Daily transformational leadership and employee job crafting: The role of promotion focus

Jørn Hetland a, *, Hilde Hetland a, Arnold B. Bakker b, Evangelia Demerouti c

a University of Bergen, Department of Psychosocial Science, Dept. of Psychosocial Science, P.O. Box 7807, 5020 Bergen, Norway
b Erasmus University Rotterdam, Faculty of Social Sciences, Department of Psychology, PO Box 1738, 3000 DR Rotterdam, The Netherlands
c Technische Universiteit Eindhoven, P.O. Box 513, 5600 MB Eindhoven, The Netherlands

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Transformational leaders are expected to challenge their followers to take greater ownership of their work, allowing the leader to align followers with tasks that enhance their performance. In the present study, we hypothesize that transformational leadership is positively related to followers’ job-crafting behaviour — proactive behaviour aimed at optimizing job demands and job resources. Moreover, we argue that followers’ promotion focus (i.e. being driven by growth and development needs) positively moderates this relationship. Data were collected from 107 employees from Norwegian knowledge-based organizations (response = 93.2%). Participants responded to a general questionnaire and five daily diary questionnaires (total N = 535 occasions). The results of multilevel analyses revealed partial support for our hypotheses. Followers’ day-level perception of their leader’s transformational behaviour was positively related to followers’ day-level job crafting in the form of increasing structural and social resources. Moreover, daily transformational leadership was particularly beneficial for job crafting when followers scored high (vs. low) on the trait promotion focus. We conclude that transformational leaders can encourage their followers’ use of job crafting, and that employees’ promotion focus facilitates this effect.

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1. Introduction

The renewed interest in the phenomenon of job crafting offers a promising direction for research in organizational psychology. Job crafting is a specific form of proactive work behaviour that entails changing and reshaping the tasks or relationships that make up the job in order to keep the job challenging, motivating and healthy (Demerouti, 2015; Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). Recent studies have shown that job crafting can result in increased work engagement, creativity and job performance (Bakker, Tims, & Derks, 2012; Demerouti, Bakker, & Gevers, 2015; Gordon et al., 2018; Petrou, Demerouti, Peeters, Schaufeli, & Hetland, 2012; Tims, Bakker, & Derks, 2012). This is consistent with the idea that job crafting increases the fit between person and organization, as well as the meaningfulness of work. A core assumption in job-crafting theory is that employees’ job crafting is a continuous process in which individuals can proactively change and shape the boundaries of their work (Berg, Wrzesniewski, & Dutton, 2010) — from day to day. Thus, several beneficial outcomes of job crafting have been demonstrated using within-person designs that capture the day-to-day dynamics of job crafting and illuminate its positive short-time outcomes for individual employees (e.g. Petrou et al., 2012; Tims, Bakker, & Derks, 2014).

Despite these promising findings, the job-crafting literature is still in its infancy. Among the unresolved questions is the question of what role leaders play in the job-crafting process? The lack of attention to the role of the leader in the job-crafting process is surprising given that the link between leadership and other forms of self-initiated proactiveness at work is well established, both theoretically and empirically, in the general literature on proactive workplace behaviour (e.g. Den Hartog & Belschak, 2012; Schmitt, Den Hartog, & Belschak, 2016). More specifically, research on proactive work behaviour suggests and demonstrates that transformational leadership in particular plays a key role in explaining both individual-level (Den Hartog & Belschak, 2012; Schmitt et al., 2016) and team-level proactivity (Strauss, Griffin, & Rafferty, 2009). However, one limitation of this line of research is that it uses research designs that focus strictly on between-person or between-
team variances. Consequently, it may fail to take into account short-term, intra-individual variances in the leadership–proactivity relationship. In the present study, we argue that leader perceptions and job-crafting behaviour are likely to vary from one day to the next. Therefore, in addition to using more conventional research designs, we need to use quantitative diary designs to capture these day-to-day dynamics. Compared to cross-sectional or longitudinal designs with time lags of several months or even years, diary methods are useful because they capture the short-term dynamics of experiences within and between individuals in the work context (Ohly, Sonnentag, Niessen, & Zapf, 2010). In this light, the present study aims to expand existing knowledge by being one of the first studies to examine the important link between transformational leadership and proactive work behaviour in the form of job crafting. It does so by applying a quantitative diary design over a period of five days in a field context, contributing new knowledge about the day-to-day dynamics of the relationship between leadership and employee proactivity at work.

