

Bad Behaviors Because of a Dead-end Job?

Effects of Career Plateau on Counterproductive Work Behaviors

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Abstract: Career advancement offers employee motivation, but what happens when an upward path reaches a plateau? With a three-wave survey of 244 members of 58 work teams, the current study explores how and when career plateaus influence counterproductive work behaviors (CWBs), in accordance with negative reciprocity theory. The results show that, at the individual level, individual job content plateau relates positively to individual CWB, through individual work alienation; individual task crafting weakens this mediating effect. At the team level, team hierarchical plateau relates positively to team CWBs through team work alienation, and team participation in decision-making weakens this mediating effect. This multi-level perspective establishes both theoretical contributions and practical implications.

Keywords: Job content plateau; Hierarchical plateau; Work alienation; Task crafting; Participation in decision-making; Counterproductive work behaviors

Introduction

Career development is crucial to most employees' work lives, serving as a means to meet material needs and a key source of psychological fulfillment, linked to achievement, self-worth, and self-esteem (Godshalk & Fender, 2015). However, certain organizational contexts significantly constrain individual career growth (McCleese et al., 2007). Downsizing and restructuring often result in fewer senior positions, which implies diminished opportunities for the internal promotion of existing employees (Chao, 1990). If they are unwilling to leave their current roles or pursue opportunities in external job markets, such employees may find themselves remaining in their current positions for extended periods (Xie et al., 2015), during which they likely master all necessary skills and knowledge, such that their jobs might become monotonous and unchallenging (McCleese & Eby, 2006). When they reach these career plateaus, employees face diminished prospects for both vertical advancement and lateral movement in their careers.

Career plateaus can be categorized as either job content plateaus or hierarchical plateaus. The former occurs when employees perceive a lack of future challenges or new responsibilities in their current role (McCleese et al., 2007); the latter implies that the employee has few chances for promotion. Both types represent undesirable experiences (McCleese & Eby, 2006), associated with the risk of greater emotional exhaustion (Wang et al., 2014) and lower job satisfaction (Lee, 2003). Despite their prevalence in organizations, studies of the detrimental effects of career plateaus remain limited and incomplete though. First, prior studies tend to focus on the implications of career plateaus for employees' attitudes and behaviors, in accordance with the theory of work adjustment or conservation of resources theory (Hurst et al., 2017; Xie et al., 2015). Few investigations consider the mechanisms through which career plateaus lead to detrimental outcomes from the perspective of negative reciprocity—an important gap, in that traditional social exchange theory emphasizes positive reciprocity, whereas negative reciprocity theory addresses how people respond to unfavorable treatment (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). In particular, it predicts that perceptions of mistreatment or lack of recognition can prompt negative behaviors, as employees effectively attempt to “return injuries” rather than seek mutual benefits (Gouldner, 1960). They regard retaliation as a justifiable response to perceived unfavorable treatment (Eisenberger et al., 2004). We argue that because career plateaus cause employees to believe their efforts are being unvalued or inadequately recognized or rewarded by their companies (Cropanzano et al., 2017), they can foster beliefs that reflect a negative reciprocity view.

Second, research on career plateaus often prioritizes the individual level (Godshalk & Fender, 2015; McCleese et al., 2007), without acknowledging the dynamics of career plateaus within teams. Notably, job content plateaus can best be understood at the individual level, due to their association with personal factors, such as professional growth opportunities, skill development, and job challenges, which vary across individuals (McKee-Ryan & Harvey, 2011). Hierarchical plateaus instead might be examined more effectively at the team level, where members collectively develop concerns about limited promotion opportunities. The resulting “team hierarchical plateau” can create the shared perception that vertical promotion prospects are limited. To explore the effects of career plateaus on counterproductive work behaviors (CWBs) at both the individual (job content plateaus) and team (hierarchical plateaus) levels, we again turn to negative reciprocity theory. In detail, we propose that job content plateaus lead to negative reciprocity beliefs, because employees perceive their treatment unfavorably. This negative experience then prompts a sense of psychological separation from work (Banai et al., 2004), or

individual work alienation, which induces individual CWBs. Similarly, team-level hierarchical plateaus create a collective sense of work alienation, driving team members to engage collectively in bad behaviors, in the form of team CWBs.

Beyond specifying how career plateaus might lead to CWBs, identifying strategies to mitigate their detrimental effects is equally crucial. Both individual job content plateaus and team hierarchical plateaus can cause individual employees and teams, respectively, to perceive mistreatment by the organization, which in turn must implement efforts and strategies to provide positive reinforcement and support. Again in line with negative reciprocity theory, if career plateaus foster work alienation, the individuals and teams might view CWBs as justified responses to the negative treatment (Eisenberger et al., 2004). However, if individual employees and work teams perceive that their organization is being attentive to their needs, they likely experience less negative reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960), which weakens the detrimental effects of career plateaus on CWBs. For example, empowering employees to engage in new tasks, through strategic, individual task crafting, can reduce feelings of powerlessness and meaninglessness (Tims et al., 2013) and thereby buffer the negative effects of individual job content plateaus. Giving teams greater control over decisions (Fernandez, 2013) and involving them in decision-making processes similarly might alleviate the negative reciprocity associated with team hierarchical plateaus.

In testing these predictions, the current study makes five primary contributions. First, we build on negative reciprocity theory to examine the relationship between career plateaus and CWBs, and this novel theoretical perspective provides new insights into the behavioral consequences of career plateaus. Second, this study extends understanding of career plateaus at both individual and team levels, such that we both explore the effects of job content plateaus at the individual level and propose hierarchical plateaus as a team-level phenomenon, on the basis of negative reciprocity theory. Third, our study elucidates mediating roles of individual and team work alienation and clarifies how individual job content plateaus and team hierarchical plateaus indirectly influence CWBs. In so doing, we address Lapalme et al.'s (2009) call for deeper explorations of the psychological processes by which career plateaus lead to specific outcomes. Fourth, this study reveals boundary conditions of the influence path of individual job content plateaus, by identifying the moderating role of individual task crafting. Individual job content plateaus require specific strategies (i.e., individual task crafting) to buffer their negative effects on attitudes and behaviors. Fifth and finally, we highlight conditions in which team participation in decision-making can moderate the effects of a team hierarchical plateau and thereby provide fresh ideas for how organizations can counteract the negative outcomes of team-level plateaus. Accordingly, this study underscores the need for organizations to adopt tailored strategies to address the challenges created by both types of plateaus.

