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# **The Relationship between Negatively Perceived Tasks, Fit, and Reenlistment Intentions**

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# THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN NEGATIVELY PERCEIVED TASKS, FIT, AND REENLISTMENT INTENTIONS

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## THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN NEGATIVELY PERCEIVED TASKS, FIT, AND REENLISTMENT INTENTIONS

This research builds on past work by testing a novel model to explain the relationship between negative task perceptions and turnover intentions by considering the role of P-O and P-J fit. Empirical research has found task-related stressors (i.e., negative perception of tasks) can threaten one's social esteem and therefore be detrimental to personal and professional identity (Semmer, Jacobshagen, Meier, Elfering, Beehr, Kälin, & Tschan, 2015). These outcomes are therefore theoretically likely to affect P-O fit and P-J fit, although no research has directly tested this assumption. We also examine the relationships between negative task perceptions, fit, and retention in a novel context. While we would expect the relationships between these variables to generalize across more traditional organizations, the Army is unique in several regards (e.g., dangerous environments, combat roles). Additionally, the stakes may be higher for Army leaders to ensure that Soldiers perceive the tasks they are completing as positive. First, the Army context encourages a heightened sense of readiness and duty, as Soldiers are expected to be trained for the dynamic, complex, and novel situations of modern warfare (Leonard, Polich, Peterson, Sortor, & Moore, 2006). If these expectations are not met, perhaps the sense of mismatch between tasks and expectations will be heightened due to the intense environment, which would lead to higher levels of negative outcomes. Second, research suggests that negative perceptions of tasks may be especially detrimental in volunteer situations. The lack of compensation volunteers receive can make perceptions of the unreasonableness of tasks more salient and impact volunteers' willingness to stay in the organization (van Schie, Güntert, & Wehner, 2014). Although Soldiers are being paid, because the U.S. Army is an all-volunteer force and there are no repercussions for separating after serving their enlistment, we theorize that the same feelings experienced by traditional volunteers experiencing negative perceptions of tasks may occur. Taking these aspects of the Army context into consideration, we believe that examining the relationships between negative perceptions of tasks, fit, and reenlistment intentions is worthwhile, especially as the Army seeks to retain high-potential Soldiers (U.S. Army Talent Management Strategy, 2016).

### **Negative Perception of Tasks**

Negative perceptions of tasks are stressors defined as unnecessary and unreasonable work tasks that employees perceive as inappropriate for their given job description (Apostel, Syrek, & Antoni, 2017). Tasks are defined as unnecessary when employees believe a given task is meaningless and ineffective for anyone to perform; whereas, tasks are unreasonable when employees view them as inappropriate for their specific job. It is important to note that tasks are not inherently unreasonable or unnecessary, but rather, they are perceived that way because of their content for a given person, environment, or time. For example, Soldiers having to do extra tasks because members of their unit are "slacking off" could perceive these tasks negatively. However, if the same Soldier had to perform these extra tasks because members of their unit were injured, such tasks may be perceived more favorably.

Negative perceptions of tasks lie within the “stress-as-offense-to self” framework (Semmer et al., 2007). When employees are assigned tasks that they perceive to be unnecessary or unreasonable, their sense of self can be threatened. A person can experience role-conflict if their professional identity is tarnished because they fail to reach performance standards that are too high or unclear (Semmer et al., 2015). Such tasks can also influence justice perceptions if employees feel uncared for or disrespected (Cropanzano, Byrne, Bobocel, & Rupp, 2001; Tyler & Blader, 2003). Threats to self from role-conflict and/or negative justice perceptions resulting from negative perceptions of tasks can have adverse influence on employee performance and other workplace outcomes. For example, negative perceptions of tasks have been linked to counterproductive work behaviors (Schulte-Braucks, Baethge, Dormann, & Vahle-Hinz, 2019; Semmer, Tschan, Meier, Fachin, & Jacobshagen, 2010), an increased likelihood of burnout and irritability (Semmer et al., 2015) and higher turnover intentions among employees (Apostel et al., 2017).

