressors and developing resilience (Crane et al., 2020), demonstrating long term effects are possible.

The way individuals perceive the type of work they do further affects how they might reflect on their work. When individuals reflect positively on their work, viewing it as meaningful, valuable, or aligned with their personal values and goals, they may experience more positive emotions as a result. The positive thoughts about work elicited by meaningful work have been associated with increased levels of affective organizational commitment (Jiang & Johnson, 2018). A cross-sectional study by Weigelt et al. (2019) found that positive reflection on work during leisure time was associated with higher reported well-being and work engagement. Positive work reflection has been associated with lowered physical fatigue within the Shirom-Melamed Burnout Measure, and those that reflected positively on work had higher well-being than those that reflected negatively on work during leisure time (Casper et al., 2019).

As research has demonstrated that the way people think about their work can assist in shaping their perceptions of work and creating a variety of outcomes, it is important to investigate the role of work reflection in the relationship between workplace stressors and negative spillover. A handful of studies have specifically assessed the mediating role of positive work reflection. In particular, positive work reflection may act as a mediator in the relationship between work and non-work enrichment, resulting in higher reported work-family enrichment (Daniel & Sonnentag, 2014). While previous research has yet to directly examine the relationship between positive work reflection and negative spillover after work, there is some evidence that positive work reflection is associated with positive spillover. A recent study found

positive reflection mediated the relationship between empowering leadership and work to home spillover, in that employee's experiences increased positive reflection under empowering leadership and therefore reported higher positive spillover into the home (Kim & Beehr, 2022).

Hypothesis 2: The relationship between workday illegitimate tasks and negative spillover after work is mediated by positive work reflection during the workday.

The Moderating Role of Job Security

I utilized the W-HR model to examine job security as a resource that serves as a boundary condition of the relationship between illegitimate tasks and positive work reflection (ten Brummelhuis & Bakker, 2012). Within the W-HR, resources can take the form of objects, personal characteristics, conditions, or energies that hold value to the individual, or may help them gain resources in these categories (ten Brummelhuis & Bakker, 2012). These resources may be personal resources, or those that come from within the self, or contextual resources, that originate outside of the individual. Within the facets of contextual conditions, employment can act as a resource (ten Brummelhuis & Bakker, 2012). Low job security may amplify the stress associated with illegitimate tasks, as employees fearing job loss may push themselves to meet unreasonable demands, draining their cognitive, time, and/or physical resources (ten Brummelhuis & Bakker, 2012). Additionally, when an individual feels they have low job security, the depletion of resources and stress resulting from increased pressure around completing work tasks may be amplified. Ye et al. (2024) found support for this, in that job insecurity heightened the likelihood of employees taking on illegitimate tasks. Similarly, if they feel they have high job security, completing their work tasks may not be perceived as of much a threat to their well-being. It can be reasoned that stable employment would then prevent an excess of resources being used to prevent job loss and may contribute to resource gain.

In addition to the way people think about the work they perform, an individual's level of job security may have a large effect on how they feel about their job after work. Individual's perceived job security is defined as the "state in which workers vary in their expectations of future job continuity within an organization" (Kraimer et al., 2005, p. 390). Their job security may impact how they perceive and adapt to changes within the organization. Previous research has conceptualized job security as a resource, as employees are generally motivated to maintain their employment (Sender et al., 2017). I argue that job security could reduce the intensity of the spillover effects of illegitimate tasks. Further research has shown support for job resources moderating the relationship between illegitimate tasks and negative outcomes (Ding & Kuvaas, 2023). Job security has also been associated with reducing the effects of workplace demands, specifically supervisor incivility and workplace physical demands (Ilic, 2018; Kwon et al., 2023). Job security thus may be uniquely positioned to affect the relationship between workplace stressors and negative spillover (Mauno et al., 2017). This study seeks to identify the constructs that influence home outcomes by analyzing the moderating role of job security and positive work reflection as the mechanism through which illegitimate tasks are related to negative spillover.

As discussed in the WH-R model, employment functions as a resource while additionally protecting against resource depletion. The time, energy, and cognitive load from illegitimate tasks may thus be buffered by job security. When an employee feels they have job security, it may provide them with increased resource levels and may mitigate negative effects that result from resource depletion (Bayraktar, 2019). Therefore, those with greater job security may find it easier to engage in positive work reflection even if they view their work tasks as illegitimate, as a sense of stability about their employment may allow employees to view illegitimate tasks as

more manageable. On the other hand, individuals who are experiencing job insecurity may be less able to reflect on their job in a positive way.

Hypothesis 3: The negative relationship between illegitimate tasks and positive work reflection will be stronger for those who have low job security compared to those with high job security.

Job security has been associated with higher job satisfaction and well-being (Fatimah et al., 2012). When individuals have higher perceived job security, the negative effect of illegitimate tasks on the home domain through reflection on work is not as strong. Job security may buffer against the potential negative impacts of illegitimate tasks by offering a sense of stability and continuity in employment. For instance, an employee that is asked to engage in tasks outside their role might feel less demoralized if they are confident their job is secure, as this assurance of stability may help employees handle illegitimate tasks without worrying that failure to complete these illegitimate tasks will endanger their job. Individuals with higher levels of job security are likely to perceive illegitimate tasks differently, viewing them as less threatening to their overall employment situation. This perception reduces the likelihood of these tasks draining the resources necessary for positive work reflection, thereby diminishing negative spillover into their personal lives.