Theory and Hypotheses

Career Plateaus and Counterproductive Work Behaviors

Career plateaus represent stagnation in professional growth and take two primary forms: job content plateaus and hierarchical plateaus (Yang et al., 2019). A job content plateau occurs when an individual employee feels trapped in an existing role, without access to new challenges or responsibilities (McCleese et al., 2007). This type of plateau is particularly relevant at the individual level, due to its close relation to personal characteristics (McKee-Ryan & Harvey, 2011). Different workers have varying opportunities for professional growth, which influence their likelihood of experiencing a job content plateau (McCleese & Eby, 2006). In particular, more talented employees

may be more prone to boredom and thus more likely to encounter a job content plateau compared with their less talented peers (Hofstetter & Cohen, 2014).

People innately aspire to succeed, and promotions offer key indicators of employees' value and contributions to an organization (Lee, 2003). However, if employees perceive few opportunities for upward mobility within the organization (Chao, 1990; McCleese et al., 2007), they experience hierarchical plateaus, which likely manifest at the team level, particularly in organizations with relatively flat structures that limit internal promotion opportunities (Chao, 1990). In such a setting, team members might collectively recognize the limited prospects for career advancement and experience a team hierarchical plateau, that is, a shared cognitive understanding that vertical promotion opportunities are restricted.

Both types of plateaus can be associated with negative attitudes and behaviors, by individuals and teams. For example, employees experiencing job content plateaus might feel exploited by their organizations' knowledge exchange processes, and in response, they might engage in knowledge hiding (Hu et al., 2023). If they confront hierarchical plateaus, team members also might exhibit passive efforts to minimize their perceived losses due to limited promotion opportunities (Jing et al., 2024). In particular, CWBs, defined as voluntary actions that violate organizational and social norms (Robinson & Bennett, 1995; Spector & Fox, 2002), represent common negative responses to career plateaus. Studies show that various perceived workplace stressors and negative emotions can lead to CWBs (Penney et al., 2011), and employees sometimes use CWBs to retaliate against unfavorable work environments (Ariani, 2013). If they perceive that their employer is treating them unfairly, employees may be even more likely to exhibit CWBs in response.

In further detail, when they reach an individual job content plateau, employees likely perceive their daily work as monotonous and unchallenging (McCleese et al., 2007) and feel overqualified for their current roles (McKee-Ryan & Harvey, 2011). These plateaus function as significant barriers to career progression, to which people might respond by exhibiting withdrawal behaviors in the workplace (Shafique & Jamil, 2023). According to negative reciprocity theory, unfavorable treatment leads employees to develop negative reciprocity beliefs, which drives them to engage in CWBs (Gouldner, 1960); when these negative reciprocity beliefs are particularly strong, people likely seek retaliation (Mitchell & Ambrose, 2007). Accordingly, we propose that when employees experience job content plateaus, the resulting boredom and sense of being undervalued lead them to believe that the organization is neglecting their need for skill development and meaningful responsibilities (McCleese & Eby, 2006). Their perception of such negative treatment fosters negative reciprocity norms (Gouldner, 1960) that prompt employees to withdraw from required tasks and engage in individual CWBs (Eisenberger et al., 2004).

The dynamics within teams also tend to be shaped by perceived opportunities for growth available within an organization. A team hierarchical plateau arises if most team members perceive limited chances for advances in status, power, or influence within the organization (Wen & Xiao, 2012). With their sense of stagnation, team members collectively develop negative attitudes toward the organization, potentially resulting in CWBs at the team level, including both unintentional and intentional actions that harm the organization, as driven by collective discontent within the team (Carpenter et al., 2021). Theoretically, the employment relationship is fundamentally transactional, and both material and psychological rewards can serve as foundations for employee motivation (Gouldner, 1960). Integrating negative reciprocity theory, which stems from social exchange theory (Gouldner, 1960; Lin et al., 2004), we argue that when a team reaches a hierarchical plateau, the

team members perceive that the lack of recognition for their efforts is a breach of the reciprocity principle, because their contributions are not properly acknowledged (Cropanzano et al., 2017). This perceived inequity and unmet expectations foster negative reciprocity beliefs, leading to resentment and disengagement from the organization's interests. Instead of striving toward organizational goals, team members contemplate CWBs, as a form of collective retaliation. As such, we propose:

H1a: Individual job content plateaus relate positively to individual CWBs.

H1b: Team hierarchical plateaus relate positively to team CWBs.

Mediating Role of Work Alienation

Career plateaus might lead to both individual and collective CWBs, but a key psychological factor that also underlies such behaviors is work alienation, which emerges due to a misalignment between the needs of individuals or teams and the environment in which they work. Defined as a "state of psychological separation from work insofar as work is perceived to lack the potentiality for satisfying one's salient needs and expectations" (Banai, et al., 2004, p. 3), work alienation highlights the disconnect between an employee's perception of his or her work environment and that person's own intrinsic needs, such as personal values, desires, and well-being (Nasurdin et al., 2004). Work alienation arises if employees believe they lack control over their work processes and cannot express themselves meaningfully in their work roles (Jiang et al., 2017). We predict, in line with negative reciprocity theory, that employees who perceive unfavorable treatment from their organizations and develop negative reciprocity beliefs also can experience a psychological separation from work (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). That is, work alienation often stems from factors such as monotonous tasks, limited job autonomy, or changes in the organizational structure that foster feelings of powerlessness, meaninglessness, isolation, or self-estrangement (DiPietro & Pizam, 2008). Research also reveals a link between work alienation and diminished motivation, which leads to disengagement and increases the risk of deviant behaviors in response to perceived unfavorable treatment (Hirschfeld & Feild, 2000; Hirschfeld et al., 2000).

If employees who have reached job content plateaus develop feelings of work alienation, in reaction to the perceived injustice (Banai et al., 2004; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005), they also might seek to "right the balance" by retaliating (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005) for the boredom and sense of meaninglessness they feel, due to the lack of opportunities for personal and professional development (McKee-Ryan & Harvey, 2011). Stagnation also diminishes employees' beliefs that their work contributes to broader organizational goals (Hirschfeld & Feild, 2000). A diminished sense of purpose can prompt withdrawal from both work environments and social interactions in the workplace. In such a state of disengagement, employees likely engage in individual CWBs, as a form of retaliation; previous research establishes a direct relationship between work alienation and CWBs (Li & Chen, 2018). Finally, engaging in individual CWBs represents a coping mechanism that individual employees can use to alleviate the psychological stress and negative emotional states that occur with work alienation (Bushman et al., 2001; Reynolds et al., 2015).

Extending the concept of individual work alienation to the team level, we predict that a team hierarchical plateau undermines morale and motivation, because team members believe their contributions are undervalued or that the organization has neglected their professional interests (Weng et al., 2010). According to negative reciprocity theory, a sense of receiving unfavorable treatment leads team members to adopt negative work attitudes and behaviors (Eisenberger et al.,

2004; Gouldner, 1960). If team members also sense a lack of control and become disillusioned with their career prospects, due to insufficient advancement opportunities (Wen & Xiao, 2012), this apparent inequity can foster collective beliefs that employees are treated unfairly. This collective mindset often results in team work alienation, a shared form of psychological disengagement that reflects the perception that the employer fails to meet the team's collective needs and expectations.

