



# Activating job crafting in public services: the roles of discretionary human resource practices and employee use of normative public values

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to examine how and when discretionary human resource (HR) practices contribute to the emergence of job crafting behavior among employees in public organizations. The data for this research were collected from employees and managers working in wards (local level governments) in Vietnam. The results lend credence to the role of employee use of normative public values in mediating the relationship between discretionary HR practices and employee job crafting. This study further finds that empowering leadership and public service motivation moderate the relationship between discretionary HR practices and employee use of normative public values.

**KEYWORDS** Discretionary HR practices; normative public values; job crafting; empowering leadership; public service motivation; Vietnam

## Introduction

Job crafting, a process through which employees proactively self-initiate sculpting to modify their jobs and work experiences in a meaningful way (Wrzesniewski and Dutton 2001), has attracted increasing academic interest not only in the private sector (Wang, Demerouti, and Bakker 2016) but also in the public sector (Audenaert et al. 2019a; Bakker 2015; Luu 2018a, 2019). Empirical studies have unveiled that employees who craft their jobs are inclined to fulfil their work, demonstrate higher work engagement (Karatepe and Eslamlou 2017; Tims et al. 2013), achieve higher performance (Bakker, Tims, and Derks 2012; Karatepe and Eslamlou 2017; Tims, Bakker, and Derks 2012), and experience a higher sense of well-being (Tims, Bakker, and Derks 2013).

Job crafting has received increasing interest from public management scholars (Audenaert et al. 2019a; Bakker 2015; Luu 2018a, 2019) since job crafting is relevant in the high-demand jobs that numerous public servants worldwide currently experience (Audenaert, George, and Decramer 2019b). Further, public sector employees can engage in proactive behaviours such as job crafting to improve their service towards citizens (Petrou et al. 2012) when management practices grant them power to increase their capacity for agency (i.e. capacity to undertake actions) (Le Grand 2003), thereby complementing to the limitations of the bureaucracy of institutional framework

(Demircioglu 2018). According to Wrzesniewski and Dutton (2001), rigid job designs, such as in public organizations with rigid structures, still allow for job crafting albeit employees with such low degrees of discretion have less opportunities to craft.

Despite the salience of job crafting, its antecedents have not been fully understood in the private sector (Bakker, Tims, and Derks 2012; Kim et al. 2018) as well as in public service organizations (Bakker 2015; Luu 2018a, 2019). A body of research in the private sector has analysed the predictive roles of individual characteristics for job crafting such as basic personality dimensions (Bipp and Demerouti 2015), proactive personality (Teng and Chen 2019), regulatory focus (Brenninkmeijer and Hekker-Koning 2015), learning goal orientation (Matsuo 2019), work experience (Niessen, Weseler, and Kostova 2016), and well-being (Hakanen, Peeters, and Schaufeli 2018). Yet, even in the private sector, there still has been the dearth of studies that have examined the effects of contextual enablers of employees' job crafting behaviour in comparison with the research stream on individual antecedents (Wang, Demerouti, and Le Blanc 2017) although contextual factors play a key role in fostering relevant employee behaviours (Johns 2006). This study aims to fill this gap particularly in the public sector domain.

The strategic human resource management (HRM) literature has documented the strategic salience of well-designed HRM systems as drivers of individual attitudes and behaviours (Jiang, Takeuchi, and Lepak 2013). HR practices have been acknowledged as a potential means through which organizations can activate employee proactive behaviours in organizations in general (Batistič et al. 2016; Chen et al. 2017; Jia et al. 2020; Khatri, Gupta, and Varma 2017; Lee et al. 2019) and in public organizations in particular (Luu 2018b). Nonetheless, to the best of our knowledge, except for Luu's (2019) work regarding the nexus between HR flexibility and job crafting, the HRM research stream especially in the public sector domain has neglected this fine-grained proactive employee outcome (i.e. job crafting) regardless of its implications for employee engagement and performance as earlier discussed. By unravelling the relationship between discretionary HR practices and job crafting among public sector employees, we address this void and also respond to Luu's (2019) call for more research on how different HRM strategies produce different variances in employee job crafting. Albeit HR flexibility and discretionary HR practices reflect an organization's investment in employees (Gavino, Wayne, and Erdogan 2012; Way et al. 2018), while HR flexibility influences public sector employees to craft their job through investing in employees' skill and behavioural flexibility (Luu 2019), discretionary HR practices may do so by influencing employees to identify with the goals (e.g. public service goals) of their organization, enhancing their competencies, and empowering them (Gavino, Wayne, and Erdogan 2012). Understanding how discretionary HR practices shape crafters in public service activities will provide public sector managers with another option to trigger employees' crafting their public service tasks under rigid institutional structures.

