

## Unraveling The Negative Outcomes Of Social Exchange Theory: Illegitimate Tasking, Self-Handicapping And Organizational Obstruction In Pakistan

Dr. Hina Fayyaz<sup>1</sup>, Dr. Nida Abbass<sup>2</sup>, Dr. Sehrish Munaf<sup>3</sup>, Dr. Sana Iqbal<sup>4</sup>

### Abstract

*This research paper aims to explore the relationship between illegitimate tasks, self-handicapping, perceived organizational obstruction, and subordinate moqi in a power-distant context such as Pakistan. Data was collected from 333 managerial employees from the public sector of Pakistan and regression analysis was used to test proposed hypotheses. The findings revealed a significant positive relationship between illegitimate tasking and self-handicapping with perceived organization obstruction mediating it. Additionally, attention to the supervisor's implicit cues had a significant effect on perceptions about organizational obstructions derived from Social Exchange Theory experiences at work by subordinates involved therein. This study provides empirical evidence that can help stakeholders globally understand relationships among variables impacted by cultural differences found across diverse contexts studied here.*

**Keywords:** *Illegitimate task, Perceived organization Obstruction, Self-handicapping, Subordinate Moqi.*

### Introduction

According to recent research, social exchange theory continues to be a prominent perspective in organizational behavior (Liao et al., 2020; Pods<sup>1</sup>akoff et al., 2022). This theory was first proposed by Blau (1964) and postulates that employee-organization relationships are based on norms of reciprocity, where both parties benefit from the exchange (e.g.: material goods and recognition or support - Eisenberger et al., 1986; Stinglhamber et al., 2006). Gouldner's (1960) norm of reciprocity states that positive relations can arise when one individual benefits another who has assisted them while negative reciprocation occurs when an individual harms those who have caused harm to him/her. The current literature suggests there is a relationship between employees perceiving supportive relationships with their organizations and holding positive attitudes towards it leading to productive outcomes whereas destructive behaviors tend to occur if they experience negative treatment or lack of appreciation from said organization (Rhoades & Eisenberger 2002; Cropanzano et al., 2017).

Organizational behavior research has generally focused on the positive aspects of the employee-organization social exchange relationship (Bishop et al., 2000; Organ, 1997; Tepper

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<sup>1</sup>Assistant Professor Dept. Business Administration Foundation University Islamabad.

<sup>2</sup>Assistant Professor Dept. Business Administration National University School of Science and Technology.

<sup>3</sup>Assistant Professor Roots IVY Islamabad.

<sup>4</sup>Assistant Professor Fatima Jinnah Women University Rawalpindi.

& Taylor, 2003). However, recent studies have suggested that employees may engage in undesirable behavior when they perceive an organization's treatment as damaging or unfair (Hershcovis et al., 2007; Vardi & Weitz 2003). Therefore, recognizing both positive and negative aspects of the social exchange theory is essential for understanding how employee behaviors are shaped within an organizational context.

The current study sheds light on the importance of exploring the negative side of social exchange theory and its impact on employee behavior towards their organization. The study identifies an illegitimate task as a stressor that can lead to self-handicapping behaviors through employees' perception of organizational obstruction. Previous research has shown that positive job characteristics, as well as perceived support from the organization, can enhance employee engagement (Taris et al., 2020; Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). Moreover, this study emphasizes how such stressors may negatively affect employee perceptions regarding organizational support and result in destructive workplace behaviors like self-handicapping. Consequently, organizations need to assess these potential risks proactively to prevent any adverse impacts on workers' well-being and performance outcomes. Furthermore, subordinate moqi with supervisors also plays a critical role in influencing work outcomes (Chen et al., 2021; Liu et al., 2020). Therefore, providing employees with the necessary resources needed to manage stressors effectively while also maintaining supportive relationships between supervisors and subordinates would be beneficial for promoting positive results within organizations going forward.