As a negative collective attitude, team work alienation typically leads to destructive reactions (Hodson & Sullivan, 2012). For example, team members might reduce their efforts or act out of self-interest, to cope with perceived mistreatment (Felps et al., 2009). Once team work alienation takes hold, maintaining positive, collaborative interactions throughout the team also becomes increasingly difficult. In such environments, team members likely engage in team CWB, as a form of retaliation (Spector & Fox, 2002). We propose:

H2a: Individual work alienation mediates the positive relationship between individual job content plateaus and individual CWBs.

H2b: Team work alienation mediates the positive relationship between team hierarchical plateaus and team CWBs.

Moderating Role of Individual Task Crafting

Even if career plateaus can lead to work alienation and CWBs, employees are not simply passive in the face of such challenges. With a proactive approach, such as task crafting, employees can reshape their work environment in ways that might mitigate feelings of alienation. Task crafting entails altering job boundaries by changing the number, scope, or type of tasks for which an employee is responsible, in ways that better align with their personal preferences and strengths (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). If it empowers employees to engage in task crafting, the organization can help ensure that their roles align with employees' self-images and competencies, especially if the jobs risk failing to meet their psychological needs (Withey & Cooper, 1989; Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). Task crafting also can serve as a direct response strategy people adopt when seeking to enhance their self-images (Lin et al., 2017). As a positive behavioral orientation, individual task crafting might include expanding the task scope, redefining job goals, or generating new procedures (Grant & Ashford, 2008). Because these actions add complexity to a job, they allow employees to assume greater responsibilities and, in turn, increase their perceptions of the value of their work and their sense of meaning. Furthermore, task crafting helps employees showcase their abilities and regain a sense of control (Lin et al., 2017; Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). Thus, it constitutes an effective strategy for reducing perceptions of work alienation (Tims et al., 2013), particularly at a job content plateau. Instead of passively accepting their monotonous work, employees proactively reshape their roles, which may prevent negative perceptions from taking root.

Organizations have a critical function in promoting task crafting; they must create conditions that encourage employees to apply their skills (Lin et al., 2017). That is, individual task crafting is not solely a personal initiative; it also requires organizational support. For employees facing job content plateaus, the freedom to engage in task crafting means they can align their job characteristics with their personal strengths and preferences, leading to greater job autonomy and person-job fit (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005). By seeking more challenging tasks or taking on additional responsibilities, employees can maintain their personal motivation and avoid the boredom that often accompanies stagnant roles (Kim et al., 2018). The opportunity to engage in task crafting also

signals that the organization values their needs for self-realization and job meaning, because it gives them a means to express their values through their work (Kira & Balkin, 2014). According to negative reciprocity theory then, individual task crafting might offset the negative effects of individual job content plateaus by reducing perceptions of unfavorable treatment, minimizing negative reciprocity beliefs, and buffering against individual work alienation (Li & Chen, 2018). In contrast, if organizations discourage individual task crafting, negative reciprocity beliefs likely persist, making it more difficult for employees to remain engaged in their work (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). With this reasoning, we propose:

H3: Individual task crafting moderates the positive relationship between individual job content plateaus and individual work alienation, such that the relationship is stronger (weaker) among employees who engage in lower (higher) levels of task crafting.

In addition to its moderation of direct effects, individual task crafting might function as a moderating mechanism that influences how individual job content plateaus lead to CWBs, through individual work alienation. When employees experience a job content plateau, they may recognize that their current role fails to leverage all their skills and forces them to function in a job that falls below their working capacity (McKee-Ryan & Harvey, 2011). This situation often prompts a perception that the organization neglects employees' needs for self-realization, esteem, and meaningful work, resulting in feelings of individual work alienation (Hirschfeld & Feild, 2000). In turn, employees may be more inclined to exhibit individual CWBs, as a way to both retaliate and avoid further exploitation (Penney et al., 2011).

Through individual task crafting, especially when supported by the organization, employees instead can reshape their roles and fully leverage their strengths (Lin et al., 2017). According to negative reciprocity theory, such favorable treatment from the organization, in the form of allocations of autonomy to craft their own tasks, disrupts the negative cycle of reciprocity (Gallucci & Perugini, 2003). A high level of individual task crafting, such as expanding their own task scope and taking on more challenging responsibilities, enables employees to find greater meaning and autonomy in their work (Vogel et al., 2016), thereby alleviating perceptions of unfavorable treatment stemming from job content plateaus, reducing individual work alienation, and evoking fewer instances of individual CWBs (Hirschfeld et al., 2000; Spector & Fox, 2002). Conversely, when employees cannot engage in task crafting, the negative reciprocity beliefs triggered by job content plateaus persist, preventing any significant reduction in individual work alienation. This lack of relief then might increase individual CWBs among employees who continue to feel exploited by the organization. As such, we propose:

H4: Individual task crafting moderates the mediating effect of individual work alienation on the relationship between individual job content plateaus and individual CWBs, such that the mediating effect of individual work alienation is stronger (weaker) among individuals who engage in lower (higher) levels of task crafting.

Moderating Role of Team Participation in Decision-Making

Individual task crafting might help mitigate the effects of job content plateaus at the individual level; we posit that participation in decision-making serves as a critical moderator at the team level, able to buffer against the negative effects of team hierarchical plateaus. Participation in decision-making refers to the extent to which individual members are involved in organizational decisions (Han et al., 2010), which implies that the organization shares power with employees, a scenario that likely satisfies their growth needs, enhances their perceived job control, and reinforces their

sense of identity within the organization (Han et al., 2010; Tremblay & Roger, 2004). A high level of decision-making participation means that employees can express their thoughts and ideas, which they likely interpret as a sign of organizational support and attention (Tremblay & Roger, 2004). Such perceived support strengthens their connection to the organization and boosts their motivation to perform well (Masterson & Stamper, 2010). Previous studies also show that such participation offers a valuable means to manage the negative effects of job stressors (Somech & Drach-Zahavy, 2013).

Although participation in decision-making might be addressed at an individual level, it can operate at the team level, especially in contexts where collaboration is essential (Narayan & Ployhart, 2013). Team decision-making participation significantly influences team dynamics and performance, such that we predict that even if team members experience a hierarchical plateau, being included in decision-making processes grants them some sense of control and career success (Gattiker & Larwood, 1986; Tremblay & Roger, 2004).

