



Illegitimate Tasks and Demand Crafting: How Configurations of Illegitimacy Shape Proactive Coping at Work

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Abstract

In this paper, we introduce a configurational model of illegitimate tasks to explain how demand crafting strategies unfold as coping responses to such demands. Drawing on cognitive appraisal theory, we investigate how distinct combinations of unreasonable and unnecessary tasks elicit different forms of regulatory demand crafting: seeking challenges, optimizing demands, and reducing demands. Specifically, we examine how congruence (both types of illegitimate tasks at similarly high or low levels) and incongruence (one type of task exceeding the other) relate to these strategies. Using two-wave data from 299 employees, we show that high levels of both unnecessary and unreasonable tasks suppress proactive crafting in the form of seeking challenges. Incongruent configurations appear associated with differentiated responses: higher levels of unreasonable tasks are associated with more frequent optimizing demands, whereas higher levels of unnecessary tasks stimulate seeking challenges. These patterns remain partially robust when controlling for baseline levels of demand crafting, suggesting that task configurations may help explain variation in employee coping strategies. By adopting an exploratory, configurational perspective, this study highlights the nuanced ways in which illegitimate tasks can influence proactive work behavior and encourages further research on the complex dynamics between task characteristics and employee agency.

Keywords Demand crafting · Illegitimate tasks · Job crafting · Optimizing demands · Proactivity

Contemporary changes in work organization, such as restructuring, digital transformation, and increased role ambiguity, have contributed to a rise in illegitimate tasks (Eatough et al., 2016; Zhao et al., 2022). Illegitimate tasks reflect job demands that violate reasonable role expectations and can be conceptualized as a unified construct encompassing two related facets: unnecessary tasks, which are perceived as inefficient or lacking value, and unreasonable tasks, which exceed an employee's role expectations (Ding & Kuvaas, 2023; Semmer et al., 2007, 2010). Both facets share a common core of illegitimacy, signaling disregard for employees' time, effort, and identity. Rather than merely withdrawing, some employees respond to these

role violations by proactively modifying their work (He et al., 2024; Jiang & Wang, 2024; Mäkikangas et al., 2023) – crafting their demands to optimize or reduce them, or even seeking new challenges. When and why such proactive responses emerge, however, remains poorly understood (Wang & Jiang, 2023). Yet, the need to address this question is growing, as these role violations can be experienced as particularly offensive because they signal disregard for professional identity and proper work design (Semmer et al., 2016; Semmer et al., 2019; Semmer & Zapf, 2019; Wang & Jiang, 2023) and are associated with detrimental consequences for employee well-being (Fila & Eatough, 2020; Kottwitz et al., 2013; Meier & Semmer, 2018; Semmer et al., 2015). Moreover, contemporary job structures often make it difficult for employees to simply avoid or refuse such tasks (Mäkikangas et al., 2023), underscoring the importance of understanding when and how employees actively cope with them.

While prior research has linked illegitimate tasks primarily to negative outcomes (Ding & Kuvaas, 2023; Kilponen et al., 2021), emerging perspectives suggest that such demands may also trigger proactive forms of coping (He et al., 2024; Jiang & Wang, 2024; Mäkikangas et al., 2023). Job crafting,

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the self-initiated adjustments employees make to their tasks, relationships, and perceptions at work (Bruning & Campion, 2018; Lichtenthaler & Fischbach, 2019; Tims & Bakker, 2010; Tims et al., 2012; Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001), provides a promising framework for understanding this phenomenon. In this research, we focus on *demand* crafting, which includes optimizing work processes, reducing hindering demands, and seeking new challenges (Demerouti & Peeters, 2018; Petrou et al., 2012; Tims et al., 2012), because it offers a conceptually robust framework for understanding how illegitimate tasks are not only endured, but potentially transformed into triggers for self-directed, proactive adjustment.

Existing studies have largely treated illegitimate tasks as a uniform stressor, overlooking how different configurations, i.e., combinations of unnecessary and unreasonable tasks, may shape distinct agentic coping responses. We propose that to better understand what types of proactive job redesign strategies result from illegitimate tasks, it is important to examine not simply the presence of illegitimate tasks per se, but rather their configuration, i.e., the relative levels and combination of unnecessary and unreasonable tasks. Specifically, drawing on cognitive appraisal theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), we argue that the congruence or incongruence between unnecessary and unreasonable tasks shapes the arousal informing the demand-focused crafting strategies employees deploy. Hence, we introduce an *illegitimacy configuration model of crafting* and examine how congruence (similar levels) and incongruence (imbalanced levels) between unnecessary and unreasonable tasks differently predict three forms of demand crafting: optimizing demands, reducing demands, and seeking challenges. By focusing on how specific patterns of illegitimate demands activate different crafting strategies, we aim to provide a more nuanced understanding of employee proactivity in the face of illegitimate tasks as a key job demand in today's workplaces (Mäkikangas et al., 2023).

This study offers three key contributions. First, we advance theory on job crafting (Tims et al., 2012, 2022; Zhang & Parker, 2019) by exploring how demand crafting may serve as a targeted, agentic response to task-based stressors that violate role expectations, offering insights into which types of demand crafting are most likely to emerge in response to specific illegitimate task configurations. Second, we contribute to the illegitimate task literature (Semmer et al., 2010) by opening up the question of how employees craft their work in response to such tasks, thereby responding to calls for research on the possible positive consequences of illegitimate tasks (Ding & Kuvaas, 2023). Third, we enrich the nomological network of illegitimate tasks by examining how specific *combinations*—not just levels—of illegitimate tasks relate to distinct demand crafting patterns. In doing so, by adopting a configuration lens, we provide a more nuanced and exploratory framework that highlights when illegitimate tasks may stimulate avoidance versus approach-oriented

coping strategies. Taken together, this study generates new insights and directions for future research, advancing both coping and job crafting literature by clarifying the functional specificity of proactive responses to illegitimate tasks.

While our theorizing draws from appraisal theory and prior research on job crafting and illegitimate tasks, the novelty of focusing on task configurations means that empirical evidence is still scarce. Thus, our study is best viewed as exploratory but theory-informed. Rather than presenting hypotheses, we formulate research questions with general expectations about how different illegitimacy patterns may shape demand crafting. This approach allows us to remain open to unexpected findings while still grounding our inquiry into established theoretical frameworks.