The void regarding contextual antecedents, especially HRM, in the job crafting literature in the public sector domain, leads to the key questions we examine in this paper on whether and how discretionary HR practices can influence job crafting behaviour among employees in the public sector. From a strategic HRM perspective, prior research has highlighted the impact of HRM practices on employee behaviour or performance via building human capital (e.g. abilities and values) among employees (Jiang, Chuang, and Chiao 2015). Through infusion pathway lens (e.g. Pandey et al.

2016), public administration scholars have made a case for the vital role of HRM practices in upholding, advancing, and infusing public values among public sector employees (Knies et al. 2018). Our study further seeks to address the question regarding the mediation path of employees' use of normative public values (i.e. a fine-grained and context-specific human capital) for the nexus between discretionary HR practices and job crafting.

Further, while acknowledging the potential power of discretionary HR practices, we are aware that examining the main effects of management practices rarely entirely captures the complexity of organizations and a more nuanced approach is hence needed (Boyd et al. 2012; Chuang, Jackson, and Jiang 2016). Researchers have demonstrated that the contingencies, both contextual and individual, that constrain the effectiveness of HR practices should be determined (Chadwick et al. 2013). Our study therefore examines how discretionary HR practices promote employee use of normative public values through interactions with empowering leadership (contextual contingency) and public service motivation (individual contingency), both of which are highly relevant to the public service context (to be discussed in the literature review section). Through the above research aims, our study seeks to introduce management studies and theories (e.g. strategic HRM perspective) from the private sector into the public sector and to reflect upon the differences between these sectors in this regard. Figure 1 summarizes the relationships in the research model.

The current research contributes to the public management literature in several respects. First, our study synthesizes the strategic HRM perspective, public value management perspective, and job design perspective to cast light on the nexus between discretionary HR practices and public sector employees' job crafting via their use of normative public values in decision making. This complements prior research on proactive or job crafting behaviour that focused heavily on generic HRM practices (e.g. Batistič et al. 2016; Chen et al. 2017; Jia et al. 2020; Khatri, Gupta, and Varma 2017; Lee et al. 2019) or some forms of high-performance HR practices (e.g. Luu 2019). Second, this study extends the public value literature by examining discretionary HR practices as a novel contextual antecedent and the impact of their interaction with empowering leadership on employee use of normative public values. Though HR practices has been discerned as a crucial antecedent of the use of public values (Knies et al. 2018), prior research has tended to revolve around the predictive role of

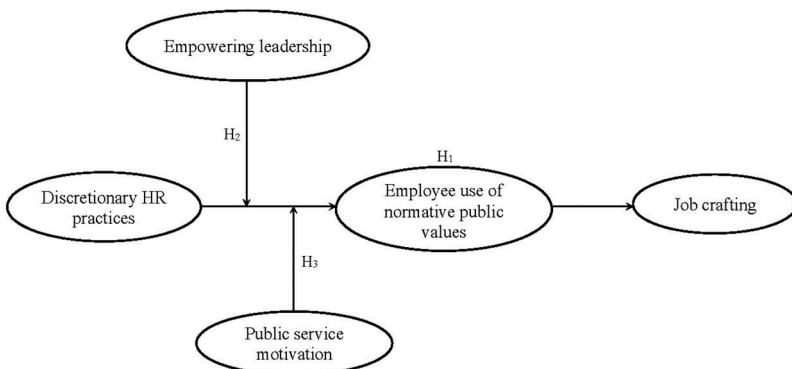


Figure 1. Research model.

leadership (Pandey et al. 2016) and almost no works have delved into its impact along with HR practices on employee use of normative public values. Third, our study advances the public value literature by unfolding individual contingency (i.e. public service motivation) for the effect of discretionary HR practices on employee use of normative public values. Further examination into individual contingency for HRM impact is critical as individual employees may react differently to HRM practices although the intended HRM is the same for a group of employees (Nishii and Wright 2008). Though the strategic HRM perspective underlines the role of boundary conditions for the effectiveness of HRM systems, HRM research has focused more on contextual than individual contingencies (Chuang, Jackson, and Jiang 2016).