A second important question addressed in this study is: to what extent do employees' general proactive profiles influence the day-to-day transformational leadership–job crafting relationship? Drawing on regulatory focus theory (Higgins, 2000), Grant and Ashford (2008) suggest in their integrative framework of proactive behaviour that, over time, individual employees develop generalized proactive profiles that are likely to influence the extent to which they act proactively in particular work situations. More specifically, individuals can develop two different dispositional, self-regulatory orientations in order to approach pleasure and avoid pain, namely a promotion focus or a prevention focus. Employees with a promotion focus primarily relate their goals to aspirations, possible gains and ideal end-states, whereas employees with a prevention focus relate their goals to duties and responsibilities (Higgins, 2000). A core assumption in the present study is that there is a particular fit between work situations created by transformational leaders, in which they express inspirational visions, common goals, high expectations and core values and create a context in which employees can pursue their goals through job crafting. In this study, employees' dispositional performance focus is measured prior to the daily data collection. This allows us to examine whether between-person variance in promotion focus moderates the dynamic, within-individual, day-to-day relationship between transformational leader behaviour and job crafting. We test this cross-level interaction by utilising the multilevel structure of the data (Ohly et al., 2010). In this way, our study not only aims to provide new knowledge about the possible day-to-day dynamics between leader behaviour and followers' proactive behaviour, but it also aims to provide essential information about the role employees' own proactive profiles may play in these dynamics.

1.1. Theoretical background

While Kulik, Oldham, and Hackman (1987) introduced the idea of job crafting almost three decades ago, it was Wreznski and Dutton who coined the term 'job crafting' in 2001. According to the latter authors, job-crafting theory complements existing theories of job design by suggesting that employees can, on their own initiative, alter the task and relational boundaries of their jobs to increase their satisfaction with their work. In contrast, traditional job design perspectives are largely concerned with determining how employees interpret objective task characteristics and social information in the job setting to produce attitudinal and motivational responses to the work (Griffin & McMahon, 1994).

Building on earlier conceptualisations of job crafting, Tims and Bakker (2010) recently introduced another perspective on job crafting using Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) theory as the framework. JD-R theory suggests that job demands and job resources are important characteristics of all jobs that influence the development of employees' job strain and motivation. In line with this perspective, job crafting can be operationalised as proactive behaviour through which employees increase their job resources and challenge job demands, while at the same time reducing their hindrance job demands. Accordingly, Tims and Bakker (2010) suggest four dimensions of job crafting: (1) increasing structural job resources, (2) increasing social job resources, (3) increasing challenge job demands, and (4) decreasing hindrance job demands.

In their theoretical model, Tims and Bakker (2010) propose that employees craft their jobs in order to enhance person–job fit and situational control, which has beneficial consequences for employees' wellbeing and job performance. Providing support for these claims, job crafting in the form of increasing job resources and increasing job challenges (but not reducing hindrance job demands) has been found to be positively related to wellbeing (Tims, Bakker, & Derks, 2012), and performance (Tims et al., 2012). Moreover, job-crafting behaviour is believed to be part of a dynamic and continuous process (Berg et al., 2010), and recent quantitative diary studies demonstrate that employees' job-crafting behaviour fluctuates from day to day (Demerouti et al., 2015; Petrou et al., 2012; Tims et al., 2014). Thus, in order to fully understand how situational characteristics can trigger the initiation of job crafting and other daily fluctuating proactive behaviour, scholars should focus on short-time processes and possible day-level predictors (Fritz & Sonnentag, 2009).

1.2. Transformational leadership and daily job crafting

Transformational leadership means providing inspiration towards constant change through idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation and individual consideration (Avolio & Bass, 2004). Because the four dimensions of transformational leadership are consistently found to be highly inter-related, they are typically regarded as and combined into a higher order transformational leadership construct (Judge & Piccolo, 2004). Accordingly, we operationalize transformational leadership as an overarching construct, and do not examine specific effects in relation to the sub-dimensions.

Although most studies still use transformational leadership as a predictor at the general level, recent research has started to use quantitative diary designs to investigate transformational leadership on a daily basis (Breevaart et al., 2014; Hetland et al., 2015; Tims, Bakker, & Xanthopoulou, 2011). The use of such a design provides important information about how leaders can show different behaviour from one day to the next, and, consequently, is able to capture the daily dynamics of leadership behaviour and its relationship to other work-related variables, such as job crafting.

Transformational leadership is suggested and demonstrated to play a central role in employees' proactive work behaviour (Den Hartog & Belschak, 2012; Schmitt et al., 2016), and we propose that transformational leaders are also important to the motivational basis for job crafting. Taking into account the short-time dynamics of the job-crafting process (Berg et al., 2010), we further assume that transformational leaders may even trigger the initiation of job-crafting behaviour among their employees on a day-to-day basis. More specifically, we propose that transformational leaders play an important role by both influencing employees' perceptions of their possible ideal-selves and altering these dynamics.
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