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Illegitimate tasks: A systematic literature review and agenda for future research

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ABSTRACT

Although expecting to undertake core tasks affirming their professional identity, employees often have to deal with tasks they perceive as unnecessary or unreasonable. The concept of illegitimate tasks captures this phenomenon and has attracted growing attention since its first appearance. Illegitimate tasks have been found to explain unique variance in well-being and strain. Given a burgeoning body of literature, a systematic narrative review of illegitimate tasks is warranted. This review summarises research regarding illegitimate tasks' antecedents (leadership, workplace characteristics, individual characteristics, and job characteristics) and outcomes (emotions, work attitudes and cognition, work behaviour, health and well-being, and interpersonal relationships). In addition, we review work done to date regarding the moderators and mediators of these relationships. Finally, we offer future directions for research.

Employees expect to undertake tasks in line with their professional roles. However, employees are sometimes required to carry out tasks that violate what they feel can reasonably be expected from them. Described as a relatively new work-related stressor, the concept of illegitimate tasks depicts this work experience well (Semmer et al., 2010). Illegitimate tasks usually refer to tasks perceived as either unreasonable or unnecessary (Semmer et al., 2010). Unreasonable tasks are tasks outside employees' occupational duties; unnecessary tasks are "tasks that simply should not exist" (Semmer et al., 2019). Tasks are perceived as legitimate when conforming to norms regulating which tasks can be legitimately expected from a given job incumbent, while they are illegitimate when violating such norms (Semmer et al., 2010). Empirical studies find that illegitimate tasks can explain unique variance in well-being and strain when controlling for conceptually similar constructs, such as role conflict, distributive justice, and social stressors (Semmer et al., 2015). These findings suggest that illegitimate tasks reveal specific characteristics, rendering it a concept in its own right. Since its first appearance in the literature, scholarly interest in this concept has proliferated, with a considerable increase in the number of publications. However, researchers have yet to review the accumulating

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knowledge to assess what we have learned about illegitimate tasks and what critical questions about the topic remain unanswered. Therefore, this paper's overarching purpose is to present a systematic narrative review of the literature and provide suggestions to researchers on how we can move forward and advance our knowledge about illegitimate tasks.

A systematic literature review is essential for advancing disciplinary knowledge. Searching strategy is a crucial part of systematic reviews as the comprehensiveness and representativeness of included articles are closely pertaining to the quality of conclusions drawn from the data (Harari et al., 2020; Kepes et al., 2013). Following the suggestions of Harari et al. (2020) and guidelines in PRISMA (Preferred Reporting in Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis; Moher et al., 2015), we proceeded literature identification method in the following three steps: First, we searched for peer-reviewed articles that contained any of the followings words in any searchable field (e.g. topic, title, abstract, keywords): "illegitimate tasks," "unnecessary tasks," "unreasonable tasks." This search was carried out in February 2022 using the Web of Science Core Collection Database. We searched literature published in 2010 and later because pioneering work on illegitimate tasks was first published in a peer-reviewed journal in 2010. The initial literature search yielded 92 articles.

Second, these articles were downloaded for review unless, based on a reading of the title and abstract, we could determine that the study (a) did not involve the concept of illegitimate tasks, (b) was from a different discipline (e.g. ecology and computer science), (c) was written in a language other than English. Among the 60 downloaded articles, three articles that did not have illegitimate tasks as the main focus were excluded from subsequent analysis. Third, we used the Web of Science to forward search Semmer et al., 2010 - the article that both (a) explained the concept of illegitimate tasks in a ground-breaking way and (b) provided a validated scale. We also conducted a backward search to check the references of identified articles. One relevant article was identified through backward and forward citation searches. Finally, we identified 58 articles relevant to our research purpose. The articles in our review included a combination of conceptual, qualitative, and quantitative studies.

The concept and measurement of illegitimate tasks

The concept of illegitimate tasks

The concept of illegitimate tasks is grounded in the study conducted by Semmer et al. (2007, p. 47) on occupational stress. They defined illegitimate tasks as task assignments perceived as either unreasonable or unnecessary. Unreasonable tasks are tasks that are "outside of one's occupational duty"; unnecessary tasks are tasks that "should not have to be carried out at all because they do not make sense" (Semmer et al., 2010, pp. 73–74). The starting point for developing this concept derives from the observation that some occupational stressors are considered typical because they are indissolubly connected with the profession. Employees do not perceive those foreseeable stressors as particularly stressful because they constitute the nature of the profession (Semmer et al., 2007). Conversely, illegitimate tasks may express disrespectful information because employees do not think carrying out those tasks is part of their jobs. Illegitimate tasks

constitute a threat to the self and one's professional identity, therefore, representing a new stressor concept.

The measurement of illegitimate tasks

The most commonly used scale to measure illegitimate tasks is the eight-item Bern Illegitimate Tasks Scale (BITS), consisting of two facets. The BITS assesses unnecessary tasks with four items; they start with the introduction "Do you have work tasks to take care of, which keep you wondering if … " followed by (1) "they have to be done at all?"; (2) "they make sense at all?"; (3) "they would not exist (or could be done with less effort), if it were organized differently?"; (4) "they just exist because some people simply demand it this way?". Four items on unreasonable tasks are introduced with "Do you have work tasks to take care of, which you believe … " followed by (1) "should be done by someone else?"; (2) "are going too far, which should not be expected from you?"; (3) "put you into an awkward position?"; (4) "are unfair that you have to deal with them?". A five-point Likert scale is generally used, ranging from *never* (1) to *frequently* (5). BITS has been subsequently adopted in many studies within different cultural contexts, such as in China (Chen et al., 2021), India (Ahmed et al., 2018), Finland (Mauno et al., 2021), and Latin America (Valdivieso Portilla et al., 2021). Good psychometric properties of BITS in those empirical studies suggest that the BITS presents satisfactory cross-cultural applicability.

Although BITS is the dominant scale to measure illegitimate tasks, some scholars used other measures. For example, Framke et al. (2018) measured unnecessary tasks and unreasonable tasks by directly asking how often participants spend their time on "something at work that appears to be unnecessary" and "activities outside central job tasks." Besides, there is also a more quantitative method of measurement. Thun et al. (2018) focused on the actual workload of illegitimate tasks, measuring unreasonable tasks by asking participants to estimate what proportion of workload is made up of unreasonable tasks.