## **Literature review and hypothesis development**

### ***Public administration in Vietnam***

Vietnam's dual ideology (i.e. market economy under socialist direction) provides a unique natural laboratory regarding the dilemma between enhancing public service quality and conserving bureaucratic forms of state management (Painter 2008; Nguyen et al. 2015). Regardless of marketization, centralization ethos of central planning regime still impacts the thinking of public servants (Christodoulakis 2015; Luu 2017).

Vietnam has adopted Western models of public administration such as new public management principles (Drechsler 2018; APIM 2010). For instance, citizen-clients' satisfaction and retention have been used as key indicators for public sector employees' performance (Vietnamese Government 2017). Nonetheless, the speedy rate of marketization rooted in the state budget shortage and ineffective governance structure (APIM 2010) has engendered numerous concerns over sustainable development of public services in Vietnam (Nguyen et al. 2015; Painter 2008). Academic discussions, political speeches, and media have acknowledged unequal access to public services (Nguyen et al. 2015) and indicated that Vietnam has developed faster than its governance capacity (Quertamp and de Miras 2012). Improving governance has been deemed to be one of the key solutions for enhancing sustainable development in Vietnam (UNDP 2012). While the term 'governance' remains novel in Vietnam (Nguyen et al. 2015), the highlight on public service values is not. Public service values have been underscored by the Party's leaders (e.g. Ho Chi Minh) and in governmental policies (Nguyen et al. 2015). While working on improving governance as a sustainable and long-term strategy, Vietnam can enhance public service quality by effectively managing public employees and activating their proactive improvement of public service activities (e.g. job crafting), thereby augmenting citizen satisfaction and trust.

### ***Discretionary HR practices and job crafting***

Job crafting is defined as the alterations employees make in their job resources and job demands (Tims and Bakker 2010). Tims, Bakker, and Derks (2012) differentiated empirically between four job crafting dimensions including increasing structural resources, increasing social resources, increasing challenge job demands, and reducing hindrance job demands. Increasing structural resources refers to proactively accruing job resources such as skill variety, autonomy, or opportunities for development while increasing social resources refers to seeking performance feedback, supervisory

coaching, or social support (Bakker, Rodríguez-Muñoz, and Vergel 2016). Challenge job demands are deemed to be demands that have the potential to foster mastery and future gains, while hindrance job demands are perceived as constraints that obstruct progress (Crawford, LePine, and Rich 2010). Examples of hindrance job demands include role ambiguity or role conflict while challenge job demands are job complexity or work pressure (Bakker, Rodríguez-Muñoz, and Vergel 2016). Employees can increase challenging job demands through proactive participation in new projects and alleviate hindering job demands for example by reducing the number of cognitive tasks or emotional interactions (Tims, Bakker, and Derks 2012).

For instance, in a ward (local-level government) in the Vietnamese context, public employees can improve notary public service regarding real estate sales through crafting the current four-phase notary process, which comprises examining the appropriateness of real estate ownership documents, drafting sales contract, the parties' signing contract under the public employee's witness, and fee paying and stamping. This notary service task can be crafted into a two-phase process consisting of online and face-to-face phases, which provides public employees with higher autonomy and e-notary service skills (structural resources) to serve citizens as well as with an opportunity in participating in the e-notary public service project (i.e. increasing challenging job demands). Public employees can encourage and invite citizens to submit real estate documents online. Public employees will check and approve them online, and then fix the appointment date for contract signing. Feedback from the manager or citizens (social resources) can also be sent online to public employees. Such a crafted service task will reduce emotionally demanding interactions with citizens (i.e. reducing hindering job demands), who tend to be unsatisfied with the time-consuming four-phase notary process.

Discretionary HR practices reflect an organization's investment in employees for the effectiveness of their daily activities as well as their career development (Shore and Shore 1995; Gavino, Wayne, and Erdogan 2012). These HR practices are nonmandatory, nonobligatory, and, thus, not externally regulated (Shore and Shore 1995). Strategic HRM researchers consider discretionary HR practices to be a bundle of HRM practices designed to (a) gear towards the acquisition and enhancement of human resources; (b) enhance employee competencies and values; (c) empower employees; and (d) encourage employees to identify with the goals of the organization (Shore and Shore 1995; Gavino, Wayne, and Erdogan 2012). Discretionary HR practices seek to promote employee contributions by empowerment, participation programmes, and incentive compensations (Oikarinen, Hyypiä, and Pihkala 2007).