Although little research has been conducted on the impact of negative perceptions of tasks in Army populations, the extant findings are consistent with those reported in the larger organizational literature. In a study conducted with Swiss armed forces, researchers found that when Soldiers are assigned tasks which they perceive negatively, they are less satisfied with their jobs as well as the organization (Stocker, Jacobshagen, Semmer, & Annen, 2010). The current research aims to build on these findings, by examining the effects of negatively perceived tasks on reenlistment intentions in the U.S. Army. Because perceived unnecessary and unreasonable tasks give rise to feelings of disrespect and threats to one’s professional identity, we hypothesize that negatively perceived tasks will have a negative effect on Soldiers’ intention to reenlist.

*Hypothesis 1:* Negatively perceived tasks will be negatively associated with reenlistment intentions.

### **Military Occupational Specialty (MOS) Fit and Negative Perception of Tasks**

Person-job (P-J) fit is defined as how well an employee’s characteristics match the tasks performed on the job. P-J fit can be conceptualized in two distinct parts: (1) demands-abilities fit (i.e., the degree of match between the employee’s knowledge, skills, and abilities with the job requirements) and (2) needs-supplies fit (i.e., how well an employee’s individual needs are met on the job) (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005). When an employee meets the demands of the job and when the job provides resources that meet the employee’s needs, desires, or preferences, high P-J fit occurs (Edwards, 1991). P-J fit has been found to be positively related to satisfaction and organizational commitment, and negatively to turnover intentions (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005).

In considering the effects of negatively perceived tasks on P-J fit, low demands-abilities fit would occur when employees are assigned tasks that are viewed as inconsistent with their abilities to accomplish the core demands of the job. Additionally, low needs-supply fit would occur when employees feel that the assigned tasks are not meeting individual’s needs, desires, and preferences. In these ways, the person-role conflict that arises from being assigned such tasks is likely to harm one’s perceived P-J fit. Because negatively perceived tasks likely influence P-J fit, which in turn is highly correlated with intentions to quit (Kristof-Brown et al.,

2005), we propose that P-J fit mediates the association between negatively perceived tasks and employee turnover intentions.

This research explores these relationships in an Army context by examining the way negatively perceived tasks and turnover intentions are influenced by Military Occupational Specialty (MOS) fit. A MOS is a Soldier's job in the Army, thus we examine the theoretical construct of P-J fit by looking at how well Soldiers fit in their MOS. As discussed previously, negatively perceived tasks are likely to negatively impact the two components of P-J fit (i.e., demand-abilities fit and needs-supply fit). As such, we hypothesize that negatively perceived tasks will be negatively associated with MOS fit. Further, as previous studies have shown that higher P-J fit is associated with lower turnover intentions, we hypothesize that MOS fit will not only positively predict reenlistment intentions, but also explain the relationship between perceptions of negatively perceived tasks and reenlistment intentions. That is, as Soldiers perceive their assigned tasks more negatively, they will report lower MOS fit. This, in turn, negatively impact Soldiers' intentions to reenlist in the Army.

*Hypothesis 2: Negatively perceived tasks will negatively predict MOS fit.*

*Hypothesis 3: MOS fit will significantly predict reenlistment intentions.*

*Hypothesis 4: MOS fit will significantly mediate the relationship between negatively perceived tasks and reenlistment intentions.*

### **Army Fit, Military Occupation Specialty (MOS) Fit and Negative Perception of Tasks**

Person-organization (P-O) fit is the degree of compatibility between an employee and the organization. P-O fit is generally theorized to be composed of two types of fit: (1) supplementary and (2) complementary. Supplementary fit occurs when an employee's characteristics and values are similar to those of the organization; whereas complementary fit is how well an employee's unique attributes contribute to the organization's existing characteristics. The assignment of negatively perceived tasks can cause employees to feel resentment towards and mismatch with their organization (Stocker et al., 2010) thereby reducing perceived P-O fit. Supplementary fit can suffer if negative perceptions of tasks reduce employees' sense of connectedness to their organization (Stocker et al., 2010). Complementary fit can also suffer if employees feel they are not uniquely contributing to the organization through their assigned tasks. Research shows that when P-O fit suffers, employees tend to turnover (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005; Verquer, Beehr, & Wagner, 2003).

