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ORIGINAL RESEARCH

The Double-Edged Sword Effect of Illegitimate Tasks on Employee Creativity: Positive and Negative Coping Perspectives

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Purpose: The purpose of our study is to explore how employees respond to illegitimate tasks and the impact it will have on employee creativity, as well as to explore the important boundary conditions for weakening the negative impact of illegitimate tasks and enhancing its positive impact.

Methods: We collected 271 pairs of employee-supervisor valid matching data through three rounds of surveys, and conducted statistical analysis and hypothesis testing using SPSS 26.0 and AMOS 24.0 statistical analysis tools.

Results: The results show that both job crafting and work withdrawal play a mediating role between illegitimate tasks and employee creativity, and the negative mediating role of work withdrawal is stronger than the positive mediating role of job crafting; supervisor developmental feedback not only positively moderates the relationship between illegitimate tasks and job crafting but also enhances the positive mediating role of job crafting; supervisor developmental feedback not only negatively moderates the link between illegitimate tasks and work withdrawal but also weakens the negative mediating role of work withdrawal.

Conclusion: Drawing on Conservation of Resources theory and Stress-as-Offense-to-Self theory, we reveal that employees will adopt job crafting and work withdrawal in response to illegitimate tasks from positive and negative coping perspectives and how it will positively and negatively affect employee creativity, respectively. Meanwhile, we find that supervisor developmental feedback is a boundary condition for reducing the negative impact of illegitimate tasks and promoting their positive impact. In addition, we provide implications for organizations to weigh the pros and cons of illegitimate tasks and improve employee creativity.

Keywords: illegitimate tasks, job crafting, work withdrawal, supervisor developmental feedback, employee creativity

Introduction

In the era of VUCA (Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous), innovation has become a practical choice for enterprises seeking to expand their competitive edge. Employee creativity, as a fundamental source of innovation, permeates various aspects such as product development, market services, and process innovation, and is a crucial force in achieving corporate goals and maintaining competitive advantages.[1,2] Consequently, identifying the key factors that influence and enhance employee creativity has become a focus of attention in both academia and industry. While existing research has highlighted positive factors such as positive leadership style,[3] proactive personality,[1] and innovative organizational climate[4] are positive drivers that enhance employee creativity, there has been relatively limited exploration on how employees cope with negative factors within the organization and the impact of these negative factors on employee creativity. Therefore, it is particularly necessary to start with negative contextual factors, such as illegitimate tasks, and explore their impact mechanisms on employee creativity.

Illegitimate tasks are those that violate the reasonable expectations of employees.[5] According to a survey by Semmer et al, approximately 30% of the task lists provided by 159 respondents were considered illegitimate tasks.[5] The survey results of Zhao et al also indicate that Chinese employees experience illegitimate tasks.[6] Thus, illegitimate tasks are a common phenomenon in organizations, and scholars have gradually become aware of its existence. They have begun to explore how employees respond to

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illegitimate tasks and the impact it will have on employee behavior. Existing research often views illegitimate tasks as a hindrance stressor, suggesting that employees may adopt negative strategies to cope with illegitimate tasks, thereby positively affecting their work-family conflict,[7,8] counterproductive work behavior,[6] and job burnout,[9] while negatively affecting their well-being,[10] service performance,[11] and innovative behavior.[12] However, do employees necessarily respond negatively to illegitimate tasks? Regarding the above question, some scholars argue that current research has overlooked the potential bright side of illegitimate tasks. For instance, the findings of Muntz and Dormann suggest that employees' perception of illegitimate tasks may be a matter of motivation, as those with high intrinsic motivation view illegitimate tasks as challenging.[13] Zong et al argue that employees can use positive methods to mitigate the negative effects of illegitimate tasks.[14] Ding and Kuvaas, through a literature review, discovered potential positive effects of illegitimate tasks and recommended scholars to analyze the effects of illegitimate tasks on employees' work attitudes and behaviors from an integrated perspective.[15] In response to this call, we construct a double-edged sword effect model of illegitimate tasks on employee creativity from the perspectives of positive and negative coping, in order to explore the coping mechanisms of employees in response to illegitimate tasks and the impact on their creativity under the influence of both coping mechanisms.

We select job crafting and work withdrawal as representative variables of positive and negative coping, respectively, to reveal the mediating mechanisms through which illegitimate tasks affect employee creativity. In terms of positive coping, job crafting refers to the behavior of employees who proactively make changes to their job in order to improve it.[16] This proactive behavior allows them to better align their job with their interests, motivations, and passions, helping them to redefine and understand the meaning and value of their job.[17,18] While illegitimate tasks are considered as job demands that consume employees' resources, according to the resource investment principle within the Conservation of Resources theory,[19] employees may willingly accept illegitimate tasks and engage in job crafting to modify the tasks, seeking to gain more resources.[20] Job crafting, as a positive behavior further stimulates employee work engagement and creative thinking, thereby promoting an enhancement in creativity.[21] In terms of negative coping, work withdrawal refers to a series of behavioral responses that employees proactively take to avoid work situations and distance themselves from the organization when they perceive situations in the organization that displease them.[22,23] Since illegitimate tasks can damage employees' professional identity, threaten their self-esteem, and reduce their sense of belonging, according to the Stress-as-Offense-to-Self theory, employees are likely to spontaneously adopt work withdrawal to avoid illegitimate tasks.[24] Work withdrawal, as a negative behavior, further weakens employees' motivation and enthusiasm,[25] thereby inhibiting creativity. Therefore, we hypothesize that illegitimate tasks will enhance employee creativity by promoting job crafting, while simultaneously reducing creativity by triggering work withdrawal.

Furthermore, what are the boundary conditions for the above two paths? In other words, under what circumstances can the negative impact of illegitimate tasks be weakened, and its positive impact be promoted to enhance employee creativity? Since illegitimate tasks originate from supervisors, it becomes crucial for supervisors to explain the legitimacy of task assignments to employees.[26] Previous research has found that positive leadership styles, such as appreciative leadership and transparent leadership, are effective means of promoting mutual understanding and eliminating potential threats from illegitimate tasks.[26,27] However, to our knowledge, there has been no research exploring the moderating role of leadership feedback. Feedback is an essential means of communication and interaction between supervisors and employees, which can influence employees' psychology and behavior.[28] In the high-context culture of China, supervisors tend to convey developmental feedback indirectly rather than providing clear positive or negative feedback to their employees.[29] Supervisor developmental feedback, as an important contextual factor in changing employees' perceptions of their work environment, can help employees understand the strengths and weaknesses of their current work and provide them with valuable resources and information related to their future development.[29,30] Therefore, we will examine the moderating role of supervisor developmental feedback, hoping that through the guidance of supervisor developmental feedback, employees will be motivated to adopt positive strategies to cope with illegitimate tasks, thereby demonstrating positive job performance.