From the employee-centred HRM perspective, employees tend not to be passive recipients of HRM practices, but (pro-)active players (Lepak and Boswell 2012; McBride 2008; Meijerink, Bos-Nehles, and de Leede 2018). Granted opportunities beyond legal requirements to improve competencies and values as well as make decisions through discretionary HR practices (Gavino, Wayne, and Erdogan 2012), public employees may be motivated to act as proactive agents in public service tasks. One of the proactive activities that employees can engage in to accrue further resources (e.g. knowledge, support, and feedback) and produce more job meaning is job crafting (Meijerink, Bos-Nehles, and de Leede 2018). Berg, Wrzesniewski, and Dutton (2010) found that lacking training and coaching opportunities, employees tend to demonstrate low levels of proactive engagement in the acquisition of new knowledge and skills. Ample opportunities for leveraging employee competence under the discretionary HRM system

(Gavino, Wayne, and Erdogan 2012) signal to employees that seeking new knowledge and skills is encouraged and the accrual of them is highly viable. Expressed differently, drawing upon such opportunities through discretionary HR practices, public employees are motivated to proactively augment their structural job resources (public service-related knowledge and skills) in their job crafting process.

Additionally, when the discretionary HRM system is in place, employees are empowered to engage in the process of setting their performance goals as well as assessing their actual performance with their supervisors, mentors and experienced colleagues (Gavino, Wayne, and Erdogan 2012). Hence, public employees can gain opportunities to enhance social job resources such as advice or feedback for crafting their public service job design. Gordon et al. (2015) report that feedback from supervisors and co-workers may further facilitate feedback seeking behaviour among employees. Meijerink, Bos-Nehles, and de Leede (2018) highlight the role of HRM practices in fuelling employees' motivation to proactively engage in building further structural and social job resources for job crafting. Employees may also proactively engage in new projects for public service enhancements since such projects, albeit challenging, can help employees amplify their repertoire of knowledge and skills as well as build new relationships across the organization or beyond it (Meijerink, Bos-Nehles, and de Leede 2018).

Public service employees may experience hindrance job demands when they face challenging situations in which citizens express little agency (e.g. silent resistance) or 'bad' agency (i.e. preferences that are interpreted by public service employees to be incompatible with policy goals or conditions) (Djuve and Kavli 2015; Le Grand 2003; Wright 2012). Some scholars argue that the reduction of hindrance job demands such as cognitive and affective job demands may reduce the likelihood of employees' reinvestment and maintenance of resources (Meijerink, Bos-Nehles, and de Leede 2018). Nonetheless, other scholars allege that job resources that employees craft may contribute to leverage personal resources such as self-efficacy and self-esteem, which help alleviate hindrance job demands (Bakker and Demerouti 2014). Further, public employees can proactively reduce emotional job demands not by avoiding interactions with citizens with little or bad agency, but instead through feedback and advice from supervisors and colleagues, they proactively prepare themselves on how to effectively address problems even through minimal interactions with such citizens. With views and experiences shared from supervisors and colleagues, employees can also proactively reduce their cognitive concentration on a task as well as handle it more effectively. Put differently, such a proactive reduction of hindrance job demands is a way for employees to enhance their knowledge and skills to handle cognitive or emotional job demands. In a nutshell, discretionary HR practices can create conditions that influence public sector employees to proactively engage in crafting their public service job.

### ***Employee use of normative public values as a mediation path***

#### ***Normative public values***

Public values capture a normative consensus regarding citizen rights and government actions (Bozeman 2007). Pandey et al. (2016) focus on three core normative public values including representation, equity, and individual rights since these values fall in the crucial intersection between citizen concerns and public management actions

(Beck Jørgensen and Bozeman 2007). According to Bozeman and Johnson (2015), these public values provide convincing justification for public management actions to ensure that all citizens are listened to, respected, and treated equally.

Embracing ‘representation’ value, public officials are responsive to all citizens by thoroughly weighing the implications of their decisions for all segments of the citizenry (Pandey et al. 2016). Equity ensures ‘no second-class citizens’ through a just allocation of resources (Nalbandian 2006, 1054). Individual rights, comprising civil rights and property rights, give meaning to constitutionally sanctioned due process, which is designed to hamper capricious and arbitrary public management actions (1054).

