ABSTRACT

There is widespread agreement that maintaining a positive image of oneself, both in terms of self-regard and in terms of respect from others, is an important human need. Surprisingly, research on stress at work has not given due attention to this issue. More recently, such aspects have increasingly been focused upon, sometimes directly and sometimes in the context of models that emphasize equity and reciprocity concerns (e.g., the Effort-Reward Imbalance model by Siegrist or recent developments in the concept of burnout by Schaufeli). Nevertheless, a systematic investigation into the role of ego-threats in occupational stress is still missing. It is argued that these aspects are important components of stress appraisal with regard to many job demands and working conditions, which are evaluated with regard to their reasonableness. Demands or circumstances that are considered to be lacking legitimacy, or as being unnecessary or unreasonable, will be perceived as ego-threatening. Important aspects of this process are social comparisons and the definition of one’s core role. In this work, the concept of illegitimate tasks - an inherent part of the “Stress as Offence to Self” concept (SOS) developed by Norbert K. Semmer and his group at the University of Bern - was tested. All in all, 11 different studies with an overall of more than 3000 individuals were pursued or utilized to test the hypotheses. Frequencies of illegitimate tasks at work were analyzed to prove that illegitimate tasks exist beyond negligibility. A scale construed to measure illegitimate tasks was tested in terms of psychometric requirements and factorial structure, its association to different indicators of psychological strain and well-being was examined, its discriminant as well as incremental validity was put to the test in cross-sectional and longitudinal analyses with regard to other stressors and resources, and its presumed closeness to the concept of effort-reward imbalance was scrutinized. In an additional effort which included a change of methods, the illegitimacy of stressful situations (illegitimate stressors) at work was tested as a stress factor for situational well-being. Most results were replicated in several samples to limit false rejection or approval of hypotheses, and to repeatedly prove the point. Results are encouraging for the concept of illegitimate tasks and illegitimate stressors as independent predictors of psychological well-being and strain, and implications relevant for researchers and practitioners are discussed.

Key words: illegitimate tasks, stress as offense to self, stress as disrespect, stress at work, threat to self-esteem, psychological strain, fairness, meta-analysis, multilevel analysis.