

CRAFTING THE UNIVERSITY EXPERIENCE

Application of Job Crafting Theory to Train Students Through Behavioral Change

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INTRODUCTION

What is the role of students’ self-directed processes to sustain their achievements and wellbeing during higher education? Are they able to concretely and proactively participate in the construction of their own knowledge and learning processes? Indeed, while research shows that a great number of factors affect students’ experiences in education (e.g., socio-cultural context, economic status, access to decent school condition), less is known about students’ proactive behaviors supporting their own educational achievements and wellbeing. Building on literature from research in the work and organizational psychology domain, in two studies we shed a light on the nature of students’ proactive behaviors aiming at balancing their experienced demands and resources and the effects of a training to support self-directed processes aiming at crafting the university experience. We argue that by adopting principles from the Job Demands-Resources Theory (JD-R, Hodge, Wright, & Bennett, 2017) and research on Job Crafting Interventions (Van den Heuvel, Demerouti & Peeters, 2015), researchers can deepen knowledge on the role of self-directed processes influencing students’ experiences in higher education, as well as devise interventions aimed at fostering students’ abilities and promoting their learning and wellbeing processes.

PURPOSE

Students can actively modify their experience and conditions in the view of educational demands and resources, as well as based on their personal resources (Bruning & Campion, 2018; Petrou et al., 2012). Through the lens of JD-R and Job Crafting Theories applied in education, we consider these self-directed activities as the results of students’ crafting behaviors in building resources for dealing with all the educational demands. These are at the origin of students’ study engagement and results from the intention of improving the study experience and reducing the impact of hindering demands. With the aim to empirically examining these theoretical assumptions, we devised two studies investigating (1) the antecedents of study crafting behaviors in building resources and challenges at the origin of study engagement, and (2) whether interventions focused on behavioral change techniques are effective to sustain students’ proactive behaviors.

STUDY 1

In study one, we collected data from two Italian university students (N=473), from Torino and Verona. To investigate the role of self-directed process for improving study demands and resources, we devised our questionnaire with self-report measures. Study Job Crafting Behaviors of students have been assessed with an adapted scale of Petrou et al. (2012) considering the following dimensions: Increasing Resources (7-item, $\alpha=.74$), Seeking Challenges (3-item, $\alpha=.73$), Reducing Demands (3-item, $\alpha=.79$) and Optimizing Demands (4-item, $\alpha=.80$). Additionally, to evaluate study engagement and exhaustion we added an adapted scale of the UGES (Schaufeli, 2017; 9-item, $\alpha=.84$) and the two items measuring exhaustion adapted from the OLB scale (Halbesleben & Demerouti, 2005; $\alpha=.70$). To test our hypotheses concerning self-directed process, we considered study crafting dimensions as antecedents of Study Engagement and Exhaustion. We found a positive significant path from Study Engagement to Increasing Resources and from Exhaustion to Reducing Demands, see Figure 1.

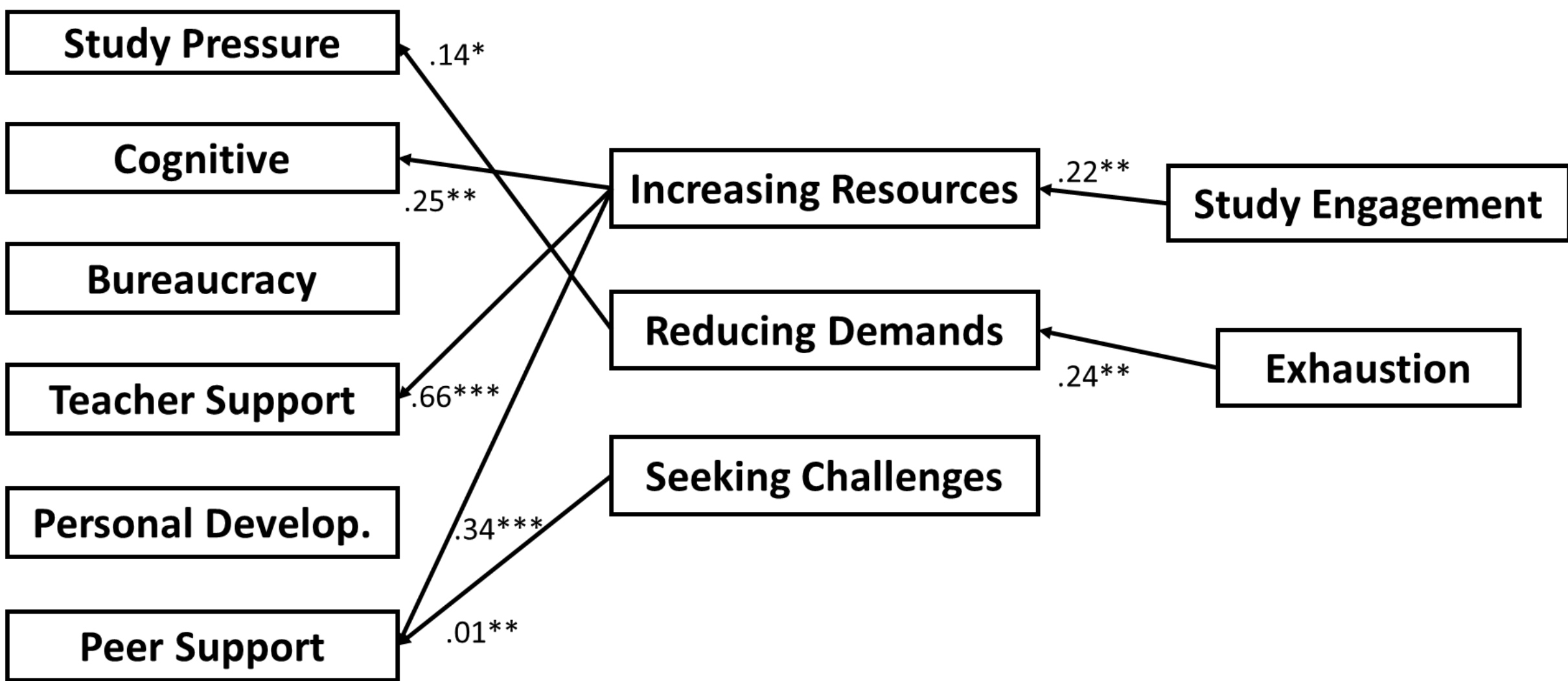
Table 1, Descriptive Statistics of the Control Group and the Experimental Group for Job Crafting Behaviour Dimensions

