Check for updates

Received: 5 November 2025 | Accepted: 28 September 2026

DOI: 10.1111/joop.70159

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promoting excellence in psychology

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Crafting and recrafting the self: Cycles of identity struggle in job crafting

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Abstract

Job crafting is widely regarded as a proactive approach for enhancing meaning and well-being at work. This study challenges this view by examining the experiences of 24 change managers across six public-sector organizations. Conceptualizing job crafting as identity work, we show that it unfolds as a cyclical process of identity management, through which individuals repeatedly respond to identity ambiguity, conflict and unvalidated self-worth as roles evolve under conditions of change. We identify three recurring identity tensions and three corresponding cycles of identity-driven job crafting that reflect an emotionally charged process of self-preservation in response to misalignment and shifting expectations. Across cycles, both approach- and avoidance-oriented crafting strategies generate unintended identity consequences that shape subsequent responses and redirect crafting over time. We further identify alternative value definitions as a novel, symbolic form of job crafting through which individuals sustain authenticity when behavioural adjustment proves insufficient. By reconceptualizing aspects of job crafting as a cyclical identity process marked by emotional strain, this study advances understanding of the darker side of job crafting beyond behaviour-centred accounts that portray it as uniformly empowering.

KEYWORDS

change manager, dark side of job crafting, identity struggle, identity threat, job crafting, role ambiguity

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Practitioner points

- Where employees are entering new or evolving roles, managers should provide early opportunities for sensemaking and role clarification. Regular conversations about expectations, responsibilities and stakeholder relationships can reduce identity ambiguity and lessen the need for continual role expansion.
- Employees experiencing conflicting demands often respond by narrowing responsibilities or withdrawing from aspects of their work. Coaching, workload reviews and facilitated discussions about priorities can help employees manage tensions without disengaging from important relationships or opportunities.
- Recognition should focus not only on outcomes but also on invisible coordination, relationship-building and change-management work. Creating opportunities for employees to reflect on and discuss what constitutes value and success may help sustain authenticity while reducing the emotional burden of ongoing identity management.

INTRODUCTION

For more than two and a half decades, job crafting has been understood as a process through which employees actively reshape their tasks, relationships and role boundaries to enhance effectiveness and improve their overall well-being (Dubbelt et al., 2019; Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001; Zhang & Parker, 2019). The ultimate goal of job crafting is that employees have a deeper sense of purpose and identity at work (Berg et al., 2013) and a better fit between organizational goals and personal performance (Tims et al., 2015). Existing literature highlights job crafting's positive influence on outcomes such as motivation, engagement, relational coordination and performance (Demerouti et al., 2015; Tims et al., 2013; Wang et al., 2024), yet also that crafting can generate unintended burdens, including increased workload, strain and emotional exhaustion when employees take on more demanding or resource-depleting changes (Berg et al., 2010; Demerouti et al., 2015; Petrou et al., 2015). Research examining the darker side of job crafting further underscores that crafting can produce social friction (Dong et al., 2023; Renkema et al., 2023) and contribute to strain or burnout when employees struggle to manage escalating demands (Rofcanin et al., 2019). Together, these insights suggest that attaining the authentic, agentic work identities celebrated in traditional job crafting accounts may be more constrained than assumed, strengthening the case for theorizing the emotional demands of job crafting as more central to the job crafting process over time.

Recent research has begun to emphasize how crafting unfolds in response to shifting social and organizational contexts. These studies show that individuals job craft to navigate power relations and emotional demands (Liang et al., 2023), to respond to identity threat (Wang et al., 2024), and create integration across work and non-work domains (Ho et al., 2024). Collectively, this work positions job crafting for identity as dynamic and context-responsive rather than fixed, encompassing both approach-oriented efforts to achieve valued identities and avoidance-oriented efforts to manage identity threats and tensions (Bruning & Campion, 2018).

Despite these advances, the relationship between job crafting and identity remains underdeveloped in two important ways. First, even where identity is treated as dynamic, much existing research conceptualizes it as a pre-existing context that motivates action, rather than as something actively shaped through crafting itself. This overlooks how identity tensions may be generated, intensified or transformed through repeated crafting efforts over time. Second, job crafting research continues to assume a coherent and unified self seeking alignment and meaning. Such assumptions underplay the fragmented, ambivalent and often contradictory nature of identity work (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). Meaning is therefore treated as an attainable endpoint rather than a provisional and ongoing accomplishment. Together, these limitations obscure the temporal and emotional complexity of job crafting. To address

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this, we adopt a processual perspective that examines job crafting as an unfolding, iterative form of identity management rather than a set of discrete behaviours or outcomes.

Drawing on qualitative, real-time analysis of 24 change management professionals in public sector organizations, this research addresses three core questions: (1) How do identity tensions give rise to job crafting over time? (2) How do job crafters deploy and shift between approach- and avoidance-oriented strategies in responding to these tensions? And (3) How do participants experience and respond to the identity consequences of job crafting over time?

Using identity literature (Corley & Gioia, 2004; Petriglieri, 2011; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003) and job crafting research (Bruning & Campion, 2018; Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001), we show how participants engaged in repeated crafting attempts, only to find fleeting relief. In this, we extend prior work (e.g., Bruning & Campion, 2018; Dong et al., 2023; Rofcanin et al., 2019) by comprehensively defining the darker side of job crafting as a process of ongoing emotionally taxing identity struggle.

JOB CRAFTING MOTIVATIONS

Job crafting is a proactive alternative to managerial job design, emphasizing the role of individual employees in shaping their work lives (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). It allows employees to define aspects of their role to better align with personal strengths and preferences (Wrzesniewski et al., 2013). Wrzesniewski and Dutton (2001), offer three crafting strategies: task crafting (modifying tasks), relational crafting (altering interactions) and cognitive crafting (reframing perceptions of work). This framework has dominated job crafting literature, positioning employees as active agents in constructing meaningful and personalized work experiences. Recent research highlights how crafting is shaped by personal goals and identities beyond work, underscoring the need to align crafting with broader self-concepts—not just job tasks (Ho et al., 2024; Niessen et al., 2016; Renkema et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2021).

While Wrzesniewski and Dutton's (2001) framework has predominantly framed job crafting as a positive, agentic process, subsequent research has noted that proactive crafting can also generate unintended burdens, such as heightened demands, strain and emotional exhaustion, when employees take on additional tasks or responsibilities (Berg et al., 2010; Demerouti et al., 2015; Petrou et al., 2015). This emerging recognition of the risks associated with traditional, improvement-oriented crafting provides an important backdrop for Bruning and Campion's (2018) distinction between *approach* and *avoidance* crafting. Drawing from human behaviour models, they distinguish approach crafting, which is motivated toward goal attainment (e.g., role or social expansion), from avoidance crafting, which is prevention-orientated and focused on work withdrawal (e.g., work role reduction). Others have documented a so-called 'darker side' of job crafting, showing how crafting can produce social friction (Dong et al., 2023; Lazazzara et al., 2020; Renkema et al., 2023) and contribute to strain or burnout when employees attempt to cope with escalating pressures (Rofcanin et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2024). Together, these insights indicate that job crafting is shaped not only by positive, growth-focused motives but also by protective or threat-avoidant motives. Renkema et al. (2023) and Liang et al. (2023) highlight how context-specific pressures, such as professional accountability and organizational politics, act as antecedents to crafting, shaping individuals' motivations and strategic responses. Employees may job craft when they find themselves in ambiguous or unpleasant situations (e.g., Grant & Parker, 2009); such as when communications are poor (Petrou et al., 2015), where they lack role clarity (Yun et al., 2007), or as a coping response when the status quo is threatened.

Crafting as an identity management process

Until recently, the relationship between work identity and job crafting had only been tentatively and theoretically explored. Wrzesniewski et al. (2013) suggest that job crafting helps employees cultivate a positive sense of meaning and identity. De Bloom et al. (2020) propose that individuals

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craft their jobs based on needs across identity domains. Most recently, Wang et al. (2024) explicitly identified identity threat as an antecedent of job crafting. When individuals feel their identity is devalued, challenged or obstructed, they craft their jobs to protect or reconstruct their work identity. Recognizing job crafting as a form of identity work fundamentally shifts how we understand its purpose, function and implications. Crafting becomes a strategic and symbolic act, not merely a functional one. Despite growing interest, significant gaps remain, particularly in empirical studies of job crafting and dynamic identity processes.

In the context of job crafting, identity is a professional label, but also a personal and subjective sense of self-worth. As such, job crafting is influenced by the interplay between personal and organizational identities (Conroy & O'Leary-Kelly, 2014; Meister et al., 2014). From this perspective, crafting becomes a process of identity negotiation, where individuals seek to align their work with who they believe themselves to be (Ho et al., 2024). This alignment is key to cultivating meaning and addressing identity tensions.

Identity research highlights that who we are at work can be a source of tension (Ashforth & Mael, 1989), as individuals seek to act in ways that reflect their personal beliefs and values (Kira et al., 2012; Meister et al., 2014). When alignment between the authentic self and work is achieved, it fosters energy, commitment and a sense of shared purpose (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Kaltiainen et al., 2024). Authenticity enables individuals to express themselves in ways consistent with their inner thoughts and feelings (Harter, 2002). However, when organizational expectations conflict with self-perceptions, this misalignment triggers identity tension (Ryan et al., 2005; Vannini, 2006). When roles change, the labels used to describe themselves lose relevance or become reinterpreted. For example, identifying as 'good with people' might imply being friendly and approachable as a unit manager, but as a project manager, it may shift to being persuasive and influential. The emergence of identity tensions creates a need for resolution, driving meaning-making activities to restore alignment.