BITS is preferred over single-item measures because multi-item measures generally have higher reliability and validity (DeVellis, 2003). However, single-item measures have been found to accurately and reliably represent different constructs (Matthews et al., 2022). It is acceptable to use single-item measures (e.g. how often do you have to spend time on tasks that are unreasonable/unnecessary for you?) to capture two faces of illegitimate tasks in appropriate scenarios. For example, single-item measures in studies requiring intensive data collection (e.g. diary studies) could reduce participant burden and measurement contamination.

Major theoretical perspectives

Stress as offense to self theory

Scholars frequently adopted the Stress as offense to Self (SOS) theory to understand the nature and the effects of illegitimate tasks (Semmer et al., 2007; Semmer et al., 2019). SOS is based on a widely accepted assumption that maintaining a positive self-image is a basic need, and any threat to self-esteem elicits strain (Semmer et al., 2007). The self contains

two aspects: the personal self and the social self. Personal self refers to the degree to which one can meet one's own standards for one's performance and behaviour (Semmer et al., 2019). One feels insufficient when those personal criteria are not met, which is called *Stress through Insufficiency* (SIN). Conversely, social self refers to the degree to which one feels socially accepted or valued by others. One feels disrespected when one perceives threats to social esteem, which is called *Stress as Disrespect* (SAD). SAD explains how illegitimate tasks cause stress through disrespect. Working conditions, such as task characteristics, may contain positive or negative social messages to employees (Semmer et al., 2016). Being assigned illegitimate tasks sends self-threatening messages to employees that they are not being valued and respected. This theory, which is tightly linked to self-esteem, also helps reveal why self-esteem is the mediator of the effects of illegitimate tasks. Several daily diary studies have already found a negative association between illegitimate tasks and self-esteem (Eatough et al., 2016; Sonnentag & Lischetzke, 2018).

Role theory

Role theory suggests that each role is attached to what can appropriately be expected from the role occupant (Katz & Kahn, 1978; Meier & Semmer, 2018). Employees' professional roles (or their jobs) define what behaviours can be legitimately expected from them. However, illegitimate tasks are usually not core elements of one's profession (Faupel et al., 2016). These tasks do not meet employees' reasonable expectations about their jobs and do not help confirm their core roles in the organisation. Therefore, illegitimate tasks can be considered a particular case of person-role conflict (Semmer et al., 2019). For many people, professional roles are crucial parts of their self-identities. Affirming one's professional roles brings about pride and self-esteem, while threats to professional identity can be pretty stressful (Semmer et al., 2015). Illegitimate tasks make people feel stressed because they threaten one's valued professional identity. Several empirical studies have found that illegitimate tasks are positively related to role conflict (Munir et al., 2017) and stress (Björk et al., 2013; Munir et al., 2017).

Justice theory

From the perspective of justice theory, being assigned illegitimate tasks can easily be associated with violating justice or fairness norms. In essence, fairness denotes conformity to specific rules or criteria, while people would feel unfair when observing such rules are violated (Semmer et al., 2007). Task illegitimacy implies the deviation and breach of one's professional identity, thus representing a case of organisational injustice. Various types of (in)justice can be involved in illegitimate tasks. First, carrying out illegitimate tasks make employees invest efforts and energy they should not have to and make them feel they are not adequately compensated. This represents an embodiment of distributive injustice, such as effort-reward imbalance (Omansky et al., 2016; Zeng et al., 2021). Second, employees may also feel the decision about task assignment is unfairly made, in which case procedural justice is involved. Third, illegitimate tasks convey negative social meaning by indicating disrespectful behaviour. In this case, interactional (in)justice is the most appropriate lens since it focuses on respect and disrespect (Meier & Semmer, 2018).

Job demands-resources model

Many researchers also refer to the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model in their empirical studies (Ahmed et al., 2018; Fila & Eatough, 2018; Koch & Adler, 2018). The JD-R model maintains that workplace conditions can be classified into job demands and job resources (Bakker et al., 2003). Job demands refer to those physical, psychological, social, or organisational features of the job that require physical or psychological efforts; job resources refer to aspects of the job that help achieve work goals, reduce job demands and promote individual development (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). Illegitimate tasks may be regarded as job demands since carrying out those additional tasks depleted employees' physical or psychological resources. As a result, illegitimate tasks may harm work attitudes and behaviours (Ahmed et al., 2018; Muntz et al., 2019). The JD-R model also suggests that job resources could buffer the impact of job demands on job strain (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). Consistent with this assumption, several types of job resources, such as leaders' appreciation and support from coworkers and leaders, have been found to mitigate the negative effects of task illegitimacy (Apostel et al., 2018; Fila & Eatough, 2020).

In summary, illegitimate tasks are derived from role and justice theories within the SOS theoretical framework (Semmer et al., 2015). SOS tightly rests on the role and justice theories to explain the nature and consequences of illegitimate tasks. Illegitimate tasks represent deviance from expected roles; therefore, role theory explains why tasks are considered illegitimate. Perception of task illegitimacy is closely connected with unfairness or injustice; therefore, justice theory explains employees' reactions toward such tasks (Semmer et al., 2015). Furthermore, besides the symbolic meaning of task illegitimacy, several scholars have already noticed the energy-related features of undertaking illegitimate tasks and related consequences (Semmer et al., 2019; Semmer & Zapf, 2019). Therefore, from the perspective of the JD-R model, illegitimate tasks can also be understood as job demands because they drain employees' physical or psychological efforts.

Review of illegitimate tasks in the workplace

We review the findings of identified articles under three headings: "Antecedents of illegitimate tasks," "outcomes of illegitimate tasks," and "moderators and mediators." Figure 1 displays the overview of empirical research involving illegitimate tasks. A detailed table comprising the reviewed quantitative studies' research designs, antecedents, outcomes, and main results can be found in the Open Science Framework: https://osf.io/ejh9w/?view_only = 1895ee09af594dcab1939624a8895cd3.