### ***Discretionary HR practices and employee use of normative public values***

We integrate a strategic HRM perspective (Jiang, Chuang, and Chiao 2015) and infusion pathway lens (Pandey et al. 2016) to consider the mediation mechanism of employee use of normative public values for the nexus between discretionary HR practices and employee job crafting. Scholars have integrated strategic HRM perspective into the public management domain (Fredericksen et al. 2015; Knies et al. 2018; Perry 2010) as well as demonstrated the implications of this perspective for public values (e.g. Gould-Williams 2016) and public service performance (Boon and Verhoest 2018; Kim 2010; Lim, Wang, and Lee 2017). Through strategic HRM lens, HR practices can foster employee performance or behaviour via building human capital (e.g. abilities and values) among employees. In light of infusion pathway perspective (e.g. Pandey et al. 2016), engaging public employees in activities (such as HRM activities), in which public values can be assessed, advanced, and exercised, will stimulate their use of public values. Therefore, we expect that discretionary HR practices may influence public employees to craft their public service tasks by infusing normative public values among public employees and facilitating their application of these values in decision making.

Discretionary HR practices may promote employee use of normative public values in different ways. Via selection and training practices, organizations can enhance employees’ competencies and values (Gavino, Wayne, and Erdogan 2012). For instance, public organizations can hire employees with knowledge of civil rights as well as experience or potential to represent responsiveness to and treat citizens justly, and then facilitate learning in the realm of how to detect and address citizen needs and expectations by offering them training and development programs. Public organizations can also reinforce normative public values through communicating their public mission and values. In view of organizational goal ambiguity, a defining characteristic of public organizations, from Gavino, Wayne, and Erdogan (2012) view, training in the discretionary HRM system can articulate public mission and values and inspire employees to identify with the public service goals of the organization.

By delegating decision rights to employees (Gavino, Wayne, and Erdogan 2012; Oikarinen, Hyypiä, and Pihkala 2007), public organizations can offer opportunities for employees to explore citizens’ expectations and serve them in the interest of their civil rights. Likewise, by involving employees in decision-making and problem-solving activities (Gavino, Wayne, and Erdogan 2012; Oikarinen, Hyypiä, and Pihkala 2007), public organizations can facilitate the application of normative public values among public employees. Additionally, through empowerment and participation programs in the discretionary HRM system (Oikarinen, Hyypiä, and Pihkala 2007), public employees can practice normative public values during service interactions with citizens and

receive performance feedback from citizens for improvement in responsiveness, fairness, and respect for civil rights. Further, covered by incentive compensations (Oikarinen, Hyypiä, and Pihkala 2007) tied to public service quality, public employees are motivated to enact normative public values through the aforementioned approaches.

Taken together, discretionary HR practices may contribute to public employees' use of normative public values in their citizen service. Albeit direct evidence is not available for the nexus between discretionary HR practices and employee use of normative public values, few public management studies have revealed the positive impact of discretionary HR practices on public employees' proactive behaviours in general (Luu 2018b). We hence anticipate to observe a positive nexus between discretionary HR practices and employee enactment of normative public values.

### ***Employee use of normative public values and job crafting***

Enacting normative public values, employees demonstrate respect for citizens' constitutionally guaranteed rights and responsiveness to citizens, as well as value citizens from different walks of life equally (Pandey et al. 2016). Employees who apply normative public values in their decision making tend to commit themselves to the public mission of the organization and the interests of citizens (Pandey et al. 2016). Therefore, they are inclined to proactively improve their public services by enhancing their public service-related knowledge and skills (structural job resources) as well as feedback (social job resources) on their decision making and public service performance. Enactment of normative public values further drives public employees to take more responsibilities (challenges) in serving the public as well as find appropriate ways to address demands from citizens.

Employees' autonomy to utilize normative public values in their decision making also indicates that they can have control over work and positive view of themselves as responsible public servants, which are needed for job crafting (Wrzesniewski and Dutton 2001). Additionally, proactive behaviours such as job crafting entail a potential psychological risk to individuals (e.g. employees who craft their jobs may have to deal with others' resistance and scepticism) (Parker, Bindl, and Strauss 2010). Employees who enact normative public values in their public services have more concerns about services for citizens than their personal risk; thus, they are able to cope with such consequences to engage in job crafting. In conjunction with the previous section, we postulate the mediating mechanism of employee use of normative public values:

H1. Employee use of normative public values mediates the relationship between discretionary HR practices and job crafting.

### ***Empowering leadership as a contextual contingency***

#### ***Leadership and governance***

Leadership and governance entail 'ensuring strategic policy frameworks exist and are combined with effective oversight, coalition building, the provision of appropriate regulations and incentives, attention to system-design, and accountability' (World



Health Organization 2007). Leadership is deemed to be focal to good governance, engaging those individuals who will promote institutional adaptations in the interest of citizens (OECD 2001). Through the new public management lens, governance is the capacity of leadership to get actions undertaken, by adopting principles and functions and engaging various role-players such as public servants, private sector organizations, and citizens in public service delivery (Rhodes 2003). Effective governance practices such as accountability, openness, transparency, and participation are pivotal to (re-)gaining public trust in the provision of public services. Leadership that empowers stakeholders is effective in involving role-players and reinforcing governance processes (Conger and Kanungo 1988; Metzger, Alexander, and Weiner 2005).

