

PAPER DEVELOPMENT WORKSHOP (PDW)

The experience of illegality

Bodies, identities, moralities

April 1 & 2, 2026, Institute of Sociology, University of St.Gallen, Switzerland

Organizing committee

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Theme

Popular perceptions of illegality often stem from sensationalist portrayals in the media, movies, or TV shows. These accounts depict, at times, dangerous criminals, mafia-like and cartel organizations, and crime-ridden neighborhoods where simply visiting could lead to one's demise. Likewise, they associate illegality with individuals who strive to stay under the radar, bending the rules for their own personal gain, disregarding laws, moral norms, or ethical considerations for themselves or others. Such accounts render illegality inherent to specific practices, activities, and individuals through their naturalization, for instance, due to personal traits, lifestyles, life trajectories, or the characteristics of a particular area.

The ethnography of the daily experience of illegality, however, offers a very different picture, one that foregrounds the socio-cultural, as well as economic and political construction of illegality (Flores and Schachter 2018) and its multi-layered consequences for those subjected to these regimes. As migration studies demonstrated, illegality is “a form of juridical status, a sociopolitical condition, and a way of being-in-the-world” (Willen 2019:47). Illegality, in that sense, not only shapes the social world of individuals subjected to illegalization processes (e.g. Sigona 2012) but also has a profound impact on their inward parts. It is an eminently embodied, temporal, and subjective experience (Garza 2018; Gutiérrez-Cueli et al. 2024)—a construct that must be analyzed rather than reified or naturalized.

This call for papers takes as its structuring theme how illegality is experienced by people in the daily conduct of their lives. Specifically, we invite papers that focus on the intricacies between illegality and the bodies, identities, and moralities of those involved in illegal activities across illegal or legal markets. Methodologically, then, we expect contributors to employ ethnographic or, more broadly, qualitative research methods. This combination, we believe, is uniquely positioned to reveal the penetration of illegality in many aspects of the lives of workers, clients, consumers, or

managers are subjected to it in ways that are most often invisible to external outsiders. We also expect these accounts of micro-level field dynamics to connect with broader,

structural trends, as illegality, despite being experienced subjectively, is a socio-cultural, economic, and political construction with concrete implications. We further structure our inquiry into the experience of illegality around three main areas—bodies, identities, and moralities—to be explored either in relation to one another or independently, as well as across contexts:

- **Bodies:** We are interested in the embodiment of illegalization. Illegality, indeed, is not a mere label applied to people and, thus, external to them. Instead, it is profoundly embodied and enacted (Holmes 2023), as well as reacted to (Gonzales and Chavez 2012). Resultingly, we expect papers that address how illegality and illegalization shape the body, for instance, through imposing circumstances for life and work on people. Likewise, we are also interested in papers examining how the body can be played out and potentially instrumentalized due to this imposed condition, for instance, through specific bodily practices that derive from the illegalization or aim to avoid detection (Perrin 2018). Overall, we welcome proposals that address the embodiment of illegality in its various forms.
- **Identities:** In a context where the legal is usually viewed as legitimate, illegality and illegalization carry consequences for individual and collective identities. Accordingly, we are interested in papers looking at questions such as how illegalization impacts self-representation across different spheres of life (e.g., work, leisure), how individuals gain respect and establish themselves through alternative means when navigating circumstances of illegality (Erickson, Hochstetler, and Copes 2019; Estrada and Hondagneu-Sotelo 2011), which coping mechanisms they develop to address illegalization, how the association of illegality with specific groups shapes the construction of collective identities, and how illegality nurture specific uncertain future that are imagined and enacted through these identities.
- **Moralities:** Illegality and illegalization are typically motivated and justified based on broader moral principles (Fassin 2012), over which governmental institutions have a monopoly and the power to enforce (Weber 1946). Given the multiplicity of moral orders (Boltanski and Thévenot 1991), we invite papers that examine how individuals and groups navigate the existence of multiple, coexisting moralities that may conflict due to illegality. We also expect papers examining how people contest the imposition of a broader moral order (Hübschle 2017; Paul Mmahi and Usman 2020), as well as how they negotiate among different moralities and express their discontent, for instance, through the emergence of advocacy groups contesting the banning of activities or reclaiming social justice (De Rond, 2025).

Purpose and format

This PDW aims to provide guidance to researchers from various disciplines (e.g., sociology, anthropology, criminology, and organizational studies) at different stages of their careers, offering support in developing their papers. Invited discussants will help participants consider novel ways to utilize their data to craft a compelling narrative and to create a theoretical contribution based on these data in a collegial manner. The PDW will be structured as a two-day interactive workshop. Each author will be given 10 minutes to present the paper and 35 minutes for discussion. Two discussants will review each paper and provide developmental feedback to strengthen and improve the authors' work. Furthermore, all authors must also commit to reading two selected papers before the workshop to provide additional feedback.

We do not expect the papers to be polished and well-finished. Still, they should be sufficiently advanced to be reviewed by the discussants, build upon a strong empirical foundation, and demonstrate the potential to contribute to developing a broader understanding of the experience of illegality. Given the workshop's aim, published papers will not be accepted.

Abstract submission

Please send an abstract of 300 words and a short biographical note to [gdumont@em-lyon.com](mailto:g dumont@em-lyon.com) and loic.pignolo@unisg.ch by December 15, 2025. Notification of acceptance will be sent by January 15, 2026. Papers must be submitted by March 15, 2026.

There is no registration fee, and we will cover the lunch on both days and the dinner on the first day. Additionally, partial grants for travel and accommodation can be provided to a small number of participants with limited resources. Please indicate if you require financial support.

Participation in the workshop is open to all upon registration.

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