Antecedents of illegitimate tasks

Leadership influence

Leaders play an essential role in task assignments. For example, Stein et al. (2020) found that abusive supervision was positively related to unreasonable tasks, supporting that abusive supervision may not be limited to mistreatment at the relationship level. On the other hand, temporal leadership was negatively associated with perceived illegitimate tasks because temporal leaders arrange employees' task time appropriately and allocate time resources, which allows employees to complete their work more efficiently (Wan
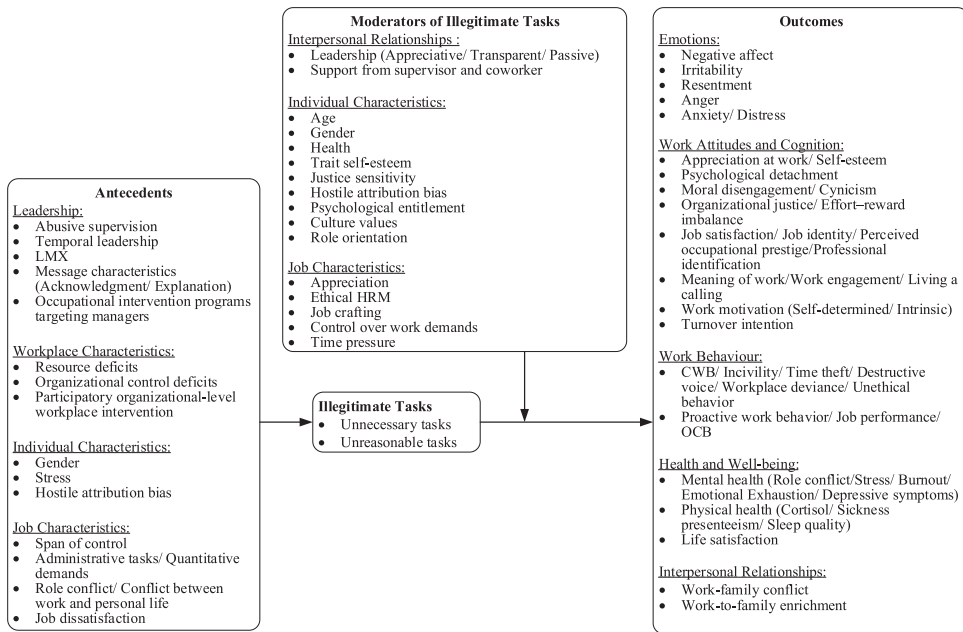
Figure 1. Overview of empirical research involving illegitimate tasks.

et al., 2021). Therefore, tasks assigned by temporal leaders are more likely to be acknowledged by employees. Sias and Duncan (2019) found that the quality of leader-member exchange (LMX) was also negatively related to the frequency of receiving unreasonable task requests. They explained that employees with high-quality LMX define their role more fluidly and less concretely; therefore, they are less likely to perceive extra-role tasks as unreasonable. Besides, the way in which the information about task assignments is communicated also matters. Specifically, messages incorporating acknowledgment, appreciation, or explanation can reduce perceptions of tasks' illegitimacy (Minei et al., 2018; Sias & Duncan, 2019). Finally, based on an experiment, Nylén et al. (2018) found that providing managers with intervention programmes to reduce employees' job demands and increase their job resources significantly prevented the growth of unnecessary tasks, but not unreasonable tasks.

Workplace characteristics

Characteristics of the workplace may also influence illegitimate tasks. Björk et al. (2013) found that organisational resource deficits were positively related to managers' illegitimate task perceptions because insufficient personnel resources and increased pressure increased their workload. Similarly, organisational control deficits, which feature ill-conceived strategic decisions, blurred organisational boundaries, and internal competition, will generate more illegitimate tasks for managers (Björk et al., 2013). Framke et al. (2018) conducted a cluster-randomized controlled trial in Danish pre-schools and implemented a set of intervention activities to improve the psychological working environment with a focus on core jobs. The result showed that unreasonable tasks and the overall score of illegitimate tasks increased significantly in the control group,

implying that a participatory organisational-level intervention targeting core job tasks may protect employees against an increase in these types of tasks.

Individual characteristics

Growing research has examined the effects of individual characteristics on illegitimate tasks. It has been found that women usually perceive more illegitimate tasks than men (Björk et al., 2013), although the conclusion was not supported in subsequent research (Stein et al., 2020). Based on two vignette experiments, García Johnson and Otto (2021) found that although supervisors are more likely to assign illegitimate tasks to transgender and gender non-conforming employees, employees might accept these tasks and are less likely to perceive them as illegitimate. Besides, one's attribution bias also influences how one views illegitimate tasks. Those who tend to interpret undesirable events as purposeful behaviours of others that intend to cause harm (i.e. hostile attribution bias) may perceive more illegitimate tasks (Pindek et al., 2019).

Job characteristics

Finally, characteristics of jobs can also predict levels of illegitimate tasks. Job dissatisfaction leads to unnecessary tasks and vice versa (Muntz et al., 2019). The control span was positively associated with illegitimate tasks (Björk et al., 2013). Specifically, having too many subordinates may lead to a heavier workload and lower-level administrative tasks that managers perceive as illegitimate. Administrative tasks divert time and attention away from employees' core roles; therefore, they might be perceived as unreasonable (Anskär et al., 2019; Thun et al., 2018). Moreover, Anskär et al. (2019) found that Sweden physicians who perceive more role conflict, stress, and conflict between work and life report higher levels of illegitimate tasks.

Outcomes of illegitimate tasks

Emotions

Employees' negative emotions naturally arise when these tasks cause threats to their professional identities and organisational justice. Some researchers conducted diary studies to capture the short-term influence of illegitimate tasks on state negative affect. For example, Eatough et al. (2016) found that illegitimate tasks during the day were positively related to evening levels of anger and depressive mood. Likewise, based on a daily diary study, Sonnentag and Lischetzke (2018) found that unreasonable tasks were associated with higher end-of-work negative affect at the between-person level, while unnecessary tasks were associated with higher end-of-work negative affect at the within-person level. Other researchers focused on specific types of negative emotions. Illegitimate tasks can elicit feelings of resentment (Semmer et al., 2015; Stocker et al., 2010), anger (Munir et al., 2017; Zhou et al., 2018), and irritability (Semmer et al., 2015). For instance, in a study of 646 managers from 49 countries, Graf-Vlachy et al. (2020) found that unnecessary tasks caused by COVID-19 significantly predicted distress, and unreasonable tasks predicted distress, anxiety, and depression.