Subordinate moqi is an important, yet often overlooked factor in employee behavior and organizational outcomes (Zheng et al., 2019). This concept is particularly relevant in cultures with high power distance such as Pakistan (Hofstede, 1980), making it a potential moderator for the current study. Research indicates that strong relationships between supervisors and their subordinates have positive effects on work outcomes and well-being (Chen et al., 2021; Liu et al., 2020). For instance, Chen et al. (2021) found that supervisor-subordinate *guanxi* positively affects job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and organizational citizenship behavior. Meanwhile, Liu et al. (2020) highlighted the importance of supportive supervisor-subordinate relationships to reduce job stress while improving overall well-being. It is essential to examine how subordinate moqi influences the relationship between illegitimate tasks with perceived organizational obstruction when identifying which factors cause self-handicapping behaviors among employees. Such insights can assist organizations in improving communication interactions between supervisors and subordinates while promoting favorable working relations conducive towards improved performance results all round.

## **Literature Review**

### **Illegitimate task and Perceived organizational obstruction**

Perceived organizational obstruction (POO) is defined as “an employee’s belief that the organization obstructs, hinders or interferes with the accomplishment of his or her goals and is a detriment to his or her well-being” (Gibney et al., 2009, p. 667). Building on social exchange theory, research suggests that when an employee is assigned an illegitimate task - tasks not related to one’s core occupation which are perceived as unnecessary or unreasonable - they develop the perception that their efforts are hindered by the organization (Zhou et al., 2015). This can lead to negative attitudes and behavioral intentions such as POO (Semmer et al., 2015).

Illegitimate tasks act as stressors and can have negative impacts on employees' behavior and well-being (Semmer et al., 2015). Empirical studies have indicated that illegitimate tasks are associated with counterproductive work behavior (Semmer et al., 2010). Furthermore, when employees perceive the task assigned to them to be illegitimate in nature,

they often consider it unfair which further worsens their perception of the organization (Zhou et al., 2015).

Additionally, recent research has shown how individual differences play an important role in studying the relationship between illegitimate assignment of duties and POO. For example, Liu et al. (2020) demonstrated that employee resilience is a moderating factor for this relationship; wherein those who had lower levels of such were most affected by these kinds of assignments. Similarly, Zheng et al. 2019 illustrated how subordinate moqi impacted this association, particularly in cultures with high power distances like Pakistan. Thus, there exists a need for exploring the correlation between assigning illegitimate tasks to enhance one's knowledge about how these activities influence behaviors and attitudes surrounding POO within an organization.

Therefore, this study proposes that the relationship between illegitimate task assignments and POO is an important area of investigation that can provide valuable insights into how organizations can improve employee well-being and organizational outcomes. The hypothesis that illegitimate tasks positively and significantly affect POO (H1) is expected to be supported by the findings of this study.

This study thus proposes that assigning illegitimate job roles will significantly trigger increases in an individual's rate of performance output. Hence, the following hypothesis has been developed:

**H1: Illegitimate tasks positively and significantly affect perceived organizational obstruction.**

### **Perceived organizational obstruction and Self Handicapping**

Self-handicapping has been widely studied by researchers and is defined as an active process of seeking inhibitory or preventing factors that inhibit performance to reduce the threat to social and self-esteem (Baumgardner et al., 1985). The underlying principle behind this behavior is for individuals to use it as a defense mechanism to protect their self-esteem and avoid potential failure (Higgins et al., 2013; Snyder 1982). Self-handicapping can be triggered by uncertainty regarding success levels (Cropanzano & Mitchell 2005).

Research indicates that negative perceptions of employee-employer relations can lead to self-handicapping behavior (Cropanzano et al., 2017). Gibney et al. (2009) discuss that if an employee believes their organization is impeding their achievement, they may respond negatively. This implies when an individual believes the workplace impedes them from achieving their goal, there is a potential for engaging in self-handicapping behaviors. Recent studies have provided further evidence for the connection between negative social exchange relations and self-handicapping behavior. For instance, Semmer et al. (2020) explored how task assignments deemed unreasonable by employees can impair their work, resulting in self-handicapping behavior. Additionally, Lee and Hwang (2021) observed that job demands and perceived organizational support were significant predictors of self-handicapping behavior.

Organizations need to create a positive work environment in which employee-employer relations, job roles and responsibilities, and well-being are mutually respected. Good morale among employees can result in improved job performance (Gagne et al., 2020), as it discourages self-handicapping behavior that could adversely affect organizational outcomes (Ackerman & Schlemmer, 2021). Moreover, providing clear expectations increases productivity while also helping workers feel satisfied with their roles within the company (Ruchansky & Sullivan, 2019). By recognizing this important relationship between an

organization's culture and its success rate – ultimately leading to better business results – employers should strive towards creating a supportive workplace atmosphere where all staff members' needs are considered.