As a signal of the organization's favorable treatment, decision-making participation indicates both investment and trust (Fernandez, 2013). Through their involvement, team members can access resources relevant to their roles, which should mitigate the formation of negative reciprocity beliefs (Perugini et al., 2003). Specifically, at high levels of team participation in decision-making, most team members share organizational rights, which fosters a sense of responsibility, predictability, and efficacy (Aryee & Chen, 2006). The enhanced sense of control also undermines feelings of unfavorable treatment that often accompany a hierarchical plateau (Pierce et al., 2001). According to negative reciprocity theory, team participation in decision-making communicates organizational recognition and support, which can offset the negative effects of limited promotion opportunities and thereby reduce the likelihood of retaliatory behaviors. In contrast, at low levels of team participation in decision-making, a team hierarchical plateau likely amplifies the belief that team members' limited responsibilities also reflect a lack of organizational rewards and recognition (McCleese et al., 2007). This perception would exacerbate negative reciprocity beliefs and team work alienation (Banai & Reisel, 2007). Therefore, we propose:

H5: Team participation in decision-making moderates the positive relationship between the team hierarchical plateau and team work alienation, such that the relationship is stronger (weaker) when team participation in decision-making is lower (higher).

In addition, we postulate that team participation in decision-making has a crucial moderating role in shaping how team hierarchical plateaus lead to CWBs through team work alienation. When a team faces a hierarchical plateau, and its members believe the organization is neglecting their need for advancement, their negative reciprocity beliefs likely emerge (Wen & Xiao, 2012) and lead to increased work alienation that escalates into retaliatory behaviors, such as team CWBs, in the team members' efforts to regain control and resist exploitation (Spector & Fox, 2002). Substantial team participation in decision-making should mitigate these negative effects. If team members participate actively in decision-making processes, they perceive greater organizational support and gain status, in the form of shared decision-making rights (Somech & Drach-Zahavy, 2013). The negative reciprocity beliefs triggered by a team hierarchical plateau thus might diminish, due to team members' experienced sense of fairness and inclusion. As predicted by negative reciprocity theory, diminished negative reciprocity beliefs should lead to lower work alienation and decreased team CWBs too (Spector & Fox, 2002).

Team participation in significant strategic and political decisions might lessen frustrations

associated with hierarchical plateaus. In contrast, low levels of participation in decision-making leave team members less equipped to counteract the unequal dynamics and negative reciprocity beliefs that arise from the hierarchical plateau. This situation can exacerbate feelings of team work alienation and also team CWBs (Robinson & Bennett, 1995). We thus propose the following hypothesis:

H6: Team participation in decision-making moderates the mediating effect of team work alienation on the relationship between team hierarchical plateaus and team CWBs, such that the mediating effect of team work alienation is stronger (weaker) when team participation in decision-making is lower (higher).

Insert Figure 1 about Here

Method

Participants and Procedures

We collected time-lagged data from employees and supervisors employed by five manufacturing firms in China. According to the 2022 Key Industries Pay Trend Guide report, blue-collar workers in China's manufacturing sector exhibit higher turnover rates of 29.4%, and blocked career development represents one of the main reasons for such trends. Only some proportion of people who experience career plateaus actually leave, so the true prevalence of career plateaus likely is greater and may encompass the team level. Therefore, we included all blue-collar workers who had worked as full-time employees for at least half a year in the sample. We distributed questionnaires onsite, after a regular monthly meeting, and we informed potential participants that their responses would be kept confidential and that they could leave the study at any time.

The data collection spanned three time points. At Time 1, we gathered data on individual job content plateaus, team hierarchical plateaus, individual task crafting, and team participation in decision-making. One month later (Time 2), the same employees provided data about individual/team work alienation. Then, one more month later (Time 3), supervisors rated individual/team CWBs. We distributed 400 questionnaires at Time 1; the matched sample consisted of 244 employees assigned to 58 teams at Time 3. Thus, the valid response rate is 61%. Among the employees, 91 were men (37.295%), and 153 were women (62.705%). Their average age was 29.652 years ($SD = 6.274$), and the average job tenure was 6.796 years ($SD = 6.346$). Employees with a high school degree or below accounted for 3.300% of the sample, those with an associate's degree represented 30.700%, those with a bachelor's degree accounted for 55.700%, and those with a master's degree or above involved 10.200% of the sample. The average team size was 10.836 members ($SD = 9.094$), and average team member diversity (i.e., the standard deviation of age divided by the mean age at the team level) was .134 ($SD = .080$).

Measures

The scales in the survey all were well-established by previous studies. We performed translation and back-translation procedures to ensure the accuracy of the scales. The items used Likert-type scales, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), with the exception of individual task crafting, for which we used a Likert-type frequency scale ranging from 1 (hardly ever) to 5 (very often).

Individual job content and team hierarchical plateaus. Employees reported their perceptions of individual job content plateaus on a 6-item scale developed by Milliman (1992). A sample item is "Job tasks are boring for me." The Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the individual job content plateau measure was .710.

Employees also reported their perceptions of the team hierarchical plateau on a 6-item scale developed by Milliman (1992), including “Our team members’ chances of moving up in the organization are limited.” The Cronbach’s alpha coefficient was .783. Furthermore, the average $rwg(j)$ value across the 58 teams of .907 indicated a high level of within-team agreement (James et al., 1993). The intraclass correlation (ICC1) was .210, and the reliability of the group mean (ICC2) was .529, in support of aggregation across teams (James, 1982; Schneider et al., 1998).

Individual/team work alienation. Employees reported individual work alienation on a 10-item scale developed by Hirschfeld and Field (2000), with items such as, “I found my own lack of enthusiasm for work.” The Cronbach’s alpha coefficient was .840. Then we aggregated these individual-level data to the team level. The average $rwg(j)$ value of team work alienation was .895, the ICC1 was .193, and the ICC2 was .501, in support of the aggregation.

Individual task crafting. Employees reported the frequency with which they engaged in different task-crafting activities using a 7-item scale developed by Slemp and Vella-Brodrick (2013). A sample item is “I introduce new approaches to improve my work.” The Cronbach’s alpha coefficient for task crafting was .793.

Team participation in decision-making. To report team participation in decision-making, respondents used a 5-item scale developed by Ruh et al. (1975) with sample items like, “Our team members have a say in selection and training decisions.” The Cronbach’s alpha coefficient for team participation in decision-making was .822, and the average $rwg(j)$ value of .899, ICC1 of .216, and ICC2 of .537 offered support for the aggregation.

Individual/team counterproductive work behaviors. Supervisors rated individual employees’ CWBs on a 19-item scale developed by Bennett and Robinson (2000) that includes items related to both organizational CWBs (13 items) and interpersonal CWBs (6 items), such as “The employee shares confidential company information with others.” However, one item, “Made an ethnic, religious, or racial remark at work,” was unsuitable in the Chinese cultural context, so we removed it from the formal survey. The Cronbach’s alpha coefficient for organizational CWBs was .926, and that for interpersonal CWBs was .928, with an overall Cronbach’s alpha coefficient for individual CWBs of .948. We aggregated the data on CWBs from the individual to the team level; the average $rwg(j)$ value of team CWBs of .876, ICC1 of .209, and ICC2 of .526 support aggregation.