Hypothesis 4: Job security will moderate the indirect effect of illegitimate tasks and negative spillover via positive work reflection, such that the mediated effect is stronger when job security is lower.

Method

Participants

These data were part of a larger study on employee stress and well-being. Participants were recruited through Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk) crowdsourcing website. The use of a crowdsourcing website serves as a strength of this study, as participants may be more likely to disclose illegitimate tasks at their workplace when the survey is not conducted in association with their organization. A total of 1,116 individuals completed the initial screening. To be included in the sample, participants were required to work at least 30 hours per week, have a job outside of crowdsourcing marketplaces, indicate they were interested in completing the daily diaries and they were able to complete the four daily surveys around the times requested, and not have vacation planned during the 10 days of the study. Participants that were deemed eligible were invited to complete the Time 1 survey.

The final sample consisted of 162 respondents who completed the Time 1 survey and at least three full daily diary surveys across the study period, to ensure sufficient data for within-person analysis. Additionally, participants retained in the final sample passed all survey attention checks. Due to missing data, the number of observations varied across variables. A flow chart depicting the data cleaning process can be found in Figure 2. While job security held 1620 observations, illegitimate tasks contained 1382 observations, positive work reflection had 1336 observations, and negative spillover had 1281 observations. Participants were 51.85% female. The average age of the sample was 39.65 (SD = 10.90) years. Participants were predominantly White/Caucasian (non-Hispanic) (71.60%), followed by Asian/Pacific Islander (16.67%), Black/African American (5.56%), and Hispanic/Latino (2.47%). Close to half the sample was married (48.77%), while 25.31% were single, 16.05% in a relationship, and 9.88% divorced or separated. Just over half the sample reported living with family (53.70%). Just under a third of participants reported at least one child under 18 in the home (32.10%). A wide variety of jobs

and industries were represented in the sample, including sales, teaching, management, engineering, and many more. Frequencies for demographics are reported in Table 1.

Procedure

Participants were asked to fill out a qualification questionnaire, followed by a Time 1 assessment, and then a daily diary survey for 10 days. Participants were required to complete the Time 1 survey in full prior to participating in the daily diaries portion. This consisted of four time points each day: morning before leaving for work, midday during work, end of workday before leaving work, and night right before going to bed. For the purposes of this study, I utilized data from the Time 1, midday, end of workday, and at night after work surveys. Compensation was provided at $6.00 per day. To receive compensation, participants were required to complete all four surveys during each day. IRB approval was received prior to recruiting participants.

Measures

Survey measures included illegitimate tasks, positive work reflection, job security, and spillover. Participants were also asked to provide their age, gender, current position title, level of education, and ethnicity at Time 1. Job security was also assessed at Time 1, prior to commencing the daily diaries. In keeping with the logical flow of the model, my predictor preceded my outcome for each daily diary. Illegitimate task questions were on the midday survey, positive work reflection was assessed at the end of the workday before leaving work, and spillover was captured in the at night after work survey.

Job Security

Job security was assessed through 10 items on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree". These questions were developed from ideology set forth in Oldham et al.'s paper that identified job security as one of four job facets (1986). Eight items

were positive, “I will be able to keep my present job as long as I wish,” while two items were negative, “My job is not a secure one.” These items were subsequently reverse coded to maintain consistency. The Cronbach’s alpha reliability for the job security scale at Time 1 was 0.94.

Illegitimate Tasks

Illegitimate tasks were assessed with eight questions from the Bern Illegitimate Tasks Scale (Semmer et al. 2010), utilizing a 7-point Likert scale ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”. Sample items are, “Today, did you have work tasks to take care of, which you believe were going too far, and should not be expected from you?” and, “Today, did you have work tasks to take care of, which kept you wondering if they just exist because some people simply demand them?” Cronbach’s alpha reliability on the illegitimate tasks items ranged between 0.95 and 0.97, respectively, over the 10 days of the study.

Positive Work Reflection

Positive work reflection was developed for this dataset and was assessed through six items on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from “never” to “very frequently”. The original measure was a destress behaviors construct composed of half positive work reflection questions and half task rotation questions. For this study I am specifically analyzing the positive work reflection facet. Sample items include, “Today at work, I looked at the bright side of my job rather than focusing on my setbacks” and, “Today at work, I tried to improve my mood by focusing on positive things about work.” Cronbach’s alpha reliability for positive work reflection ranged between 0.91 and 0.95 for the 10 days of the study.

Negative Spillover

Negative spillover was assessed through eight negative work to home spillover items developed from Grzywacz & Marks (2000). For negative spillover, a 7-point Likert scale ranging

from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree” was used. A negative spillover item sample was, “Today, my job reduced the effort I was able to give to activities at home.” Cronbach’s alpha reliability for negative spillover ranged between 0.92 and 0.94 over the 10 days.