In this research, we consider the role that negative perceptions of tasks has on P-O and P-J fit. Specifically, we propose that P-J fit should positively impact P-O fit. If tasks do not fit employees' skill sets, or they are not given proper resources to complete them, employees are likely become dissatisfied with their job and frustrated with their organization. If this displeasure continues for too long or is too intense, employees will be more likely to leave. We further theorize that this pattern would not only exist in traditional organizations, but in Army environments, as well. We hypothesize that negatively perceived tasks will negatively influence Soldiers' perception of fit in the Army and hypothesize that Army fit will positively predict



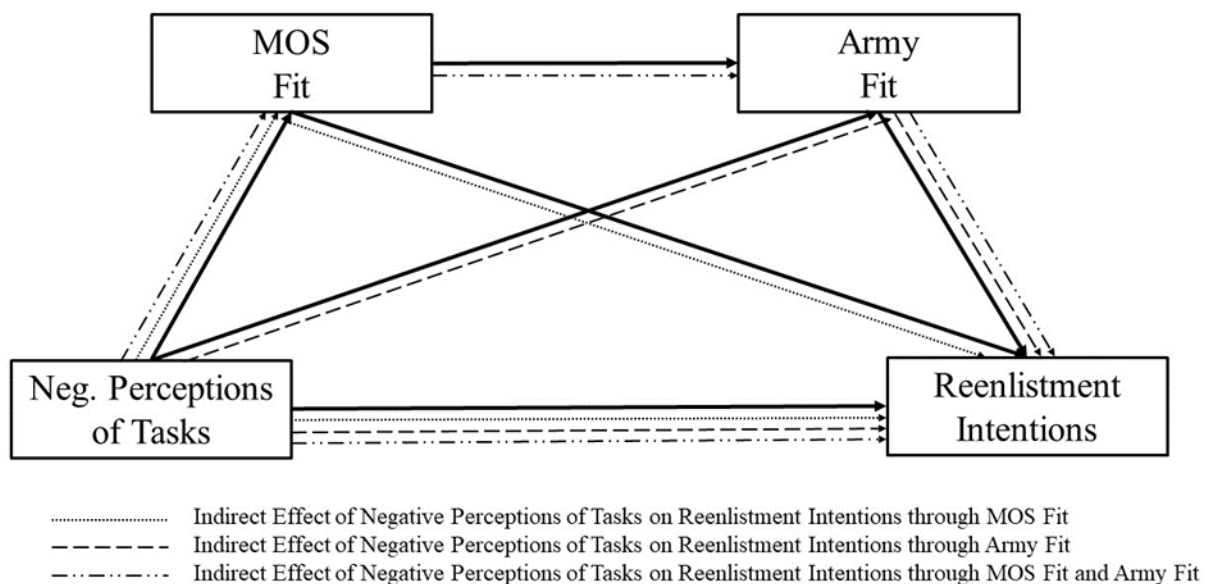
reenlistment intentions. Finally, taking into consideration that job fit and organization fit are inherently related, we expect that MOS fit via Army fit could help explain the relationship between negatively perceived tasks and reenlistment intentions.

*Hypothesis 5:* Negatively perceived tasks will negatively predict Army fit.

*Hypothesis 6:* Army fit will positively predict reenlistment intentions.

*Hypothesis 7:* Army fit will significantly mediate the relationship between negatively perceived tasks and reenlistment intentions.

*Hypothesis 8:* Negatively perceived tasks will negatively predict MOS Fit which, in turn, will negatively predict Army Fit which will lead to reduced reenlistment intentions.



**Figure 1.** Summary of hypothesized direct and indirect effects.

## Method

### Participants

A total of 1,359 participants were included for analyses in this research. The sample was restricted to those in the lower (i.e., E-1 to E-4) pay grades as that group is the most susceptible to separating from the Army. Most participants indicated they were in the E-3 pay grade ( $n = 574$ ) or E-4 pay grade ( $n = 423$ ). Further, the majority of participants reported being male (74.3%), around 24 years of age ( $M = 24.13$ ;  $SD = 4.63$ ). The sample 48% White, 20% Black, and 15% Hispanic.