Work attitudes and cognition

Illegitimate tasks are consistently associated with some negative work attitudes and cognition. Being assigned illegitimate tasks constitute a threat to one's professional identity; therefore, in addition to the negative emotions, they have been found to jeopardise identity-related variables. For example, many studies have found that illegitimate tasks are negatively related to self-esteem (Eatough et al., 2016; Schulte-Braucks et al., 2019; Semmer et al., 2015; Sonnentag & Lischetzke, 2018). Illegitimate tasks signal a lack of appreciation, making employees experience less appreciation at work (Stocker et al., 2010). They also represent a form of unjust treatment, violating employees' normative and moral expectations of their organisations. As a result, illegitimate tasks may elicit some negative cognition related to morality and justice, such as moral disengagement (Zhao et al., 2021), cynicism (Kilponen et al., 2021; Mauno et al., 2021), and organisational justice (Ahmed et al., 2018). For instance, some studies have found that illegitimate tasks were associated with lower organisational justice (Ahmed et al., 2018; Munir et al., 2017) and higher effort-reward imbalance (Omansky et al., 2016; Zeng et al., 2021). Experiencing illegitimate tasks keeps employees constantly thinking about those tasks and relevant negative experiences at home. Employees may even need to invest extra time in dealing with these tasks even after work. Therefore, illegitimate task experiences make it difficult for employees to detach from their work (Sonnentag & Lischetzke, 2018; Zhou et al., 2020).

Moreover, an individual's positive work attitude may be undermined when one's work is filled with many undesirable tasks. For instance, several empirical studies have found that illegitimate tasks were negatively associated with job satisfaction (Björk et al., 2013; Ilyas et al., 2021; Omansky et al., 2016; Werdecker & Esch, 2021) and job identity (Ma & Peng, 2019). Illegitimate tasks were also negatively related to one's professional identification and perceived occupational prestige, although the results were inconsistent for the two dimensions (Akyurek & Can, 2021).

Moreover, employees would perceive illegitimate tasks as less meaningful because they are not part of their core tasks. Accordingly, accomplishing these tasks does not bring a sense of achievement or fulfilment. Instead, wasting time on them may hamper the meaning of work (Kilponen et al., 2021; Mäkikangas et al., 2021) and work engagement (Kilponen et al., 2021; van Schie et al., 2014). In a three-wave study, Mauno et al. (2021) found that unnecessary tasks related negatively to next year's living a calling at work. They explained that calling at work implies that one's identity is strongly connected with work, while unnecessary tasks are usually identity-threatening. Furthermore, illegitimate tasks are discordant with one's occupational role and may thwart the need for autonomy. They have also been found to impair work motivation, such as intrinsic motivation (Omansky et al., 2016) and self-determined motivation (van Schie et al., 2014). Finally, there is clear evidence in both qualitative and quantitative studies that illegitimate tasks are associated with higher turnover intention (Apostel et al., 2018; Cregård & Corin, 2019; Eriksson et al., 2021; García Johnson & Otto, 2021; Muntz et al., 2019; Zeng et al., 2021). This is because illegitimate tasks do not meet employees' reasonable expectations about their jobs. As a result, employees may consider quitting their jobs and searching for more enjoyable jobs to avoid these threats.

Work behaviour

Like the relationships between illegitimate tasks and work attitudes, a growing body of literature has found that illegitimate tasks can lead to various negative work-related

behaviours. Employees tend to decline a task when realising it is unreasonable (Duncan et al., 2021). Being forced to perform illegitimate tasks can breed negative workplace behaviours, such as workplace deviance (Wan et al., 2021) and counterproductive work behaviour (CWB; Schulte-Braucks et al., 2019; Semmer et al., 2010; Zhou et al., 2018). According to the stressor-emotion model of CWB, workplace stressors immediately cause negative emotions that further lead to CWB (Spector & Fox, 2005). Undertaking illegitimate tasks makes employees feel disrespected and mistreated, causing negative emotions, which in turn raises CWB. Supporting this argument, Zhou et al. (2018) found that daily illegitimate tasks were positively associated with next-day CWB at the within-person level, and this relationship was mediated by end-of-work anger. Colleagues and supervisors could become targets of CWB. For example, Semmer et al. (2010) found that illegitimate tasks related positively to CWB against supervisors and colleagues. A similar study found that both employee-reported and supervisor-reported illegitimate tasks can predict higher incivility against supervisors (Meier & Semmer, 2018). In addition to the emotion-based perspective, other researchers adopted a cognition-based explanation because illegitimate tasks undermine employees' values regarding morality and justice. For instance, several researchers used moral disengagement as a mediator to explain why illegitimate tasks resulted in unethical behaviour (Chen et al., 2021), destructive voice, and time theft (Zhao et al., 2021).

Moreover, Ma and Peng (2019) employed the threat-to-identity effect to examine the performance costs of illegitimate tasks. Using time-lagged research, they found that illegitimate tasks were negatively related to employees' task performance and proactive work behaviour; job identity mediated the two relationships. Similarly, in a three-wave study, Mauno et al. (2021) found that unnecessary tasks impaired organisational citizenship behaviour (OCB) by harming living a calling.

Health and well-being

Work-related stressors have been consistently related to both physical and psychological health (Ganster & Rosen, 2013). Several scholars have revealed that illegitimate tasks might jeopardise many indicators of health and well-being (Elfering et al., 2018; Van Niekerk et al., 2021). Illegitimate tasks have been found to relate to role conflict (Munir et al., 2017) and stress (Björk et al., 2013). A growing body of research shows that the positive association between illegitimate tasks and burnout is very stable, regardless of the research context (García Johnson & Otto, 2021; Munir et al., 2017; Semmer et al., 2015; Werdecker & Esch, 2021). Many researchers have focused on a specific facet of burnout caused by task illegitimacy: emotional exhaustion. Semmer et al. (2015) argued that illegitimate tasks drain mental and emotional energy, leading to emotional exhaustion. Several subsequent studies have supported this argument (Fila & Eatough, 2018; Kilponen et al., 2021; Koch & Adler, 2018; Meier & Semmer, 2018). There is also evidence that illegitimate tasks can raise depressive symptoms (Fila & Eatough, 2020; Graf-Vlachy et al., 2020; Pfister et al., 2020) because task illegitimacy does not make employees feel accepted or included socially (Fila & Eatough, 2020).