Identity work provides a means to understand how individuals revise, maintain, strengthen or change their identity to seek coherence and meaning (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). This work views identity as constantly changing and adapting. Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003) suggest that individuals have identity positions which fluctuate and are mobilized in different situations, rather than a stable identity. These identity positions are anchored by a narrative self-identity which itself is ever-changing. Job crafting research largely lacks this dynamic, process view of crafting. Although recent studies such as Wang et al. (2024) have drawn attention to the potentially strategic and symbolic nature of job crafting, survey-based studies may not capture this. Identity work is deeply emotional and symbolic, involving pride, shame, resistance or aspiration. Qualitative data uncovers symbolic acts that are invisible in behavioural measures. For example, how role definition prompted by a feeling of disconnection allows an individual to reclaim a sense of purpose in their work. Creating meaning is a dynamic process and therefore, exploring job crafting through a more processual, ever-changing identity lens allows us to better understand how crafting and identity interact, and what the outcomes might be.

Building on this perspective, we conceptualize identity as neither solely an antecedent nor an outcome of job crafting, but as embedded throughout the crafting process. Identity tensions may prompt crafting efforts, yet job crafting itself constitutes identity work through which individuals negotiate, maintain and revise their sense of self. In doing so, individuals engage in both behavioural modifications to tasks and relationships and symbolic efforts to redefine the meaning and value of their work. The identity consequences of these efforts then shape subsequent crafting responses, creating an ongoing process of identity management rather than a discrete act of job redesign. Building on research linking job crafting to identity alignment, threat and misidentification (Meister et al., 2014; Petriglieri, 2011; Wang et al., 2024), we therefore examine how identity tensions shape crafting efforts and how the consequences of those efforts generate further crafting over time. This perspective enables us to theorize job crafting as a cyclical form of identity management characterized by ongoing struggle rather than lasting resolution.

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METHODS

Research approach

This study is part of a broader project on organizational strategies for multifaceted change, focusing on the experiences of change managers. Leading major change can be a pivotal career moment (Dabak & Mulla, 2022), yet also a demanding role involving emotional management and work intensification, where managers must sell change, implement policy and solve problems. As a result, employees often navigate conflicting role expectations and must make sense of their identity and role (Tucker et al., 2015). Fortunately, they typically have scope to adjust behavioural and cognitive aspects of their work (Tucker & Cirella, 2018), offering an ideal context to explore how identity tensions and job crafting interrelate.

Participants ($n=24$) were recruited through existing connections with six public sector organizations undergoing significant change, where researchers were involved in data collection, knowledge exchange or executive education. Access alone did not determine inclusion. Participants were selected because they occupied roles with responsibility for leading, coordinating or implementing organizational change, contexts in which opportunities for job crafting and identity negotiation were expected to be particularly salient. While our focus was on individual experiences, this approach enabled us to study participants within a broader organizational context, offering insight into group, organizational and external pressures shaping job crafting. Participant identification particularly within the first three organizations was phased, allowing preliminary analysis and reflection on emerging patterns throughout the data collection process. Our ongoing collaboration with participating organizations also enabled us to identify newly created roles and address gaps in variation as theoretical insights developed. As analysis progressed, participants were purposively selected to maximize variation in organizational setting, professional background and change-management role, and to develop and refine emerging theoretical insights through theoretical sampling (Charmaz, 2017; Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Sampling continued until additional cases largely reinforced existing patterns and no longer generated substantively new insights relevant to the developing theoretical model.

Data collection

Interview timing aligned with the change programme.[1] 17 participants were interviewed twice—before and after the main change activity. Six were interviewed only before the change but had been in the role long enough to engage in job crafting.[2] One participant, interviewed only after the change due to medical leave, was able to reflect on experiences throughout the programme. Interviews were semi-structured, audio-recorded and all but one conducted face-to-face. They lasted 40–80 min and took place in private settings at participants' workplaces. Our interview schedule was iterative and adaptive depending on the specifics of the organizational change context. Typically in our first interview with participants, we began with questions to explore the organizational context. Rather than directly prompting participants to tell us about job crafting, which would likely have artificially forced insignificant instances to the fore, we asked questions to understand early perceptions our change managers had of their job role, how and why it was created, how their role positioned them within the organization, and how they would utilize their skills and other resources

[1]As change processes varied across different organizations, the exact dates in relation to the change date varied. Before interviews ranged from 2 to 4 months before the change. After dates ranged from 3 to 10 months. In two organizations the nature of change was more ongoing and therefore interviews happened 'during' the change.

[2]One further participant was removed as they were unable to describe any job crafting activity.

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for the job. Where a second interview was conducted, we asked participants to reflect on how the change had gone, explored their learning and challenges overcome as well as how their job had changed and next steps in their career. Repeated interviews enabled us to capture evolving interpretations and experiences over time, rather than relying on static accounts (Hermanowicz, 2013). In the later interviews where participants had completed diary entries (see below), we sent participants a reminder of their entries before the interview and asked them to reflect on their journey over the previous six months. Transcripts were professionally produced, and pseudonyms were used to ensure confidentiality.

Identity work is a social process shaped by others' expectations and organizational dynamics (Beech, 2008; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). To better understand the context of job crafting, we observed participants at work where access was possible, such as during meetings, training sessions or guided tours of work settings and collected relevant documents, including job descriptions, strategy papers, and meeting minutes discussing each role's creation and evolution. Together, these materials provided contextual insight into job crafting boundaries and identity work, offering a holistic view of these processes (Czarniawska-Joerges, 2007).

We began our data analysis during the data collection period. After reviewing data from our first three organizations, it became apparent that understanding how identity tensions and job crafting unfolded over time was important to our emerging analysis. While interviews provided rich retrospective accounts, they could not always capture the ongoing nature of participants' sensemaking, emotional responses and adjustments to changing role demands in real time. Diaries offered insight into participants' experiences closer to the events being described, helping to capture ongoing interpretations and reactions as they emerged over time (Bolger et al., 2003). Therefore, the final four participants were invited to complete a six-month qualitative diary study. The diaries enabled us to capture reflections closer to events as they occurred, providing insight into the temporal evolution of job crafting, the emergence of identity tensions and participants' emotional experiences as they navigated change.

We asked participants to make one diary entry a month responding to a short series of prompts. Participants were sent a link to a qualitative online survey asking them to reflect on their main job activities; if they had experienced any challenges; how they overcame these and any feelings or emotions they had about the role. All answers were free text and participants could write as much or as little detail as they wished. Several participants expressed that they found the process of completing the diary a good opportunity to reflect on their experience, to express feelings and/or to articulate frustrations in a safe environment. While survey-based diaries have been used in job crafting research, typically tracking weekly quantitative responses (e.g., Petrou et al., 2017; Rofcanin et al., 2019), we used qualitative diaries to complement interview accounts and explore evolving identity tensions, emotional responses and job crafting practices as close to real time as possible. This proved particularly valuable for identifying recurring patterns and shifts in participants' experiences that informed our later theorizing of job crafting as a cyclical process.

Combining interviews, diaries, observations and documentary materials enabled triangulation across data sources and provided multiple perspectives on evolving identity tensions and crafting responses (Eisenhardt, 1989). The dataset includes 41 interviews, 73.5 h of observation, 15 relevant organizational documents and diaries, from 24 participants across six organizations. Table 1 provides more information about the organizations, their roles and backgrounds.

Data analysis

Our interest in identity tensions and crafting responses over time aligns with a process perspective that seeks to understand how phenomena emerge, evolve and recur through ongoing activity rather than as static states (Langley, 1999; Langley et al., 2013). After familiarizing ourselves with the data, we reviewed transcripts and observation notes to systematically identify instances of job crafting. We followed Berg et al. (2010), who define job crafting as *'participant's descriptions of a proactive change to the*

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TABLE 1 Data collection summary.