### ***Empowering leadership***

Empowerment is the process through which managers provide their employees with the influence over their own functioning (e.g. Leach, Wall, and Jackson 2003). Empowering leadership refers to ‘the process of implementing conditions that enable sharing power with an employee by delineating the significance of the employee’s job, providing greater decision-making autonomy, expressing confidence in the employee’s capabilities, and removing hindrances to performance’ (Zhang and Bartol 2010, 109). Empowering leadership comprises a set of managerial practices, such as delegation, participative decision-making, persuasive and encouraging communication, mentoring and performance development (Zhang and Zhou 2014).

Empowering leadership differs from transformational leadership. Transformational leadership centres around building vision and inspiring employees’ pursuit of the vision (Tekleab et al. 2008). On the contrary, by granting opportunities for employees to make and carry out decisions (Tekleab et al. 2008), empowering leadership is orientated towards developing the self-leadership capabilities among employees (Sims and Manz 1996). Albeit transformational leadership may be a crucial contextual precursor of employee proactive behaviour, empowering leadership may have a more straightforward impact on job crafting since it focuses particularly on empowering behaviour from the leader, which enables followers to experience more autonomy to job craft (Audenaert et al. 2019a).

Transactional leaders articulate goals to employees, monitor and appraise employees’ behaviours, and respond with rewards or disciplinary actions (Taylor 2017). Transactional leadership is labelled ‘lower order’ and argued to be insufficient for an organization to attain its full potential (Bass et al. 2003). Empowering leadership is alleged to be a more effective than transactional leadership in achieving organizational goals (McLean 2013).

The emerging research on empowering leadership in public organizations suggests that empowering leadership is relevant to public service settings (Govender 2017). While in the past, public leaders tended to resort to transactional leadership style, they are currently expected to empower their employees to behave proactively (Audenaert et al. 2019) through empowering leadership (Vecchio, Justin, and Pearce 2010). Transactional leadership models have self-interest at their foundation, which differs from the psychological model of public service employees (Govender 2017). Empowering leaders not only share power with employees, but likewise provide support for dealing with high-demand public service works and encourage them to devise and implement initiatives to address public service issues (Hassan, Park, and

Raadschelders 2019; Park and Hassan 2018). Empowering leadership demonstrates strong associations with employee work effort, performance, and improved public service delivery (Govender 2017).

### *Empowering leadership as a contextual contingency*

Employee use of normative public values requires self-initiated actions, which empowering leadership can foster. Empowering leaders who encourage independent employee action demonstrate their trust in employee competencies and their recognition towards employees' value to the organization (Seibert, Wang, and Courtright 2011). This trust and recognition from leaders may fuel employees' motivation and confidence (Griffin, Neal, and Parker 2007) to fulfil their public service roles in the public organization's strategic direction. Moreover, leaders who empower independent employee action delegate vital discretion to employees to enable them to directly influence their own functioning (e.g. Conger and Kanungo 1988) and experience more flexibility in their work. With perceptions of flexibility, employees can independently make decisions without direct supervision (van Dijke et al. 2012) and therefore have the propensity to go an extra mile in their work (Parker 1998) by enacting public values in their decision making in accordance with the public mission. Demonstrating concerns about employees' autonomy, capabilities, performance, and development (Zhang and Bartol 2010), empowering leadership is other-regarding, and is thus expected to be supportive of the utilization of public values (Pandey et al. 2016). Moreover, empowering leadership was reported to positively relate to citizenship behaviour (Fong and Snape 2015; Li, Chiaburu, and Kirkman 2017) and negatively relate to deviant behaviour (Kim and Beehr 2017). Hence, under empowering leadership, public employees are inclined to act in the interests of stakeholders including citizens such as through the enactment of normative public values in their decisions.