In summary, using the Conservation of Resources theory and Stress-as-Offense-to-Self theory, we introduce job crafting and work withdrawal as mediating variables from the perspectives of positive and negative coping, and supervisor developmental feedback as a moderating variable from the perspective of leadership feedback, to explore the double-edged sword effect of illegitimate tasks on employee creativity. This not only enriches the integrated study of illegitimate tasks, but also helps organizations weigh the pros and cons of illegitimate tasks to further enhance employee creativity.

Theory and Hypotheses

Illegitimate Tasks and Employee Creativity

Employee creativity refers to the novel and practical ideas, perspectives, or thoughts generated by employees, which is crucial for organizations to maintain flexibility and competitiveness.[1,2,31] Research indicates that individual internal factors and contextual factors are the two major influences on employee creativity.[32,33] Individual internal factors mainly include intrinsic motivation, knowledge reserves, and risk-taking tendencies, while contextual factors mainly include organizational culture, leadership style, team atmosphere, and work pressure.[32,33] As a contextual factor in the workplace, the characteristics and attributes of illegitimate tasks undoubtedly influence employee creativity. However, the relationship between illegitimate tasks and employee creativity is still insufficiently explored.

In real-world work situations, employees are often required or assigned to perform tasks that are outside their regular duties or unnecessary, known as illegitimate tasks.[5] Existing research generally suggests that illegitimate tasks have a series of negative effects on employees. Specifically, illegitimate tasks can violate employees' professional identity, threaten their self-perception, and lower their role expectations and self-worth, which may weaken their motivation to innovate.[9,24,34] Additionally, illegitimate tasks can occupy employees' work time, leaving them with no extra time to think about new ideas and solutions, which may hinder the further development of innovative ideas.[12] Therefore, we speculate that there may be a negative relationship between illegitimate tasks and employee creativity. While mainstream views emphasize the negative effects of illegitimate tasks, some scholars have gradually pointed out their potential bright side.[15] Specifically, illegitimate tasks may be perceived as challenging and rewarding because completing them may gain recognition and praise from supervisors.[13] As a result, employees may invest more enthusiasm and energy into creatively completing these tasks. In addition, to some extent, illegitimate tasks can expand the range of tasks accessible to employees, thereby enhancing their work skills and experience and stimulating creative thinking.[15] Therefore, we speculate that there may also be a positive correlation between illegitimate tasks and employee creativity. To address the above controversy, we attempt to reveal the double-edged mechanism of how illegitimate tasks affect employee creativity from both positive and negative coping perspectives.

The Mediating Role of Job Crafting

Job crafting is the process by which employees proactively shape, mold and redefine their jobs.[16,17] It is divided into three distinct facets: task crafting, relational crafting and cognitive crafting.[16] Task crafting involves proactively changing the amount, type, and scope of job tasks. Relational crafting refers to proactively changing the quality and quantity of interactions with others so that employees gain more supportive and beneficial interactions. Cognitive crafting refers to changing an individual's perception of job, which can enhance employees' sense of job significance.[18] According to the Conservation of Resources theory, we suggest that employees will adopt job crafting as a resource gain strategy to proactively cope with illegitimate tasks, thereby enhancing their creativity.

The Conservation of Resources theory suggests that while stress can cause resources loss for employees, it can be seen as a potential enhancer. Employees who experience resource losses may invest their remaining resources in creative solutions to gain new resources.[19] For this reason, employees assigned illegitimate tasks may have a stronger motivation to adopt job crafting strategies to cope with these tasks in order to acquire new resources to improve their current situation.[35] Specifically, firstly, employees may redesign tasks by proactively altering the order, quantity, or type of work to align illegitimate tasks with their preferences and perceptions. This can enhance their sense of meaning and satisfaction at work, reducing the resource losses incurred from performing illegitimate tasks.[36] Secondly, in Chinese cultural context that emphasizes favor and mianzi (face-saving), employees are likely to engage in relational crafting. They may seek help and resources from supervisors and colleagues in a tactful manner, thus reducing resource losses.[37] Simultaneously, relational crafting can lower the likelihood of employees being assigned illegitimate tasks again, thereby mitigating their psychological costs.[20] Finally, employees and supervisors differ in the criteria used to measure illegitimate tasks, and cognitive crafting can change employees' perceptions of these tasks.[18] When employees view illegitimate tasks as a challenge or opportunity, they may be more willing to accept and perform them in order to receive recognition and encouragement from their supervisors.[38]

The Conservation of Resources theory posits that when individuals acquire resources, they are in a better position to invest those resources, creating a resource gain spiral.[19] Creativity is the foundation of organizational innovation and an important force

in promoting enterprise development. When employees propose innovative ideas, they can receive support and resources from the organization.[39] For this reason, we argue that employees will invest in resources to enhance their creativity during job crafting. Specifically, firstly, through task crafting, employees can accumulate new information and search for more effective ways to enhance the person-job fit.[17] Creativity stems from the configuration and reconfiguration of original information and resources, so task crafting is critical for employees to develop creative ideas.[40] Secondly, through relational crafting, employees can build stronger interpersonal networks, receive more support and encouragement from their supervisors and colleagues, and thus they will be more motivated to unleash creative energy.[37] Finally, through cognitive crafting, employees can change their career perceptions, increase work engagement, and further boost creative expectations.[38] Previous studies have shown a positive correlation between job crafting and employees' attitudes and behaviors. For instance, job crafting can enhance employee job performance, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment, all of which are closely related to creativity.[18,41] Therefore, we suggest that job crafting positively affects employee creativity.