Organizational context	Pseudonym	Description of role and role holder background	Interviews and diaries	Observation and additional documents[a]
English NHS Trust managing the construction of a new hospital. 3-year change project included both physical infrastructure management and service redesign.	Sally	*Divisional Project Manager—Cancer Care*, Senior nurse seconded full time into project manager position to provide links between construction project office and clinical teams. Tasked to translate operational procedures arising from the hospital design to the clinical divisions which would be working in the new facility.	2 interviews, 9 months apart (before/after)	Job Description
	Jane	*Divisional Project Manager—Emergency Care*, Ward manager seconded full time into project manager position to provide links between construction project office and clinical teams. Tasked to translate operational procedures arising from the hospital design to the clinical divisions which would be working in the new facility.	2 interviews, 9 months apart (before/after)	Job Description, Hospital tour (1.5 h)
	Emma	*Divisional Project Manager—Planned Care*, Senior nurse seconded 2 days a week into project manager position to provide links between construction project office and clinical teams. Tasked to translate operational procedures arising from the hospital design to the clinical divisions which would be working in the new facility.	2 interviews, 9 months apart (before/after)	Job Description
	Paul	*Divisional Project Manager—Planned Care*, Divisional operations lead seconded 3 days a week into project manager position to provide links between construction project office and clinical teams. Tasked to translate operational procedures arising from the hospital design to the clinical divisions which would be working in the new facility.	2 interviews, 9 months apart (before/after)	Job Description
	Rebecca	*Divisional Project Manager—Women and Children* (Sick leave cover for 7 months), Senior nurse seconded full time into project manager position to provide links between construction project office and clinical teams. Tasked to translate operational procedures arising from the hospital design to the clinical divisions which would be working in the new facility.	2 interviews, 6 months apart (before/after)	Job Description
	Hayley	*Divisional Project Manager—Women and Children*, Senior nurse seconded full time into project manager position to provide links between construction project office and clinical teams. Tasked to translate operational procedures arising from the hospital design to the clinical divisions which would be working in the new facility.	1 interview, 3 months post change	Job Description
Not-for-profit US healthcare organization managing transition to a new purpose build facility. Considered frontrunners in process improvement management practices and lean healthcare. 3 year project moved women and children's services to a new facility.	Maise	*Six Sigma Black belt—Project Management Engineer*. Specially trained by the organization in skills for process redesign. Internally consults with clinical teams to help improve processes and plan for changes. Deployed to multiple groups for 8–12 week blocks to help them prepare for new processes and environment in new facility.	2 interviews, 7 months apart (before/after)	-
	Jacob	*Management Engineer*. Analyst specially trained by the organization in skills for process redesign and tasked with the safe move and migration of services to the new facility. Managed simulations and co-ordinated a team of non-clinical support staff preparing facilities for the new building.	1 interview, 4 months before change (6 months into role)	Project plan document co-written by participant. Observation of a move day training event (5 h), feedback report on training event

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TABLE 1 (Continued)

Organizational context	Pseudonym	Description of role and role holder background	Interviews and diaries	Observation and additional documents[a]
Canadian public sector hospital. 2 year project redesigning work processes and moving work to a new elder friendly in-patient tower building. Project team created to absorb most of the burden of the change management as well as the engagement and training of front line staff.	Drake	*Chief Project Manager*. Experienced manager, specifically hired to lead a series of transformation projects across the health authority. Led a team of change agents (see below) and reported directly to CEO.	2 interviews, 7 months apart (before/after)	Observation at knowledge exchange senior leadership event (4 h)
	Rachel	*Project Manager, People, Equipment and Clinical Services*. Senior nurse seconded to project team full time tasked with clinical transformation, training of staff and internal stakeholder engagement.	2 interviews, 7 months apart (before/after)	Provided Hospital tour (2 h)
	Paige	*Divisional Operations Manager—Elder Care*. Senior nurse, turned operations manager, seconded 2 days per week to support the project team whilst providing general management support to division the rest of the time.	1 interview, 4 months before change (3 months into role)	-
	Ian	*Project Manager, New Hospital Facilities*. Facilities manager seconded to project team full time tasked with digital and facilities preparation, commissioning and deployment for the new patient tower.	2 interviews, 7 months apart (before/after)	-
	Wendy	*Quality Assurance Operations Manager*. Experienced operations manager focused on quality assurance, seconded 2 days per week to support the project team (full time for 4 months leading up to the opening)	2 interviews, 7 months apart (before/after)	Observed progress update meeting (2 h)
	Maddy	*Project Manager, Operational Commissioning*. Experienced operations manager focused on commissioning. Seconded full time to the project team for 10 months to support engagement and training of front line staff.	2 interviews, 7 months apart (before/after)	Observed progress update meeting (2 h)
	Anna	*Department Project Manager, Physio services*. Senior physiotherapist nominated as representative from department to join new facility readiness team.	2 interviews, 7 months apart (before/after)	
	Louise	*Department Project Manager, Mental Health services*. Senior nurse nominated as representative from department to join new facility readiness team.	2 interviews, 7 months apart (before/after)	
	Phil	*Operations Director, Surgery*. Department manager nominated as representative from department to join new facility readiness team.	1 interview, 4 months before change (ongoing role)	
	Jason	*Operations Director, Rehabilitation*. Department manager nominated as representative from department to join new facility readiness team.	1 interview, 4 months before change (ongoing role)	
	Erin	*Operations Director, Inpatient*. Department manager nominated as representative from department to join new facility readiness team.	1 interview, 4 months before change (ongoing role)	
	Carrie	*Operations Director, Medicine*. Department manager nominated as representative from department to join new facility readiness team.	1 interview, 4 months before change (ongoing role)	

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TABLE 1 (Continued)

Organizational context	Pseudonym	Description of role and role holder background	Interviews and diaries	Observation and additional documents[a]
UK Borough Council (local government) in England 2-year project aiming to redesign in-person services to improve the customer experience, providing more council services digitally and deliver efficiency savings.	Emily	*Transformation Project Manager*. Experienced project manager seconded to lead this project. Tasked to co-ordinate and develop a set of projects across a range of agencies and join them into a co-ordinated programme to provide integrated customer journeys. Focus on digital inclusion.	2 interviews, 8 months apart (before/after) 5/6 months of diary study submitted	2 documents outlining project funding tender and job description Observation of project partnership steering group (approx. 5 h)
	Laura	*Transformation Project support analyst*. Former data analyst, turned project manager. Fixed term role created to support the above project manager, research and cost deliverables and liaise with partners. The focus was to provide support data to measure progress of the project and evidence decisions.	2 interviews, 8 months apart (before/after) 6/6 months of diary study submitted	3 documents including job description, workplan and report on stage 1 of project authored by the participant
Accountable Care Partnership Organization in England, UK. 5 Year Cross organization project management organization created to provide integrated solutions to patient care within a regional network of health and social care providers.	Charlotte	*Partnership Projects Operational Lead*. Senior nurse turned operations manager seconded in from Primary Care Trust (one of three local partners represented by this Partnership). Fixed term role created to manage a range of projects within a programme of work, coordinating operations and partnership working arrangements	2 interviews, 8 months apart (before/middle) 4/6 months of diary study submitted	4 documents including job description, workplan, business case for project and presentation by the participant to steering group Observation at 3 partnership strategy setting meetings (approx. 6 h total)
Integrated Care partnership in England. UK. Ongoing partnership between local government organization and social enterprise who were one of their leading social care providers. Programme of work to improve services in both organizations	Amelia	*Programme Manager*. Experienced project manager at the social care provider. This role was joint funded by both organizations as a secondment to run a special change management programme of work. The role was to coordinate 4 workstreams of small innovative projects bringing together various organizational partners across the county, all aimed to provide more integrated health, social care and mental health solutions to service users.	2 interviews, 8 months apart (ongoing change) 3/6 months of diary study submitted	3 documents including role description and case for joint funding, project workplan, evaluation workplan. Observation of 18 months of monthly programme meetings at strategic and operational level (approx. 48 h)
		Total	41 interviews and 18 diary entries	73.5 h observation, 15 supplementary documents

[a]Refers to documents specifically related to the role e.g., job description, performance appraisal. In most cases numerous additional documents relating to the organization or the change project were also collected but were not specifically analysed for this paper.

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formal task, relational, or cognitive boundaries of their job and the perceptions and experiences that they associate with this change' (p. 163). Our approach explored motivations, challenges, responses, perceived consequences and complexity of processes. Because job crafting must be initiated by the employee (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001), we excluded cases where this was unclear. This resulted in 152 identified instances.

Our analysis proceeded in three interconnected stages; firstly, we examined how recurring identity tensions gave rise to job crafting as roles evolve. We began with open coding to capture participants' expressed motivations in navigating their roles (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). These first-order codes reflected recurring identity struggles as articulated in participants' accounts, such as uncertainty about expectations, competing allegiances or concerns about legitimacy. We then iteratively reviewed and refined these codes through engagement with identity theory (Ashforth et al., 2024; Brown, 2022), which sensitized our analysis to how participants understood themselves in relation to role expectations, social evaluation and legitimacy. Rather than treating reported difficulties as isolated stressors or demands, we examined how participants described misalignments between their self-concept, the expectations of others and the recognition they received, and how these misalignments threatened their ability to sustain a coherent professional identity.

Through this process, we abstracted three aggregate dimensions (Gioia et al., 1994) that represent enduring identity tensions shaping participants' job crafting over time. Table 2 documents this analytic progression, showing how empirically grounded identity struggles were integrated into higher-order identity tensions that motivate job crafting. Throughout the research process, we sought to enhance credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Analysis was iterative, involving repeated movement between emerging codes, theoretical concepts and raw data, alongside regular discussion between authors to challenge, refine and validate interpretations (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). We triangulated findings across interviews, diaries, observations and documentary evidence, using each source to contextualize and interrogate emerging explanations. This process is reflected in Table 2, which provides a transparent audit trail from first-order concepts to aggregate dimensions, and in Table 3, where participant journeys draw on multiple data sources to illustrate the development of job crafting over time. Reflexivity was supported through ongoing discussion among the authors regarding assumptions, interpretations and the potential influence of our organizational access and engagement on the research process.