## **H2 Perceived organizational obstruction will positively and significantly affect Self-handicapping.**

### **Illegitimate task and Self-handicapping**

Illegitimate tasks and self-handicapping are two interrelated concepts that can have negative consequences for both the employee and the organization (Semmer et al., 2007). An illegitimate task is defined as a situation where an employee is assigned tasks that do not fall within their job role, which can lead to stress and frustration (Semmer et al., 2007). Self-handicapping on the other hand, refers to a defensive mechanism employed by individuals to protect their self-esteem when faced with uncertainty about their ability to perform a task (Higgins et al., 2013). By using this strategy of creating obstacles, it allows them to avoid failure or blame if they don't succeed. Ultimately though, these strategies may reduce motivation and effectiveness in performance due to increased worry over potential outcomes from lack of effort or skill (Higgins et al., 2013).

Drawing upon the social exchange theory, it is argued that illegitimate task assignments can lead to negative perceptions of employee-employer relationships, leading to self-handicapping behavior as a form of retaliation (Cropanzano et al., 2017). This refers to when an individual deliberately hinders their performance to balance any perceived unfairness or disparity within the workplace relationship. Recent studies have provided support for the relationship between illegitimate task assignments and self-handicapping. Qazi et al. (2021) investigated this in the Pakistani banking sector and found a positive correlation between them. Saleem and Arif (2020) conducted a similar investigation with employees of the Pakistani textile industry, also finding significant results.

## **H3 Illegitimate tasks positively and significantly affect self-handicapping.**

### **Perceived organizational obstruction as a mediator between illegitimate tasks and self-handicapping**

Illegitimate tasks assigned by supervisors can create negative perceptions among employees, which could lead to detrimental behavioral outcomes such as self-handicapping. Social Exchange Theory suggests that Perceived Organizational Obstruction (POO) mediates the relationship between illegitimate tasks and self-handicapping. Recent studies have provided empirical evidence in support of this hypothesis; for example, Zhang et al. (2020) found that POO was a partial mediator in the relationship between perceived illegitimate task assignment and employee self-handicapping behavior. Similarly, Wu and Wu (2021) showed that POO partially mediated the association between job demands and burnout among employees. Additionally, Mackey et al. (2018) observed a link between abusive supervision from managers resulting in lower organizational citizenship behaviors due to increased feelings of obstruction from the organization demonstrated through their study on POO mediation effect.

Overall, there is ample evidence indicating POO acts as an intervening variable when it comes to positive or negative effects associated with illegitimate task assignments or supervisor mistreatment on employee well-being outcomes like performance or burn out respectively. This has significant implications for organizations since they need to address people's concerns around illegitimate tasks to promote a better work environment leading to ultimately improved outcomes for both performance and well-being.

In conclusion, these findings provide strong indications about the importance of addressing any underlying causes driving perception-related issues increasingly seen in workplace settings owing to globalization and digital adoption making deeper connectivity more accessible than ever before. Thus, organizations need to devise strategies to proactively mitigate potential risks coming way from improper handling of cases and legitimate grievances causing damage to morale motivation across teams will inevitably affect bottom line results too