In summary, employees assigned illegitimate tasks will adopt job crafting as a positive coping strategy to minimize the loss of resources. With the increasing of resources and positive psychological experiences in the process of job crafting, employees will invest in resources to enhance creativity. Based on this, we propose the following hypothesis:

H1: Job crafting mediates the relationship between illegitimate tasks and employee creativity. Illegitimate tasks promote job crafting, which in turn enhances employee creativity.

The Mediating Role of Work Withdrawal

Work withdrawal is considered a behavior that is detrimental to the development of individuals and organizations, it can reduce employee performance and hinder organizational reform.[22] Lehman and Simpson classified work withdrawal into psychological withdrawal and behavioral withdrawal from a psychological point of perspective.[23] The former is generated by employees in their psychological activities, such as daydreaming or having absent thoughts while working; the latter is exhibited by employees in their actual actions, such as leaving work early and reducing their commitment. Previous studies have confirmed that work withdrawal is a consequence of stress avoidance.[25] According to the Stress-as-Offense-to-Self theory, we suggest that employees may adopt work withdrawal as a negative coping strategy to avoid illegitimate tasks, thereby diminishing their creativity.

The Stress-as-Offense-to-Self theory suggests that negative behaviors experienced or negative messages received by individuals in the workplace can damage their self-esteem, which in turn induces a stress response.[24] In order to maintain their own image, individuals may adopt defensive or avoidance strategies to reduce or avoid potential threats and losses. Given that illegitimate tasks violate an individual's reasonable expectations and professional norms, employees are likely to choose work withdrawal as a way to avoid this threat. Specifically, on the one hand, individuals tend to pursue positive self-evaluation to enhance their self-esteem.[6] However, illegitimate tasks convey disrespectful messages to employees, which not only threatens their job identity,[34] but also reduces their sense of identity and work meaning, which can lead to negative self-evaluations.[24] Therefore, employees are likely to engage in work withdrawal behaviors, withdrawing their cognitive, emotional, and physical involvement as a way to cope with illegitimate tasks. On the other hand, individuals also tend to enhance their social self-esteem by receiving positive evaluations from others. A high level of social self-esteem can strengthen employees' sense of organizational belonging and positively influence their work behaviors.[24] However, when employees are assigned illegitimate tasks, it implies that they fail to receive respect and recognition from their supervisors, which reinforces employees' perception of declining social relationships.[42] This negative perception will trigger negative emotions in employees, reduce their work enthusiasm, and consequently lead to work withdrawal.[43]

Work withdrawal, as a negative behavior exhibited by employees voluntarily undermining organizational interests both psychologically and behaviorally, is detrimental to the formation and enhancement of individual creativity. On the one hand, work withdrawal is specifically manifested as employees reducing their efforts from their work and distancing themselves from the organization in order to preserve various resources such as their time and energy. Therefore, when employees show work withdrawal, it implies that they have diminished their work enthusiasm and organizational identity,[25] making it challenging for them to allocate their limited resources towards creative tasks, thus hindering the enhancement of individual creativity.[40] On the other hand, when employees implement work withdrawal, they will approach their work with a negative attitude and gradually

lose the meaning of their work, thus becoming less focused and less inclined to cooperate.[43,44] As a result, employees will not be able to focus on exploring creative solutions, which in turn limits the development of creativity.[45]

In summary, employees assigned illegitimate tasks will adopt work withdrawal as a negative coping strategy to preserve their self-esteem. With the weakening of work passion, organizational identification, and motivation to invest resources in the process of work withdrawal, employee creativity will also decline. Based on this, we propose the following hypothesis:

H2: Work withdrawal mediates the relationship between illegitimate tasks and employee creativity. Illegitimate tasks trigger work withdrawal, which in turn reduces employee creativity.

The Moderating Role of Supervisor Developmental Feedback

Feedback is a crucial means of conveying information and exchanging ideas between leaders and employees.[28] The type of feedback given by leaders can greatly influence employees' psychology and behavior at work.[28] Supervisor developmental feedback refers to the tactful and indirect way in which supervisors provide employees with helpful and valuable information related to their learning, work, and development.[29] This feedback focuses on whether the content of the feedback is beneficial to the employee's work, and whether it can help the employee enhance their skills and job performance, rather than imposing mandatory tasks and goals on the employee. Existing research has shown that supervisor developmental feedback, as a guiding and supportive information feedback, can provide employees with sufficient work resources, enhance their self-efficacy and work passion, improve their work performance, and promote their innovative behaviors.[28,30,46] Therefore, we suggest that supervisor developmental feedback is likely to influence individual psychological, cognitive, or behavioral responses in conflict situations, and high levels of supervisor developmental feedback are likely to weaken employees' interpretation of the threat posed by illegitimate tasks.

On the one hand, employees will engage in job crafting to cope with illegitimate tasks in order to reduce resource loss or gain new resources. This relationship is further enhanced under high levels of supervisor developmental feedback. Specifically, supervisor developmental feedback focuses on employees' future career development and competence enhancement, which can help employees identify their personal strengths and potential challenges at work, and provide them with targeted guidance and advice.[28] In this context, employees are better equipped to comprehend methods and procedures for task improvement when faced with illegitimate tasks, thus reducing the resources required for job crafting and enhancing the initiative of job crafting.[47] In addition, high levels of supervisor developmental feedback imply that employees have access to more work-related resources.[46] Driven by the principle of reciprocity, employees tend to reciprocate the organization with positive work attitudes and behaviors.[48] Therefore, when employees receive high levels of supervisor developmental feedback, they will gain more resources to complete illegitimate tasks, thereby becoming more motivated to improve and complete these tasks through the positive approach of job crafting.[47] Conversely, under low levels of supervisor developmental feedback, employees are likely to fall into a negative state of psychological imbalance when engaging in job crafting due to the lack of resource supplementation, and therefore motivation for job crafting will be reduced.[17] Based on this, we propose the following hypothesis:

H3: Supervisor developmental feedback moderates the relationship between illegitimate tasks and job crafting. Under high levels of supervisor developmental feedback, the positive relationship between illegitimate tasks and job crafting is strengthened.