Theoretical Background

Illegitimate Tasks as Stressors: The Role of Configuration in Shaping Coping Responses

Illegitimate tasks represent a distinctive class of job stressors that violate normative role expectations and threaten employees' professional identity. According to the Stress-as-Offense-to-Self (SOS) framework (Apostel et al., 2018; Kronenwett & Rigotti, 2019; Semmer et al., 2015), illegitimate tasks undermine employees' sense of self by signaling disrespect for their professional role boundaries (Semmer et al., 2007). These tasks are classified into *unnecessary* tasks, i.e., tasks that should not exist if work were properly organized, and *unreasonable* tasks, which fall outside employees' legitimate role responsibilities. Drawing on the SOS perspective and informed by the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Bakker & Demerouti, 2017), illegitimate tasks can be conceptualized as job demands: aspects of the job that require sustained emotional, cognitive, and/or physical effort, and are thus associated with psychological costs (for the negative outcomes associated with illegitimate tasks see: Eatough et al., 2016; Fila & Eatough, 2020; Kottwitz et al., 2013; Meier & Semmer, 2018; Munir et al., 2017; Semmer et al., 2015). Crucially, while such demands often function as hindrances, employees may also proactively cope with them by engaging in job crafting, which allows them to reconfigure their work environment to fit their needs (Bakker et al., 2023).

From a cognitive appraisal perspective (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), coping stems from two appraisals: primary appraisal, assessing threats or opportunities, and secondary appraisal, evaluating controllability. When stressors are appraised as meaningful and controllable, employees are more likely to engage in problem-focused coping, while tasks appraised as hindrances lead to protective, avoidance-oriented responses. To better understand agentic coping

responses to illegitimate tasks, we argue that it is crucial to examine not merely their presence, but their configuration, that is, the relative levels and combination of unnecessary and unreasonable tasks. These task types differ in their attributions (Pindek et al., 2019), which suggests that different configurations elicit distinct forms of arousal, potentially shaping employees' psychological reactions and subsequent behaviors (Wang & Jiang, 2023). Hence, we propose that such arousal, driven by specific task configurations, directs different types of agentic coping responses in the form of approach- or avoidance-oriented demand crafting behaviors.

To capture and model these effects, we adopt a polynomial regression with response surface analysis approach (Edwards & Parry, 1993). Unlike traditional difference scores or interaction terms, polynomial regression allows for modeling congruence (similar levels of unnecessary and unreasonable tasks) and incongruence (different levels between them) in the levels of illegitimate tasks as distinct surfaces, thereby offering a nuanced understanding of how their interplay affects outcomes. Response surface analysis enables researchers to visualize and interpret these patterns, showing, for example, whether congruence at high levels leads to worse outcomes compared to congruence at low levels, or how particular patterns of imbalance (e.g., more unnecessary than unreasonable tasks) relate to different demand crafting behaviors. Overall, we propose that different patterns of unnecessary and unreasonable tasks create distinct psychological experiences that activate different forms of demand crafting.

Demand Crafting as an Agentic Coping Response

Employees do not always passively endure unfair or stressful job demands; rather, they may engage in proactive efforts to protect their well-being and preserve a sense of control (Parker et al., 2010). The JD-R model conceptualizes job crafting as a proactive strategy through which individuals reshape job demands and resources to better align with their personal needs (Bakker et al., 2023; Tims & Bakker, 2010). This form of agentic behavior becomes especially critical when employees encounter stressors that challenge their professional identity and violate role expectations, such as illegitimate tasks (Semmer et al., 2007, 2015).

Demand crafting can thus be understood as a form of coping shaped by appraisal (Zhang & Parker, 2022). As illegitimate tasks constitute job demands, here we focus on *demand* crafting strategies because they specifically target job demands. The job crafting literature distinguishes between three forms of demand crafting (Demerouti & Peeters, 2018; Petrou et al., 2012; Tims et al., 2012; Zhang & Parker, 2019): *seeking challenges*, where employees actively pursue stimulating tasks or responsibilities; *optimizing demands*, which focuses on improving work efficiency

and streamlining task processes, and *reducing demands*, a protective strategy aimed at avoiding draining, hindering aspects of work.

While recent research has provided valuable insights into the relationship between illegitimate tasks and job crafting (e.g., Mäkikangas et al., 2023; Jiang & Wang, 2024; He et al., 2024), questions remain about how specific configurations of tasks may shape differentiated coping responses. For instance, Mäkikangas et al. (2023) found that seeking resources buffered the negative effects of unreasonable tasks on work meaning but not of unnecessary tasks. Jiang and Wang (2024) showed that an aggregated measure of job crafting mitigated overload. However, Mäkikangas and colleagues (2023) focused specifically on optimizing demands and seeking resource strategies, while Jiang and Wang (2024) merged all forms of job crafting and illegitimate tasks into composite scores. As such, the configuration of illegitimate tasks, i.e., how unreasonable and unnecessary tasks co-occur, has not yet been systematically examined, nor have differentiated demand crafting strategies with distinct motivational underpinnings (Zhang & Parker, 2019). In another study, He et al. (2024) framed job crafting and withdrawal as possible behavioral responses to illegitimate tasks, thus providing valuable evidence that crafting can be understood as a direct response rather than solely as a moderator. At the same time, their operationalization was necessarily broad: illegitimate tasks were treated as a unitary construct, and crafting was measured through a composite of task, relational, and cognitive changes, thereby still leaving open the question of how specific forms of demand crafting unfold in response to distinct features of illegitimate tasks.

Building on these contributions, we propose that demand-focused crafting strategies, i.e., reducing and optimizing hindering demands, and seeking challenging demands, are relevant coping responses to illegitimate tasks precisely because such tasks represent *job demands* that may prompt employees to protect or reassert control through specific forms of crafting that target the source of depletion. Extending prior studies that have conceptualized job crafting as a moderator (e.g., Mäkikangas et al., 2023; Jiang & Wang, 2024), we frame it as a direct agentic response shaped by task configuration. Specifically, we posit that crafting responses are influenced by the *configuration* of illegitimate tasks, i.e., the congruence or incongruence between unreasonable and unnecessary demands, because these different tasks can potentially threaten different aspects (Pindek et al., 2019). Unnecessary tasks, by undermining the meaning and rationality of work, may evoke disengagement and avoidance (e.g., reducing demands), whereas unreasonable tasks may evoke efforts to assert competence or manage expectations, potentially prompting optimizing or challenge-seeking behaviors. When both are present at high levels, the combined threat may lead to paralyzed responses, yet under patterns of

incongruence, employees may experience manageable pressure that enables agency.