#### **H4 POO mediates the relationship between illegitimate tasks and self-handicapping.**

##### **Subordinate Moqi as a moderator**

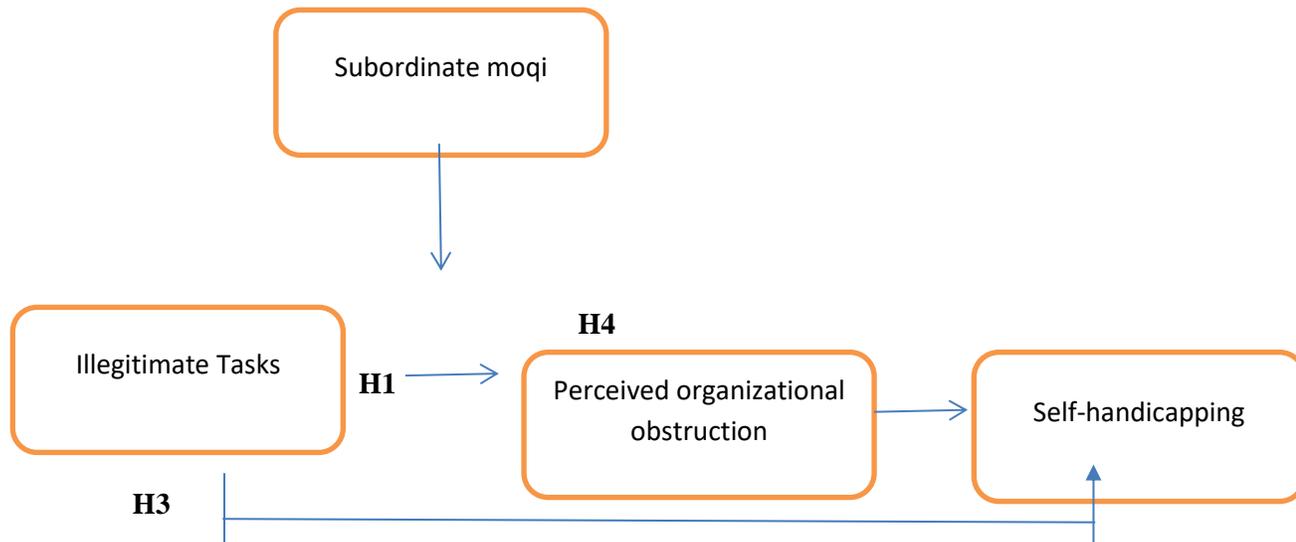
Subordinate moqi is a significant concept in the context of employee-supervisor relationships. It refers to how subordinates implicitly gauge their supervisor's work expectations, requirements, intentions, and desires (Zheng et al., 2019). This knowledge plays an important role in cultures that have high power distance (Hofstede, 1980), such as Pakistan. Not only does Subordinate moqi improve job effectiveness but it also helps shape individual employees' selective perception of workplace events (Robbins & Judge, 2005). Selective perception involves interpreting what one sees based on attitude, experience, or self-interest; thus, understanding subordinate moqi can be invaluable for supervisors wanting to understand their team members better.

When illegitimate tasks are assigned to employees, this may lead them to question their supervisor's expectations and create a negative perception of the workplace (known as perceived organizational obstruction). This is particularly true in high power distance cultures where formal authority prevents subordinates from effectively communicating their concerns. As such, Subordinate moqi can be seen as an important moderating factor that shapes the relationship between illegitimate tasks and perceived organizational obstruction.

Recent research supports this concept; Xie et al. (2021) found that higher levels of Subordinate moqi strengthened the connection between perceived supervisor support and employee innovative behavior whereas Li et al. (2020) observed that abusive supervision had decreased effects on work engagement with stronger Subordinate moqi. Therefore, it appears clear that when addressing issues related to illegitimate tasks, organizations should consider implementing strategies that encourage strong communication among supervisors and subordinates to reduce potential misunderstandings or misperceptions regarding task legitimacy. Thus, based on the literature following hypothesis has been developed:

**H5: Subordinate moqi moderates the positive relationship between illegitimate tasks and perceived organizational obstruction such that the relationship will be strengthened when subordinate moqi is high.**

**Figure 1** Research Model



## Method

### Participants and procedure

According to a recent report by the World Health Organization (2021), Pakistan faces significant challenges in its healthcare system, including inadequate funding, a shortage of skilled professionals, and limited access to essential medicines and technologies. These issues have been further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighting the importance of investing in health services for improving overall health outcomes as well as economic development. A study conducted by Syed Muhammad Faraz Khalid et al., published in the *Journal of Public Health* 2020 suggests that the quality of healthcare services available through public sector hospitals is suboptimal primarily due to factors such as lack of adequate staffing levels, poor infrastructure, and lack of resources. Similarly, another research led by Muhammad Rafiq et al., published in the *Journal of Hospital Administration* 2021 has further highlighted the need for improvement organizational culture & management practices within these public sectors providing healthcare facilities across the country – to improve upon service quality being provided. Needless to mention the crucial requirement here is to conduct more focused investigative studies towards enhancing domain knowledge on the subject matter - or else progress would be hard to realize when it comes to ameliorating standards of Pakistani care sector offerings (Khalid et al., 2020; Rafiq et al., 2021).