## Measures

Negative task perceptions were assessed on a 5-point Likert-type scale from 1(*Never*) to 5(*Almost Every Day*) using the Bern Illegitimate Tasks Scale (BITS; Semmer et al., 2015). Participants rated the frequency of the occurrence of daily work activities. This scale consists of eight items. Four of the items of the scale tap the unnecessary component of negatively perceived tasks (e.g., "...the tasks you do are unnecessary?") and four of the items tap the unreasonable component of negatively perceived tasks (e.g., "...the tasks you do should be done by someone with less experience than you?"). In order to reduce participant burden, we used a shortened version of this scale with only two items assessing each component. A CFA conducted on this shortened scale, estimating the two higher order factors of unnecessary and unreasonable tasks exhibited excellent model fit (CFI = 1.000; TLI = 1.003; RMSEA = 0.000 [90% CI = 0.000 - 0.060]; SRMR = 0.002).

MOS fit was assessed using the MOS Fit questionnaire. This questionnaire is part of the Army Life Questionnaire, which was developed to assess the attitudes and perspectives of Army Soldiers (Van Iddekinge, Putka, & Sager, 2005). All items are assessed on a 5-point Likert-type scale from 1(*Strongly Disagree*) to 5(*Strongly Agree*) (e.g., "I like the work I do in my MOS.").

Army fit was assessed using Army Fit questionnaire. This questionnaire is also a part of the Army Life Questionnaire (Van Iddekinge et al., 2005). Items are assessed on a 5-point Likert-type scale from 1(*Strongly Disagree*) to 5(*Strongly Agree*) (e.g., "The Army is a good match for me.").

Reenlistment intentions were assessed using a single item (i.e., "How unlikely or likely is it that you will re-enlist in the Army?"). Participants rated this item using a 5-point Likert-type scale from 1(*Extremely Unlikely*) to 5(*Extremely Likely*).

## Data Screening and Preparation

Attention checks were placed throughout the survey to help ensure purposeful responding, as recommended by Desimone, Harms, and Desimone (2015). Participants (n = 140) who did not respond to the attention checks correctly were removed from further analyses.

## Results

**Table 1**

*Intercorrelations, Means, SDs, and Reliabilities for All Measures (N= 1359)*

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4
1 Negative Task Perceptions	3.04	1	<b>.73</b>			
2 MOS Fit	3.26	1.06	-0.25	<b>.92</b>		
3 Army Fit	3.38	0.89	-0.38	0.34	<b>.83</b>	
4 Reenlistment Intentions	3.16	1.40	-0.26	0.19	0.19	-

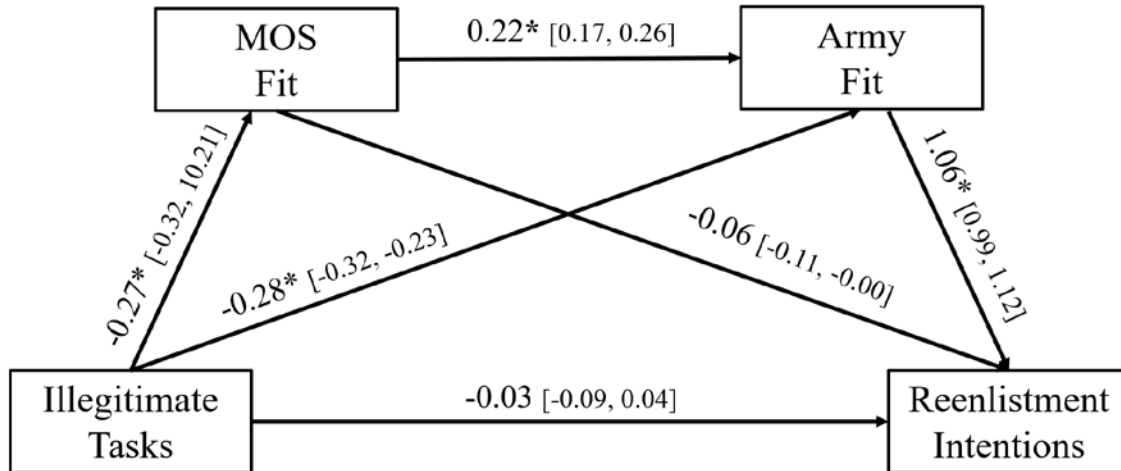
*Note:* All correlations significant at  $p < 0.001$ .