Importantly, this theorizing does not deny that unnecessary and unreasonable tasks both reflect a common core of illegitimacy, as evidenced by studies modeling them as indicators of a single latent construct (e.g., Fila et al., 2023; Jiang & Wang, 2024; Pfister et al., 2020; Semmer et al., 2015; Zhou et al., 2018). Rather, enriching this perspective, we suggest that examining how different facet configurations, whether congruent or incongruent, operate in tandem can shed light on distinct cognitive-affective patterns that shape demand crafting. Our proposed framework highlights how congruence amplifies either depletion (when high) or exploration (when low), while incongruence activates targeted responses to the most salient violation, i.e., inefficiency or identity threat. In doing so, we acknowledge that the perception of incongruence may depend on the subjective salience and intensity of the difference between the two types of tasks. However, our framework emphasizes not absolute incongruence, but *relative* imbalance and its consequences for the demand crafting strategy adopted. This distinction allows us to move beyond the isolated effects of each type of illegitimate task and explore how employees navigate complex task environments through differentiated forms of proactive adjustment.

Congruent Illegitimate Tasks and Demand Crafting

While each type of illegitimate task (unreasonable or unnecessary) has distinct implications for appraisal and behavior (Pindek et al., 2019; Wang & Jiang, 2023), their joint presence or absence may create qualitatively different conditions that go beyond additive effects. Congruence, whether high or low, can provide a coherent signal about the work environment, reinforcing specific appraisals (e.g., consistent threat or consistent fairness). For example, high–high configurations may trigger stronger, compounded threat appraisals due to simultaneous violations of role identity and task legitimacy, while low–low configurations may foster resource availability, clarity, and structure, encouraging proactive engagement. Thus, examining congruence allows us to capture the synergistic dynamics that emerge from the interplay of illegitimate task types.

High-High Congruence: Threat Appraisal

When both unnecessary and unreasonable tasks are high, employees may perceive their work as both meaningless and identity-threatening, with minimal perceived opportunities for gain. Unreasonable tasks signal a violation of professional identity and fairness, while unnecessary tasks add a sense of inefficiency and wasted effort (Pindek et al., 2019; Semmer et al., 2015). Together, these forms of illegitimacy

are likely to overwhelm coping resources and activate avoidance-oriented appraisals (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). In this context, employees may engage in reducing demands, a strategy aimed at psychologically or practically minimizing exposure to excessive or aversive aspects of work (Petrou et al., 2012; Zhang & Parker, 2019).

Research Question 1: How does congruence in the levels of unnecessary and unreasonable tasks relate to demand crafting, particularly reducing demands, when both are high?

Low-Low Congruence: Growth Orientation

Conversely, when both types of illegitimate tasks are low, employees may appraise the work environment as fair, predictable, and well-aligned with their role expectations. In such conditions, employees have available resources that can be deployed for further development. This resource availability may enable growth-oriented behaviors (Rosing et al., 2011) in the form of demand crafting, as employees may engage in seeking challenges, introducing complexity or novelty to enhance engagement and learning (Petrou et al., 2012). In parallel, employees may engage in optimizing demands, refining tasks to increase efficiency and maintain high standards (Demerouti & Peeters, 2018), reflecting an approach-oriented response to a positively appraised environment.

Research Question 2: How does congruence in the levels of unnecessary and unreasonable tasks, when both are low, relate to demand crafting, particularly seeking challenges and optimizing demands?

Incongruent Illegitimate Tasks

Examining incongruent configurations adds value by revealing how ambiguous or contradictory signals affect employees' cognitive appraisals and coping efforts. When one type of illegitimate task is higher than the other, the salience of the more dominant task may guide primary appraisal, but the incongruence itself may still trigger cognitive dissonance or uncertainty, affecting perceived control and behavioral responses. This aligns with stress configuration models suggesting that misfit, not just intensity, shapes adaptation (Edwards & Rothbard, 1999; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Therefore, studying incongruence offers insights into how employees navigate ambivalent environments, where motivational and identity cues are in tension.

Illegitimate tasks, though uniformly stress-inducing, differ in their qualitative features (Pindek et al., 2019). Unreasonable tasks tend to violate identity and fairness norms, whereas unnecessary tasks often suggest inefficiency and lack of value. At the same time, both facets share the common feature of threatening identity: unreasonable tasks relate more strongly to one's personal occupational identity,

while unnecessary tasks undermine one's broader identity as an employee (Semmer et al., 2015, 2019). When levels of these two types are incongruent, it seems plausible that the more salient task type dominates the appraisal process, shaping both primary appraisals (threat vs. hindrance) and secondary appraisals (controllability), consistent with the transactional model of stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), thereby informing distinct demand crafting responses.

Unreasonable Tasks Higher than Unnecessary Tasks

When unreasonable tasks outweigh unnecessary ones, the dominant experience is one of identity threat and violated role boundaries (Semmer et al., 2015). Such experiences are likely to elicit a threat-based primary appraisal, where employees perceive a challenge to their competence or professional legitimacy (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Wang & Jiang, 2023). However, because unnecessary tasks are less prominent, the work context may retain a sense of productivity or relevance, allowing employees to perceive some degree of control. In response, employees may adopt optimizing demands as a strategy to restore professional standards by streamlining task execution, enhancing efficiency, or redefining processes to realign the role with internalized expectations (Demerouti & Peeters, 2018). This represents an active coping strategy aimed at reinforcing control and credibility, rather than avoidance.

Research Question 3: How does incongruence in the level of illegitimate tasks, with unreasonable tasks being higher than unnecessary ones, relate to optimizing demands?

Unnecessary Tasks Higher than Unreasonable Tasks

In contrast, when unnecessary tasks are higher than unreasonable ones, the dominant appraisal may be one of procedural hindrance and lack of value. While such tasks do not directly threaten professional identity, they obstruct meaningful work and frustrate intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000), prompting hindrance-based appraisals (LePine et al., 2005). Because unreasonable tasks in this scenario are less salient, employees may feel demoralized rather than threatened and motivated to restore meaning and stimulation. This may lead to seeking challenges, a strategy aimed at reintroducing growth and purpose into one's role (Tims et al., 2012; Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). At the same time, if employees perceive low control, which is particularly the case for unnecessary tasks that are typically perceived as non-volitional (Mäkikangas et al., 2023) and may be embedded in routines or regulations, optimizing demands may feel ineffective. In such contexts, employees may instead turn to reducing demands, not as a response to identity threat, but to withdraw effort from futile or demotivating tasks that

are perceived as difficult to change (Carver et al., 1989; de Hooge et al., 2011; Petrou et al., 2012).

Research Question 4: How does incongruence in the level of illegitimate tasks, with unnecessary tasks being higher than unreasonable ones, relate to seeking challenges and reducing demands?