In this study, data was collected from public sector hospitals in Pakistan. The administration personnel including doctors, nurses, and administrative staff of the respective hospital were contacted to obtain approval for conducting the study. A written application seeking permission was submitted to these authorities who granted authorization upon acceptance of our request. Participants were conveniently recruited as per their availability and willingness to be part of the research after which it could commence. Convenience sampling is a non-probability method where individuals are selected based on accessibility and enthusiasm towards participating in such an investigation. The data was analyzed using the PROCESS macro. The results were examined for meaningful insight into the trends in the data.

### Measures

### **Illegitimate Task**

Daily illegitimate tasks were assessed with the eight-item Bern Illegitimate Task Scale (Semmer et al., 2010). Five-point Likert scale ranging from never to very frequently. The illegitimate task is measured from two perspectives, unnecessary and unreasonable tasks. Each perspective was measured using four items.

### **Perceived organizational Obstruction**

The researcher used (Gibney et al., 2009) five-item measure of perceived organizational obstruction. Measured on the five-point Likert scale strongly disagree to strongly agree

### **Self-Handicapping**

The ten-item scale was developed by (Strube, 1986). Five-point Likert scale was used to rate self-handicapping from strongly disagree to strongly agree

### **Subordinate moqi**

Eight items developed by (Zheng et al., 2019), the researcher measured subordinate moqi on a five-point Likert scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

## **Results**

### **Descriptive Statistics:**

333 valid responses were analyzed, out of 333, 144 (43.2%) were female respondents and 189 (56.8%) were male. Respondents of ages 21-30 were 194 (58.1%) 31-40 were 105 (31.6%), 41-50 were 34 (10.3%).

The evaluation of models in PLS-SEM follows a two-step process, which includes both the measurement model and the structural model.

### **Evaluation of Measurement Model**

The measurement model entails the assessment of indicator reliability, internal consistency reliability, and convergent validity. The researchers have established the minimum acceptable values for each criterion. The factor loading should be equal to or more than 0.7 (Hair et al., 2021), the composite reliability should likewise be equal to or greater than 0.7 (Gefen et al., 2000), and the average variance extracted (AVE) needs to be equal to or greater than 0.5 (Bagozzi et al., 1991).