Control variables. According to the third principle of control variable selection, as summarized by Becker et al. (2016), studies can include control variables in hypotheses and models when feasible. We controlled for possible effects of demographic variables, including employees’ gender (0 = male, 1 = female), age (years), education level (1 = senior middle school or below, 2 = college or associate degree, 3 = bachelor’s degree, 4 = master’s degree or above), job tenure (years), team size (number of members), and team member diversity (standard deviation of age divided by the mean at the team level), all of which might be related to individual/team work alienation and CWBs.

Analytical Strategies

With a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), we test the discriminant validity of all the variables. Next, with bootstrap resampling in Mplus 7.0, we test the direct effects of the individual job content plateau and team hierarchical plateau, as well as the mediating roles of individual work alienation and team work alienation. Finally, in accordance with the moderation path analysis proposed by Edwards and Lambert (2007), we test the moderating effects on the basis of bootstrap resampling. In particular, for the individual-level model, we test the moderating role of individual task crafting, and for the team-level model, we test the moderating role of team participation in decision-making.

Results

Confirmatory Factor Analysis and Descriptive Statistics

We conducted the CFA with the six focal research variables (i.e., job content plateau, hierarchical plateau, work alienation, CWBs, task crafting, and participation in decision-making). As Table 1 shows, the fit of the six-factor model ($\chi^2/df = 1.648$, confirmatory fit index = .879, root mean square error of approximation = .052, standardized root mean residual = .064) was much better than that of the other alternative models. That is, the six-factor model offers good fit, and the proposed constructs achieve good discriminant validity.

Insert Table 1 about Here

In Table 2, we present the descriptive statistics and zero-order correlations among the variables, which reveal that individual CWBs relate significantly to the individual job content plateau ($r = .258$, $p < .01$) and individual work alienation ($r = .328$, $p < .01$); individual work alienation also is significantly related to the individual job content plateau ($r = .267$, $p < .01$). Furthermore, team CWBs relate significantly to the team hierarchical plateau ($r = .335$, $p < .05$) and team work alienation ($r = .527$, $p < .01$). Team work alienation is significantly related to the team hierarchical plateau ($r = .449$, $p < .01$), consistent with our predictions.

Insert Table 2 about Here

Hypothesis Testing

We used Mplus 7.0 to test the hypotheses. The results in Table 3 affirm that the individual job content plateau relates positively to individual CWBs ($B = .314$, 95% confidence interval [CI] [.149, .482]), and the team hierarchical plateau relates positively to team CWBs ($B = .344$, 95% CI [.113, .652]). Therefore, we find support for H1a and H1b.

Insert Table 3 about Here

The bootstrap resampling (2000 times) to test H2a and H2b reveals that the mediating effect of individual work alienation on the relationship between the individual job content plateau and individual CWBs was .090, with a 95% CI [.039, .167] that does not include 0 (Table 4), in support of H2a. Similarly, the mediating effect of team work alienation on the relationship between the team hierarchical plateau and team CWBs equals .232, and the 95% CI [.078, .440] does not span 0, in support of H2b.

Insert Table 4 about Here

With the moderating path analysis introduced by Edwards and Lambert (2007) and bootstrap resampling (2000 times), we test H3–H6. As the results in Table 5 indicate, individual task crafting moderates the relationship between the individual job content plateau and individual work alienation. According to the simple effects analysis, the coefficient of low-level individual task crafting is significant ($B = .654$, 95% CI [.397, .884]), but the coefficient of high-level individual task crafting is not ($B = .162$, 95% CI [-.039, .358]). The significant difference between high- and low-level individual task crafting ($B = -.492$, 95% CI [-.803, -.178]) suggests that individual task crafting negatively moderates the relationship between the individual job content plateau and individual work alienation. The greater the level of individual task crafting, the weaker the positive effect of the individual job content plateau on individual work alienation, as we predicted in H3.

The results in Table 6 show that the mediating effect of individual work alienation is significant for low-level individual task crafting ($B = .168$, 95% CI [.080, .294]) and not significant when individual task crafting attains a high level ($B = .042$, 95% CI [-.006, .112]). The difference between high- and low-level individual task crafting is significant ($B = -.126$, 95% CI [-.253, -.045]). That is, individual

task crafting moderates the mediating effect of individual work alienation on the relationship between the individual job content plateau and individual CWBs, in support of H4.

The results in Table 5 also indicate that team participation in decision-making moderates the relationship between the team hierarchical plateau and team work alienation. In the simple effects analysis, the coefficient of low-level team participation in decision-making is significant ($B = .387$, 95% CI [.283, .525]), whereas the coefficient of high-level team participation in decision-making is not significant ($B = .023$, 95% CI [-.085, .187]). The difference also is significant ($B = -.387$, 95% CI [-.544, -.179]). Therefore, team participation in decision-making negatively moderates the relationship between the team hierarchical plateau and team work alienation. The higher the level of team participation in decision-making, the weaker the positive effect of the team hierarchical plateau on team work alienation. Therefore, we find support for H5.

Finally, Table 6 contains the results showing that the mediating effect of team work alienation is significant for low-level team participation in decision-making ($B = .212$, 95% CI [.072, .336]), whereas the mediating effect of team work alienation is not significant at high levels of team participation in decision-making ($B = .059$, 95% CI [-.066, .185]). The significant difference ($B = -.153$, 95% CI [-.312, -.028]) suggests that team participation in decision-making moderates the mediating effect of team work alienation on the relationship between the team hierarchical plateau and team CWBs, in support of H6.

Insert Tables 5 and 6 about Here

Then in Figures 2 and 3, we plot the interaction patterns. In Figure 2, the positive relationship between individual job content plateaus and individual work alienation appears weaker when individual task crafting reaches a high level, rather than a low level. Similarly, in Figure 3, the positive relationship between the team hierarchical plateau and team work alienation is weaker when team participation in decision-making achieves a high level than when it remains at a low level.

Insert Figures 2 and 3 about Here

Discussion

Trends toward flatter, more streamlined organizational structures have created situations in which increasing numbers of employees encounter career plateaus (Wen & Liu, 2012; Xie et al., 2015). Drawing on negative reciprocity theory, we theorize and examine when and why career plateaus—at both individual and team levels—might induce CWBs at the individual and team levels. The findings reveal that individual job content plateaus relate to individual CWBs, mediated by individual work alienation. Turning to the team level, team hierarchical plateaus are associated with team CWBs, mediated by team-level work alienation. Moreover, individual task crafting mitigates the negative effects of individual job content plateaus on individual work alienation, as well as its indirect effect on CWBs. Specifically, the indirect effect of individual job content plateaus on individual CWBs, through individual work alienation, is weaker when individual task crafting is high rather than low. At the team level, team participation in decision-making moderates the relationship between team hierarchical plateaus and team work alienation, as well as the indirect effect on team CWBs. When teams actively participate in decision-making, the indirect effect of the team hierarchical plateau on team CWBs through team work alienation is less pronounced.