Analytic Strategy

Given the hierarchical structure of these data, I used multilevel modeling to test my hypotheses. All statistical analyses were conducted using R statistical software (Version 2024.12.0+467; R Core Team, 2024). Hypotheses were tested using path analysis conducted using R package lme4 (Bates et al., 2015), and mediation was assessed with the R package Multilevelmediation (Falk et al., 2024). Job security was assessed at Time 1 and treated as a Level-2 variable, representing between-person differences. Illegitimate tasks, positive work reflection, and negative spillover were treated as Level-1 variables. Intraclass correlations (ICCs) are essential for assessing the degree of non-independence in nested data structures and can help inform the choice of appropriate statistical techniques (Bliese, 2000). To evaluate the appropriateness of multilevel modeling for the nested data (daily observations nested within individuals), ICCs were calculated for each variable, except job security, prior to hypothesis testing. I computed the ICC values for the Level-1 variables at the day-level to determine if they demonstrated sufficient within-person variability. For the daily diary variables, the ICC values ranged from .54 (negative spillover) to .73 (positive work reflection), indicating 54.1% to 73.0% of the variance present was due to between-person variation, with the remaining 27.0% to 45.9% of the variance due to within-person variations. A multilevel approach was deemed appropriate for analysis, as the variables of interest exhibit sufficient within-person variability (Bliese, 1998). Prior to testing my hypotheses, Level-1 illegitimate tasks was person-mean centered to isolate within-person effects; Level-2 job security was grand-mean centered.

For hypothesis testing, I followed Aguinis et al. (2013) recommendations for steps in building the cross-level model. I began with the random intercept and fixed slope models. I then specified the random intercept and random slope models, examining whether within-person effects from illegitimate tasks differ across participants. For the cross-level moderation analyses in Hypotheses 3 and 4, I added the Level-2 moderator, job security, as a cross-level interaction term to test whether differences in job security explained variability in the slopes of illegitimate tasks. This approach ensured that the fixed effects of illegitimate tasks represent the average within-person effect across individuals, while the random slopes capture variability in these effects across individuals.

Results

Means, standard deviations, and correlations between variables are shown in Table 2. At the within-person level, days with higher illegitimate tasks showed a significant and negative relationship with positive work reflection (r = -.20, p < .001), and a significant positive relationship with negative spillover (r = .51, p < .001). Daily positive work reflection was significantly and negatively associated with negative spillover (r = -.27, p < .001). These patterns are consistent with the study's theoretical framework and provide preliminary support for the hypothesized relationships.

Hypotheses Tests

Multilevel estimates for the hypothesized model are presented in Table 3. Hypothesis 1 supposed that illegitimate tasks will be positively related to negative spillover. To test this, I examined the direct effect of illegitimate tasks on daily negative spillover. Results showed that illegitimate tasks were positively related to negative spillover (γ = 0.23, SE = 0.05, p < .001, supporting Hypothesis 1.

Hypothesis 2 proposed that the relationship between illegitimate tasks at work and negative spillover after work would be mediated by positive work reflection during the workday. Path analysis results indicated illegitimate tasks were unrelated to positive work reflection (γ = –0.041, *SE* = 0.027, p = .143). On the other hand, positive work reflection was negatively related to negative spillover (γ = –0.384, *SE* = 0.085, $p < .001$). Mediation was assessed by illegitimate tasks predicting positive work reflection, and both positive work reflection and illegitimate tasks predicting negative spillover. Results from bootstrapping conducted at k = 10,000 iterations suggested a significant indirect effect of illegitimate tasks on negative spillover via positive work reflection (*B* = 0.06, 95% CI [0.002, 0.160]), supporting Hypothesis 2.

Hypothesis 3 posited that job security would moderate the relationship between illegitimate tasks and positive work reflection. In the random slopes model, the fixed effect of illegitimate tasks predicting lower positive work reflection was not significant (*B* = -0.04, *SE* = 0.03, p = .165). However, job security was significantly and positively associated with positive work reflection (*B* = 0.2, *SE* = 0.06, $p < .001$). The interaction between illegitimate tasks and job security was also significant (*B* = 0.04, *SE* = 0.02, p = .024), demonstrating a moderation effect. Full model estimates for the random slope variance components are presented in Table 3. To probe the interaction, simple slopes were examined using the Emmeans package in R (Lenth et al., 2024), at low (i.e., 1 *SD* below the mean) and high (i.e., 1 *SD* above the mean) levels of job security. As shown in Figure 3, when job security was low, illegitimate tasks were negatively associated with positive work reflection (*b* = -.09, *SE* = .03, 95%, p = .008). However, when job security was high, the relationship between illegitimate tasks and positive work reflection was nonsignificant (*b* = -0.02, *SE* = 0.04, 95%, p = .660). These findings support Hypothesis 3.

Finally, to test Hypothesis 4, I examined the full moderated mediation model to assess the conditional indirect effects of job security on the mediated relationship between illegitimate tasks and negative spillover. Specifically, this model proposed that the mediated effect through positive work reflection would be stronger when job security is low. A bootstrapped moderated multilevel mediation analysis was conducted using k = 10,000 iterations. The results supported a significant conditional indirect effect. As predicted, the indirect effect was statistically significant at low levels of job security, b = 0.08, 95% CI [0.009, 0.189], but not at high levels of job security, b = 0.05, 95% CI [-0.018, 0.140]. Full path coefficients for the moderated mediation model are shown in Table 3. Conditional indirect effects can be found in Table 4. These results provide support for Hypothesis 4.