### **Figure 2**

Measurement Model

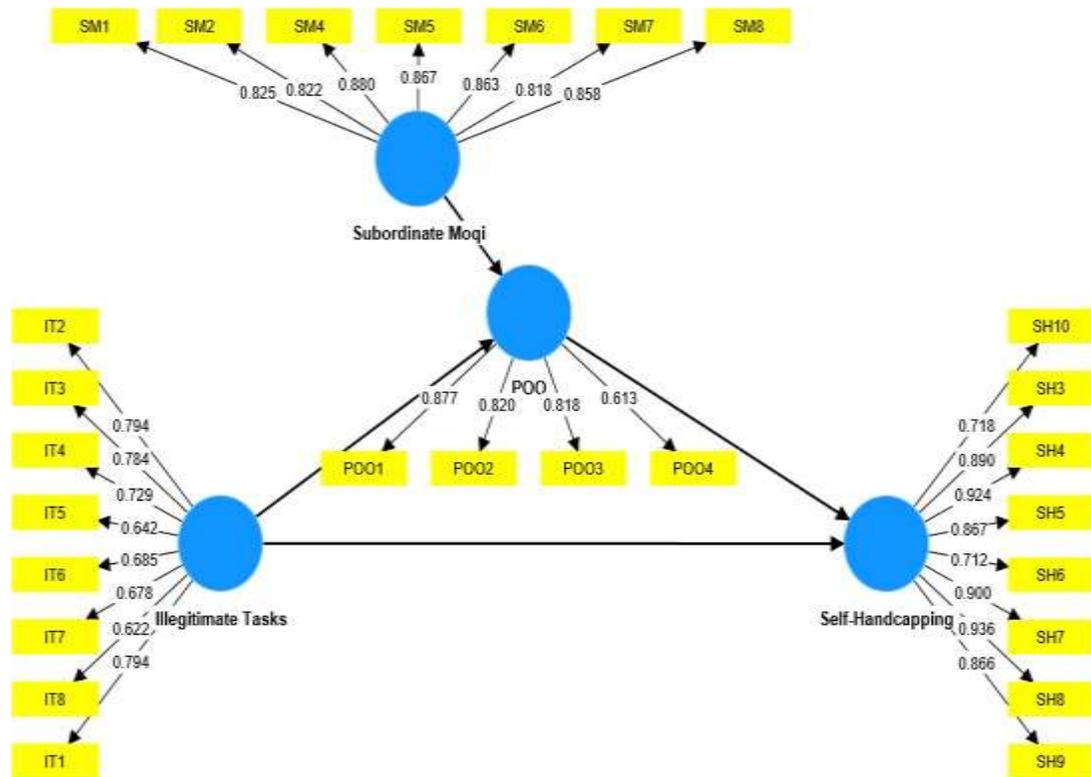


Figure 2 illustrates the factor loading; the majority of the construct's loadings are equal to or more than 0.7, with the exception of specific items. However, stated by Hair et al. (2017), factors with loadings below 0.4 should be eliminated if it enhances the Average Variance Extracted (AVE). In the current investigation few indicators had loadings less than 0.4. The items were SM3, POO5, SH1 and SH2. The measurement model was evaluated following the exclusion of these items.

Table 1 shows that the composite reliability of Illegitimate jobs is 0.895, POO is 0.866, Self-Handicapping is 0.956, and Subordinate Moqi is 0.947. All of these composite reliability values are greater than 0.7. All constructs have AVE values greater than or equal to 0.5. Nevertheless, the other computed metrics, composite reliability, and Cronbach alpha exceed the threshold, so ensuring the presence of convergent validity.

**Table 1** Validity and Reliability

	Cronbach's alpha ( $\alpha$ )	Composite reliability (rho_c)	Average variance extracted (AVE)
Illegitimate Tasks	0.869	0.895	0.517
POO	0.790	0.866	0.621
Self-Handicapping	0.946	0.956	0.732
Subordinate Moqi	0.936	0.947	0.719

A  $\geq$  0.7 CR  $\geq$  0.7 AVE  $\geq$  0.5

The discriminant validity was established using the HTMT Ratio, which should be below 0.90 to confirm discriminant validity among components (Henseler et al., 2015). According to Table 2, all the constructs have HTMT values below 0.90. Hence, the validity of discrimination is verified.

**Table 2** Discriminant Validity: Heterotrait Monotrait Ratio (HTMT)

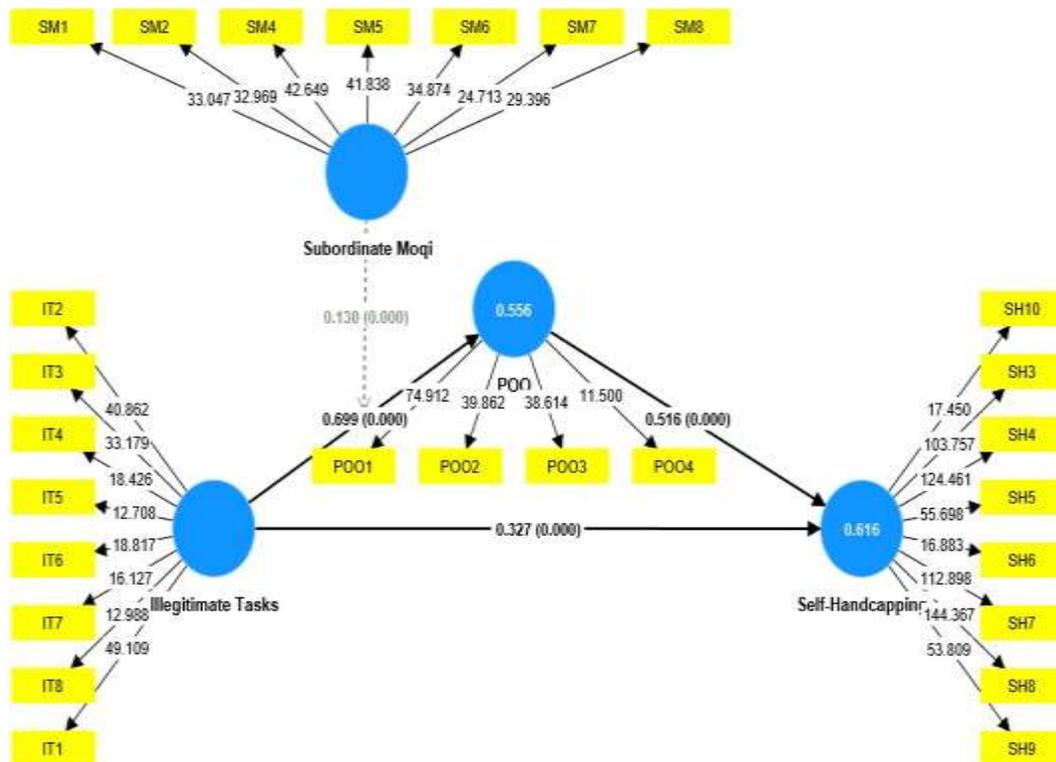
	Illegitimate Tasks	POO	Self-Handicapping	Subordinate Moqi
Illegitimate Tasks				
POO	0.306			
Self-Handicapping	0.564	0.845		
Subordinate Moqi	0.578	0.207	0.133	