On the other hand, illegitimate tasks can damage employees' self-esteem and lead to work withdrawal. However, under high levels of supervisor developmental feedback, this relationship will be mitigated. Specifically, when employees receive high levels of supervisor developmental feedback, they are more likely to feel cared for and valued by their supervisors.[29,30] Consequently, they are more willing to trust and understand their supervisors' arrangements and instructions, leading to a change in their negative perception of illegitimate tasks. This can alleviate the threat to employees' self-esteem posed by illegitimate tasks, enhance their psychological resources and organizational belonging, and thereby reduce work withdrawal. In addition, supervisor developmental feedback has a future-oriented nature. High levels of supervisor developmental feedback can guide employees to focus more on the opportunities and rewards behind the stress, enabling them to understand illegitimate tasks from different perspectives and view these tasks as an integral part of their workflow.[28,46] This cognitive shift helps inspire employees to face challenges fearlessly, strengthen their sense of alignment with the organization's mission, and thereby reduce the likelihood of work

withdrawal. Conversely, under low levels of supervisor developmental feedback, as employees struggle to gain respect and guidance from their supervisors, they are likely to interpret illegitimate tasks negatively, further inducing work withdrawal.[49] Based on this, we propose the following hypothesis:

H4: Supervisor developmental feedback moderates the relationship between illegitimate tasks and work withdrawal. Under high levels of supervisor developmental feedback, the positive relationship between illegitimate tasks and work withdrawal is weakened.

Furthermore, based on the above hypotheses, we propose a moderated mediation hypothesis that the double pathways of illegitimate tasks affecting employee creativity through job crafting and work withdrawal are moderated by supervisor developmental feedback. Specifically, by providing constructive guidance to help employees grow and improve, high levels of supervisor developmental feedback can make employees feel respected and valued, making them more likely to change their negative perceptions of illegitimate tasks, engage in more job crafting rather than work withdrawal, and thus enhance their creativity. Conversely, low levels of supervisor developmental feedback hinder resource supplementation for employees and make it challenging for employees to feel valued by the organization. This weakens employees' professional identity and organizational belonging, prompting them to adopt work withdrawal instead of job crafting as a negative coping strategy for illegitimate tasks, ultimately reducing their creativity. Based on this, we propose the following hypotheses:

H5: Supervisor developmental feedback positively moderates the mediating role of job crafting on the relationship between illegitimate tasks and employee creativity, such that the indirect positive link between illegitimate tasks and employee creativity via job crafting is stronger when supervisor developmental feedback is high.

H6: Supervisor developmental feedback negatively moderates the mediating role of work withdrawal on the relationship between illegitimate tasks and employee creativity, such that the indirect negative link between illegitimate tasks and employee creativity via work withdrawal is weaker when supervisor developmental feedback is high.

To conclude, Figure 1 shows the theoretical model.

Materials and Methods

The sample for our survey was collected from nine enterprises located in Hangzhou, Nanchang, Nanning, and Liuzhou in China, covering various service industries such as banking, real estate, and hotels, which greatly ensured the applicability of the survey data. We first worked with the human resources departments of the companies to identify employees interested in participating in the survey, and then distributed questionnaires to the participants through the Chinese survey platform, Sojump. In the introductory section of the questionnaire, we provided detailed information about the purpose and process of this survey, informing participants that all responses would be kept confidential and used only for research purposes, and that completing the survey effectively would entitle them to a gift. Data collection was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the researcher's affiliated institution.

Our study was conducted at three time points, with a two-week interval between each survey, to reduce the possibility of common method bias. The survey at the first time point focused on employee demographic variables, illegitimate tasks, and
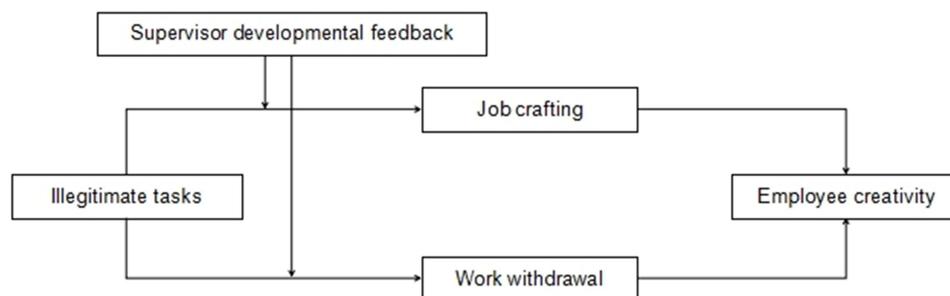

Figure 1 Theoretical model.

supervisor developmental feedback. We distributed 397 questionnaires to the employee, and based on criteria of consistency, completeness, and consistency in questionnaire responses, we screened out 62 invalid questionnaires, resulting in 335 valid questionnaires. The survey at the second time point involved job crafting and work withdrawal. We distributed questionnaires to the 335 employees who had provided valid responses in the first round, based on their unique identifiers. Using the same criteria, we identified 43 invalid questionnaires, resulting in 292 valid questionnaires. The survey at the third time point centered on employee creativity, we organized the supervisor identifiers from the second round of valid questionnaires, distributed 292 questionnaires to supervisors, and obtained 271 valid questionnaires after screening according to the same criteria. Finally, the questionnaires completed by employees and supervisors were matched to compile the final survey results. In this survey, the overall questionnaire response rate was 68.26%.

Of the 271 valid samples, 56.09% were male and 43.91% were female. Regarding age, 0.37% were 19 years or younger, 53.51% were in the 20–29 age range, 28.04% were in the 30–39 age range, 11.07% were in the 40–49 age range, and 7.01% were 50 years or older. In terms of education, 35.43% had completed college or lower, 51.66% had a bachelor's degree, and 12.91% had a master's degree or higher. Regarding job tenure, 11.07% had less than 1 year, 37.64% had 1–3 years, 29.89% had 3–5 years, 11.81% had 5–10 years, and 9.59% had more than 10 years.

Measurement Variables

The scales selected for our study have all been verified to have good reliability and validity. In order to improve the accuracy of the scales, we used a translation-back procedure by inviting a professor and two PhDs in the field of human resource management to translate the scales into English and Chinese.[50] Except for demographic variables, all the scales were measured using the Likert 5-point scale, with 1 indicating "strongly disagree" and 5 indicating "strongly agree".