JC Dimension	Group	M	SD
Increase Resources	Pre	2.66	.68
	Post	3.49	.56
Seeking Challenge	Pre	2.44	.64
	Post	2.95	.61
Reducing Demands	Pre	2.32	.85
	Post	3.13	.80

DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

We hypothesized that (1) students make self-initiated changes to the levels of their demands/resources to better align these with their own abilities, which reflect in different levels of demands/resources; (2) a tailored intervention focused on reflection and goal setting would have been effective to sustain students’ crafting behaviors. In study 1, 473 students from two universities in Italy self-reported data on study demands/resources, engagement, and crafting behaviors. To test the crafting behavior for sustaining the study engagement, we tested a path analysis as displayed in Figure 1. In study 2, 34 students took part to a study crafting intervention, completing the same questionnaire administered in Study 1, with pre/post measures. We examined the effectiveness of our study crafting training intervention by means of a paired sample t-test.

Figure 1, Path Analysis



Note. Only significant path are reported; Model fit: $\chi^2(df=21)=70.40, p<.001$; CFI=.90; TLI=.90, RMSEA=.08

STUDY 2

Building on results from Study 1, we gained the rationale for devising a study crafting intervention for students. Results from Study 2 showed that the intervention was effective to sustain students’ crafting behaviors. A paired sample t-test was run to examine the efficiency of the crafting intervention. Pre-post analysis revealed a general increase for the dimensions considered. Indeed, participating students reported higher levels of Increasing Resources, $t(36)=-6.448, p<.001$; of Seeking Challenges $[t(36)=-4.058, p<.001]$ and, of Reducing Demands $[t(36)=-4.716, p<.001]$ in the data collected after the training intervention. Table 1 shows the significant increase of the dimensions compared to the pre-measures. Indeed, participants reported for all study crafting dimensions significantly higher levels (e.g., $M=3.49, SD=.56$ vs control group, $M=2.66, SD=.68$).

DISCUSSION

In the wake of the labor transformation of recent years, Italy, similar to Europe countries, is managing several societal and economic changes trying to improve and innovate the general and higher education systems. Indeed, the increase of demands for a highly skilled workforce is a particularly significant concern for government, policy makers, practitioners and leaders (Kahu & Nelson, 2018). Individuals need to maintain and develop key-competences to sustain their knowledge, work performance, and work engagement. Moreover, an additional significant concern is whether and how individuals sustain – craft – their study resources/demands. This research investigated the role of such proactive behaviors as predictors of the study engagement and exhaustion. Results from a path analysis confirmed our hypothesis and strengthened the rationale of Study 2. Indeed, with the aim of proposing training intervention for higher education, we wanted to examine whether a crafting intervention among students could be effective to support their proactive self-management of demands and resources. Although all the measured variables were assessed via self-report, our results provide relevant insights for training students in higher education showing that supporting expansion strategies allows positive experiences among students, i.e. increased levels of study engagement.

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