Method

Participants and Procedure

We collected data from Italian employees working across different organizations and holding different job types. Using a snowball sampling approach, participants were invited via email to take part in the study and asked to complete two anonymous, web-based surveys with a three-month time lag. Data were collected in 2021 and 2022. Participation was voluntary, and employees received information about the study's aims and data treatment. Responses were anonymous, and participants gave their consent to participate in the study. To ensure anonymity, participants created an anonymous code in both questionnaires. The code was composed of the first two letters of the mother's maiden name combined with the first two letters of the father's name, the total number of brothers and sisters, and the number corresponding to the day of birth.

After matching responses, we obtained a matched sample of 299 respondents out of 667 (45%) who initially agreed to participate in the study. Among the 299 respondents ($M_{\text{age}} = 38.57$; $SD_{\text{age}} = 10.62$), 53% were male. Most of them (25.6%) worked in the administrative field, the next most common occupations were consultancy (8%) and research and education (4.8%). They worked across a wide range of industries, including IT, finance, manufacturing, and education. Results from t-tests comparing participants only at T1 and the final sample at T2 showed no significant differences in terms of age ($t = -1.09$, $p = .28$), illegitimate tasks (unnecessary: $t = -.82$, $p = .41$; unreasonable: $t = -.82$, $p = .41$), job crafting (seeking challenges: $t = -.54$, $p = .59$; reducing demands: $t = -.90$, $p = .37$; optimizing demands $t = -.46$, $p = .39$), emotional exhaustion ($t = -1.07$, $p = .24$), and job control ($t = 1.72$, $p = .09$).

Measures

All questionnaires were administered in Italian. Scales not available in Italian were translated using the back-translation procedure (Behling & Law, 2000).

Illegitimate tasks were assessed at Time 1 (T1) using the Bern Illegitimate Tasks Scale (Semmer et al., 2010), consisting of eight items. Four of these assessed unnecessary tasks (e.g., "Do you have work tasks to take care of, which keep

you wondering if they have to be done at all?”), while the other four assessed unreasonable tasks (e.g., “Do you have work tasks to take care of, which you believe should be done by someone else?”). Answers were provided on a 5-point scale, ranging from 1 = *never* to 5 = *frequently*. McDonald’s ω were = .85 and .87, respectively.

Demand crafting was assessed at Time 2 (T2) using the Italian version (Costantini et al., 2021) of the job crafting subscales developed by Petrou et al. (2012) – seeking challenges (three items, e.g., “I ask for more tasks if I finish my work”; McDonald’s ω = .74) and reducing demands (three items, e.g., “I make sure that my work is mentally less intense”; McDonald’s ω = .84) – and Demerouti and Peeters (2018) – optimizing demands (six items, e.g., “I simplify work processes or procedures to make my job easier”; McDonald’s ω = .76). All items were rated on a 6-point frequency scale (1 = “never” to 6 = “often”).

Control variables. We collected data on emotional exhaustion and job control as control variables in our analyses. These variables have theoretical relevance for our focal variables. Specifically, emotional exhaustion at T1 can be linked to higher ensuing avoidance demands behaviors because exhausted employees tend to avoid demands as a coping mechanism (Petrou et al., 2015; Zhang & Parker, 2019). We assessed emotional exhaustion using five items (e.g., “I feel tired when I get up in the morning and have to face another day on the job”) developed by Maslach and colleagues (1986). Items were rated on a 7-point scale, ranging from 1 = *never* to 6 = *every day*. McDonald’s ω = .86. Similarly, job control can influence job crafting behaviors because individuals with higher autonomy have greater latitude to craft their jobs and motivation to engage in goal-directed behaviors (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Rudolph et al., 2017; Zhang & Parker, 2019). Job control was assessed at T1 using four items (e.g., “I have a choice in deciding how I do my work”) from the Italian version of the 25-item Health and Safety Executive Stress Indicator Tool (Balducci et al., 2017). Items were rated on a 4-point scale, ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 4 = *strongly agree*. McDonald’s ω = .86. As recommended, we ran our analyses with and without control variables (Becker et al., 2016). These analyses did not change significantly the pattern of the results observed. Accordingly, we report these results as robustness checks.

Statistical Analyses

To address our research questions, we conducted polynomial regression analyses (Edwards, 1994; Edwards & Parry, 1993), following recommendations by Shanock et al. (2010). This approach was appropriate due to the common conceptual domain of the independent variables, i.e., illegitimate tasks, and the fact that these variables were measured on the

same scale. Before proceeding with the analyses, we centered the variables at the scale mean (i.e., 3) and calculated squared values and interactions. A surface response plot was used to visualize the results.

In polynomial regression analysis, four indices are calculated (Shanock et al., 2010): a_1 represents the slope along the line of balance, calculated as the sum of the unstandardized coefficients of the linear relationships between unnecessary and unreasonable tasks and the different demand crafting strategies. The a_2 coefficient indicates the curvature along the line of balance, reflecting the extent of a non-linear relationship between the congruence of unnecessary and unreasonable tasks and demand crafting. a_3 signifies the slope of the line of imbalance, indicating the direction of the imbalance between the different illegitimate tasks. A positive a_3 suggests that a positive difference between unnecessary and unreasonable tasks is positively related to demand crafting, while a negative a_3 implies a negative relationship. Finally, a_4 denotes the curvature along the line of imbalance, indicating the extent to which the degree of imbalance between unnecessary and unreasonable tasks is related to demand crafting in a non-linear way.

Results

Descriptive Statistics and Preliminary Analyses

The means, standard deviations, and correlations among the variables are reported in Table 1.

Before addressing our research questions, we conducted a series of confirmatory factor analyses to test the factorial validity of our measures. As reported in Table 2, at T1, the hypothesized four-factor model consisting of job control, unrelated tasks, unnecessary tasks, and emotional exhaustion supported the discriminant validity of our measures ($\chi^2 = 300.65$, $df = 113$, CFI = .95, RMSEA = .07, SRMR = .05). Similarly, at T2, a three-factor model consisting of seeking challenges, reducing demands, and optimizing demands showed to be superior to the alternative models tested, $\chi^2 = 84.76$, $df = 50$, CFI = .96, RMSEA = .05, SRMR = .05.