Illegitimate Tasks

An 8-item Bern Illegitimate Tasks Scale developed by Semmer et al was used,[5] which was rated by employees. The scale consists of two dimensions, unreasonable tasks and unnecessary tasks, with example items such as "Do you have work tasks to take care of, which keep you wondering if they have to be done at all?" and "Do you have work tasks to take care of, which keep you wondering if should be done by someone else". The McDonald's ω for this scale was 0.908.

Job Crafting

A 15-item scale developed by Slemp and Vella-Brodrick was used,[41] which was rated by employees. The scale consists of three dimensions: task crafting, relational crafting, and cognitive crafting, with example items such as "Change the scope or types of tasks that you complete at work", "Make friends with people at work who have similar skills or interests" and "Remind yourself about the significance your work has for the success of the organization". The McDonald's ω for this scale was 0.912.

Work Withdrawal

A 12-item scale developed by Lehman and Simpson was used,[23] which was rated by employees. The scale consists of two dimensions, psychological withdrawal and behavioral withdrawal, with example items such as "I thought about being absent" and "I put less effort into the job than I should have". The McDonald's ω for this scale was 0.929.

Supervisor Developmental Feedback

A 3-item scale developed by Zhou was used,[29] which was rated by employees. An example item is "My supervisor provides me with useful information on how to improve my job performance". The McDonald's ω for this scale was 0.858.

Employee Creativity

A 4-item scale developed by Farmer et al was used,[31] which was rated by supervisors. An example item is "This employee seeks new ideas and ways to solve problems". The McDonald's ω for this scale was 0.829.

Control Variables

Previous research has indicated that gender, age, and job tenure can influence employees' responses to work stressors and job performance.[15,34] Additionally, education level can influence the crucial elements of knowledge, skills, and critical

thinking essential for creativity.[45] Therefore, we controlled for these variables to test our hypotheses. However, we found that controlling for these variables was not significant in predicting job crafting and employee creativity, and the inclusion of the control variables did not cause a significant difference in the study results. Following the suggestions of Becker et al and Bernerth and Aguinis, in order to maximize statistical power and offer the most interpretable results,[51,52] we report the results without controlling for gender, age, job tenure, and education level.

Results

Confirmatory Factor Analysis

We used the CICFA (0.9) suggested by Rönkkö and Cho to test the discriminant validity,[53] and the results are shown in Table 1. As can be seen in Table 1, the upper limit of the 95% confidence interval for the correlation estimates between the factors is less than 0.9 and the lower limit is larger than −0.9, indicating that the factors have good discriminant validity.

Correlation Analysis

Table 2 shows the results of the correlation analysis. Illegitimate tasks were negatively correlated with employee creativity (r=−0.324, p<0.001), positively correlated with job crafting (r=0.167, p<0.01), and positively correlated with

Table 1 Results of Confidence Intervals for Correlations

Variables	IT	JC	WW	SDF	EC
IT	1				
JC	[0.079, 0.303]	1			
WW	[0.306, 0.530]	[−0.386, −0.140]	1		
SDF	[−0.307, −0.057]	[0.378, 0.578]	[−0.408, −0.200]	1	
EC	[−0.427, −0.177]	[0.323, 0.515]	[−0.695, −0.467]	[0.345, 0.455]	1

Abbreviations: IT, illegitimate tasks; JC, job crafting; WW, work withdrawal; EC, employee creativity; SDF, supervisor developmental feedback.

Table 2 Descriptive Statistical Analysis and Reliability

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1.Gender	1								
2.Age	−0.03	1							
3.Education	−0.049	−0.024	1						
4.Job tenure	−0.028	0.739**	−0.002	1					
5.IT	0.015	−0.097	−0.076	−0.202**	1				
6.JC	−0.002	0.005	0.067	−0.066	0.167**	1			
7.WW	0.021	−0.147*	−0.143*	−0.135*	0.389***	−0.248***	1		
8.SDF	−0.004	0.005	0.033	−0.077	−0.168***	0.451***	−0.241***	1	
9.EC	0.028	0.053	0.092	0.047	−0.324***	0.369***	−0.540***	0.327***	1
Mean	0.56	2.71	2.69	2.71	3.54	3.45	3.35	3.32	3.19
SD	0.20	0.93	0.81	1.12	0.83	0.85	0.88	0.93	1.11

Notes: N=271; *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001.
Abbreviations: IT, illegitimate tasks; JC, job crafting; WW, work withdrawal; EC, employee creativity; SDF, supervisor developmental feedback; SD, standard deviation.

work withdrawal (r=0.389, p<0.001). Job crafting was positively correlated with employee creativity (r=0.369, p <0.001), while work withdrawal was negatively correlated with employee creativity (r=−0.540, p<0.001). These results laid the foundation for further testing.

Hypothesis Testing

We used Hayes' Process macro to test the hypotheses.[54] First, we tested the mediating effects of job crafting and work withdrawal using Process Model 4. As shown in Table 3, illegitimate tasks were significantly positively correlated with job crafting (b=0.148, p<0.01), and job crafting was significantly positively correlated with employee creativity (b=0.655, p<0.001). The indirect effect of illegitimate tasks on employee creativity through job crafting was 0.068, with a 95% confidence interval of [0.015, 0.133], excluding 0. Therefore, H1 is supported. At the same time, illegitimate tasks were significantly positively correlated with work withdrawal (b=0.407, p<0.001), and work withdrawal was significantly negatively correlated with employee creativity (b= −0.833, p<0.001). The indirect effect of illegitimate tasks on employee creativity through work withdrawal was −0.253, with a 95% confidence interval of [−0.313, −0.192], excluding 0. Therefore, H2 is supported. Additionally, by comparing the effect values of positive mediation and negative mediation, it was found that the difference between the two effects was 0.321, with a 95% confidence interval of [0.262, 0.381], excluding 0, indicating that the negative effect of illegitimate tasks through work withdrawal is stronger than the positive effect through job crafting.