Secondly, we examined how job crafters responded to these tensions through different strategies. We examined instances of job crafting through Bruning and Campion's (2018) distinction between approach-oriented and avoidance-oriented crafting. We allowed groupings of similar job crafting behaviours to emerge abductively, initially clustering instances based on data-led similarities and then iterating between these clusters and Bruning and Campion's seven domains as a sensitizing framework. Through this process, we identified six types of job crafting, five of which aligned with existing categories, and one that represents a distinct domain. Four of these were examples of an Approach orientation, and two were examples of an Avoidance orientation.

We then reviewed these job crafting categories by examining how different forms of crafting functioned as responses to identity-related concerns such as legitimacy, coherence, visibility and self-worth (Brown, 2022). Using abductive reasoning, we looked for surprises and anomalies; for example, where crafting strategies that appeared functionally similar had divergent identity consequences, or where efforts to stabilize identity through crafting generated new vulnerabilities. This identity-based interpretation allowed us to refine and extend existing job crafting theory by foregrounding the identity work embedded within different crafting strategies (Charmaz, 2014).

To theorize job crafting as a dynamic process, we analysed how participants' use of different job crafting practices unfolded over time across interviews and diary entries. Diary data were analysed alongside interview transcripts rather than as a separate dataset and were particularly valuable in revealing how participants interpreted ongoing challenges, emotional reactions and changes in their crafting responses between interview points. These longitudinal accounts helped us identify recurring tensions and transitions between crafting responses, informing the development of the three job crafting cycles. Rather than treating crafting types as static or discrete, we traced how individuals combined, shifted

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TABLE 2 Identity tensions data structure.

Open codes	Identity struggles	Second order themes (motivations for crafting)	Aggregate dimensions (identity tensions)
Political agendas, others unable to articulate expectations well, not willing to commit to expectations	Unknown or hidden expectations	Need for more information	Identity ambiguity
Who's job is it to do X? That's not my job. I'm not sure what my job is	Unclear definition of job and boundaries		
Getting to know new people, language of work, long term goals, political agendas	New role/unclear expectations		
Juggling aspects of the role and expectations of others, negotiating between different views/perspectives of others	Pulled in different directions by others	Need for direction	
Trying lots of different things to see what works	Lack of direction		
Which groups am I part of? Where do I fit? What is my role/contribution?	Loss of social comparators	Searching for a sense of belonging	
Torn loyalties, wanting to give everyone voice, struggling to bring ideas together	Negotiating different priorities	Need to take control/ ownership	Identity conflict
Hard to let go, personal successes and project successes go hand in hand, leaving a part of oneself behind	Entanglement of self and project		
Setting different priorities, unrealistic deadlines, sense of urgency. Organizationally imposed deliverables and personal accountability for those	Conflicting or unrealistic expectations	Need to manage expectations	
Wanting to respond to feedback or consultation of others, listening to others, Managing other's anxieties	Demands of others		
Former relationships dismantled or relabelled (e.g., former mentors) Bringing relationships or expectations from a previous role	Redefining relationships		
Taking on new activities (e.g., public speaking), or ways of working outside of comfort zone	Discomfort with the role	Need for recognition	Self worth validation
Downplaying own power/influence. Doubting ability.	Unsure about claiming ownership		
Role is misunderstood or underappreciated by others Hidden work not recognized	Feeling undervalued	Need to self promote	
Didn't know if the role would help, scepticism from stakeholders, work less important to other stakeholders	Ambiguity of value (of the role)		

between and revisited different forms of crafting as their roles and identity concerns evolved. To support this processual analysis, we developed a summary profile for each participant that situated their job crafting within the timeline of their role, including key organizational developments and external constraints. These profiles were iteratively updated throughout the analysis and revisited as patterns and transitions between crafting responses emerged.

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This longitudinal analysis revealed systematic links between job crafting practices and the emergence of identity tensions (Corley & Gioia, 2004). Critically, identity tensions appeared not only as initial triggers for crafting, but also as consequences that participants associated with prior crafting efforts, often prompting further responses. Re-engaging with the data through this temporal, outcome-focused lens enabled us to identify recurring patterns through which individuals sought to manage the unintended identity costs of job crafting, which formed the basis of the three job crafting cycles presented in the findings section below and summarized in Figure 1.

To make these dynamics visible, we developed a set of longitudinal vignettes drawing on participants for whom we had richer data across multiple time points (see Table 3). These vignettes are not intended to represent typical cases or linear progressions, but to illustrate how transitions between cycles are precipitated by the identity consequences of earlier crafting efforts, how certain tensions recur in different forms, and how individuals may move between cycles in non-linear ways.

FINDINGS

The analysis identified three interrelated Cycles of job crafting. *Cycle 1—Trying to fit in* describes how individuals addressed identity ambiguity through approach-oriented crafting, including role and social expansion, to gain clarity and belonging. *Cycle 2—Taking back control of self* captures responses to identity conflict, where participants adopted avoidance-oriented strategies such as work role reduction and withdrawal to protect role coherence and manage expectations. *Cycle 3—Living with ambiguity* reflects a shift toward introspective approach crafting, including meta-cognition and alternative value definitions, as individuals sought to sustain authenticity where earlier strategies provided only partial relief.

Cycle 1—Trying to fit in

This Cycle describes how participants responded to identity ambiguity and worked to position themselves as legitimate members of the new context.

Identity tension: Identity ambiguity

Identity ambiguity describes the tension where an individual experiences a lack of clarity about their sense of self in a particular context (Ashforth et al., 2008). Our participants experienced a *need for more information* and sensemaking as they sought to establish their place within a changing context (see Weick, 1995). This was especially common in the early stages of a new role where participants had to understand a new shared language and ways of working:

> I didn't even understand the words you're saying to me. You want me to do what now?
>
> (Laura)

Similar to Liang et al. (2023), our participants particularly described a need to understand political agendas and job role boundaries for themselves and others. It was expressed that expectations were often hidden or unknown.

Participants struggled to reconcile documented descriptions of their role with how it was enacted in practice around the expectations and roles of others (e.g., see Jane's narrative in Table 3). As one participant reflected,

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> The way coordinators that run [four departments] they work with me, and that was a definite rub in the beginning, because my previous boss… well, now I'm kind of representing her, and so it was a real, um, fine line and dance of well, what's your position now, and what's my position, and what are you taking on, and what do I take on… so we had a number of meetings trying to figure out role clarity, because I know that role clarity is the number one conflict among teams, and we were starting to feel that… um, that pinch.
>
> (Anna)

Participants described trying to follow guidance to find direction. Although, ambiguity driven, this *need for direction* involved a tension around the translation of information into steps to create meaning. It is one thing to understand the expectations of others, and another to determine how to create actions from that (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003).

A key trigger for identity ambiguity occurs when the social referents used to make comparisons are lost (Corley & Gioia, 2004). Former referents provide a framework for an individual to compare the similarities and differences to others and derive meaning about their own identity. Our data showed the influence of expectations and relationships, brought from a previous role, on a desire to engage in crafting.

> Because I still work at the [host organization] offices I also get dragged into day-to-day stuff that has nothing to do with transformation… I've had to have a few conversations about, is this actually what I should be doing…?
>
> (Emily)

Individuals questioned where they stood within new groups and struggled to understand their contribution in terms of political agendas, other people's anxieties and expectations. This aligns with Wrzesniewski and Dutton's (2001) theory that *searching for a sense of belonging* is a key motivator for job crafting, which involved reaching out to others and seeking opportunities to listen and consult with groups to re-establish new identity referents.

Job crafting strategies used to resolve identity ambiguity

In responding to identity ambiguity, participants engaged in two forms of approach-oriented job crafting: role expansion and social expansion.

Role expansion

Bruning and Campion (2018) describe role expansion as a self-initiated enlargement of the incumbent's formal job description. From an identity perspective, role boundaries are negotiated limits defining 'in-role' and 'extra-role' behaviours (Katz & Kahn, 1978). The prevalence of a well-defined job description varied between our participants, and ambiguity was a tension which motivated them. Job crafters worked hard to understand project needs and fit themselves to the role. They identified additional organizational needs and felt obligated to address gaps beyond their formal responsibilities (Parker et al., 1997). From an identity perspective, role expansion enabled participants to actively define what their role should become when expectations remained unclear. Rather than waiting for others to specify responsibilities, they enlarged their remit by creating new activities, taking ownership of organizational problems and positioning themselves as key coordinators and facilitators. Maddy, for example, describes how she brought together a wide range of stakeholder groups:

> I formed a commissioning committee and there was probably about 32 to 34 individuals… We would get together once a month and then it became every two weeks about three

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> months leading up to the move, and then it became weekly. And we were all together, so they got to know each other and they knew that if they were making decisions on certain things, who it would affect.
>
> (Maddy)

Other examples included organizing workshops, creating collaborations and supporting peer development. Behaviours included staying late and learning new skills. Sometimes, job crafters chose to develop skills that were personally useful (in their career) or to gain 'good will' within the organization. Examples include expanding roles, taking on leadership and stepping outside their comfort zone.

> I will also be responsible for leading the training of all staff at the library so that everyone is multi-skilled across the services. For this, I have decided that I will ask the staff to train each other and I will facilitate and design a handout booklet with the summary of the service and training. I feel my role… has expanded to include more responsibility and support in the project.
>
> (Laura, month 1 diary entry)

Social expansion

Social expansion is a form of job crafting where the individual proactively uses social resources toward problem-focused social activities (Bruning & Campion, 2018). In our data, social expansion involved adapting relationships to achieve identity coherence by expanding or contracting relational boundaries.