Discussion

The goal of this study was to explore the role of illegitimate tasks as an antecedent of negative spillover through positive work reflection, and to further examine whether this mediated effect was stronger for those who experienced reduced job security. Results supported a positive relationship between workday illegitimate tasks and increased negative spillover at night the same day. Additionally, positive work reflection emerged as a mediator of this relationship. Notably, my findings suggested that job security moderated the relationship between illegitimate tasks and positive work reflection, such that the relationship between illegitimate tasks and positive work reflection was stronger and negative when job security was low versus high. Further, the mediated relationship between illegitimate tasks and negative spillover via positive work reflection was more pronounced under low levels of job security. In other words, when individuals felt their jobs were less secure, the effects of illegitimate tasks made it more difficult to reflect positively on work, leading to more negative spillover even at night.

Theoretical Implications

This study contributes to the extant literature by extending the transactional model of stress theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Beyond the established role of cognitive appraisal as a mediator in the stressor-response relationship, this study specifically introduces positive work reflection as an integral component mediating the link between illegitimate tasks and negative spillover. When employees engage in positive work reflection, like reminding themselves how their job benefits others or focusing on the positive aspects of their work, this appraisal shapes how experiencing illegitimate tasks at work translate into experiences of spillover. This suggests that engaging in positive thinking as part of the appraisal process is a meaningful aspect of this relationship and highlights the role of positive work reflection in shaping emotional responses to illegitimate tasks. By situating positive work reflection within the transactional model, this study demonstrates that employee's cognitive appraisals can shape the extent to which illegitimate tasks contribute to negative spillover and underscores the theoretical importance of positive work reflection in the appraisal process.

Additionally, illegitimate tasks did not demonstrate a significant relationship with positive work reflection. One interpretation of this may be that situational illegitimate tasks alone are not enough to change an individual's cognitive tendency towards reflecting positively on their work. In other words, the degree to which individuals engage in positive work reflection is not dependent on the presence of external factors like illegitimate tasks. While illegitimate tasks may not automatically or uniformly affect whether individuals engage in positive work reflection, positive reflection plays a central role in shaping outcomes when it occurs. This extends the transactional model of stress by suggesting that appraisal processes are not just reactive but can also be constructive, and deliberately recalling positive aspects of work can have

positive results. This suggests that positive work reflection functions as a key appraisal mechanism within the transactional model, shaping how individuals interpret and respond to stressors like illegitimate tasks, even if it is not consistently activated by these stressors.

This study additionally adds to the W-HR theory (Ten Brummelhuis & Bakker, 2012) by providing empirical support for the role of job security as a contextual resource that moderates the effects of illegitimate tasks and spillover. These findings align with theoretical expectations in that when job security is low, illegitimate tasks may pose a greater threat to individual's sense of control and value, thereby reducing their ability to reflect positively on their work. However, when job security is high, this potentially harmful impact of illegitimate tasks appears to be buffered, suggesting that job security serves as a protective contextual resource.

Practical Implications

This study offers several insights for organizations. Consistent with existing findings, we found that illegitimate tasks result in negative consequences. Therefore, organizations should first take steps to reduce the overall occurrence of illegitimate tasks. This could involve auditing task distributions across employees or teams, consulting employees about their concerns, or equipping managers with the tools to assign tasks more thoughtfully and equitably. While organizations should encourage managers to refrain from assigning illegitimate tasks (Zhou et al., 2018), employees that find themselves in roles with unnecessary or unreasonable task assignments may benefit from interventions that help them recognize when tasks fall outside of their role and set forth systems for handling illegitimate tasks if or when they arise. Training workshops could potentially include clarification around what constitutes illegitimate tasks.

In addition, clarifying work expectations by increasing awareness of illegitimate tasks in the workplace can serve as a crucial starting point. Organizations should take note to reduce

illegitimate tasks by ensuring job descriptions and role expectations are clearly defined and sufficiently specific. Any changes, updates or amendments should be clearly communicated and documented in written format. These should also be readily available to employees and simple to navigate. Providing justification for an assignment by explaining the necessity and reasoning behind a task may help reduce negative outcomes (Semmer et al., 2010; Sonnentag & Lischetzke, 2018). Managers may also demonstrate this to their employees by sharing the workload of the illegitimate tasks or doing these tasks themselves (Semmer et al., 2010).

Organizations and managers should also consider that employees facing low job security may be especially impacted when making decisions regarding assignment of illegitimate tasks. Thus, they should consider establishing procedures to identify, remove and/or limit illegitimate tasks, or reassign them as appropriate, to mitigate stress and improve employee outcomes, particularly in work environments where job security may be volatile.