Next, we used Process Model 1 to test the moderating effects of supervisor developmental feedback. As shown in Table 4, the interaction term between illegitimate tasks and supervisor developmental feedback was significantly positively correlated with job crafting (b=0.565, p<0.001), with a 95% confidence interval of [0.294, 0.836], excluding

Table 3 Results of Mediating Effect Test

Variables	JC	WW	EC			
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
IT	0.148**	0.407***	−0.294***	−0.391***	0.045	−0.109**
JC				0.655***		0.458***
WW					−0.833***	−0.622***
R^2	0.028	0.239	0.105	0.505	0.550	0.717
ΔR^2				0.400	0.045	0.167
F	7.702**	84.576***	31.608***	136.783***	163.856***	225.070***

Notes: N=271; **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001.
Abbreviations: IT, illegitimate tasks; JC, job crafting; WW, work withdrawal; EC, employee creativity.

Table 4 Results of Moderating Effect Test

Variables	JC		WW	
	Model 7	Model 8	Model 9	Model 10
IT	0.053	0.122**	0.453***	0.407***
SDF	0.720***	0.660***	−0.350***	−0.311***
IT×SDF		0.565***		−0.377**
R^2	0.425	0.459	0.346	0.363
ΔR^2		0.034		0.017
F	99.001***	75.536***	70.936***	50.819***

Notes: N=271; **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001.
Abbreviations: IT, illegitimate tasks; JC, job crafting; WW, work withdrawal; EC, employee creativity; SDF, supervisor developmental feedback.

0. This indicates that supervisor developmental feedback positively moderates the relationship between illegitimate tasks and job crafting, and H3 is supported. In addition, we conducted a simple slope analysis of the moderating effect, as shown in Figure 2. From Figure 2, it can be seen that when supervisor developmental feedback is high, the positive relationship between illegitimate tasks and job crafting is strengthened. Moreover, the interaction term between illegitimate tasks and supervisor developmental feedback was significantly negatively correlated with work withdrawal (b=−0.377, p<0.01), with a 95% confidence interval of [−0.653, −0.102], excluding 0. This indicates that supervisor developmental feedback negatively moderates the relationship between illegitimate tasks and work withdrawal, and H4 is supported. In addition, we conducted a simple slope analysis of the moderating effect, as shown in Figure 3. From Figure 3, it can be seen that when supervisor developmental feedback is high, the positive relationship between illegitimate tasks and work withdrawal is weakened.

Finally, we used Process Model 7 to examine the moderated mediation effects. As shown in Table 5, under the condition of low supervisor developmental feedback (−1SD), the mediation effect of job crafting was −0.015, with a 95% confidence interval of [−0.053, 0.013], including 0. In contrast, under the condition of high supervisor developmental feedback (+1SD), the mediation effect of job crafting was 0.126, with a 95% confidence interval of [0.074, 0.180], excluding 0. Additionally, the difference in mediation effects between the high and low groups was 0.141, with a 95% confidence interval of [0.094, 0.202], excluding 0. This indicates that supervisor developmental feedback significantly moderates the mediating effect of job crafting, and H5 is supported. Moreover, under the condition of low supervisor developmental feedback (−1SD), the mediation effect of work withdrawal was −0.317, with a 95% confidence interval of [−0.382, −0.259], excluding 0. In contrast, under the condition of high supervisor developmental feedback (+1SD), the mediation effect of work withdrawal was −0.189, with a 95% confidence interval of [−0.284, −0.111], excluding 0. Additionally, the difference in mediation effects between the high and low groups was 0.128, with a 95% confidence interval of [0.045, 0.204], excluding 0. This indicates that supervisor developmental feedback significantly moderates the mediating effect of work withdrawal, and H6 is supported.
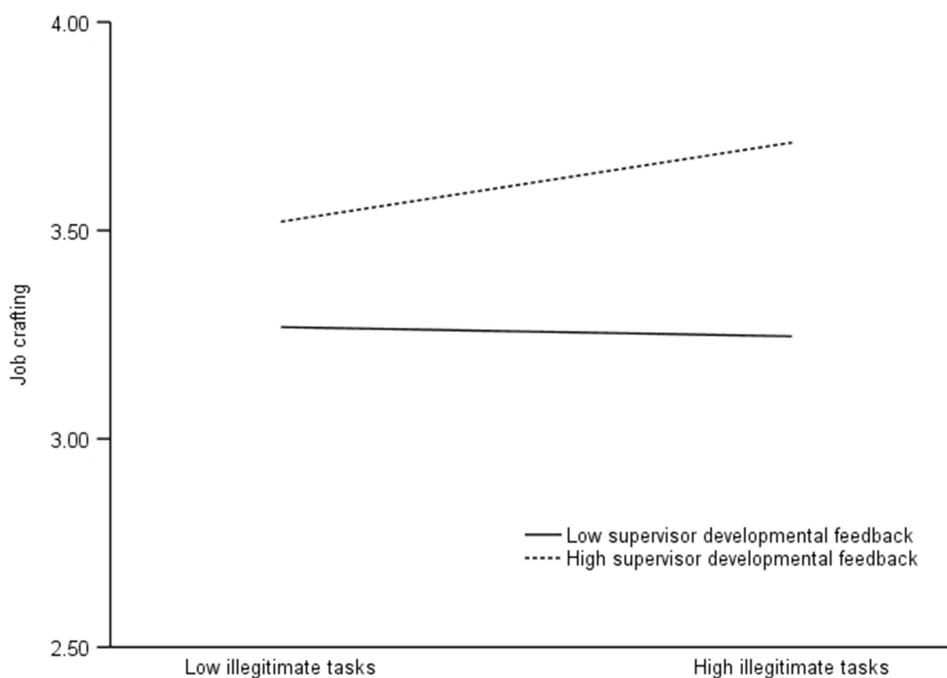
Figure 2 Results of moderating role of supervisor developmental feedback between illegitimate tasks and job crafting.
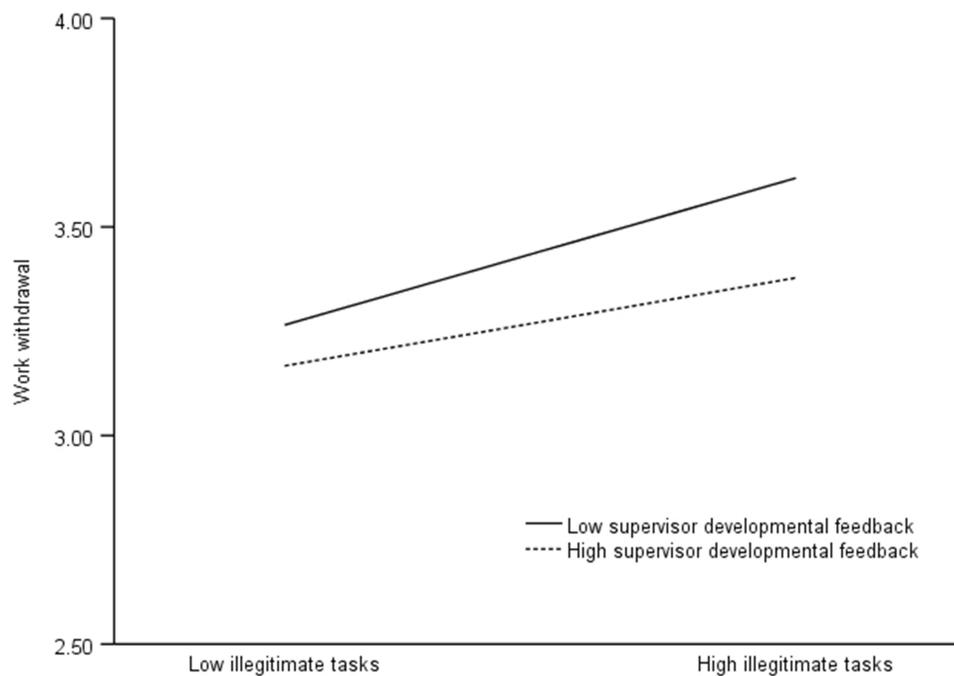
Figure 3 Results of moderating role of supervisor developmental feedback between illegitimate tasks and work withdrawal.