Main Analyses

The results of the polynomial regression analysis are shown in Table 3. Illegitimate tasks and their interactions explained a larger share of variance for seeking challenges (12%) and optimizing demands (10%) compared to reducing demands (6%). Unreasonable tasks had a significant negative relationship with seeking challenges behaviors ($B = -.53$; $p < .001$), were positively related to optimizing demands ($B = .13$; $p = .05$) and were unrelated to reducing

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics and Correlations Among the Study Variables

| | <i>M (SD)</i> | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 |
|----------------------------|---------------|---------|--------|---------|--------|--------|---------|-------|--------|-------|
| 1. Gender | 0.46 (0.50) | - | | | | | | | | |
| 2. Age | 38.57 (10.62) | -.035 | - | | | | | | | |
| 3. Job control T1 | 3.75 (0.71) | .015 | .169* | (.86) | | | | | | |
| 4. Emotional exhaustion T1 | 2.36 (1.36) | -.247** | -.037 | -.198** | (.86) | | | | | |
| 5. Unnecessary tasks T1 | 3.09 (0.92) | -.150* | -.017 | -.141 | .247** | (.85) | | | | |
| 6. Unreasonable tasks T1 | 2.63 (0.98) | -.295** | .110 | -.147* | .470** | .452** | (.87) | | | |
| 7. Seeking challenges T2 | 4.11 (1.33) | .107 | -.153* | .055 | .018 | -.049 | -.220** | (.74) | | |
| 8. Reducing demands T2 | 3.37 (1.75) | -.010 | -.133 | -.114 | .281** | .159* | .132 | .131* | (.83) | |
| 9. Optimizing demands T2 | 4.60 (0.79) | -.044 | .008 | -.126 | .155* | -.032 | .156* | .128* | .210** | (.76) |

N = 299. Gender: 0 = Male; 1 = Female. T1 = Time 1; T2 = Time 2. Cronbach's alphas are reported on the diagonal

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$ (two-tailed)

Table 2 Results of Confirmatory Factor Analyses

| Model | χ^2 | <i>df</i> | CFI | RMSEA | SRMR | $\Delta\chi^2$ | Δdf | <i>p</i> |
|---|----------|-----------|-----|-------|------|----------------|-------------|----------|
| <i>Time 1</i> | | | | | | | | |
| Hypothesized four-factor model | 300.65 | 113 | .95 | .07 | .05 | | | |
| Three-factor model (job control, unreasonable + unnecessary tasks, emotional exhaustion) | 676.55 | 116 | .84 | .11 | .07 | 375.90 | 3 | < .01 |
| One-factor model | 921.05 | 118 | .69 | .16 | .11 | 545.15 | 5 | < .01 |
| <i>Time 2</i> | | | | | | | | |
| Hypothesized three-factor model | 84.76 | 50 | .96 | .05 | .05 | | | |
| Two-factor model (seeking challenges, reducing + optimizing demands) | 302.59 | 53 | .68 | .13 | .11 | 217.83 | 3 | < .01 |
| One-factor model | 328.70 | 54 | .54 | .15 | .13 | 110.87 | 4 | < .01 |

CFI = comparative fit index; RMSEA = root mean square error of approximation; SRMR = standardized root mean square residual
df = degrees of freedom. Models are compared to the hypothesized factor model

Table 3 Results of Polynomial Regression Analyses

| | T2 Seeking Chal- lenges | | T2 Reducing Demands | | T2 Optimizing Demands | |
|---|----------------------------|------------|------------------------|------------|--------------------------|------------|
| | <i>B</i> | <i>SE</i> | <i>B</i> | <i>SE</i> | <i>B</i> | <i>SE</i> |
| Unnecessary Tasks (UT) | .08 | .12 | .20 | .16 | -.18** | .07 |
| Unreasonable Tasks (UNRT) | -.53*** | .12 | -.02 | .16 | .13* | .07 |
| Unnecessary Tasks ² | .13 | .11 | .01 | .14 | .02 | .06 |
| Unreasonable Tasks ² | -.34*** | .10 | -.28* | .13 | -.07 | .06 |
| Unnecessary Tasks x Unreasonable Tasks | .06 | .13 | .01 | .17 | -.17* | .07 |
| <i>R</i> ² | .12 | | .06 | | .10 | |
| <i>a</i> ₁ : Congruence slope along UT = UNRT | -.45*** | .13 | .18 | .17 | -.05 | .07 |
| <i>a</i> ₂ : Congruence curvature along UT = UNRT | -.15 | .12 | -.27 | .16 | -.22*** | .07 |
| <i>a</i> ₃ : Incongruence slope along UT = -UNRT | .61** | .20 | .21 | .27 | -.32*** | .12 |
| <i>a</i> ₄ : Incongruence curvature along UT = -UNRT | -.27 | .25 | -.28 | .33 | .11 | .14 |

N = 299. Unstandardized regression coefficients are reported

* $p \leq .05$; ** $p \leq .01$; *** $p \leq .001$

demands behaviors ($B = -.02$; $p = .91$). Unnecessary tasks were significantly negatively related only to optimizing demands ($B = -.18$; $p = .01$). Furthermore, the squared term for unreasonable tasks was negatively related to both seeking challenges ($B = -.34$, $p = .001$) and reducing demands ($B = -.28$, $p = .03$), but it was unrelated to optimizing demands ($B = -.07$, $p = .22$). The interaction between different types of illegitimate tasks had a significant relationship only with optimizing demands ($B = -.17$, $p = .02$). However, in the polynomial regression analysis framework, the interpretation of the results focuses on the a indices (Rosing & Zacher, 2016). These results are presented in the bottom part of Table 3. For seeking challenges and optimizing demands, results are summarized graphically in Figs. 1 and 2 using a response surface plot.

To address our first and second research questions, which examined how congruence in the levels of unnecessary and unreasonable tasks relates to demand crafting strategies, we tested whether equal levels of both facets of illegitimacy, at either high or low intensity, were associated with reducing, seeking, and optimizing demands. As shown in Table 3, the coefficient representing the line of congruence between unnecessary and unreasonable tasks was not significant for reducing demands ($a_1 = .18$, $p = .293$). Differently, for seeking challenges, the coefficient was negative and significant ($a_1: -.45$, $p = .001$), indicating that seeking challenges was less frequent when both unnecessary and unreasonable tasks were high. For optimizing demands, the congruence coefficient was not significant, suggesting that congruent levels

of illegitimate tasks were unrelated to this outcome. As illustrated in Fig. 1, seeking challenges was lowest at the rear corner of the line of congruence, where both unnecessary and unreasonable tasks were high.

Our third and fourth research questions explored the role of incongruence between unnecessary and unreasonable tasks in shaping demand crafting strategies. Specifically, we examined whether one facet of illegitimate task being more salient than the other was associated with different proactive responses.

As shown in Table 3, the coefficient representing the line of incongruence (a_3) was negative and significant for optimizing demands ($a_3 = -.36$, $p = .007$), positive and significant for seeking challenges ($a_3 = .61$, $p = .003$), and not significant for reducing demands ($a_3 = .21$, $p = .430$). These results indicate that when unreasonable tasks exceeded unnecessary ones, employees were more likely to engage in optimizing demands (see Fig. 2). Conversely, when unnecessary tasks were higher than unreasonable ones, employees were more likely to seek challenges (see Fig. 1). In other words, relatively higher levels of unnecessary tasks triggered greater challenge-seeking behavior, whereas higher levels of unreasonable tasks encouraged employees to improve task execution through optimization strategies.