Crafting involved resolving disputes or changing the work environment to build relationships or gain insight (e.g., working one day a week in a specific office with project partners):

> I specifically moved… took the opportunity to move back to [this hospital site] so that I would situate myself to be well involved with the [project plans]
>
> (Anna)

To address the loss of social referents prevalent in identity ambiguity, job crafters manipulated their own expectations and past relationships to help them compare and derive meaning about their success. Sometimes, job crafting meant shifting the dynamics of an existing relationship where this was causing conflict.

> …this coordinator, who I used to be close with, we've now grown apart, which is sad because we used to have a very good relationship, and we don't so much now because there's been a bit too many of those pinches… we can still work fine and we still collaborate. It's just not quite the way it was, which, quite frankly, I think it's a little bit healthier now, so this is me, that's you, so, um… so I've had to give and take
>
> (Paige)

Consequences

Our data suggest that role expansion may temporarily resolve identity ambiguity, but it can also generate additional complexity in how individuals negotiate and sustain their professional identities over time. Laura's account of volunteering to act as the main link with an external partner illustrates how expanding role boundaries can foster a sense of contribution, visibility and ownership, particularly in the absence of clearly defined responsibilities. At the same time, assuming such boundary-spanning responsibilities increased expectations and blurred distinctions between formal and informal role obligations, introducing new pressures around accountability and coordination. These expanded commitments required ongoing identity work to manage emerging expectations and maintain control over role boundaries as the scope of the role evolved, and conflicts emerged (see Cycle 2).

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Reframing relationships (social expansion) often involved emotional strain and the redefinition or loss of valued connections. For example, Paige described how implementing organizational change led to conflict with a close colleague, prompting her to distance herself. She framed the shift as healthier, though our notes reflected sadness and sacrifice. Her account illustrates how crafting for professional alignment and personal gain can come at the cost of work relationships, highlighting the emotional trade-offs involved.

Cycle 2—Taking back control of self

This Cycle captures how emerging identity conflict prompted participants to reassert control over their roles through avoidance-oriented crafting, such as work role reduction and withdrawal.

Identity tension: Identity conflict

Identity conflict describes the tension between multiple selves or between the self and the demands of others. The notion of needing to take control of one's own identity is commonly cited (Ashforth et al., 2000; Ibarra, 1999; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). In job crafting research, this need is particularly salient where individuals find themselves pulled between competing expectations and risk being defined by others. As Jane reflected, occupying the role required a continuous negotiation of position and self-definition:

> I've very much found obviously sitting in this role that actually I can't favour anything as such… I have to sort of be a bit sitting on the fence.
>
> (Jane)

There was a tension in how participants understood ownership of different aspects of themselves, as they were pulled between wanting to give everyone a voice, ensuring project success and letting go of personal passion projects. We observed a need to *manage expectations*, where different priorities or expectations produced conflict or were perceived as unrealistic. Organizationally imposed deliverables or unrealistic deadlines can lead individuals to perceive that their identity is at risk of being devalued, posing a threat to the self (Petriglieri, 2011). In our data, participants described an acute awareness that they would be held personally accountable for outcomes that depended on many others, and over which they did not have full control. As one participant reflected:

> that will be my worst nightmare if somebody says, 'I don't know quite where I'm going now'. I really will feel a failure if that happens
>
> (Sally).

Others became concerned that the priorities of the organization were becoming misaligned from their own—presenting a need to clarify their own position about what was possible and what could/should not be expected.

> If we're not careful you can cut too much money and lose sight of what we're actually trying to do… this is meant to be for the patients.
>
> (Jane)

Overall, we noticed a desire of participants to 'push back' against the imposed urgency of the change.

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Job crafting strategies to resolve identity conflict

To address identity conflict, participants relied on two forms of avoidance-oriented job crafting: work role reduction and withdrawal, through which they deliberately narrowed their role scope and distanced themselves from aspects of work that threatened coherence and legitimacy. Unlike the role expansion observed in Cycle 1, which was driven by ambiguity and a need to fit in, the crafting observed here reflected a protective response aimed at managing expectations and containing identity strain.

Work role reduction

Bruning and Campion (2018) define work role reduction as *'consciously, proactively, and systematically reducing the work role, work requirements, effort expenditures, or task accountability'* (p507). In our study, change manager roles expanded with unanticipated tasks, making work role reduction common after role expansion. From an identity perspective, work role reduction reshapes roles to align with a desired self-concept or priorities (Brown, 2022). We distinguish it from 'withdrawal,' as crafters focus on adjusting identity or boundaries, not disengaging. The individual seeks to maintain identity coherence while scaling down role demands.

For participants like Jane, the demand to remain neutral translated into the need to actively regulate what the role would absorb. Rather than disengaging, this involved selectively limiting the scope of initiatives taken on to sustain role coherence. As Jane explained:

> Sometimes it's a case of letting people run with ideas to a certain point and then having to say, actually, no, we can't do that now. I totally appreciate what you're trying to do, but that doesn't affect what we're moving. That's a change you might want to do in the future, but it's not part of this, and if we try to cover everything, then we won't deliver this properly.
>
> (Jane)

Job crafting included modifying structures, creating decision-making groups and hiring consultants. This avoided the demands of conflict between different stakeholder groups and created strategic alignment but also allowed participants to reduce the plurality of their identities, bringing them into alignment and reducing conflict.

> I was asking… how are we going to train [front line staff], how are we going to do all these types of things and so I kept raising it as an issue and then professional practice [eventually] responded and acknowledged that that was their domain… so then they brought in the consultant to start working on the plans.
>
> (Rachel)

Participants also tried to prioritize the organization's needs by positioning themselves as advocates. Examples include pointing out or actioning opportunities that would benefit the organization and managing the organization's reputation to outsiders by hiding conflict.

Withdrawal

Withdrawal refers to cognitive job crafting where an individual removes themselves from a person, situation or event (Bruning & Campion, 2018). Viewed through an identity lens, this involves a deliberate identity-focused distancing from specific aspects of work (mentally, emotionally or physically), without necessarily reducing overall role scope or formal responsibilities.

Participants quickly pointed out where they did not agree with the decisions or actions of representatives of the organization ('others') and made clear their own stance on an issue. Renkema et al. (2023) found that public professionals used job crafting to reduce the perceived pressure of public accountability in similar ways. Distancing from certain groups was common when employees feared organizational

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behaviour could reflect poorly on them. One participant appeared uncomfortable discussing an organizational goal and their role in achieving it:

> I mean, I think like anything in life, it's a combination of… it's the absence of some limiting factors, and it's a combination of some happy circumstances. Combined with, I… being… I hate… I don't like to do this, but basically some strategy.
>
> (Ian)

In this example, Ian described a staffing decision aimed at efficiency, which he predicted would provoke employee animosity. The quote reflects his discomfort representing the organization's efficiency-driven objectives. Anything that could be construed as prioritizing the organization over people, he tried to avoid admitting to as a means of protecting his identity from being associated with values he did not endorse (Petriglieri, 2011).

Participants addressed this tension by crafting a 'career project manager' identity, distinct from organizational goals. Rather than being a champion of the change initiative, they reframed themselves as 'delivering a project' designed and wanted by 'others' (Tucker & Cirella, 2018). They did this by cognitively crafting to compartmentalize their work on their project, downplaying their power and role in decision-making and framing their achievements in terms of transferable skills. This was exhibited in the way that individuals talked about the project, both to us and to others. For example, they were keen to claim ownership of the project—'my work', my ideas', 'my successes' (not the organization's), but later, the same individuals disengaged from the project—'my work is done', 'time to move on'. Participants used job crafting to gather resources to take forward (knowledge, learning, building a team):

> [talking about shifting focus] So for me, it's the post-implementations that I'm interested in, um, you know, how did we do, because we're starting to move into two other projects… so now it's gathering the lessons learnt… we'll be collecting all of this experience—what do we do next? So, um, so that's what… I will continue to do that now… just basically pick off lessons-learnt, so we can apply them to the next project.
>
> (Maise)

Consequences

Action taken to achieve work role reduction reinforced an identity oriented toward organizational objectives, prioritization, and delivery. However, as illustrated by Jane's account above, setting boundaries around what could and could not be taken on also carried potential identity costs. By limiting the scope of initiatives absorbed or deferring work deemed outside the immediate remit, individuals risked being perceived as less flexible or less engaged with wider strategic ambitions, which could undermine their visibility and recognition. This may affect their sense of legitimacy, particularly where commitment was associated with visible involvement across multiple areas of work. Additionally, narrowing one's scope in this way could limit opportunities for leadership or strategic involvement, constraining career progression and the development of a broader professional identity.

Withdrawal offered a way to manage discomfort and maintain a coherent sense of self, but it also introduced longer-term identity tensions. We see examples of participants working hard to preserve a distinct professional identity, yet this often came at the cost of connection to broader organizational narratives. For example, Ian's reluctance to associate himself with a staffing decision (above) simultaneously weakens his identification with the organization's mission. This disconnect makes it harder to sustain a sense of belonging or shared purpose, and over time may erode perceived legitimacy or reduce opportunities for recognition and advancement.