HTMT < 0.90

**Evaluation of Structural Model**

The second step was the assessment of the structural model. The variance inflation factor (VIF) was assessed to rule out the possibility of multicollinearity. According to scholars,  $VIF < 5$  (Hair et al., 2019). About Table 3, all the constructs  $VIF < 5$ . This ensures no multicollinearity. As suggested by scholars, the bootstrapping procedure with 5000 sub-samples was followed to test the hypotheses (Hair et al., 2011).

**Figure 3** Structural Model



**Table 3** Variance Inflation Factor (VIF)

Constructs	VIF
Illegitimate Tasks -> POO	1.001
Illegitimate Tasks -> Self-Handicapping	2.072
POO -> Self-Handicapping	2.072
Subordinate Moqi -> POO	1.001

VIF < 5

### Hypotheses Testing

For hypotheses testing, firstly direct and moderation paths were analyzed, and then the mediation path was evaluated.

There were three direct hypotheses formulated in the present study. The first hypothesis was that IT has a positive and significant effect on POO ( $\beta = 0.699$   $p=0.000$   $t = 31.727$ ). Thus, the statistical analysis supported H1. The second hypothesis states that POO has a positive and significant effect on SH ( $\beta = 0.309$   $p = 0.000$   $t = 10.931$ ). The statistical results supported this hypothesis. The third hypothesis was that IT has a significant and positive effect on SH ( $\beta = 0.327$   $p = 0.000$   $t = 6.512$ ); the results confirmed this hypothesis.

The moderation hypothesis was that subordinate moqi moderates the relationship between illegitimate tasks and POO such that the relationship is stronger when subordinate moqi is high

( $\beta = 0.130$   $p = 0.000$   $t = 4.255$ ); thus, statistical results also supported the moderation hypothesis.

Refer to Table 4 for direct and moderation effect results.

**Table 4**

Direct and Moderation Paths

	$\beta$	STDE V	T statistics	P values
Illegitimate Tasks -> POO	0.699	0.022	31.727	0.000
Illegitimate Tasks -> Self-Handicapping	0.327	0.050	6.512	0.000
POO -> Self-Handicapping	0.309	0.047	10.931	0.000
Subordinate Moqi x Illegitimate Tasks -> POO	0.130	0.030	4.255	0.000

$P < 0.05$   $t > 1.96$  CI = 95% POO = Perceived Organizational Obstruction

The mediation hypothesis formulated in the current study states that POO mediates the relationship between IT and SH ( $\beta = 0.017$   $p=0.224$   $t = 2.170$ ); thus, mediation effect hypothesis was confirmed by the statistical analysis. The statistical results supported partial mediation.