Robustness Checks

To test the robustness of our results, we controlled for emotional exhaustion and job control, both measured at Time

Fig. 1 Response Surface Plot of Unnecessary and Unreasonable Tasks with Seeking Challenges. *Note.* The response surface plot shows that seeking challenges is lower in the rear corner, where both unnecessary and unreasonable tasks are high. It is higher toward the front-right corner, where unnecessary tasks are higher and unreasonable tasks are lower

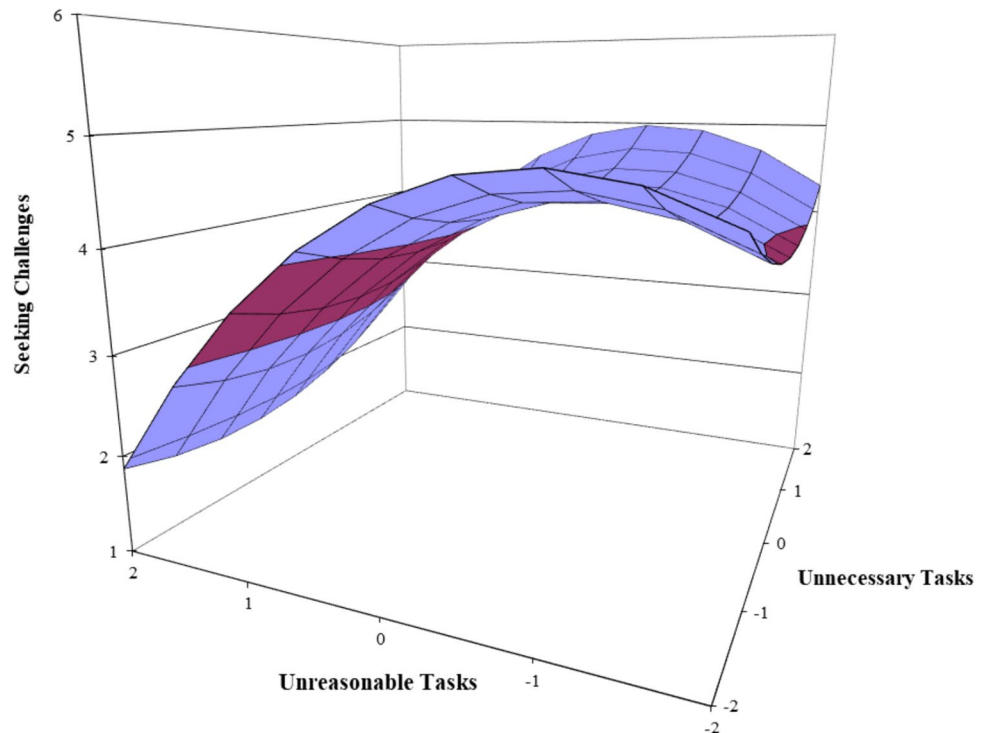


Fig. 2 Response Surface Plot of Unnecessary and Unreasonable Tasks with Optimizing Demands. *Note.* The response surface plot shows that optimizing demands is higher in the left corner, where unreasonable tasks are higher and unnecessary tasks are lower