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Cycle 3—Living with ambiguity

This last Cycle captures a qualitatively different form of identity work in which participants, having already modified roles and relationships in earlier Cycles, turned inward to engage in introspective forms of approach crafting, such as metacognition and alternative value definitions, in order to actively construct meaning, sustain authenticity and live with tensions that could not be resolved through further behavioural change.

Identity tension: Lack of self-worth validation

This tension describes the internal conflict experienced when an individual's sense of self-worth is challenged by a lack of external recognition or misalignment between their self-concept and how they are perceived by others (Burke & Stets, 2009). This tension arises from the need to affirm one's intrinsic value while navigating external expectations by seeking validation, redefining roles or making contributions visible.

Participants experienced tension with the role when asked to perform tasks outside of their comfort zone, e.g., public speaking or strategy development. This experience makes misalignment salient: the tension between how a participant sees themselves and the internalized standards of how the role should be enacted (Burke & Stets, 2009). For example, Emily expressed a disconnect between where the real learning in the role had been achieved and what would be recognized.

> I think there's things that I will gain from, like, networking… but I wouldn't say that it was a success if I'd just done those things. I think I do have to deliver the project.
>
> (Emily)

Participants also expressed doubts about whether they were fulfilling the role adequately, which made them unsure about claiming ownership of their actions. This created a *need for recognition* from others, which would provide external cues that validate self-worth. Wrzesniewski and Dutton (2001) highlight the need for a positive self-image both in the eyes of oneself and in the eyes of others. Similarly, Meister et al. (2014) have highlighted how the potential of being misrepresented can cause a threat to identity.

When an individual's role is underappreciated, this triggers a *need to self-promote*. When feeling frustration, defensiveness and a desire to prove one's worth, self-promotion of their role can clarify expectations, reducing the identity conflict created by relational misalignment (Burke & Stets, 2009). Similarly, participants described that the work that they did was sometimes invisible to others (e.g., background support).

> There's only a few people who ever said to me, you know, couldn't have done it without you… sometimes you'd like somebody to say, yes, we've achieved what we needed to achieve.
>
> (Paul)

Work visibility and appreciation are salient to identity. The individual may feel that the role lacks external significance, leading to a reduced sense of connection and pride in the role (Burke & Stets, 2009).

Job crafting strategies to resolve lack of self-worth validation

To manage persistent self-worth validation tensions, participants engaged in two introspective forms of approach-oriented job crafting. While meta-cognition reflects a strategy identified by Bruning and Campion (2018), we also identify alternative value definitions as a novel form of job crafting through

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which individuals redefined what counted as value and success in their role, with important implications for identity sustainability.

Meta-cognition

Bruning and Campion (2018) distinguish meta-cognition from other forms of job crafting, arguing that it represents a purely cognitive manipulation of one's own psychological states. In our data this involved aligning psychological states with identity-related expectations and norms, such as managing thoughts, emotions and behaviours to sustain identity congruence.

We found individuals investing emotional energy in organizational goals and staking their reputation on project success. Below, Charlotte describes a big mindset change, when her good reputation was intertwined with the project; this became a powerful driver for her to accomplish the project well:

> … there was a big reservation [at first], I said, look, I know there's an element of risk, that if I don't deliver or there's conflict with another [stakeholder], then actually that might be something that doesn't look favourably on my CV… or my reputation. So it has been very key that my reputation has remained positive, because if I didn't deliver then, you know, that wouldn't be a good look.
>
> (Charlotte)

Other examples included reconceptualizing demands as opportunities for change, deadlines as momentum and detachment as creating space for creative innovation. Participants frequently engaged in reflexive sensemaking about who they could become within the role, experimenting with aspirational identity positions and evaluating whether these were seen as legitimate by others. Labels were important in this process, with participants describing themselves using terms such as 'leader', 'mentor' or 'mini project manager' as they explored possible future selves. Laura, for example, described pursuing a more strategic identity before reassessing it following feedback from a senior colleague:

> And there was talk at one point of me almost being a mini project manager of bringing in things like the [a new partner into the project]… so I pursued that for a bit and then when I spoke with [a senior colleague who is part of the project] and sort of said here's the data I've got and here's what I've seen and here's what I know and what I think and how we can help, and she sort of pooh-poohed the idea and said it's not really [this organization's] way.
>
> (Laura)

Laura's account illustrates how metacognitive crafting involved testing and revising possible identity positions. By exploring a 'mini project manager' role and then recalibrating her aspirations in response to feedback, she actively reshaped how she understood her contribution and future role within the project.

Alternative value definitions

In addition to the approach crafting types previously identified by Bruning and Campion (2018) we identified another form of job crafting: 'alternative value definitions'. This job crafting is a conscious expansion of the value propositions of the role (differing from expanding job remit—role expansion—or adjusting relationship boundaries—social expansion), including manipulation of identification, beyond altering one's psychological state or meta-cognition. Within this theme, we see multiple examples of job crafters seeking alternative ways of thinking about how their role adds special value, and making this new information a reality by going public. We found this most commonly when participants appeared mentally depleted within the identity narrative they had created for themselves. Often these alternative values appeared to be ego-sustaining, new ways of validating the self with visible actions that led to virtuous behaviour or serving a greater purpose. Examples include telling people within the organization

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about the underlying philosophy of the decisions being made and emphasizing who would benefit and why this was important.

> So it's a culture that is very cost-management, and as I kept explaining to everybody, my job is not to save money. My job is to spend the budget to get the best possible outcome… And as I said to [colleagues] one day, it's about a million overnight stays. So a million nights where it can change someone's life or not…
>
> (Drake)

Another individual described the opportunity to add value by representing the views of others, particularly underrepresented groups, within the organization, such as speaking out against organizational actions. By becoming a voice for others, they positioned themselves as the defender of those less powerful.

> So I took it probably too personally that it was my responsibility back to these people who had trusted me to be their voice, um, and so every decision every day was made with that mind-set that I owe it to them and that they trusted me to do this and I have to make it right for them. Especially fighting with construction about different things. It was like no, I'm not going to back… I'm not going to stand here after we open up and have them say, [Emily] decided that? No, no, no, no, no.
>
> (Emily)

By striving for a greater purpose, participants preserved a distinct and more sustained identity beyond their initial job role. They reframed their work to be something noble that they and others believed in.

Consequences

However, these forms of job crafting were not without their identity consequences. We found that metacognitive crafting, while supporting identity coherence, could introduce new tensions. Participants invested emotional energy in aligning with role expectations, but as Laura's account shows, this reconceptualization sometimes led to rejection. This highlights the emotional labour involved and the provisional nature of identity stability achieved through cognitive crafting.

Alternative value crafting introduced ethical strain. For example, we see that Emily positioning herself as a voice for others can lead to a deep sense of personal responsibility, which may result in burnout or frustration when systemic change is limited. Moreover, when these redefined values are not recognized by the organization, individuals may experience identity dissonance—discomfort arising from a misalignment between how we see ourselves and how we are seen or valued by others. This highlights the risk that such crafting may intensify rather than resolve underlying tensions of a lack of self-worth validation.

Dynamic relationships between crafting cycles

While the findings are organized around analytically distinct Cycles, participants' accounts suggest that these Cycles are not discrete stages that individuals pass through in a linear fashion. Table 3 presents three selected vignettes constructed from interview, diary, observational and documentary evidence, illustrating how identity tensions and crafting responses evolved across time and data sources, reflecting recurring patterns of identity tension and job crafting that may unfold over time, contingent on evolving role demands and organizational contexts. These are summarized below.

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TABLE 3 Dynamic relationships between crafting cycles.

Transition	Summary[a]	Illustrative quotations
Cycle 1 → Cycle 2 Jane	Jane entered her role at a time when expectations were unclear and the position itself was still taking shape. Although a formal job description was later developed, outlining a relatively broad but coherent divisional project management role, Jane had been recruited before this document was finalized and recalled that initial discussions about the position were 'a bit woolly'. Rather than relying on the formal role specification, she learned what was expected through interactions with colleagues and stakeholders, drawing on evolving social expectations to construct an understanding of the role. This contributed to early experiences of identity ambiguity and uncertainty about where her involvement should begin and end. Over time, this openness drew her into an expanding range of issues, relationships and responsibilities. As more people came to rely on her availability, the role began to absorb escalating demands, leaving little clarity about where her involvement should end. Jane gradually became aware that her willingness to accommodate multiple agendas had no natural limit, prompting a sense that the role could continue to grow indefinitely without clear containment.	*I did wonder about it because obviously I knew nothing about it. So I made a few enquiries as to what the role might be, which was a bit woolly, to be honest, at first, because these roles were being created. (Jane—Interview 1)* *The Divisional Project Manager will act as the principal link between the New Hospital Programme Team and the Emergency Care Division…* *DPM will:* • *Lead operational readiness activities for Emergency Care services transitioning into the new hospital…* *(Extracts from Jane's Job Description)* *At the beginning you very much felt that you were the one in the middle and it was very much a them and us situation. People realized they'd got somebody to go to from both parts, whether it be the trust or the new hospital development team. You very much felt like you were the one in the middle, trying to balance what both sides needed. (Jane—Interview 1)* *If I had come up with it and said, 'I'm going to go round to all the ambulance stations and speak to everyone', people would have said, really, you've got time for that? … where does it stop? (Jane—Interview 2)*
Cycle 2 → Cycle 3 Charlotte	Charlotte's role increasingly placed her across organizational boundaries, requiring her to navigate different expectations, governance structure and accountabilities. As these demands intensified, she began to feel stretched between being influential and remaining compliant with formal organizational processes. To cope, Charlotte selectively stepped back from certain tasks, delegating work and narrowing her direct involvement in order to manage capacity. While this helped contain the immediate workload, it also reduced her visibility and left her feeling insufficiently recognized for the scale and complexity of the role. Over time, Charlotte shifted how she sustained herself in the role, placing greater emphasis on protecting her reputation and redefining her contribution in terms of influence and credibility rather than task ownership or output.	*I think, within the [organization], I'm an influencer… you still need to run with our governance structures… so I'm just… that's still really difficult. And I think, with any integrated structure, you're going to have that. (Charlotte—Interview 1)* *I had to ask her to do a piece of work yesterday, that I have not got capacity to do… I'd love to be involved in that, I just have not got the capacity to do it. (Charlotte—Interview 2)* *I feel that I am well respected within my organization but not always recognized for the amount of demands that are now involved in this role. (Charlotte—diary entry)* *…it has been very key that my reputation has remained positive. (Charlotte—Interview 2)* *I'm much more of a voice and an influencer. (Charlotte—Interview 2)*