Theoretical Contributions

This study deepens understanding of the negative effects of career plateaus in several important ways. First, it clarifies the relationship between career plateaus and CWBs, through the lens of

negative reciprocity theory. Previous research has tended to focus on how career plateaus influence employee attitudes and behaviors, often by leveraging work adjustment or conservation of resources theory (Hurst et al., 2017; Xie et al., 2015), whereas the current study adopts a novel perspective. That is, work adjustment theory suggests that career plateaus result from a misalignment between employees' needs and the work environment, leading to dissatisfaction and turnover (Xie et al., 2015); conservation of resources theory posits that career plateaus threaten employees' resources, which reduces their job satisfaction and encourages withdrawal (Hurst et al., 2017). However, neither of these frameworks can capture all the complexities of career plateaus in organizational contexts, where relationships often hinge on mutual obligation and reciprocity (Goulder, 1960; Lawrence & Kacmar, 2012). By adopting a negative reciprocity theory perspective, we can explain in detail how career plateaus, perceived as breaches of reciprocity, might result in CWBs at the individual and team levels. When employees believe their employer has neglected their needs and thus develop negative reciprocal beliefs, it can fuel CWBs at both individual and team levels (Eisenberger et al., 2004; McCleese & Eby, 2006). This novel perspective represents a theoretical contribution to research into the consequences of career plateaus.

Second, we explicitly address career plateaus at both individual and team levels. Most extant literature prioritizes individual-level career plateaus (Godshalk & Fender, 2015; McCleese et al., 2007) and their connections with personal growth or skill development opportunities, which differ across individuals (McKee-Ryan & Harvey, 2011). By extending the discussion to include the team level, we also acknowledge how hierarchical plateaus can affect entire teams of members who share a collective understanding of their limited promotion prospects. Analyzing the effects of both individual job content plateaus and team hierarchical plateaus provides a more comprehensive perspective on how career plateaus at different levels produce negative workplace behaviors.

Third, we uncover psychological mechanisms that link individual job content plateaus and team hierarchical plateaus to CWBs, with work alienation as a key mediator, by leveraging negative reciprocity theory. As it suggests, individual job content plateaus create a sense of inequity, such that employees feel as if they are treated unfavorably, suffer from unmet expectations and a lack of control, and experience work alienation (Banai & Reisel, 2007). This psychological response has been associated with destructive behaviors (Hodson & Sullivan, 2012), including individual CWBs. Team hierarchical plateaus can diminish perceptions of organizational support and reduce team members' engagement, resulting in team work alienation and team-level CWBs. By emphasizing the mediating roles of work alienation at both individual and team levels, our study sheds new light on the theoretical "black box" that drives the negative consequences of career plateaus. It also addresses calls for research into the psychological processes that link career plateaus with their outcomes (Lapalme et al., 2009).

Fourth, we investigate how individual task crafting might mitigate the negative effects of individual job content plateaus. Task crafting allows employees to reshape their job responsibilities to align with their strengths and interests, with enhancing effects on both job autonomy and person-job fit (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005; Tims et al., 2013). According to negative reciprocity theory, high levels of individual task crafting mitigate feelings of powerlessness or frustration (Eisenberger et al., 2004; Tims et al., 2013) and thereby weaken the negative reciprocal beliefs that arise from individual job content plateaus. In turn, employees are less likely to experience individual work alienation or engage in individual CWBs (Li & Chen, 2018; Spector & Fox, 2002). This study contributes to growing understanding of how individual task crafting functions as a boundary condition,

influencing when the negative effects of individual job content plateaus are more or less likely to occur.

Fifth and finally, we clarify how and team participation in decision-making buffers the negative effects of team hierarchical plateaus. From the perspective of negative reciprocity theory, team participation in decision-making represents a form of favorable treatment, in that it offers team members a sense of organizational support and empowerment (Perugini et al., 2003; Somech & Drach-Zahavy, 2013). By involving teams in decision-making processes, organizations can foster a sense of career fulfillment, even in the absence of promotion opportunities (Gattiker & Larwood, 1986). This sense of inclusion helps restore the balance disrupted by team hierarchical plateaus and reduce team work alienation and team CWBs. In turn, organizations can and should implement strategies to alleviate the detrimental effects of team hierarchical plateaus by encouraging greater team involvement in decision-making. That is, we specify how different strategies can mitigate the negative consequences of individual job content plateaus and team hierarchical plateaus.

Practical Implications

As suggested in the previous section, our findings offer valuable practical guidance for managers. In particular, organizations should adopt different strategies to address and mitigate the negative effects of different career plateaus. For individual career stagnation, they might encourage employees to pursue challenging tasks or participate in job rotations, which would enrich their work experience. For teams, the organization should provide necessary resources and cultivate a professional environment that emphasizes respect and understanding. More broadly, organizational leaders must recognize that hierarchical plateaus affect entire teams, not just individuals, such that they might need to pay particular attention to the career progression of noncore teams.

To weaken the detrimental outcomes of career plateaus, they also might find ways to minimize work alienation, such as by enhancing workplace autonomy and encouraging employee involvement. Creating environments in which employees and teams can express their career goals and increase their work initiative and autonomy is key (Jiang et al., 2017). Rather than strictly adhering to rigid guidelines, organizations should foster practices that enable employees to engage deeply with their work. Example-driven training and sharing success stories can strengthen employees' and teams' connection to their roles.

A related goal should be to empower employees to craft or redesign their own tasks and expand their responsibilities, which can enhance their sense of the meaning and value of their work and thereby reduce the negative effects of individual job content plateaus. Organizations can offer opportunities for employees to rethink their tasks, implement feedback mechanisms, and support skill development through training. By aligning tasks with employees' unique strengths and interests, they can cultivate a more engaged and motivated workforce.

Finally, as our findings show, involving team members in decision-making processes is critical, because it enhances their sense of control and initiative, thereby reducing the impact of team hierarchical plateaus. Organizations should decentralize decision-making power to lower hierarchical levels to account for team members' needs for job control and recognition (Tremblay & Roger, 2004). Building a fair and inclusive decision-making environment, where all team members feel free to share their perspectives, can further strengthen team cohesion and lessen the negative effects of team hierarchical plateaus.

Limitations and Directions for Research

Several limitations of this study offer opportunities for continued research. First, though we frame career plateaus as generally unfavorable, this framing might not capture their complexity fully. Career plateaus can provide some benefits, such as improved work–life balance, that might offset their negative impacts on work attitudes and performance. The positive aspects of career plateaus likely depend on certain boundary conditions (Godshalk & Fender, 2015). Continued research should explore the conditions—such as different life stages or varying levels of self-actualization—in which the effects of career plateaus might be more positive.