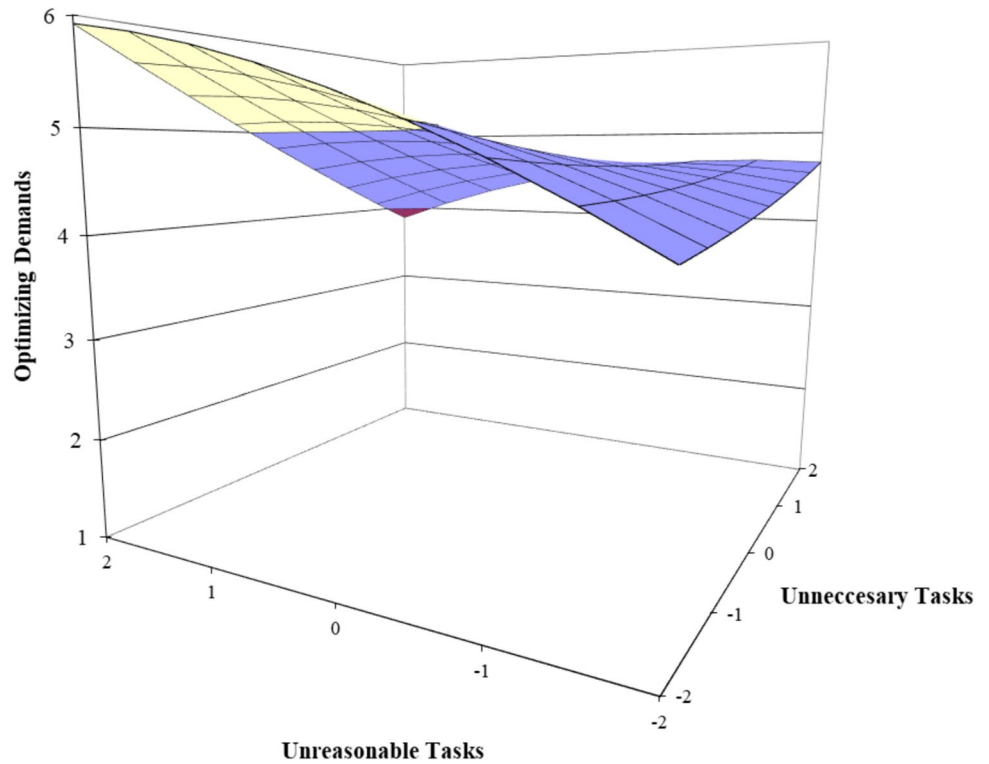


Table 4 Results of Polynomial Regression Analyses with Control Variables

| | T2 Seeking Challenges | | T2 Reducing Demands | | T2 Optimizing Demands | |
|---|------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|
| | Step 1 | Step 2 | Step 1 | Step 2 | Step 1 | Step 2 |
| | <i>B</i> (<i>SE</i>) | <i>B</i> (<i>SE</i>) | <i>B</i> (<i>SE</i>) | <i>B</i> (<i>SE</i>) | <i>B</i> (<i>SE</i>) | <i>B</i> (<i>SE</i>) |
| Gender | .01 (.20) | .03 (.20) | .02 (.27) | .14 (.26) | .03 (.11) | .03 (.11) |
| Age | -.02* (.01) | -.02 (.01) | -.02 (.01) | -.02 (.01) | -.01 (.01) | .01 (.01) |
| Job Control | | .07 (.14) | | -.07 (.19) | | -.10 (.08) |
| Emotional Exhaustion | | .10 (.08) | | .33** (.11) | | .04 (.05) |
| Unnecessary Tasks (UT) | .04 (.13) | .04 (.13) | .16 (.17) | .16 (.17) | -.19** (.07) | -.21** (.07) |
| Unreasonable Tasks (UNRT) | -.47*** (.14) | -.52*** (.14) | .06 (.18) | -.14 (.19) | .16* (.08) | .13 (.08) |
| Unnecessary Tasks ² | .14 (.11) | .13 (.11) | .03 (.15) | .03 (.14) | .02 (.06) | .02 (.06) |
| Unreasonable Tasks ² | -.31** (.11) | -.29** (.11) | -.26 (.15) | -.20 (.15) | -.05 (.06) | -.05 (.06) |
| Unnecessary Tasks x Unreasonable Tasks | .04 (.13) | .04 (.13) | -.02 (.18) | -.03 (.17) | -.18* (.08) | -.18* (.08) |
| <i>R</i> ² | .12 | .13 | .07 | .12 | .10 | .12 |
| ΔR^2 | | .01 | | .05** | | .02 |
| <i>a</i> ₁ : Congruence slope UT=UNRT | -.43** (.13) | -.47** (.14) | .22 (.18) | .02 (.19) | -.03 (.07) | -.07 (.09) |
| <i>a</i> ₂ : Congruence curvature along UT=UNRT | -.13 (.12) | -.12 (.12) | -.24 (.17) | -.20 (.17) | -.21** (.08) | -.20** (.07) |
| <i>a</i> ₃ : Incongruence slope along UT=-UNRT | .51* (.22) | .56* (.23) | .11 (.30) | .30 (.30) | -.36** (.13) | -.34** (.13) |
| <i>a</i> ₄ : Incongruence curvature along UT=-UNRT | -.21 (.26) | -.20 (.26) | -.20 (.35) | -.14 (.35) | .15 (.15) | .15 (.15) |

N = 299. Unstandardized regression coefficients are reported

* *p* ≤ .05; ** *p* ≤ .01; *** *p* ≤ .001

1, as well as for age and gender. Results for all robustness checks are reported in Table 4. The inclusion of age and gender did not change the results meaningfully. Similarly,

controlling for emotional exhaustion and job control yielded largely the same results for polynomial regressions as the original analyses, and the response surface plots remained

virtually the same. Only in the regression analysis did results slightly change, with squared unreasonable tasks no longer being significantly related to reducing demands when emotional exhaustion was held constant. Overall, the robustness checks largely supported the original results.

Moreover, we examined how our results changed when controlling for Time 1 demand crafting strategies, allowing us to assess whether illegitimate tasks explain changes in demand crafting over time. Results were partially consistent with those obtained without controlling for Time 1 demand crafting strategies. Specifically, for seeking challenges, the coefficient representing the line of congruence between unnecessary and unreasonable tasks remained negative and significant ($a_1: -.47, p < .001$), while the coefficient representing the line of incongruence was no longer significant ($a_3: .27, p = .142$). For reducing demands, both the coefficient for the line of congruence ($a_1: .06, p = .718$) and the line of incongruence ($a_3: .16, p = .510$) remained non-significant. For optimizing demands, the coefficient for the line of congruence remained non-significant ($a_1: -.10, p = .140$), whereas the coefficient for the line of incongruence remained negative and significant ($a_3: -.31, p = .008$).

Discussion

In this study, we introduced and examined an illegitimacy configuration model of demand crafting to explain how specific combinations of unnecessary and unreasonable tasks may shape demand crafting behaviors. Anchored in cognitive appraisal theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), our model conceptualizes demand crafting as a potential agentic coping response to qualitatively different stress signals embedded in work demands that violate role expectations. Our two-wave study over three months provides preliminary evidence that different configurations of illegitimate tasks may be associated with distinct patterns of demand crafting, suggesting that proactive behaviors are not uniformly triggered by illegitimate tasks, but may instead emerge through more nuanced appraisal processes.

We observed that lower levels of both illegitimate task types were associated with relatively greater seeking of challenges, but not with optimizing demands. This pattern suggests that in the relative absence of illegitimacy, employees may be more likely to channel their resources toward developmental crafting behaviors aimed at growth and exploration (Rosing et al., 2011), without necessarily focusing on efficiency. Contrary to theoretical expectations, high congruence in illegitimate tasks (whether high or low) did not relate to reducing demands. One possible interpretation is that when illegitimate tasks are consistently high, the sense of injustice or role violation may prompt approach-oriented rather than avoidant strategies. More revealing were the

incongruent configurations. When unreasonable tasks were higher than unnecessary ones, employees engaged more in optimizing demands, perhaps reflecting attempts to bring order and clarity to tasks in a way that aligns with their roles. Conversely, when unnecessary tasks were higher, employees reported more frequent seeking of challenges, possibly in an effort to restore meaning and purpose in the face of assignments they perceive as pointless or devoid of value (Mäkikangas et al., 2023). However, we also note that when we controlled for Time 1 seeking challenges, the incongruence effect on Time 2 seeking challenges became non-significant. This is because the covariate model isolates only the change in seeking challenges from Time 1 to Time 2. Thus, while task configurations related to absolute levels of seeking challenges, they did not appear to drive further increases beyond employees' established seeking challenges tendencies.

We also observed that optimizing demands declined sharply as both types of illegitimate tasks increased. This pattern seems consistent with a threshold effect: when task illegitimacy becomes overwhelming, it may deplete the cognitive and emotional resources required for employees to actively optimize their work (Ahmed et al., 2018; Muntz et al., 2019). This aligns with the resource depletion argument in the stress literature (Fila & Eatough, 2018), suggesting that excessive illegitimacy may not only impair outcomes directly but also suppress proactive responses that could otherwise mitigate its effects.

Taken together, these findings offer preliminary support for a configurational approach to illegitimate tasks. They suggest that different combinations of illegitimacy might be associated with distinct forms of demand crafting, highlighting possible conditions under which such demands could catalyze or constrain proactive behavior.

Theoretical Implications

As a primary contribution, this study enriches theoretical understanding of demand crafting as an agentic coping response to specific stressors embedded in role expectations, namely, illegitimate tasks. By exploring how different configurations of unreasonable and unnecessary tasks may influence demand crafting strategies, we move beyond general associations and highlight potential situational nuances that shape proactive employee behavior. This refinement contributes to the job crafting literature (Tims et al., 2012, 2022; Zhang & Parker, 2019) by illustrating how contextual cues influence not just whether employees craft, but also *how* they craft, ranging from exploration-focused strategies like seeking challenges (Rosing et al., 2011) to approaches that are more aimed at restricting the range of potential outcomes such as optimizing demands (Greco et al., 2019). These insights align with recent calls to better understand

the environmental contingencies that guide demand crafting (Tims et al., 2022).