From a practical standpoint, this study's findings underscore the importance of promoting cognitive strategies to mitigate the harm imposed by workplace stressors. Organizations should consider interventions that encourage employees to take a few moments to focus on the positive aspects of their workday, like guided reflection exercises, positive journaling, or end-of-day positive work reviews. Such practices may be particularly useful in roles where illegitimate or unreasonable tasks are difficult to eliminate. Interventions aimed at promoting positive work reflection could be pivotal in helping employees reframe challenging experiences and reduce the risk of negative effects spilling over after work into the evening.

Limitations

A few limitations should be noted. First, this study measured perceptions of illegitimate tasks rather than an objective metric of whether tasks fell outside an employee's job description.

Perceptions of what constitutes an illegitimate task may vary by person or between supervisors and employees (Meier & Semmer, 2018); however, the subjective perception is what shapes employee's mindsets and contributes to outcomes such as negative spillover. Second, due to the nature of the daily diary design, illegitimate tasks were assessed before lunch each day, meaning that if illegitimate tasks occurred later in the afternoon, they were not captured. Third, all measures in the current study were self-reported. Notably, negative spillover might have been more comprehensively assessed by a spouse, family, or those sharing a living space. Utilizing partner or family member reports could reduce self-report bias and provide a more objective view of negative spillover each day, and potentially capture the reciprocal influence of close others (e.g., a spouse perceiving illegitimate tasks as unfair and, in turn, exacerbating the employee's negative spillover) (Huang et al., 2023). Finally, common method variance may be a concern given the reliance on self-report measures, although this risk was mitigated to some extent by collecting data at multiple time points throughout the day.

Future Directions

While this work focused on the mediating role of positive work reflection, future research should also examine negative work reflection. Positive and negative work reflection are distinct constructs, thus preventing us from analyzing them simultaneously here (Binnewies et al., 2009). It would be interesting to explore if negative work reflection mirrors positive work reflection in this context, in creating a negative influence on the work and home dynamic. This could provide a more nuanced understanding of how the way people think about work shapes their daily outcomes. Also, future studies should examine these dynamics at the team or unit level. It is possible that norms surrounding task legitimacy, job expectations, and when or if positive work reflection occurs are shaped by collective experiences or managerial practices within teams.

Multilevel research could explore how shared perceptions of illegitimate tasks or job security within a team influence individual level outcomes and could shed light on how organizational culture and leadership practices contribute to outcomes related to illegitimate tasks. In addition, while we identified positive work reflection and job security as mediators and moderators of this relationship, researchers should explore additional outcomes that may result from the resource loss associated with illegitimate tasks beyond negative spillover. Together, these directions could deepen our understanding of how employees navigate illegitimate tasks and how organizations can cultivate positive and supportive work environments.

Conclusion

When employees experience more illegitimate tasks during the morning, they also feel greater interference in their home life even well after work hours. This demonstrates that illegitimate tasks exert pressures on employees that have lingering effects beyond their work hours. Positive work reflection can aid in mitigating the effects of illegitimate tasks by focusing on the positive aspects of work. However, low job security can make it harder for employees to engage in positive work reflection, and negative spillover increases. To help employees manage work stressors and prevent them from affecting them into the evening, organizations should minimize illegitimate tasks, promote job security, and support engaging in positive work reflection.

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Table 1.

Participant Demographics

	Frequency
Gender	
Male	78
Female	84
Ethnicity	
White/Caucasian (non-Hispanic)	116
Asian/Pacific Islander	27
Black/African American	9
Hispanic/Latino	4
Marital Status	
Single, never married	41
In a relationship	26
Married	79
Divorced/Separated	16
Education	
Less than high school	1
GED/High school proficiency	7
Some college education without degree	22
Associate's degree	5
Bachelor's degree	76
Some post graduate education without advanced degree	2
Advanced degree (MS, MA, PhD, JD, MD, etc.)	49

Table 2.

Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations among Variables

Variable	*M*	*SD*	1	2	3	4
1. Job security	5.02	1.30	–	–	–	–
2. Illegitimate tasks	2.41	1.51	-.231**	–	-0.204***	0.510***
3. Positive work reflection	3.38	1.16	.304***	-0.214**	–	-0.265***
4. Negative spillover	2.68	1.91	-.262***	0.674***	-0.279***	–

Note. $N = 162$. Presented are means (*M*) and standard deviations (*SD*) representing the range over ten workdays. Between-person correlations are shown below the diagonal. Within-person correlations are shown above the diagonal. $^{**}p < .01$, $^{***}p < .001$.

Table 3.

Multilevel Estimates

Variable	Positive Work Reflection		Negative Spillover	
	Estimate (*B*)	***SE***	**Estimate (*B*)**	***SE***
Intercept	3.388***	0.07	2.732***	0.12
Main effects				
Illegitimate tasks	-0.038	0.03	0.225***	0.06
Job Security	0.232***	0.06	0.304***	0.09
Positive work reflection	–	–	-0.384***	0.08
Interaction				
Illegitimate tasks × Job security	0.042*	0.02	-0.067	0.04
Indirect Effect				**95% *CI***
Illegitimate tasks → Positive work reflection → Negative spillover	–	–	0.064	[0.002, 0.160]

Note. $N = 162$; observations ranged from 1,281 to 1,336 across models. Positive work reflection estimates (moderation model) used maximum likelihood (ML); negative spillover and indirect effect estimates (mediation model) used restricted maximum likelihood (REML). Fixed effects show standard errors (*SE*); bootstrapped indirect effect shows 95% confidence interval (*CI*). *$p <$ .05, ***$p <$ .001.