Discussion

Using Conservation of Resources theory and Stress-as-Offense-to-Self theory as the overarching theoretical framework, we systematically examine the double-edged sword effect of illegitimate tasks on employee creativity. We found that job crafting mediates the relationship between illegitimate tasks and employee creativity. In order to mitigate the resource depletion caused by illegitimate tasks and seek new work resources, employees actively adjust and design their work tasks, seek help and support from their supervisors, change their attitudes and perceptions, and engage in more job crafting. Job crafting is a process through which employees improve their fit with their work, understand the intrinsic meaning of their tasks, establish good interpersonal relationships, and thus construct a positive self. This process is beneficial for employees to enhance their creativity. Therefore, illegitimate tasks promote job crafting, which in turn enhances employee creativity. Work withdrawal mediates the relationship between illegitimate tasks and employee creativity. Employees assigned illegitimate tasks may experience disrespect from their leaders, which leads to complaints and disappointment towards the organization, prompting them to respond to this threat by adopting work withdrawal. Work withdrawal is the process through which employees withdraw their efforts from work, reduce their work engagement, and gradually lose their sense of organizational identity and belonging. This process inhibits employee

Table 5 Results of Moderated Mediating Effect Test

Structural Paths	Groups	Effect	Boot SE	Boot LLCI	Boot ULCI
IT→JC→EC	High (+1SD)	0.126	0.027	0.074	0.180
	Low (−1SD)	−0.015	0.017	−0.053	0.013
	Effect difference	0.141	0.027	0.094	0.202
IT→WW→EC	High (+1SD)	−0.189	0.043	−0.284	−0.111
	Low (−1SD)	−0.317	0.031	−0.382	−0.259
	Effect difference	0.128	0.040	0.045	0.204

Abbreviations: IT, illegitimate tasks; JC, job crafting; WW, work withdrawal; EC, employee creativity.

creativity. Therefore, illegitimate tasks trigger work withdrawal, which in turn reduces employee creativity. Work withdrawal has a stronger negative mediating role compared to the positive mediating role of job crafting. The possible reason for this is that when employees are assigned illegitimate tasks, their psychological activities are a changing process out of consideration for their own interests and values, the first thing they experience is that the illegitimate tasks will violate their professional roles and lower their psychological expectations, and then most of the employees will take work withdrawal to respond negatively to such tasks in order to show their dissatisfaction, and a small number of employees will think about how to craft illegitimate tasks to gain new resources. Furthermore, we further revealed that supervisor developmental feedback is a crucial boundary condition for weakening the negative impact of illegitimate tasks and enhancing its positive impact. Under high levels of supervisor developmental feedback, the positive relationship between illegitimate tasks and job crafting is enhanced, and the positive relationship between illegitimate tasks and work withdrawal is weakened. Next, we will discuss the contributions and implications for theory and practice.

Theoretical Implications

Firstly, we enrich the research on the consequences of illegitimate tasks and the antecedents of employee creativity by examining the relationship between illegitimate tasks and employee creativity. Previous studies of illegitimate tasks have largely focused on exploring its impact on counterproductive work behavior,[6] work-family conflict,[7,8] job burnout,[9] and well-being.[10] However, the relationship between illegitimate tasks and employee creativity has received limited attention. In light of this, we have found evidence supporting the relationship between illegitimate tasks and employee creativity. This not only extends the research on the consequences of illegitimate tasks, responding to the call made by Ding and Kuvaas to investigate the broader effects of illegitimate tasks,[15] but also enriches the research on how negative contextual factors affect employee creativity.

Secondly, we explore the double-edged sword effect of illegitimate tasks on employee creativity, challenging the existing research consensus. Existing studies have mostly explored the impact mechanism of illegitimate tasks from a negative coping perspective. For instance, Apostel et al have suggested that employees may view turnover intentions as a response to illegitimate tasks.[27] However, individuals may either engage in positive coping with illegitimate tasks to gain resources or adopt negative coping to maintain self-esteem or prevent resource loss. Therefore, we construct a double-path model of "illegitimate tasks → job crafting → employee creativity" and "illegitimate tasks → work withdrawal → employee creativity" from both positive and negative coping perspectives, which can comprehensively reveal the impact mechanism of illegitimate tasks on employee creativity. Specifically, in terms of positive coping, we reveal the mediating role of job crafting, responding to the suggestion of Ding and Kuvaas to "the need to investigate the impact of illegitimate tasks on employees' positive work behaviors",[15] which is a valuable exploration of the positive effects of illegitimate tasks. In terms of negative coping, we reveal the mediating role of work withdrawal, expanding the transmission mechanism of the negative effects of illegitimate tasks. Meanwhile, existing studies often treat work withdrawal as an outcome variable in research models,[25] but we use work withdrawal as a mediating variable, further deepening the academic understanding of the antecedents and consequences of work withdrawal. Additionally, we compare the mediating role of job crafting and work withdrawal and find that the negative mediating role of work withdrawal is stronger than the positive mediating role of job crafting, indicating that the adverse impact of illegitimate tasks on employees is more pronounced. This not only contributes to a better understanding of the complete pathway and effects of illegitimate tasks on employee creativity, but also lays the foundation for future research that integrates the analysis of employees' positive and negative coping with illegitimate tasks.