**Table 5** Mediation Effects

Relationship	$\beta$	P-value	Relationship	$\beta$	STDEV	T statistics	P values
Direct	0.68		Indirect	0.36			
IT -> SH	0.8	0.000	IT-> POO -> SH	0.1	0.034	10.471	0.000

P < 0.05 T > 1.96 IT = Illegitimate Tasks POO = Perceived Organization Obstruction SH = Self-Handicapping

Table 6 demonstrates the explanatory and predictive power of the model that R<sup>2</sup> and Q<sup>2</sup> represent, respectively. Research scholars underlined that R<sup>2</sup> ranges from 0 to 1; in the case of primary data, it should be greater than 0.2 (Hair et al., 2021). Table 6 shows R<sup>2</sup> is > 0.2, thus meeting the criteria. In addition to the coefficient of determination (R<sup>2</sup>), researchers, for instance, Shmueli et al. (2016), suggested an assessment of the predictive power of latent variables represented by Q<sup>2</sup> and recommended it should be > 0. Table 6 illustrates that Q<sup>2</sup> > 0.

**Table 6** Explanatory and Predictive Power

Constructs	R <sup>2</sup>	Q <sup>2</sup>
POO	0.544	0.339
Self-Handicapping	0.616	0.443

Q<sup>2</sup> > 0

Research Scholar provides guidelines for effect size (f<sup>2</sup>) assessment, and the values range from 0.02 (small), 0.15 (medium), and 0.35 (high) effect size, and below 0.02, it is considered that there is no effect (Cohen, 1988).

Referring to Table 7, it can be seen that in Illegitimate tasks POO, there is a medium effect size. Illegitimate Tasks Self-Handicapping there exists a medium effect size. POO → Self-handicapping there is high effect size.

**Table 7** Effect Size

	POO	Self-Handicapping
Illegitimate Tasks	1.113	0.134
POO		0.334

## Discussion

The research results support the main hypotheses formulated in the current study. The authors in the current study discussed the social exchange theory from the perspective of its adverse consequences. It was hypothesized that assigning illegitimate task will positively and significantly affect perceived organizational obstruction. The results supported the hypothesis, confirming that when an employee is assigned with a task that is considered to be illegitimate employee perceives it negatively that it is an intentional obstacle that has been created to reduce his / her performance. It was further hypothesized that perceived organizational obstruction leads to employee involvement in self-handicapping. The research results supported the hypothesis, ensuring that negative perception compels the employee in the involvement of strategies that hinders his / her performance intentionally. It can be indicated that employee formulates such strategies that reduce the productivity of the employee. The results also supported Subordinate moqi as a potential moderator between illegitimate task and POO. Subordinate moqi does have a considerable impact in power high distant countries. Pakistan is

one of power distant countries as per Hofstede ranking in 1980. The testing of Subordinate moqi as a moderator in the current study added to the body of knowledge that in a hierarchical relationship employees may feel that their actions do not mesh with supervisor expectation and requirements, this unspoken understanding further strengthens the relationship between illegitimate tasks and self-handicapping. It is important to note that subordinate moqi can be injurious because the perception of the employee plays a vital role. However, the manager needs to be attentive to the negative perception held by the employee because a negative perception by the employee is more detrimental for organization (Gibney et al., 2009)

Furthermore, the supervisor should be aware of the characteristics of illegitimate tasks and should avoid assigning such tasks that act as stressors for employee and develop a negative perception in the minds of employees. It's critical for managers in an organization to understand the consequences of the undesirable employee-employer relationship. The SET theory helps to clarify the reciprocity norms practiced in an organization and when reciprocity is aligned with negativity impacts are much stronger. Besides, this study yields significant results that how workplace stressors ultimately damage the organization. It also provides insight to the practitioners for avoiding factors that generate an undesirable relationship between employee and organization.

### **Limitations and Future Research Directions**

The first limitation of the study is its cross-sectional nature. Future research if employs time-lag study research will yield more significant and generalizable results. The second limitation of the current research is concerning its sample, only hospitals that fall in the category of the public sector of Pakistan have been included in the research sample. Empirical pieces of evidence of the current study do not apply to the private sector, as its dynamics differ. Future research can test a similar model in the private sector of Pakistan.

Further, it is of significant importance to identify more antecedents of self-handicapping. It is of critical importance to identify why employees handicap themselves because it impacts the overall efficiency and effectiveness of the organization. Moreover, Subordinate moqi (Zheng et al., 2019) is a variable that needs empirical pieces of evidence to ensure its applicability. Future research can empirically investigate this variable with other possible outcomes.

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