Table 4.

Conditional Indirect Effects: Multilevel Estimates for the Moderated Mediation

Indirect Effect	Condition	Estimate (*B*)	95% *CI*
Illegitimate tasks → Positive work reflection → Negative spillover	Low job security	0.083	[0.009, 0.189]
	High job security	0.046	[-0.018, 0.140]

Note. N = 162 participants with 1,281 observations. Confidence intervals (*CI*).

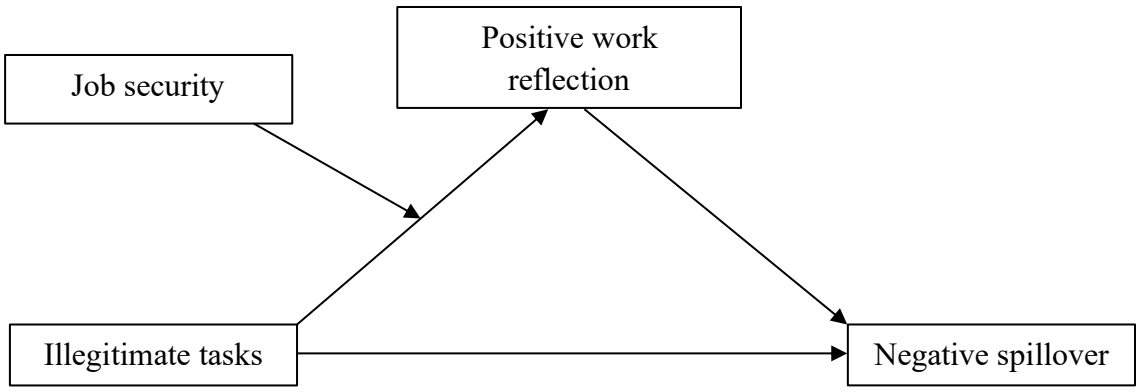

Figure 1.

Conceptual model with hypothesized path analysis.