Second, our findings broaden the theoretical scope of illegitimate task research, which has largely focused on their detrimental effects (e.g., counterproductive work behaviors; Schulte-Braucks et al., 2019; Semmer et al., 2010; Zhou et al., 2018). Our results suggest that under certain configurations, illegitimate tasks may also be linked to proactive behavior, responding to calls for advancing knowledge on their potential positive outcomes (Ding & Kuvaas, 2023). While previous research investigated the relationship between job crafting and illegitimate tasks (He et al., 2024; Jiang et al., 2024; Mäkikangas et al., 2023), our study adds conceptual nuance by differentiating demand crafting strategies that differ based on their motivational orientation (approach vs. avoidance), offering a more fine-grained understanding of the psychological mechanisms at play.

Third, we enrich the nomological network surrounding illegitimate tasks by examining their configurational effects, not simply their individual presence, on proactive work behavior. This approach captures the interactive dynamics between unnecessary and unreasonable tasks, showing that high levels of both may overwhelm resources and dampen crafting, whereas specific imbalances can spur targeted proactive strategies. These preliminary insights contribute to the literature by suggesting that illegitimate tasks are complex and multifaceted demands that can strain employees and potentially stimulate proactive adaptation, depending on their configuration.

Practical Implications

Our findings offer preliminary but useful insights for organizations interested in supporting proactive employee behavior and improving job design. First, the results reinforce the detrimental impact of sustained exposure to both unnecessary and unreasonable tasks. High levels of these stressors appeared to deplete employees' capacity to proactively redesign their roles. To prevent this, organizations may consider regular task audits aimed at identifying and minimizing sources of task-based role violations. This includes removing redundant or non-value-adding administrative tasks and ensuring task assignments are meaningfully aligned with employees' roles, competencies, and expectations. Second, the differentiated patterns we observed suggest that employees may respond in distinct ways depending on which type of illegitimacy is more salient. When unreasonable tasks prevailed, i.e., those that may carry some relevance but are misaligned with employees' responsibilities, employees appeared to focus on optimizing demands, perhaps as an attempt to re-establish order and legitimacy. Managers could facilitate this adaptive response by offering greater autonomy in task execution, supporting efforts to streamline

workflows, as these strategies help employees regain a sense of coherence and control. Conversely, when unnecessary tasks were more prominent, i.e., those seen as meaningless, employees tended to respond by seeking new challenges, possibly as a way to reassert autonomy or restore purpose in their work. Overall, while illegitimate tasks are inherently aversive and demotivating, employees' coping efforts can manifest in proactive behaviors that help them manage or mitigate the impact of such demands. Organizations can support these responses by providing resources, autonomy, and opportunities for employees to adjust their work in constructive ways, for example, through job crafting interventions (e.g., Costantini et al., 2022; Demerouti et al., 2024; Van Wingerden et al., 2017) or by allowing space for self-initiated projects or development activities. In this way, managers can help employees navigate challenging or poorly designed tasks effectively, ultimately fostering resilience in the workforce.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Although these findings generate useful theoretical and practical insights, they must be considered within the context of the study's limitations. First, we focused on the relationship between illegitimate tasks and job crafting, but we have no information on whether and how different configurations of illegitimate tasks influence more distal outcomes via demand crafting. Future research may investigate how congruence and incongruence between different types of illegitimate tasks are linked to outcomes such as work engagement, emotional exhaustion, or creativity through different demand crafting strategies (cf. Holman et al., 2024).

Second, this research focused on demand crafting because we deemed it a particularly relevant strategy in the face of illegitimate tasks that represent a specific type of demand. However, job crafting can manifest in various forms (Costantini, 2024; Lopper et al., 2024; Tims et al., 2022; Zhang & Parker, 2019), including seeking resources and cognitive crafting, which may also play a role in managing uncertainty and threats posed by illegitimate tasks. Future studies could broaden the scope to include these other crafting strategies, thereby enriching our understanding of how employees regulate illegitimacy through different forms of agency.

Third, while our two-wave design is relevant to establishing a temporal order in the relationships we observed, we acknowledge that job crafting also unfolds as a daily process (Bakker & Oerlemans, 2019; Tims et al., 2014) and that perceptions of illegitimate tasks may fluctuate daily. Future diary studies could explore how daily experiences of unnecessary and unreasonable tasks, and their interplay, activate daily crafting, offering a more fine-grained picture of appraisal and proactive responses.

Fourth, although our model conceptualizes incongruence between unnecessary and unreasonable tasks as a meaningful trigger of demand crafting, it remains unclear whether employees consciously detect this incongruence and how large the discrepancy must be to exert psychological effects. Future research should consider experimental designs (e.g., scenario-based manipulations) that explicitly test the salience and cognitive processing of such an incongruence. This would deepen our understanding of the boundary conditions under which incongruent demands become psychologically meaningful and behaviorally consequential.

Overall, these limitations underscore the exploratory nature of our study and point toward promising directions for extending the theorizing and empirical testing of illegitimate task configurations and their role in shaping proactive employee responses.

Conclusion

This study sought to explore how illegitimate tasks, and, more specifically, their configurations, relate to demand crafting as a proactive coping mechanism. By moving beyond isolated effects and exploring the role of congruence and incongruence between unreasonable and unnecessary tasks, we highlight that illegitimate task experiences may not be uniform in their consequences. While congruently high levels of both types appeared to suppress proactive responses, certain asymmetries activated targeted forms of crafting, such as seeking new challenges or optimizing task execution. Importantly, these findings do not imply that illegitimate tasks are beneficial or that they should be deliberately used as motivators. Rather, they highlight that employees may respond proactively to illegitimate tasks, in the same way that people can sometimes adapt constructively to adverse experiences. The adaptive outcomes observed thus reflect individuals' coping resources, not any inherent benefit of illegitimate tasks themselves. This highlights the importance of equipping employees with resources and autonomy that enable effective appraisal and constructive action when encountering such stressors. Ultimately, this study contributes to a more nuanced and differentiated view of illegitimate tasks, portraying them as aversive elements of the work environment that employees may find ways to manage proactively, depending on their configurations. By adopting a configurational perspective, we contribute to theory building on job crafting and coping, while opening avenues for future research to test, refine, and extend these ideas in different contexts and with different methodologies.

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Data availability The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, [AC], upon reasonable request.

Declarations

Ethics Approval All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Consent to Participate Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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