Second, we identify work alienation as a key mediator in the relationship between career plateaus and CWBs, but other mechanisms also could play a role. For example, career plateaus might reduce individual and team identification with the organization (Chang & Chen, 2013), which could lead to increased CWBs. Additional studies might investigate alternative cognitive mediators, to offer a more holistic understanding of the relationship between career plateaus and CWBs.

Third, this study distinguishes individual job content plateaus from team hierarchical plateaus; the generalizability of these findings to various contexts remains uncertain though. Responses to career plateaus may differ across cultural backgrounds and organizational environments. Further research to extend these insights might replicate our study in diverse contexts. Longitudinal designs with even more than three waves also could validate and build on the current findings. Such an approach would enhance understanding of the dynamics of career plateaus and their effects in various settings.

Conclusion

Although career plateaus can contribute to CWBs by fostering feelings of alienation at both individual and team levels, the story is not exclusively a negative one. The adverse effects of perceptions of “dead-end jobs” can be softened with strategies like task crafting and encouraging team participation in decision-making. With the right support, organizations can undermine the detrimental consequences of career plateaus and ultimately reduce the risk of negative workplace behaviors.

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Table 1. CFA Results

Model	Structures of Factors	χ^2/df	CFI	RMSEA	SRMR
Six-factor Model	CP, HP, TC, PDM, WA, CWBs	1.648	0.879	0.052	0.064
Five-factor model	CP, HP, TC, PDM, WA+CWBs	2.040	0.805	0.065	0.084
Four-factor model	CP, HP, TC, PDM+WA+CWBs	2.260	0.762	0.072	0.104
Three-factor Model	CP, HP, TC+PDM+WA+CWBs	2.605	0.695	0.081	0.109
Two-factor Model	CP, HP+TC+PDM+WA+CWBs	3.020	0.613	0.091	0.110
One-factor Model	CP+HP+TC+PDM+WA+CWB	3.246	0.569	0.96	0.113

Notes: JS = job satisfaction, OJ = organizational justice, CP = job content plateau, HP = hierarchical plateau, WA = work alienation, TC = task crafting, PDM = participation in decision-making, CWBs = counterproductive work behaviors, CFI = confirmatory fit index, RMSEA = root mean square error of approximation, and SRMR = standardized root mean residual.

Table 2. Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations

Individual-Level Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Gender	0.627	0.485	—									
2. Age	29.652	6.274	-0.019	—								
3. Education level	2.730	0.685	-0.107	0.019	—							
4. Tenure	6.800	6.346	-0.078	0.285**	-0.158*	—						
5. Team size	10.836	9.094	0.055	0.179**	-0.123	0.132*	—					
6. Team member diversity	0.134	0.080	0.000	0.348**	-0.150*	0.313**	0.246**	—				
7. Individual job content plateau	2.187	0.530	0.150*	0.102	0.042	0.195**	-0.013	-0.021	—			
8. Individual work alienation	2.654	0.662	0.024	0.022	-0.007	0.071	-0.066	0.069	0.267**	—		
9. Individual task crafting	2.826	0.530	-0.018	0.129*	0.003	0.047	0.004	-0.085	0.208**	-0.028	—	
10. Individual CWBs	2.067	0.627	0.032	0.016	-0.010	0.065	0.010	0.051	0.258**	0.328**	0.041	—
Team-Level Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6				
1. Team size	9.931	8.711	—									
2. Team member diversity	0.129	0.081	-0.207	—								
3. Team hierarchical plateau	2.499	0.407	-	0.415**	—							
4. Team work alienation	2.664	0.426	-0.130	-0.093	0.449**	—						

5. Team participation in decision-making	3.190	0.381	-0.285*	0.097	0.294*	0.282*	—		
6. Team CWBs	2.092	0.417	-0.120	0.037	0.335*	0.527**	0.296*	0.335*	—

* p < .05, ** p < .01.

Table 3. Main Effect Analysis

Individual-Level Variables	Individual CWBs	
	Effect	95% Confidence Interval
Gender	-0.012(0.087)	[-0.183, 0.159]
Age	-0.003(0.007)	[-0.018, 0.010]
Education level	-0.010(0.064)	[-0.125, 0.118]
Tenure	0.000(0.007)	[-0.012, 0.015]
Team size	0.000(0.005)	[-0.010, 0.011]
Team member diversity	0.520(0.556)	[-0.640, 1.525]
Individual job content plateau	0.314(0.084)	[0.149, 0.482]
Team-Level Variables	Team CWBs	
	Effect	95% Confidence Interval
Team size	0.000(0.005)	[-0.014, 0.008]
Team member diversity	0.009(0.743)	[-1.658, 1.248]
Team hierarchical plateau	0.344(0.137)	[0.113, 0.652]

Table 4. Mediation Effect Analysis

Individual-Level Variables	Individual Job Content Plateau → Individual Work Alienation → Individual CWBs	
	Effect	95% Confidence Interval
Gender	-0.007(0.083)	[-0.170, 0.162]
Age	-0.003(0.007)	[-0.017, 0.011]
Education level	-0.007(0.061)	[-0.125, 0.109]
Tenure	0.000(0.006)	[-0.012, 0.013]
Team size	0.002(0.005)	[-0.008, 0.011]
Team member diversity	0.297(0.516)	[-0.798, 1.203]
Indirect effect	0.090(0.032)	[0.039, 0.167]
Direct effect	0.224(0.083)	[0.071, 0.388]
Total effect	0.314(0.084)	[0.149, 0.482]
Team-Level Variables	Team Hierarchical Plateau → Team Work Alienation → Team CWBs	
	Effect	95% Confidence Interval
Team size	0.003(0.005)	[-0.008, 0.011]
Team member diversity	-0.023(0.641)	[-1.322, 1.163]
Indirect effect	0.232(0.093)	[0.078, 0.440]
Direct effect	0.111(0.122)	[-0.155, 0.404]
Total effect	0.344(0.137)	[0.113, 0.625]

Table 5. Moderation Effect Analysis

Individual-Level Variables	Individual Job Content Plateau → Individual Work Alienation	
	Effect	95% Confidence Interval
Gender	-0.007(0.086)	[-0.179, 0.156]
Age	-0.002(0.008)	[-0.016, 0.014]
Education level	-0.028(0.060)	[-0.154, 0.084]
Tenure	0.002(0.008)	[-0.012, -0.019]
Team size	-0.006(0.005)	[-0.014, 0.004]
Team member diversity	-0.732(0.595)	[-0.527, 1.854]
High-level individual task crafting	0.162(0.102)	[-0.039, 0.358]
Low-level individual task crafting	0.654(0.125)	[0.397, 0.884]
Differences	-0.492(0.160)	[-0.803, -0.178]
Team-Level Variables	Team Hierarchical Plateau → Team Work Alienation	
	Effect	95% Confidence interval
Team size	-0.008(0.006)	[-0.019, 0.004]
Team member diversity	-0.502(0.684)	[-1.895, 0.666]
High-level team participation in decision-making	0.023(0.068)	[-0.085, 0.187]
Low-level team participation in decision-making	0.387(0.060)	[0.283, 0.525]
Differences	-0.364(0.091)	[-0.544, -0.179]