There is also evidence that illegitimate tasks may imperil employees' physical health (Faes & Elfering, 2021). Cortisol has been frequently used as a biological indicator of stress. In a three-wave study, Kottwitz et al. (2013) found illegitimate tasks were associated with higher cortisol levels among male employees when subjective health was

relatively low. A study of 545 Norwegian physicians also shows that unreasonable illegitimate task relates to a higher probability of sickness presenteeism (Thun et al., 2018). The detrimental effect of illegitimate tasks can sometimes extend beyond the workplace context. Pereira et al. (2014) conducted an ambulatory study, finding that illegitimate tasks were positively related to sleep fragmentation and sleep-onset latency but not to sleep efficiency or sleep duration. There is also evidence that illegitimate tasks are negatively associated with life satisfaction (Werdecker & Esch, 2021).

Interpersonal relationships

Illegitimate tasks also threaten interpersonal relationships in both workplace and family contexts. Making illegitimate task requests have implications for the relationships between supervisor and subordinate. However, when a supervisor requests that subordinates undertake an illegitimate task, the facework strategies of acknowledgment and explanation can effectively reduce employees' anger and perceived task illegitimacy (Minei et al., 2018). Illegitimate tasks represent extra job demands, draining employees' resources and energy originally allocated to the family domain. Therefore, the detrimental effects of illegitimate tasks may spill over from the workplace to the family context, leading to work-family conflict (Ahmed et al., 2018; Meier & Semmer, 2018; Zeng et al., 2021). Ahmed et al. (2018) adopted a serial mediation by interactional justice and negative emotion to explain why illegitimate tasks were negatively related to work-family enrichment. Although a negative correlation between illegitimate tasks and work-family enrichment was found, the proposed serial mediation got support only in the U.S. but not in the Indian sample. They also found a negative mediated effect of change in illegitimate tasks on change in work-family enrichment through change in interactional justice (Ahmed et al., 2018).

Moderators and mediators

Moderators of illegitimate tasks

Interpersonal relationships. Supervisors play a critical role in influencing employees' perception of tasks' legitimacy (Apostel et al., 2018). Positive leadership styles, such as appreciative (Apostel et al., 2018) and transparent leadership (Muntz et al., 2019), have been found to mitigate the threat of illegitimate tasks. For example, Muntz et al. (2019) argued that the more transparently a leader communicates the assignment of unusual tasks, the better an employee understands the reason behind it; the less likely an employee's job satisfaction would be impaired. Therefore, the positive association between illegitimate tasks and job dissatisfaction would be weaker when supervisors' relational transparency is high. They designed a four-wave panel study and corroborated this argument. Conversely, Zhou et al. (2020) found that passive leadership could exacerbate the detrimental influences of illegitimate tasks on psychological detachment. This is because passive leadership, which features disengagement and inaction, corresponds to a lack of resources and feedback. Passive leaders barely provide employees with necessary job resources. In conclusion, when supervisors provide employees with adequate job resources, such as appreciation (Pfister et al., 2020), employees can effectively protect themselves against illegitimate tasks.

Compared to the support from leaders, we currently do not have enough empirical evidence to show support from coworkers in alleviating the effects of illegitimate tasks. Fila and Eatough (2020) predicted that coworker support would buffer the effects of unreasonable tasks on anxiety and depressive symptoms. However, preliminary evidence did not support these hypotheses. Nevertheless, they found the correlation between unreasonable tasks and depression was weaker for those perceiving high supervisor support.

Individual characteristics. First, many researchers examined the moderating roles of demographic variables. For example, illegitimate tasks cause stronger negative reactions among male workers (Omansky et al., 2016) and older workers (Madsen et al., 2014). Evidence shows that illegitimate tasks lead to more severe consequences when employees are in poor health (Kottwitz et al., 2013; Madsen et al., 2014). For instance, in a three-wave study involving 1351 Danish human service workers, Madsen et al. (2014) found that unnecessary tasks decreased mental health cross-sectionally and prospectively. This association was stronger for employees with poor baseline mental health. Similarly, Kottwitz et al. (2013) found that illegitimate tasks were associated with higher cortisol levels among employees with relatively low subjective health.

Second, some personality traits influence employees' mindsets and how employees view illegitimate tasks. For instance, a within-person level analysis showed that the positive association between daily unreasonable tasks and daily CWB was stronger when they were high in justice sensitivity (Schulte-Braucks et al., 2019). This is because justice-sensitive people are more likely to sense unfairness and have less tolerance toward illegitimate tasks. Pindek et al. (2019) found that the negative relationship between illegitimate tasks and negative emotions was stronger for people high on hostile attribution bias. Another important moderator is psychological entitlement, which refers to individuals' tendency to believe they deserve preferential treatment and praise at work (Lee et al., 2019). Evidence shows that psychological entitlement strengthens the positive link between illegitimate tasks and moral disengagement and its indirect effect on destructive voice and time theft (Zhao et al., 2021). Conversely, Eatough et al. (2016) revealed that although illegitimate tasks were associated with lowered state self-esteem, high trait self-esteem significantly buffered the relationship.

Third, individual differences in cultural values and role orientation can also moderate the influence of illegitimate tasks. For instance, Ma and Peng (2019) argued that employees with high flexible role orientation would not regard illegitimate tasks as a severe threat because they broadly define their job roles. Supporting this argument, they found that the negative relationship between illegitimate tasks and job identity and its indirect effect on proactive work behaviour and task performance were insignificant for people with high flexible role orientation. Similarly, Akyurek and Can (2021) found that although illegitimate tasks weakened employees' perceived occupational prestige and workplace well-being, employees with high vertical collectivism felt these detrimental effects to a lesser extent. This is because vertical collectivism highlights collective interest over individuals, making people tolerate and comply with other people's task demands.

Job characteristics. From the perspective of the JD-R model, job resources can reduce job demands and the associated adverse outcomes. Therefore, it is reasonable to expect job resources to mitigate illegitimate tasks-strain relationships. Some studies have supported

this argument. Pfister et al. (2020) found that on the within-level, appreciation from supervisors and colleagues buffered the effect of illegitimate tasks for two of the four facets of affective well-being. Similarly, Chen et al. (2021) found that the indirect effect of illegitimate tasks on unethical behaviour via moral disengagement was weaker when employees perceived high ethical human resource management. Likewise, in a longitudinal study, Mäkikangas et al. (2021) found that job crafting, especially seeking job resources, could mitigate the negative association between illegitimate and meaning of work.