In the current research, we expect that the interactional effect of HR practices and empowering leadership would emerge in the public service context. Particularly, we predict that discretionary HR practices and empowering leadership may act as substitutes for the impact of each other to promote employee use of normative public values. This prediction is premised on Chuang, Jackson, and Jiang (2016) evidence regarding the substitutive effect of leadership for the impact of HRM practices. The theoretical underpinning for Chuang, Jackson, and Jiang (2016) research model is the substitutes-for-leadership theory (Kerr and Jermier 1978), which indicates that organizational conditions such as HRM practices can substitute for or attenuate the influence of leader behaviours (Kerr and Jermier 1978; Podsakoff, MacKenzie, and Fetter 1993).

Discretionary HR practices and empowering leadership can promote employee use of normative public value in a substitutive fashion since they overlap in their functions to nurture this behaviour among public employees. In one respect, as earlier discussed, discretionary HR practices can infuse or reinforce normative public values among employees as well as facilitate their use of these values in decision making during interactions with citizens. In another respect, empowering leaders who increase competencies, motivation, confidence, and opportunities for employee enactment of normative public values. Given the rather analogous influence of discretionary HR practices and empowering leadership on employee use of normative public values, empowering leadership can function as a substitute for discretionary HR practices and thereby attenuate the impact of discretionary HR practices. In other words, when

empowering leadership is already in use, the influence of discretionary HR practices may be reduced. Further, empowering leaders create the conditions that facilitate follower behaviours through their direct interactions with followers (Chuang, Jackson, and Jiang 2016). Therefore, the formal system of discretionary HR practices may be redundant with these informal interactions, and the potential value of a well-designed discretionary HRM system may be alleviated. Alternatively, when empowering leadership is absent, employees may rely more on discretionary HR practices for opportunities to apply normative public values. The ensuing hypothesis is consequently formulated:

H2. Discretionary HR practices interact with empowering leadership in predicting employee use of normative public values such that the relationship between discretionary HR practices and employee use of normative public values is stronger when empowering leadership is lower.

### ***Public service motivation as a moderator***

Public service motivation (PSM) is defined as ‘the belief, values and attitudes that go beyond self-interest and organizational interest, that concern the interest of a larger political entity and that motivate individuals to act accordingly whenever appropriate’ (Vandenabeele 2007, 549). It can be nurtured by a number of factors including family socialization, religious activities, education, and social volunteering (Perry et al. 2008). Grounded on affective, normative, and rational motives, PSM is an intrinsic, altruistic, and prosocial form of motivation that comprises four dimensions: (1) attraction to policy-making, (2) commitment to the public interest and civic duty, (3) compassion, and (4) self-sacrifice (Perry 1996; Perry and Wise 1990). Research found that public service motivated employees are more engaged in their communities, leading to other types of prosocial behaviour such as volunteering and blood donation (Houston 2005).

PSM is driven by intrinsic rewards (e.g. duty of a public service employee, sense of accomplishment, or reputation for serving the public interest) rather than extrinsic rewards (e.g. pay raise or advancement opportunity) (Crewson 1997). Public sector employees tend to be intrinsically motivated by a desire to serve the public interest and a concern for the community (i.e. intrinsic values) albeit some may be extrinsically motivated (Crewson 1997; Houston 2005). Some public employees are motivated to self-select into public service job on account of work conditions such as job security, public sector retirement/benefit plans, or family-friendly policies (Park and Word 2012). Since attitudes towards serving the public interest have proven to be rather stable over longer periods of time, a person’s motivational level when entering a public organization is likely to be the best predictor of future PSM scores (Vogel and Kroll 2016, 71).

Lepak and Snell (2002) maintain that HRM effectiveness depends on the type of contribution employees make to the organization. Public employees vary in their PSM level, the motivation to contribute to the public interest (Park and Word 2012). PSM can function as an interpretation framework through which employees react to HRM practices. Thus, we propose that the extent to which discretionary HR practices are associated with employee use of normative public values is contingent on employees’ PSM.

Besides organizational resources (e.g. HR practices), employees may have critical individual resources in the form of motivation (e.g. PSM among public sector employees) (Hobfoll 2001). High in PSM, public employees express high levels of attraction to public service, commitment to public values, compassion, and self-sacrifice (Kim et al. 2013; Perry 1996). They deem serving the public interest to be the meaning of their job and guiding principles in life (Mostafa, Gould-Williams, and Bottomley 2015) even at their personal cost and build their self-esteem mainly from the public service rather than from resources from the organization. Hence, public employees higher in PSM may have higher motivation in enacting normative public values in their decisions to serve the public than those lower in PSM. In this case, employees with high PSM may be less influenced by discretionary HR practices than those with low PSM. Expressed differently, since their actions would instead be spurred by their own motivations and concern for others (Potipiroon and Faerman 2016), discretionary HR practices may be redundant for employees with high PSM. This is consistent with Tummers et al. (2015) view that employees scoring high on PSM may have a strong desire for providing high quality public service (such as through the enactment of normative public values) to citizens even when it means utilizing personal resources regardless of their contextual conditions such as HR practices. Furthermore, in light of the dark sides of PSM perspective (e.g. Schott and Ritz 2018), highly public-service motivated employees may cling to their own conceptions of public values and may resist influence efforts (Schott and Ritz 2018). Therefore, they may be less influenced by discretionary HR practices.