Table 6. Moderated Moderation Effect Analysis

Individual-Level Variables	Individual Job Content Plateau → Individual Work Alienation → Individual CWBs	
	Effect	95% Confidence Interval
Gender	-0.004(0.084)	[-0.171, 0.162]
Age	-0.003(0.007)	[-0.018, 0.011]
Education level	-0.008(0.061)	[-0.123, 0.108]
Tenure	0.000(0.006)	[-0.011, 0.013]
Team size	0.002(0.005)	[-0.008, 0.011]
Team member diversity	0.315(0.515)	[-0.764, 1.259]
High-level individual task crafting	0.042(0.029)	[-0.006, 0.112]
Low-level individual task crafting	0.168(0.052)	[0.080, 0.294]
Differences	-0.126(0.052)	[-0.253, -0.045]
Team-Level Variables	Team Hierarchical Plateau → Team Work Alienation → Team CWBs	
	Effect	95% Confidence Interval
Team size	0.003(0.005)	[-0.009, 0.013]
Team member diversity	-0.137(0.687)	[-1.666, 1.087]
High-level team participation in decision-making	0.059(0.065)	[-0.066, 0.185]
Low-level team participation in decision-making	0.212(0.066)	[0.072, 0.336]
Differences	-0.153(0.071)	[-0.312, -0.028]

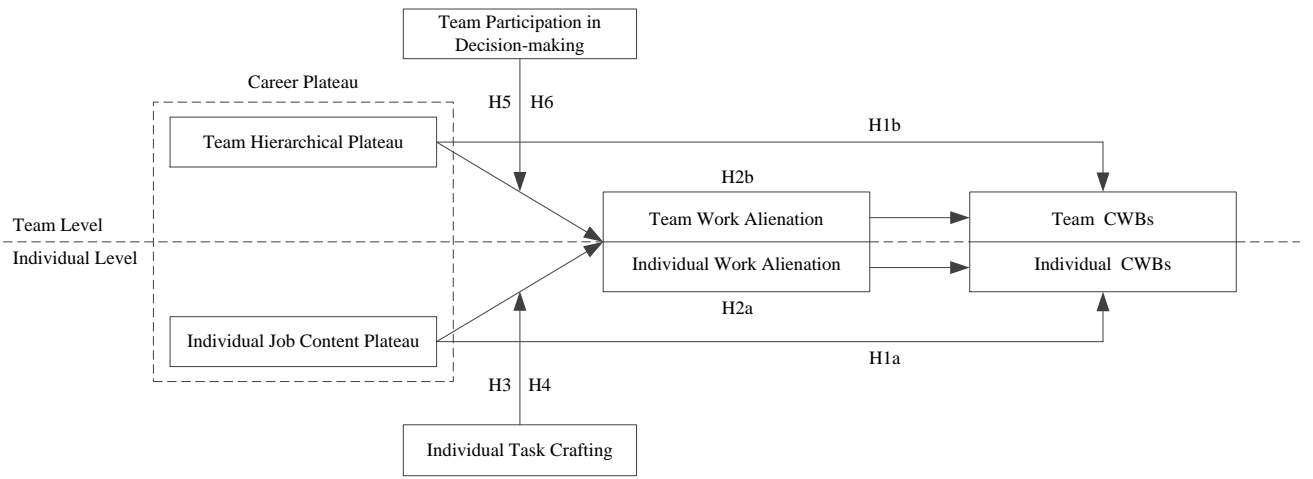


Figure 1. Theoretical Model

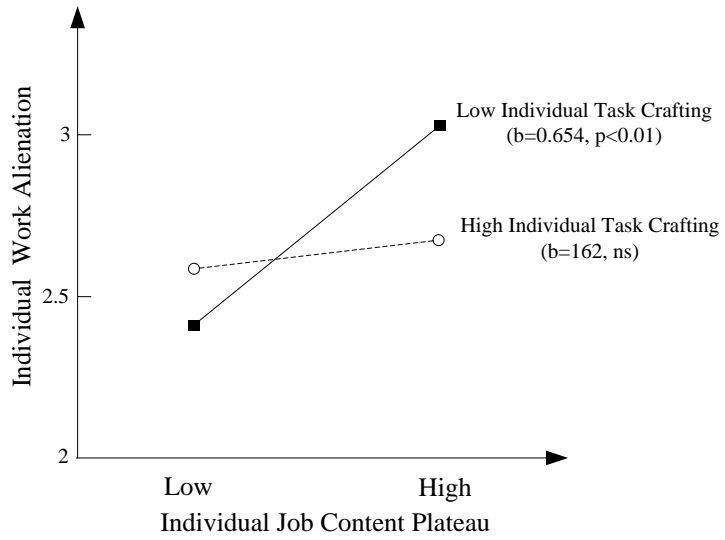


Figure 2. Moderating Effect of Individual Task Crafting on the Relationship between the Individual Job Content Plateau and Individual Work Alienation

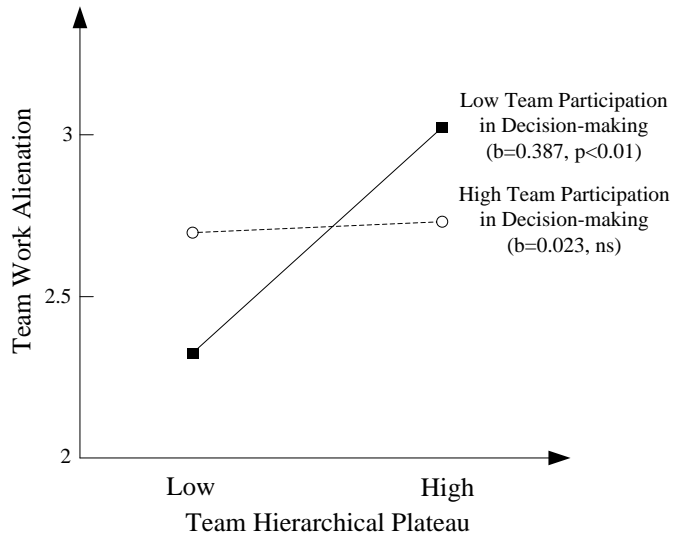


Figure 3. Moderating Effect of Team Participation in Decision-Making on the Relationship between the Team Hierarchical Plateau and Team Work Alienation

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