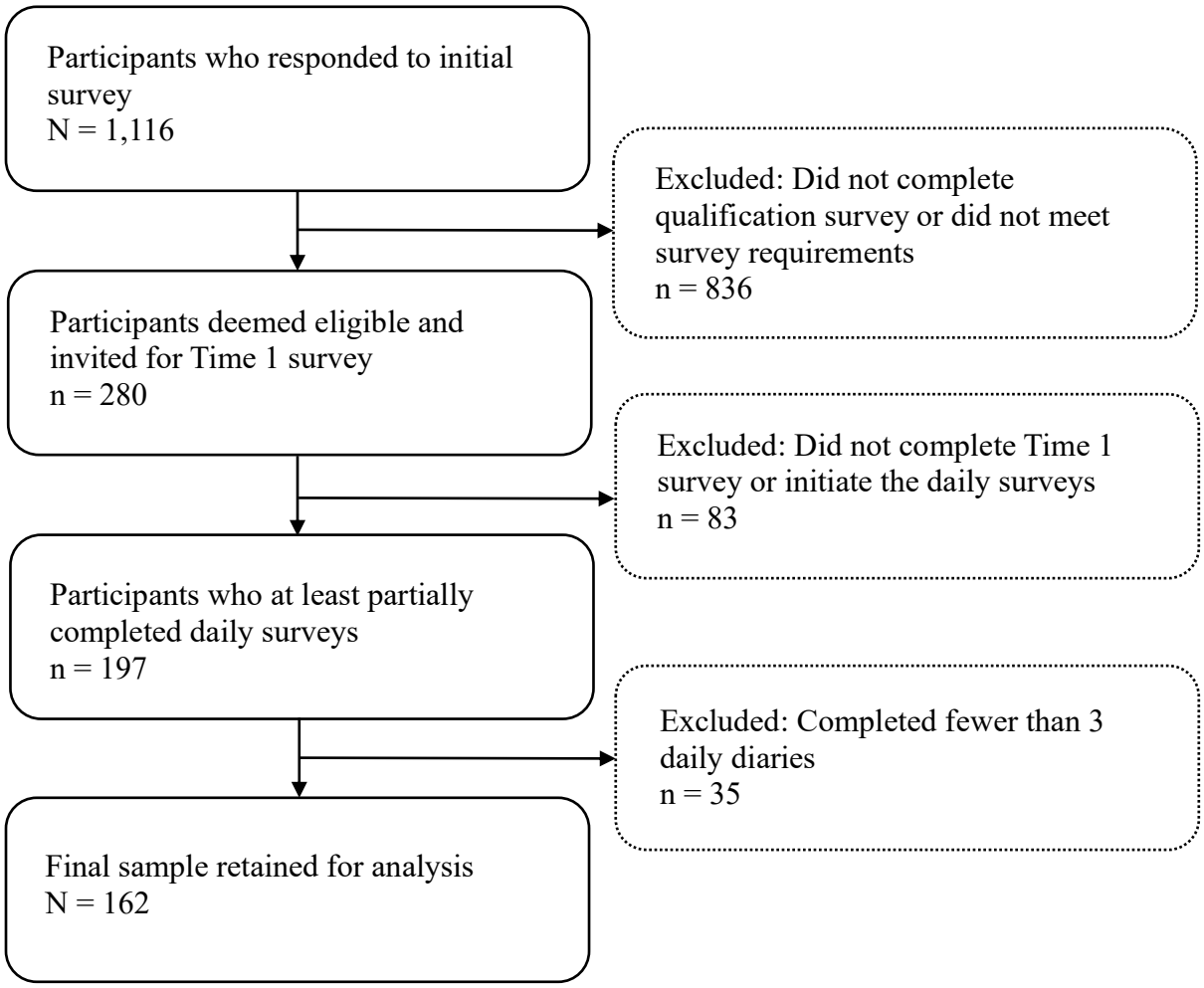

Figure 2.

Flow chart depicting the stages of the data cleaning process.

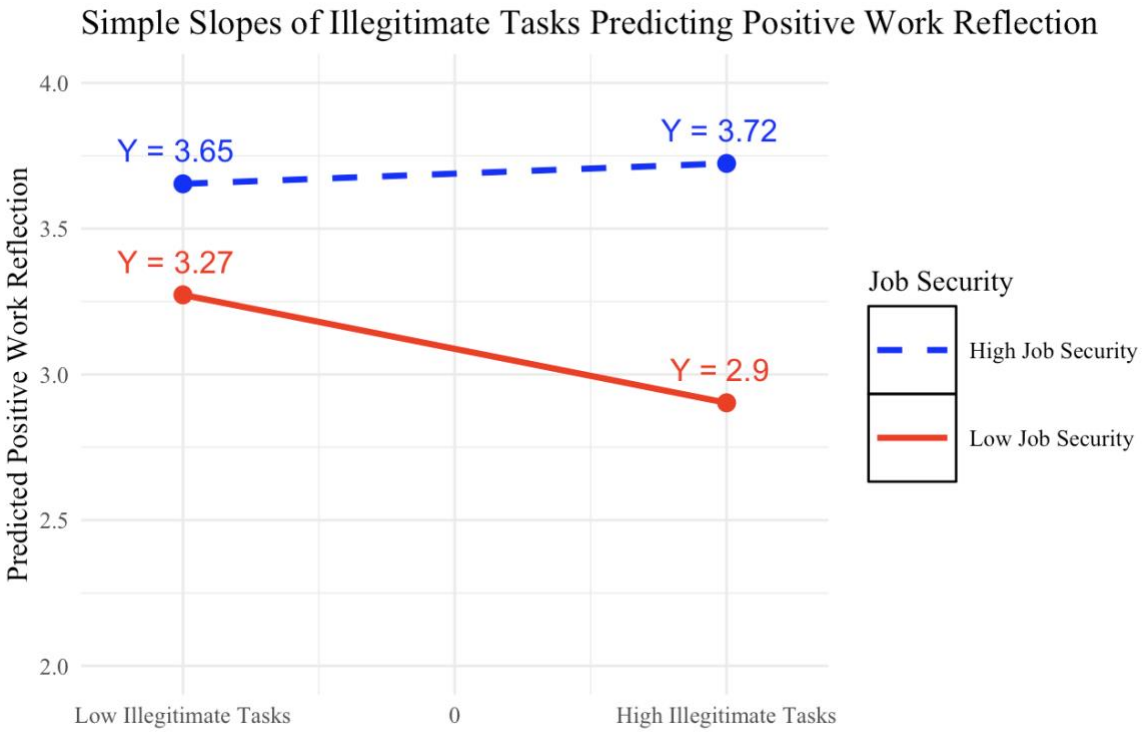

Figure 3.

Simple slopes depicting interaction between illegitimate tasks and job security predicting positive work reflection.

Appendix

Qualification Survey

1. What is your Mturk ID?

    o (Open-ended)

2. Are you currently employed at a job other than Mturk or any other crowdsourcing marketplace?

    o Yes

    o No

3. If yes, how many hours do you work per week? **(This does not include the work you complete through Mturk or any other crowdsourcing marketplace).**

    o (Open-ended)

4. What specific days of the week do you work? **(Select all that apply).**

    o (Open-ended)

5. What is your current position?

    o (Open-ended)

6. Do you work from home?

    o Yes

    o No

7. Will you be on vacation on any day from _____ 2021 to _____ 2021?

    o Yes

    o No

8. What is your marital status?

o Single, never married

o In a relationship

o Married

o Divorced / separated

o Widowed

9. Do you live with your family?

o Yes

o No

10. If yes, please specify family members with whom you live (e.g., wife, children, parents, partner, etc.)

o (Open-ended)

11. How many children under the age of 18 live with you?

o (Open-ended)

12. At what time do you wake up in the morning on weekdays?

o Please select a time: Hour - Minute - AM/PM

13. At what time do you start work each day?

o Please select a time: Hour - Minute - AM/PM

14. At what time do you eat lunch each day?

o Please select a time: Hour - Minute - AM/PM

15. At what time do you end work each day?

o Please select a time: Hour - Minute - AM/PM

16. At what time do you go to sleep on weekdays?

o Please select a time: Hour - Minute - AM/PM

17. What is the time zone of the state in which you work?

o (Open-ended)