(Continues)

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TABLE 3 (Continued)

Transition	Summary[a]	Illustrative quotations
Cycle 1 → Cycle 3 Emily	Emily entered a role where expectations were formally defined but continually evolving in practice across multiple partner organizations. Much of her work quickly centred on negotiation, relationship management and responding to emerging project directions rather than on the tasks originally specified. As new partners, funding opportunities and strategic priorities surfaced, Emily's responsibilities expanded, and boundaries around the role became increasingly unclear. Alongside this growth, working relationships grew more strained as collaboration gave way to territorial behaviour and negotiation over ownership. Despite recognizing that many tasks lay beyond her remit, Emily continued to take them on as a pragmatic way to keep the work moving. Over time, the accumulation of demands and relational strain prompted her to reflect more deeply on what success and value meant in the role.	*I think naively I thought it would be more about the operational delivery… whereas actually 60% of my day is taken up with those people negotiations* (Emily—Interview 1). *Because I still work at the [host organization] offices I also get dragged into day-to-day stuff that has nothing to do with transformation… I've had to have a few conversations about, is this actually what I should be doing…?* (Emily—Interview 1) *[name of a partner] has been very involved in steering additional directions for the project… this has increased the level of responsibility. (Emily—diary entry)* *A lot of challenges have been down to personality and staff being territorial, wanting to 'own' the space. (Emily—diary entry)* *Sometimes I know it's not in my role, but I do it anyway… it's the best way to just get on and get things done. (Emily—Interview 2)* *So I took it probably too personally that it was my responsibility back to these people who had trusted me to be their voice, um and so every decision every day was made with that mind-set that I owe it to them and that they trusted me to do this, and I have to make it right for them. Especially fighting with construction about different things. It was like no, I'm not going to back… I'm not going to stand here after we open up and have them say, [Emily] decided that? No, no, no, no, no. (Emily—Interview 2)*

[a]Summary narratives drawn from interviews, diaries, observation field notes and documentary evidence.

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Cycle 1 → Cycle 2 (Jane)

Jane's vignette illustrates how attempts to resolve identity ambiguity through fitting in were associated with new forms of identity conflict over time (see Table 3). Faced with an initially ill-defined role, Jane responded by remaining open and responsive to emerging expectations, gradually expanding her involvement across stakeholder groups. While this accommodation reduced early uncertainty, it also produced Cycle 1 consequences, as escalating demands and blurred boundaries left her accountable for an ever-widening remit. Recognition of the unsustainability of this openness marked a critical transition point. As Jane became aware that continued expansion offered no natural stopping point, she began to experience identity conflict arising from competing expectations. In response, she shifted her job crafting strategy toward deliberate containment, redirecting demands and setting clearer limits on what the role would absorb. This movement from expansion to boundary setting captures a transition from Cycle 1 to Cycle 2, showing how ambiguity-reducing strategies can paradoxically generate new identity tensions rather than closure.

Cycle 2 → Cycle 3 (Charlotte)

Charlotte's story illustrates a transition from Cycle 2 to Cycle 3, showing how efforts to contain identity conflict through behavioural adjustment can give rise to new identity consequences over time (see Table 3). As her role spanned multiple organizational boundaries, Charlotte experienced persistent tension between influence and compliance, prompting a shift toward work role reduction and delegation to manage competing demands. While these containment strategies reduced immediate overload, they also carried unintended consequences, including diminished visibility and a sense of being under-recognized for the expanding expectations attached to the role. Rather than resolving this strain through further boundary narrowing, Charlotte turned inward, engaging in metacognitive reflection and alternative value definitions that emphasized reputation, influence and legitimacy. This transition marks a move from behavioural containment toward internally sustaining identity, illustrating how the consequences of attempting to reduce conflict were often associated with a move towards more symbolic forms of identity maintenance characteristic of Cycle 3.

Cycle 1 → Cycle 3 (Emily)

Emily's vignette illustrates a direct transition from Cycle 1 to Cycle 3, demonstrating how sustained role expansion can partially resolve identity ambiguity while simultaneously generating new tensions around recognition and self-worth (see Table 3). Faced with unclear and evolving expectations across partner organizations, Emily responded by continually extending her involvement, taking on negotiation, coordination and relational work beyond the formal remit of the role. While this expansion offered a pragmatic way to enact competence and maintain momentum, it also produced Cycle 1 consequences, including escalating expectations and increasingly strained working relationships. Unlike participants who shifted toward behavioural containment, Emily continued to expand her role even when acknowledging that tasks fell outside her responsibilities. Over time, the cumulative effects of expansion were reflected in a reorientation toward introspective job crafting, as Emily reframed what constituted success, value and contribution. This pathway highlights how responding to ambiguity can trigger direct movement into Cycle 3, bypassing sustained avoidance and underscoring the non-linear nature of the crafting cycles.

While the vignettes illustrate particular transition pathways, participants did not always move neatly between cycles. Emily repeatedly expanded her role to address ambiguity while also encountering renewed concerns about role boundaries and responsibilities, whereas Charlotte simultaneously managed tensions relating to capacity, influence, recognition and reputation. These examples suggest that

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participants often revisited or experienced multiple identity tensions concurrently rather than moving through the cycles in a linear or one-directional manner.

DISCUSSION

Drawing on qualitative data from 24 change management professionals across six organizations, this study reframes job crafting as a cyclical identity process characterized by persistent emotional strain, relational erosion and identity fatigue. Our findings show that job crafting frequently emerges in response to identity tensions and unfolds through repeated efforts to negotiate role expectations, legitimacy and self-understanding. Importantly, these efforts do not culminate in stable resolution. Instead, job crafting often provides only partial or temporary relief while simultaneously generating new identity tensions that require further management. In this sense, the dark side of job crafting lies not in particular forms of crafting, but in the persistent and emotionally demanding process of the identity work it entails.

Firstly, our findings suggest job crafting is not solely a proactive behaviour aimed at enhancing job fit or performance, but a reactive strategy employed in response to identity tensions (Ashforth et al., 2008; Petriglieri, 2011). Participants engaged in crafting to maintain a coherent sense of self amid shifting expectations, emotionally charged environments and unclear role boundaries. This extends prior research

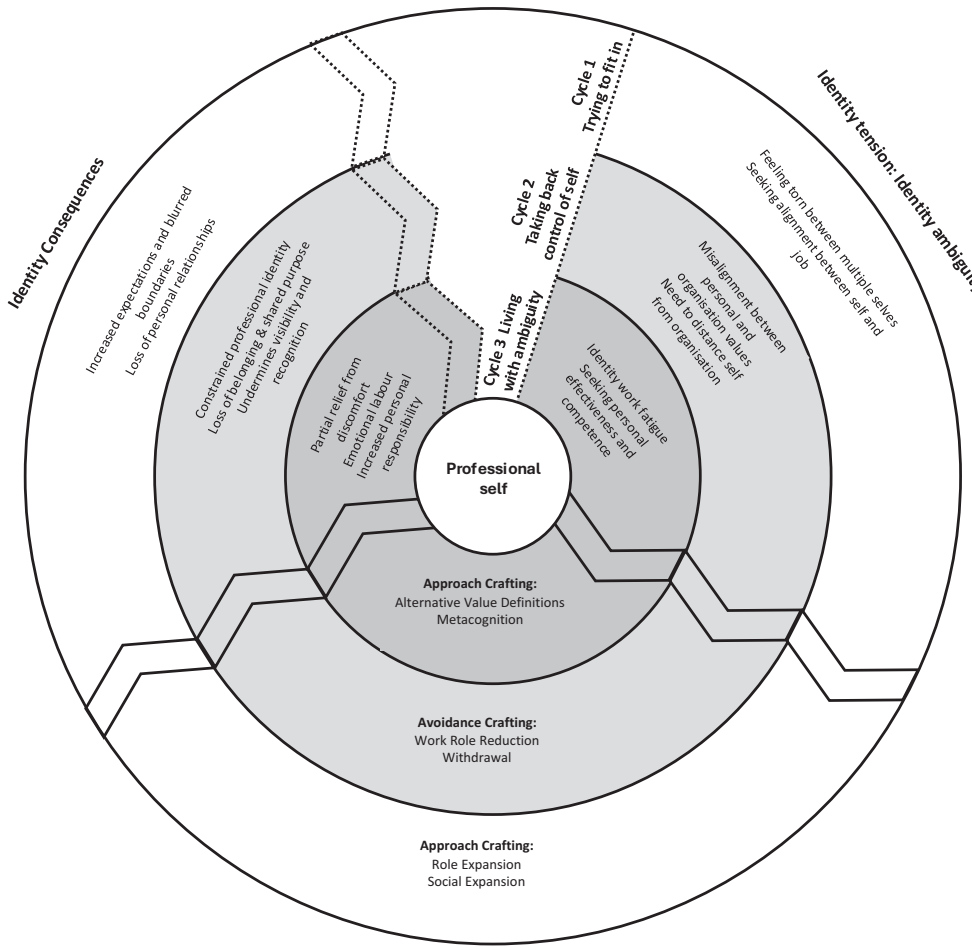


FIGURE 1 Cycles of identity management through job crafting.