Some job resources have been found to alleviate the influence of illegitimate tasks, while others failed to buffer connections between task illegitimacy and adverse outcomes. For instance, in a study of 840 nurses from Swedish hospitals, Eriksson predicted that several types of job resources (e.g. workflow, vertical trust, organisational justice, and so on) might buffer the negative association between illegitimate tasks and intention to leave. However, none of the resources were found to play such a moderating role. Likewise, Fila and Eatough (2020) found that control over work demands alone does not function as a buffer in the illegitimate tasks-strain relationship. Nevertheless, a three-way interaction among illegitimate tasks, control, and supervisor support was significant such that the illegitimate tasks-strain relationship was mitigated when control and supervisor support were both high. Worse, additional job demands may intensify the negative aspects of illegitimate tasks. Zhou et al. (2018) found that the relationship between daily illegitimate tasks and daily end-of-work anger was stronger when time pressure was high. This is because time pressure represents job demands that deplete resources, making employees more vulnerable to negative emotional reactions.

Illegitimate tasks as the moderator

Empirical studies have already begun to examine the moderating effects of illegitimate tasks on the relationships between job demands and work attitudes and behaviours. Illegitimate tasks would further drain employees' time and emotional resources, making them more vulnerable to job demands and less likely to complete important tasks. Thus, illegitimate tasks may play the role of "adding insult to injury," strengthening the detrimental effects of job demands. On the other hand, job demands can also function like challenging stressors, potentially promoting personal growth and achieving goals. Illegitimate tasks may hinder the potential for challenging stressors to exert their positive impact. Several studies have supported this argument. For example, in a diary study involving 323 participants, Kronenwett and Rigotti (2019) found that the association between time pressure and task-related achievement became insignificant when unnecessary tasks were high; it became positive only when unnecessary tasks were low. Unnecessary tasks also function similarly in the association between time pressure and task-related achievement. Schmitt et al. (2015) found an inverted U-shape relation between time pressure and work engagement, showing that work engagement is higher when employees have moderate levels of time pressure. However, the inverted U-shape relation was insignificant when unreasonable tasks were high. In addition, there is also evidence that illegitimate tasks may catalyse signs of dehydration. Based on a daily diary study, Kottwitz et al. (2017) revealed that the negative association between daily work interruption and fluid intake was stronger when employees were assigned more unreasonable tasks.

Mediators of illegitimate tasks

Mediators of illegitimate tasks help understand how and why illegitimate tasks influence employees' attitudes and behaviours. Table 1 shows representative mediators of illegitimate tasks. Only studies with time-lagged research designs are discussed to guarantee the credibility of the research findings. Although current studies examined various mediators, they can be roughly classified into four categories. The first is negative emotions (e.g. anger) (Zhou et al., 2018), which constitute core elements of stress. The second is self- and identity-related variables, echoing the role theory, such as self-esteem (Sonnentag & Lischetzke, 2018), job identity (Ma & Peng, 2019), and living a calling (Mauno et al., 2021). This category should also include appreciation because it reflects the social self (Kottwitz et al., 2019). The third is justice- and moral-related variables. As indicated by justice theory, illegitimate tasks represent a breach of organisational justice (Ahmed et al., 2018) and might also destroy the moral values (i.e. moral disengagement) in their minds (Chen et al., 2021; Zhao et al., 2021). The fourth is the psychological and physiological strain (e.g. psychological detachment) (Sonnentag & Lischetzke, 2018), as illegitimate tasks can also be understood as extra job demands. This supports the argument that illegitimate tasks might cause threats through energy-related features other than symbolic meaning (Semmer et al., 2019). These four categories of mediators reflect the aforementioned major theoretical perspectives that enable us to understand the mechanisms of illegitimate tasks. However, with some exceptions (Ahmed et al., 2018; Sonnentag & Lischetzke, 2018), most studies only include a single mediator in the empirical analysis, which hinders us from exploring the relative strength of different mediating mechanisms and their potential interactions.

Table 1. A representative list of mediators of illegitimate tasks.

Mediator	Outcome	Source	Research design
End-of-work Anger	CWB	Zhou et al., 2018	Diary study (10 consecutive working days)
Appreciation	Job satisfaction	Kottwitz et al., 2019	Two waves (1-year time lag)
End-of-work self-esteem; end-of-work negative affect; psychological detachment	Bedtime self-esteem; bedtime negative affect	Sonnentag & Lischetzke, 2018	Dairy study (5 consecutive working days)
Interactional justice; negative emotions	Work interference with family; work to family enrichment	Ahmed et al., 2018	Two waves (3-month time lag)
Job identity	Task performance; proactive work behaviour	Ma & Peng, 2019	Three waves (2-week time lag); multi-source
Living a calling	Cynicism, OCB	Mauno et al., 2021	Three waves (1-year time lag)
Moral disengagement	Destructive voice; time theft	Zhao et al., 2021	Two waves (4-week time lag), multi-source
Moral disengagement	Unethical behaviour	Chen et al., 2021	Two waves (2-week time lag)
Psychological detachment	Time-based work-to-family conflict; strain-based work-to-family conflict; behaviour-based work-to-family conflict	Zhou et al., 2020	Three waves (2-month time lag)

Future research directions

Similar or different? Two facets of illegitimate tasks

BITS comprises two facets: unnecessary tasks and unreasonable tasks. Many studies found inconsistent results for the two dimensions (Mäkikangas et al., 2021; Muntz et al., 2019; Muntz & Dormann, 2020; Sonnentag & Lischetzke, 2018), which raised the issue of whether the two dimensions should be used separately. Three criteria can be used to evaluate the appropriateness of averaging the two dimensions into an overall illegitimate tasks measure (Van den Broeck et al., 2016). First, if the correlations between the two facets exceed 0.7, they may represent the same construct and be interchangeable. In this case, using them separately is inappropriate. Second, conducting relative weight analysis examines each facet's incremental predictive validity when predicting outcomes. Redundant measures would not incrementally predict beyond each other. Third, examining whether the nomological networks of the antecedents of each facet are similar. If the confidence intervals for the correlation of each facet with a given antecedent do not overlap, this would suggest that the relations are different, and each facet should be used separately. However, current studies do not provide enough information that enables us to conduct these analyses because only a limited number of studies have used both dimensions separately. Therefore, we suggest that scholars using overall illegitimate tasks should also report the correlations between its two dimensions and other variables, such that future scholars can have enough information to answer the above question in a meta-analysis study.