18. Are you able to complete 5 minute surveys first thing EVERY MORNING BEFORE YOU LEAVE FOR WORK from _____ 2021 to _____ 2021?

o Please select a time: Hour - Minute - AM/PM

19. Are you able to complete 15 minute surveys BEFORE LUNCH TIME DURING WORK from _____ 2021 to _____ 2021?

o Please select a time: Hour - Minute - AM/PM

20. Are you able to complete 15 minute surveys EVERY EVENING BEFORE YOU LEAVE WORK from _____ 2021 to _____ 2021?

o Please select a time: Hour - Minute - AM/PM

21. Are you able to complete 15 minute surveys EVERY NIGHT RIGHT BEFORE GOING TO BED from_____ 2021 to _____ 2021?

o Please select a time: Hour - Minute - AM/PM

22. If eligible, would you be interested in participating in a daily study that will begin on Monday morning (DATE), and end on Friday evening of the same week (DATE)? If yes, you will receive four survey links from Monday, DATE to Friday, DATE. **You will be asked to complete each survey within 1 hour of receiving the link.** On average, the surveys will take you 5-20 minutes per survey. **You will need to complete all four surveys in a day to receive compensation. The compensation amount per day will be $6.00.** Therefore, you can earn up to $30.00 if you complete every survey over the course of the week. This compensation will appear in the form of a bonus payment.

o I am interested in participating in the study from DATE - DATE

o I am not interested in participating in the study

23. Are you taking this survey on a:

o Laptop/computer

o Smartphone

o iPad/Tablet

Time 1 Survey- Demographic Questions & Job Security

3. What is your age?

o (drop-down menu)

2. What is your gender?

o Male

o Female

3. Please indicate your race / ethnicity (check all that apply)

o Black / African American

o White / Caucasian (non-Hispanic)

o Asian / Pacific Islander

o Middle Eastern / West Asian

o Native American

o Hispanic / Latino

o Other

4. What is your highest level of education? Please enter the highest degree you have obtained.

o Less than high school

o GED / High school proficiency

o Some college education without degree

o Associate's degree

o Bachelor's degree

o Some post graduate education without advanced degree

o Advanced degree (MS, MA, PhD., JD, MD, etc.)

Job Security (Oldham et al., 1986)

Directions: Please rate your agreement with the following statements.

Strongly disagree	*Disagree*	*Somewhat disagree*	*Neither agree nor disagree*	*Somewhat agree*	*Agree*	*Strongly agree*

1. I will be able to keep my present job as long as I wish.

2. My current organization will not cut back on the number of hours I work each week.

3. If my current organization were facing economic problems, my job would be the first to go. (R)

4. I am confident that I will be able to work for my organization as long as I wish.

5. My job will be there as long as I want it.

6. If my job were eliminated, I would be offered another job in my current organization.

7. Regardless of economic conditions, I will have a job at my current organization.

8. I am secure in my job.

9. My current organization would transfer me to another job if I were laid off from my present job.

10. My job is not a secure one. (R)

Illegitimate Tasks (Semmer et al. 2010)

Strongly disagree	*Disagree*	*Somewhat disagree*	*Neither agree nor disagree*	*Somewhat agree*	*Agree*	*Strongly agree*

1. Today, did you have work tasks to take care of, which you believe should be done by someone else?

2. Today, did you have work tasks to take care of, which you believe were going too far, and should not be expected from you?

3. Today, did you have work tasks to take care of, which you believe put you in an awkward position?

4. Today, did you have work tasks to take care of, which you believe were unfair for you to have to deal with?

5. Today, did you have work tasks to take care of, which kept you wondering if they made sense at all?

6. Today, did you have work tasks to take care of, which kept you wondering if they had to be done at all?

7. Today, did you have work tasks to take care of, which kept you wondering if they would not exist (or could be done with less effort), if things were organized differently?

8. Today, did you have work tasks to take care of, which kept you wondering if they just exist because some people simply demand them?

Positive Work Reflection

Directions: Please indicate the degree to which you engaged in the following behaviors to destress from work-related stress TODAY AT WORK.

Never	*Very Rarely*	*Rarely*	*Occasionally*	*Very Frequently*

1. Today at work, I focused on positive things about work
2. Today at work, I looked at the bright side of my job rather than focusing on my setbacks
3. Today at work, I constantly reminded myself of how far I have come at work
4. Today at work, I avoided dwelling on things at work
5. Today at work, I tried to improve my mood by focusing on positive things about work
6. Today at work, I reminded myself how my job benefited others

Negative Spillover (Grzywacz & Marks, 2000)

Strongly disagree	*Disagree*	*Somewhat disagree*	*Neither agree nor disagree*	*Somewhat agree*	*Agree*	*Strongly agree*

1. Today, my job reduced the effort I was able to give to activities at home.
2. Today, stress from work made me irritable at home.
3. Today, my job made me feel too tired to do the things that need attention at home.
4. Today, job worries or problems distracted me when I was at home.