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on job crafting motivations (Liang et al., 2023; Niessen et al., 2016; Wang et al., 2024; Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001;) by showing that crafting is driven by a desire to resolve identity tensions rather than solely optimizing work conditions. In this way, job crafting becomes a form of emotional and relational labour, shaped by affective dimensions that are frequently overlooked in existing models such as anxiety, fear and disillusionment.

Our findings also offer insight into why particular identity tensions become associated with different crafting orientations. Bruning and Campion (2018) distinguish between approach-oriented crafting, directed toward achieving desired goals and expanded possibilities and avoidance-oriented crafting, directed towards preventing or reducing undesirable conditions. Our findings suggest that identity tensions help explain when and why individuals move toward one orientation rather than the other. Consistent with identity research suggesting that ambiguity motivates sensemaking and the search for viable identity referents (Corley & Gioia, 2004), participants responded through approach-oriented crafting strategies such as role and social expansion that enabled them to gather information, establish relationships and construct a more coherent sense of self. In contrast, for identity conflict, the challenge was not exploration but self-protection. In line with Bruning and Campion's (2018) theorization of avoidance crafting as prevention-focused, participants engaged in work role reduction and withdrawal to protect valued identity claims and limit exposure to conflicting demands. Finally, tensions related to self-worth validation differed from both ambiguity and conflict because participants had already established a provisional role identity but struggled to sustain its legitimacy. In response, they engaged in more introspective forms of approach-oriented crafting through metacognition and alternative value definitions, seeking not to expand behavioural boundaries but to reconstruct the meaning and value attached to their work. In this way, our findings extend existing job crafting theory by suggesting that crafting orientations are not simply alternative behavioural choices but identity-regulation responses shaped by the particular tension individuals are attempting to resolve (Bindl et al., 2019; Bruning & Campion, 2018).

Building on Lazazzara et al.'s (2020) process model and calls for more dynamic conceptualizations of job crafting (Zhang & Parker, 2019), our findings suggest that job crafting operates as an ongoing identity-management process. Whereas prior process models emphasize how motivations, context and crafting behaviours generate outcomes, we show how job crafting operates as an ongoing identity-management process (Pratt, 2000), creating cycles of identity struggle that rarely achieve lasting resolution. Consistent with identity work research, identities are continuously reconstructed through iterative sensemaking (Corley & Gioia, 2004; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003) and experimentation with provisional selves (Ibarra, 1999). We show how job crafting becomes a primary means through which this identity work is enacted in contemporary change-oriented roles.

Consistent with a process perspective, the three cycles identified in Figure 1 are not conceptualized as a developmental sequence through which individuals progressively advance (Langley, 1999). Instead, they represent alternative and contingent identity pathways that emerge in response to evolving identity tensions and the consequences of prior crafting efforts. The cycles identified here therefore represent recurring identity dynamics.

Rather than producing resolution, job crafting was often experienced as redirecting identity work inward over time (with Cycle 3 being the closest to a unique sense of professional self). For many participants, behavioural crafting strategies used in Cycles 1 and 2 to negotiate tasks, boundaries or relationships eventually gave way to more introspective forms of crafting, such as metacognition and alternative value definitions, aimed at sustaining a viable sense of self amid unresolved tensions. Although our data tended to show progression from outer cycles inward, we did see participants revisiting earlier cycles; several accounts suggested movement between ambiguity, conflict and self-worth concerns as role expectations evolved. Accordingly, we argue that movement between cycles may occur in multiple directions, with periods of apparent identity stability (represented in the empty space at the top of Figure 1), giving way to renewed tensions which begin another cycle and prompt further crafting.

This shift highlights how individuals continue to invest identity labour even when prior crafting has failed to deliver lasting alignment, reinforcing the cyclical nature of job crafting as ongoing identity

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management. Taken together, these dynamics help explain why job crafting is experienced as cyclical rather than episodic. This process-oriented account better captures the lived experience of change-oriented roles and the identity work they demand.

The model therefore foregrounds the dark side of job crafting not as a deviation, but as a constitutive feature of identity-driven work. Emotional labour, relational erosion and identity fatigue are not merely outcomes of crafting but key drivers of ongoing movement between cycles. While prior research has often associated negative experiences primarily with avoidance-oriented crafting (e.g., Lazazzara et al., 2020; Rofcanin et al., 2019) and increasingly highlighted social and relational costs of crafting (Dong et al., 2023; Renkema et al., 2023), our analysis demonstrates that approach-oriented strategies, frequently celebrated as proactive and empowering (Berg et al., 2013; Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001), can also intensify identity strain by escalating expectations, accountability and relational exposure. In this sense, no single crafting orientation constitutes the 'dark side' of job crafting. Rather, the darker aspect lies in the persistent effort to sustain a viable and legitimate sense of self through repeated crafting attempts that rarely deliver lasting resolution.

A further contribution of this study is the identification of 'alternative value definitions' as a distinct and uniquely symbolic form of job crafting. While all forms of crafting identified in this study are rooted in identity management, alternative value crafting focuses on reconstructing the meaning of work itself, rather than adjusting how work is done or with whom. This form of crafting reflects a deeper engagement with the symbolic and ethical dimensions of identity (Driver, 2025; Liang et al., 2023) and aligns with recent calls to understand crafting beyond task modification and in relation to broader identity domains (De Bloom et al., 2020; Ho et al., 2024). We find that it allows individuals to preserve authenticity and coherence in contexts where their personal values are in conflict with expected work norms (Brown, 2022). It resonates with what Pratt (2000) describes as identity enrichment or identity customization—processes through which individuals actively reshape their roles and associated identities to maintain relevance, legitimacy or influence. In this view, individuals do not merely adapt to roles but actively redefine their significance, often in response to internal tensions or external pressures. By symbolically reconceptualizing aspects of job crafting, we introduce emotional and ethical strain and illustrate the depth of identity work needed in sustaining a meaningful professional self.

While the findings were derived from change management professionals operating in contexts characterized by ongoing transformation, ambiguity and evolving expectations, we do not suggest that the identified cycles are unique to change-oriented roles. Rather, change management provided a particularly revealing context in which identity tensions and job crafting processes became highly visible. Such roles are frequently newly created, loosely defined and shaped by multiple stakeholder expectations (Tucker et al., 2015; Tucker & Cirella, 2018), increasing the likelihood of identity ambiguity and legitimacy concerns (Corley & Gioia, 2004; Murphy & Kreiner, 2020). We therefore expect similar dynamics may emerge in other contexts where role boundaries are contested, expectations are shifting or identities are under negotiation. However, the frequency, intensity and form of these cycles may differ in more stable and institutionalized roles, where clearer role expectations and established identity referents may reduce the salience of identity tensions. Future research should therefore explore the boundary conditions of the model across different occupational and organizational settings.

CONCLUSION

This study found that both approach- and avoidance-oriented strategies generate unintended identity consequences that influence how participants approach subsequent crafting attempts, locating the dark side of job crafting in the ongoing work of identity management rather than in any single strategy. Because crafting rarely delivers closure, it becomes emotionally demanding and often depleting over time. Our findings highlight that crafting offers temporary relief but may intensify identity tensions,

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underscoring the need to understand job crafting as a dynamic process of shaping work and sustaining a viable sense of self.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Danielle A. Tucker: Conceptualization; investigation; writing – original draft; methodology; validation; writing – review and editing; formal analysis; project administration. **Jane Hendy:** Conceptualization; writing – review and editing; methodology.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to thank the organizations that supported this research and facilitated access to participants. We are especially grateful to all participants who generously shared their experiences and insights. We also thank the Associate Editor and two anonymous reviewers for their thoughtful and constructive feedback, which helped to strengthen and improve the manuscript.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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How to cite this article: Tucker, D. A., & Hendy, J. (2026). Crafting and recrafting the self: Cycles of identity struggle in job crafting. *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, *99*, e70159. https://doi.org/10.1111/joop.70159

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