Where do (Perceptions of) illegitimate tasks come from?

Compared with a large amount of literature focusing on the detrimental outcomes of illegitimate tasks, studies exploring antecedents of this illegitimacy stressor have grown more slowly. Future research would benefit from studies revealing the triggers of illegitimate tasks because they will help develop policies and interventions to diminish the prevalence of illegitimate tasks. Illegitimate tasks have dual attributes of subjectivity and objectivity. Employees have high perceptions of illegitimate tasks because (a) they undertake too many such tasks (task allocation perspective) or (b) they are more likely to appraise tasks as illegitimate (task appraisal perspective). Both perspectives can provide essential clues about the antecedents of illegitimate tasks.

Individual characteristics

Individuals with some specific traits are more likely to receive illegitimate tasks, or they are more likely to perceive some extra-role tasks as illegitimate. First, in terms of demographic characteristics, it has been found that disadvantaged people (or the minority) in the organisation are more likely to be assigned illegitimate tasks, such as transgender and gender non-conforming individuals (García Johnson & Otto, 2021). This finding may imply that other disadvantaged people or minority groups can become victims of illegitimate tasks, such as ethnic minorities, younger employees, and newcomers.

Second, regarding personality traits, supervisors may tend to assign illegitimate tasks to an employee who is high on other orientation and agreeableness because they know this person is not likely to reject this request. People with high other orientation or

agreeableness tend to be friendly and kind, and they are more likely to engender behaviours like submissiveness, conformity, and interpersonal citizenship behaviour (Lester et al., 2008; Taylor et al., 2010). However, employees high on other orientation or agreeableness may report less illegitimate task perceptions because they think undertaking extra tasks is their responsibility. The two hypotheses are two competing but interesting and deserve more attention. A possible explanation is a distinction between self-reported and supervisor-reported variables. For example, supervisors may tend to assign illegitimate tasks to employees they perceive to be high on agreeableness (i.e. supervisor-reported agreeableness). Nevertheless, employees high on agreeableness (i.e. self-reported agreeableness) may perceive fewer illegitimate tasks because they tend to acknowledge them.

Third, some individual characteristics may make employees more (or less) likely to perceive some work tasks as illegitimate. For example, people high on OCB may report fewer illegitimate tasks because they have prosocial motivation. It is interesting to explore both normal and reversed causal directions. Do employees performing illegitimate tasks might be less likely to be engaged in OCB because of experiencing resource depletion? Mauno et al. (2021) found an insignificant association between unnecessary tasks and OCB, but an indirect negative association was significant. The finding implies that multiple mediation mechanisms with opposite directions (i.e. competitive mediations) may exist in the relationship between OCB and illegitimate tasks.

Fourth, employees' job attitudes may also influence to what extent they perceive some tasks as illegitimate (Ma & Peng, 2019). For example, employees who perceive their jobs/roles more broadly or flexibly may report fewer illegitimate tasks.

Finally, supervisors may assign illegitimate tasks to an employee with great competence at work because they believe this person will help accomplish these tasks (Muntz & Dormann, 2020). This may apply to tasks that others cannot accomplish well (i.e. unreasonable tasks). With great power comes greater responsibility. Being competent in an organisation may come at an additional cost: Carrying out extra tasks that someone else should have done.

Leadership influence

Leaders play a crucial role in task assignments. Several studies have used leader-related variables as the antecedents or moderators of illegitimate tasks (Apostel et al., 2018; Stein et al., 2020). There are still several leadership paradigms that are worth further investigation. First, ethical leadership may help reduce employees' illegitimate task perception. Ethical leadership demonstrates and promotes normatively appropriate conduct (Brown et al., 2005), while illegitimate tasks violate social norms or reasonable role expectations. Therefore, ethical leaders regard assigning illegitimate tasks to employees as unethical behaviour and might avoid such behaviours. On the other hand, ethical leadership may also serve as a moderator. Suppose illegitimate tasks cannot be avoided in organisations. In that case, ethical leaders may justify and communicate to employees why these seemingly useless or unreasonable tasks should be done or are beneficial for the organisation to alleviate the harmful effects of illegitimate tasks. The same may apply to other similar leadership variables, such as self-sacrificing leadership.

Second, leaders' trust may also bring employees some unexpected tasks. When dealing with tricky tasks, leaders tend to assign illegitimate tasks to trusted followers because they

trust their willingness to accept these unusual tasks and their abilities to accomplish them (Muntz & Dormann, 2020). Being trusted by leaders may therefore come with a price. Studies like this may help uncover the potential adverse effect of being trusted.

Coworker influence

Coworker is another source of illegitimate tasks. On the one hand, coworkers' behaviours may directly result in more illegitimate tasks. For example, having a poor relationship with coworkers or being perceived as having a high level of rivalry by coworkers may result in more illegitimate tasks. According to the rivalry theory, individuals are motivated to do whatever is needed to defeat their rivals (Kilduff et al., 2016). Coworkers may regard creating illegitimate tasks as an approach to cause trouble for competitors. For example, they may withhold critical information and shirk their tasks to increase their coworkers' workload of unnecessary and unreasonable tasks. Therefore, we predict that interpersonal rivalry will be positively associated with illegitimate tasks.

On the other hand, comparisons with illegitimate tasks undertaken by colleagues may also affect employees' critical outcomes, such as organisational justice. According to equality theory, fairness perception depends on social comparison; an employee cares about both his/her absolute gain and his/her relative gain (Adams, 1965). What if employees perceive that they undertake more illegitimate tasks than their coworkers? We predict that the relative amount of illegitimate tasks (compared to those undertaken by coworkers) can also lead to negative consequences, such as lower organisational justice and work engagement.

Customers influence

Customer mistreatment is defined as low-quality treatment that employees receive from customers and may come in various forms (Dormann & Zapf, 2004). Customer mistreatment might be another source of illegitimate tasks, especially for employees in service organisations. Making exorbitant demands on employees is a typical manifestation of customer mistreatment (Wang et al., 2011). Some service rules, such as "customer is always right," require employees to give a high priority to customers. Employees have to seriously consider customer task requests even though these tasks may be unreasonable or unnecessary. Therefore, we predict that customer mistreatment may elicit illegitimate tasks.