Descriptive statistics are reported in Table 1. To test the hypotheses proposed in the introduction, we conducted a path analysis of the model described in Figure 1 and tested the proposed mediated effects using bootstrapping with 5000 iterations (Preacher & Hayes, 2004). The results of this analysis are presented in Figure 2.

Hypothesis 1 was not supported. In contrast to our first hypothesis, there was not a significant direct effect of negatively perceived tasks on reenlistment intentions (Figure 2). However, hypothesis 2 was supported such that higher rates of negatively perceived tasks were significantly related to lower MOS fit (Figure 2). Contrary to expectations, Hypothesis 3, which expected that MOS fit would significantly predict reenlistment intentions, was not supported (Figure 2). Specifically, higher rates of MOS fit were not associated with higher reenlistment intentions, but our fourth hypothesis was supported in that MOS fit significantly mediated the relationship between negatively perceived tasks and reenlistment intention. Expressly, higher rates of negatively perceived tasks led to lower perceptions of MOS fit which in turn led to reduced reenlistment intentions (*Indirect Effect* = -0.28, 95%CI [-0.34, -0.22],  $p < 0.001$ ).

Our fifth hypothesis that negative perception of tasks would lead to less Army fit was supported. In alignment with our fifth hypothesis, there was a significant and negative effect of negatively perceived tasks on Army fit such that higher rates of negatively perceived tasks were associated with reduced Army fit (Figure 2). Hypothesis 6, that Army fit would positively predict reenlistment intentions, was also supported (Figure 2). As expected in hypothesis 6, higher levels of Army fit was associated with increased reenlistment intentions. Our seventh hypothesis was also supported. Specifically, Army fit significantly mediated the relationship between negatively perceived tasks and reenlistment intentions (*Indirect Effect* = -0.29, 95%CI [-0.34, -0.25],  $p < 0.001$ ).

Finally, our eighth hypothesis that the effect of negatively perceived tasks on reenlistment intentions would be mediated via Army fit and MOS fit was supported (*Indirect Effect* = -0.06, 95%CI [-0.08, -0.05],  $p < 0.001$ ). Specifically, higher rates of negatively perceived tasks led to significantly reduced MOS fit which led to reduced Army fit, which in turn led to reduced reenlistment intentions.



Note: \*  $p < 0.001$

**Figure 2.** Model with direct effects and standard errors included in parentheses.

## Discussion

The results of the current investigation add to the growing body of work concerning the detriment of having employees engage in tasks that they deem to be unnecessary and/or unreasonable. We proposed that negative perceptions of work tasks would lead to lower perceptions of fit within Soldiers' MOS and the Army. First, the insignificant direct effect between the negative perception of tasks and reenlistment intentions highlights the importance of fit in explaining this relationship. To prevent the adverse effects of negative perceptions of tasks, we have to understand the mechanisms through which they work. This research provides some insight into how fit perceptions can be reduced and subsequently lead to turnover. Second, this research provides specific insight into how these constructs operate in an Army setting. As the Army works to retain well-performing Soldiers, information like this is especially useful. These results indicate that Army needs to ensure the negative perceptions of tasks are mitigated, so that Soldiers fit within their MOS and the greater Army and are not negatively impacted.

These results also have implications for research and practice. More research needs to be conducted regarding the mediators of the relationships between negative perception of tasks and various work outcomes. Much of the research thus far has focused on the effects of the negative perceptions of tasks. In order to truly buffer or stop the influence of negative perceptions of tasks, researchers need to better understand the mechanisms of these relationships. More research also needs to be conducted regarding these constructs in military settings. While some characteristics of the Army are found in traditional organizations, the unique structure and culture of this environment make it so that more targeted research regarding negative perceptions of tasks in this setting is warranted.

Finally, this research is not without its limitations. The research was cross-sectional which raises the possibility of common method bias. Additionally, all variables were self-reported which may inflate the relationship among variables. Despite these limitations, we hope that this research inspires researchers to continue to explore the mechanisms through which negative

perceptions of tasks operate and inspires practitioners to continue to develop interventions to prevent negative perceptions of task from developing, as well as interventions to help mitigate their effects.

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