Finally, we examine the moderating role of supervisor developmental feedback, revealing the boundary conditions of the double-edged sword pathway of illegitimate tasks. From existing research, scholars have been focused on exploring boundary conditions that mitigate the negative impact of illegitimate tasks. For instance, factors such as collective climate,[9] supervisors' relational transparency,[26] and appreciative leadership[27] have been demonstrated to have positive moderating effects. However, while these studies have contributed to enriching relevant theories, few scholars have focused on the boundary role of leadership feedback in this context. Studies by Cai et al,[28] Zhang et al,[30] and Li et al[46] have shown that supervisor developmental feedback, as a positive form of feedback, can effectively regulate employees' psychological states, ignite their intrinsic interest in tasks, and help them experience the positive meaning of work.

Therefore, we introduce supervisor developmental feedback as a moderating variable and explore its moderating role in the double pathways, finding that supervisor developmental feedback can both mitigate the negative impact of illegitimate tasks on work withdrawal and enhance the positive impact of illegitimate tasks on job crafting. Our findings enrich the research on the boundary mechanisms through which illegitimate tasks affect employee creativity, providing a reasonable explanation for when illegitimate tasks are more likely to have a stronger promoting or inhibiting effect on employee creativity.

Practical Implications

Firstly, we find a negative correlation between illegitimate tasks and employee creativity. Therefore, organizations should give careful attention and take appropriate measures to eliminate illegitimate tasks to avoid their negative impact on positive factors such as employee creativity. For instance, organizations can enhance supervisors' awareness and sensitivity to illegitimate tasks through specialized training to prevent the assignment of tasks that might be perceived as illegitimate. When it becomes unavoidable to assign illegitimate tasks, supervisors should explain in detail to employees regarding the purpose of the task assignment to prevent the negative effects of illegitimate tasks.

Secondly, we find that illegitimate tasks can stimulate job crafting, thereby enhancing employee creativity. This suggests that supervisors need to fully understand the complex relationship between illegitimate tasks and job crafting. On the one hand, during the recruitment phase, organizations can use methods such as structured interviews and job sample assessments to select candidates with a higher ability for job crafting. On the other hand, organizations can change employees' perceptions and enhance their ability and willingness to craft their job through stress resilience training and case sharing, thus enabling them to better adapt to and respond to the changes in the work environment caused by illegitimate tasks, further enhancing their creativity.

Thirdly, we find that illegitimate tasks can trigger work withdrawal, thereby reducing employee creativity. This suggests that supervisors should grasp the complex relationship between illegitimate tasks and work withdrawal. On the one hand, supervisors should provide necessary resources and support to employees assigned illegitimate tasks, and convey positive evaluations to boost their self-esteem, thereby reducing the likelihood of employees resorting to work withdrawal behavior. On the other hand, supervisors should pay close attention to the psychological state of employees after being assigned illegitimate tasks. If employees are found to be in serious negative moods, supervisors can help them overcome their psychological difficulties by means of communication and counseling, thus preventing them from engaging in work withdrawal behaviors.

Finally, we find that high levels of supervisor developmental feedback can regulate employees' psychological states and guide them to positively cope with illegitimate tasks. Therefore, organizations can cultivate and strengthen supervisors' developmental feedback skills through special training to improve the art of applying feedback. Furthermore, supervisors should pay more attention to employees' future development, encourage and help them to set career goals, promote positive interactions with employees, and stimulate their intrinsic motivation so as to reduce the impact of illegitimate tasks and enhance employee creativity.

Limitations and Future Research

There are several limitations worth discussing in our study. Firstly, experiments can be considered to explore the relationship between illegitimate tasks and employee creativity in the future. Secondly, we examined the mediating role of job crafting and work withdrawal based on positive and negative coping perspectives. In the future, work withdrawal could be considered as a consequence of illegitimate tasks, examining the relationship between the two. The mediating role of employees' cognition (organizational justice, affective commitment) and attitudes (intrinsic motivation, job identity, self-esteem) between illegitimate tasks and creativity can also be explored. Moreover, employees' responses to illegitimate tasks are not limited to job crafting and work withdrawal. Facades of conformity, as a low-cost and more covert coping strategy, is also worth exploring in the future. Thirdly, we only examined the moderating effect of supervisor developmental feedback, and given complexity of individual responses to illegitimate tasks, boundary conditions such as personal traits also need to be explored. Finally, we used Chinese employees as the research sample,

which affected the external validity of the results. In the future, samples from other countries can be used for testing to enhance the generalizability of research conclusions.

Conclusion

We explore the impact mechanisms of illegitimate tasks on employee creativity from positive and negative coping perspectives. Through empirical testing of 271 valid paired data of employees and supervisors, the results indicate that illegitimate tasks not only trigger work withdrawal and thus reduce employee creativity, but also promote job crafting and thus enhance employee creativity, showing a double-edged sword effect. The negative mediating role of work withdrawal is stronger than the positive mediating role of job crafting. Supervisor developmental feedback moderates the above two paths, with high levels of supervisor developmental feedback reducing work withdrawal, increasing job crafting, and ultimately enhancing employee creativity. These findings expand our understanding of the pros and cons of illegitimate tasks and their relationship with employee creativity, and highlight that supervisor developmental feedback, as a positive leadership feedback behavior, is an effective tool for buffering the negative impact of illegitimate tasks and improving employee creativity. We hope that our research can provide important guidance for organizations to weigh the pros and cons of illegitimate tasks and improve employee creativity.

Ethical Statement

Our study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki. Our study was approved by the Ethics Committee of Minzu University of China. Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

Funding

Disclosure

The authors report no conflicts of interest in this work.

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