Organisational influence

Another interesting direction that warrants research attention is how organisational climate might influence the prevalence and impact of illegitimate tasks. Organisational climate and culture may help explain the variation in illegitimate tasks of employees working in different organisations. Organisational ethical climate involves a shared perception of organisational practices with ethical content (Victor & Cullen, 1988), influencing various organisational procedures, including tasks assignment. Therefore, we predict that caring, rules, and benevolent climates negatively relate to task illegitimacy because these climates value employees' feelings and compliance with organisational rules. By contrast, employees might undertake more illegitimate tasks in organisations with egoistic and instrumental climates. In addition, some organisational characteristics, such as the organisational red tape (Jacobsen & Jakobsen, 2018), may also increase

employees' illegitimate task perceptions because wasting time on burdensome rules and procedures is likely to be perceived as unreasonable or unnecessary.

Exploring more outcomes of illegitimate tasks

Current studies have revealed various outcomes of illegitimate tasks, from emotions to interpersonal relationships. Future research could benefit from examining more theoretically possible outcomes. In terms of negative emotions, illegitimate tasks might induce guilt or shame because it is usually associated with negative self-devaluation (Semmer et al., 2015). Illegitimate tasks might also lead to emotional labour because employees usually need to suppress negative emotions when interacting with others (Grandey, 2000). Regarding work attitudes and behaviours, illegitimate tasks might deteriorate employees' attitudes towards the organisation. We predict that illegitimate tasks might relate to lower organisational identification, affective commitment, and higher psychological contract breach. Carrying out illegitimate tasks elicits negative emotions and exhausts resources, making it hard for employees to maintain good interpersonal relationships. In addition to the relationships with colleagues, supervisors, and family members, we argue that illegitimate tasks might also harm employee-customer relationships. Negative emotions and cognitions incited by illegitimate tasks may further be transferred into sabotage reactions toward customers (Skarlicki et al., 2008).

The potential bright side of illegitimate tasks

Illegitimate tasks might have some potential positive effects. Webster et al. (2011) point out that almost any stressor has an element of both challenge and hindrance. Minei et al. (2018) suggest that illegitimate tasks can be promoting or demoting. Although specific tasks are out of one's occupational duty, they might still be challenging and, therefore, satisfy one's need for competence in that a supervisor trusts the employee to accomplish these tasks (Muntz & Dormann, 2020; Pindek et al., 2019). Unreasonable tasks seem more likely to be appraised as challenges than unnecessary tasks. We suggest future scholars explore the positive effects of promoting tasks on work attitudes and behaviour instead of health and well-being because the unfavourable associations between illegitimate tasks (or stress in general) and well-being seem stable. For instance, employees may regard job crafting as an actively responding strategy to unreasonable tasks and manage to accomplish them well (Tims et al., 2012). They may also gradually adapt to these tasks and view their job duties more broadly (McAllister et al., 2007), which might improve future job performance.

Besides, researchers may consider incorporating appraisal measures for illegitimate tasks because people appraise stressors differently, thus causing different outcomes, as proposed by appraisal theories of stress (Webster et al., 2011). Another interesting direction is to include a stress mindset in explaining how employees react to illegitimate tasks. Stress mindset refers to the extent to which an individual believes that stress has enhancing or deliberating effects on various stress-related outcomes (Crum et al., 2013). These variables influence employees' responses to stress, such as whether they view the stress as a challenge or hindrance, thus may help explain the differing effects of illegitimate tasks. Moreover, Grant and Schwartz (2011) noted that research needs to test curvilinear

relations that might better capture reality apart from linear relationships. As Mazzola and Disselhorst (2019) noted, challenging stressors can be helpful to a point, but a very high level may probably diminish performance. Therefore, future researchers could also explore whether a curvilinear relationship exists to work outcomes if illegitimate tasks can be considered a challenge stressor.

Moderators of illegitimate tasks

We also call for more attention to moderators of illegitimate tasks, especially cultural values. Although Ahmed et al. (2018) found that the links between illegitimate tasks and work-family outcomes vary by nation, they do not empirically examine the moderating effects of specific cultural values. Therefore, future research would benefit from examining some particular cultural values (e.g. power distance and individualism-collectivism) as moderators. We predict that power distance and collectivism may buffer the detrimental effects of illegitimate tasks because individuals with high power distance orientation and collectivism may tolerate illegitimate tasks and be willing to sacrifice themselves for the organisation's benefit. However, culture could also be an antecedent: A task considered illegitimate in one culture may be considered legitimate in others. Besides, some potential antecedents of illegitimate tasks discussed earlier (e.g. flexible role orientation and job breadth) may also play the moderator role.

Mediators of illegitimate tasks

Research of illegitimate tasks would benefit from empirical studies considering multiple mediators. On the one hand, integrating different mediators may help explore their potential interactional effects, such as the interaction between cognition and emotion. Studies like this might advance our knowledge about how cognition and emotion interplay in the stressor-strain relationship. On the other hand, it may also help examine competing theories and hypotheses. For example, the two commonly used approaches in understanding illegitimate tasks are emotion-based and cognition-based mechanisms. Nevertheless, which mechanism is dominant in explaining the effects of illegitimate tasks has not been clear. It is important to control established mediators when new mediators are introduced. Exploring whether the dominant explanatory mechanism would change in different contexts is also beneficial.

Multilevel implications of illegitimate tasks

We also found in the present review that most researchers focus almost exclusively on the individual level analysis when studying illegitimate tasks. We found no attempt to explore the function of illegitimate tasks on the team or organisational level. However, the differences in illegitimate tasks might exist at the within-person, between-person, group, organisational, and occupational levels. Besides, we suggest that researchers adopt a dynamic perspective to understand how these task-related stressors operate in organisational life (e.g. distinguishing between short-term and long-term effects). Therefore, future research would benefit from investigating the multilevel implications of illegitimate tasks.

Conclusion

In summary, illegitimate tasks have been found to explain unique variance in indicators of well-being and strain. Past research has explored both antecedents and outcomes of illegitimate tasks, focusing primarily on the individual level. Future research should explore the appropriateness of using overall illegitimate tasks measure. We provide a lot of practical research suggestions that are theoretically possible but ignored by past researchers for future investigation. We also call more attention to the antecedents and potential bright effects of illegitimate tasks. Additionally, to further advance our knowledge in this realm, future research should investigate the multilevel implications of illegitimate tasks while also considering the influence of cultural differences.

Disclosure statement

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