In contrast, employees low in PSM are less committed to public values and interests (Bakker 2015; Kim et al. 2013; Perry 1996) and less inclined to engage in activities that benefit others (Jaskyte 2017), and therefore less likely to apply normative public values in their public service decisions. With low motivation to engage in meaningful public service, employees with low PSM may need to rely on discretionary HR practices to energize them and direct their efforts in the application of normative public values. Hence, when PSM is low, discretionary HR practices is likely to be more strongly related to employee use of normative public values. Consequently, we anticipate that the relationship between discretionary HR practices and employee use of normative public values is stronger for public employees with low PSM than for those with high PSM:

H3. The relationship between discretionary HR practices and employee use of normative public values is stronger when employees have lower public service motivation.

## **Research methods**

### ***Sampling***

We collected data for the current research from full-time employees working in wards (local level governments) under the administration of district-level governments in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. We randomly chose five wards from each of all 24 districts of the city using lucky dip (or ‘dip hat’) method (balloting). This random sampling technique provided every ward in a district equal chance of participating in the study without favour or bias, which contributes to the representativeness of the sample organizations. We contacted the heads of these wards, explicated our academic

purpose and solicited their voluntary participation. We obtained the list of employees and managers, and their contact details and emailed the link to survey questionnaire to them. As requested, employees provided their managers with a five-digit number that they had entered in their surveys for the aim of matching employees' and managers' responses.

Within each ward, except the head of the ward, each public employee is responsible for a public service area and has a direct contact with citizens. Public service areas that employees in the ward handle include real estate transactions, matrimonial and family issues, wills, and notary public services.

Three waves of data collection with a three-month time lag were conducted starting in September 2018. This time lag was used since it should be long enough to mitigate common method biases but not mask any relationship that exists (Podsakoff et al. 2003). HRM studies deemed three months reasonable to capture the impact of HRM practices on employee outcomes (e.g. Jiang, Chuang, and Chiao 2015; Xu and Lv 2018).

We collected data for different variables from different survey waves. Separating the independent variables from the dependent variables in the survey waves further contributes to alleviate common method bias (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, and Podsakoff 2012). Besides, testing mediation paths requires at least two survey waves (Cole and Maxwell 2003). In the first survey wave (T1), data on discretionary HR practices were garnered from managers. In the second survey (T2), employees provided data on empowering leadership, use of normative public values, and public service motivation. The third survey wave (T3) collected employee responses regarding job crafting.

When responses were returned, we excluded the responses from wards with under five respondents (Chuang and Liao 2010) and built a final sample of 517 complete responses (response rate: 44.87%). These 517 participants belonged to 46 wards with the average of 11.23 employees per ward (ranging from 7 to 16 employees per ward). Among the employees, 191 (36.94%) were female. Employees' average age was 33.48 years ( $SD = 7.62$ ) and their average organizational tenure was 8.14 years ( $SD = 3.71$ ). Chi-square tests for the distribution of public employees' age, gender, and education between the sample and the population (General Statistics Office of Vietnam 2017) revealed no statistical significance, indicating that the sample provides a proper representation of the population.

We further compared the data on the demographic and study variables of those completing the entire study with the data of those who dropped out after T1 and of those who dropped out after T2. T-test results denoted no significant differences in terms of age, gender, education, and organizational tenure were observed between these groups. No significant differences existed between the study completers and T1 or T2 dropouts in terms of employee use of normative public values, job crafting, and public service motivation. Nonetheless, in comparison with the study completers, T1 and T2 dropouts scored slightly lower on discretionary HR practices and empowering leadership.

### **Measures**

Respondents indicated their perceptions on items on a five-point Likert scale (1 = 'strongly disagree', 5 = 'strongly agree') unless otherwise indicated. The scale items were translated into Vietnamese, following the back-translation procedure (Schaffer and Riordan 2003). We measured discretionary HR practices

utilizing Gavino, Wayne, and Erdogan (2012) 29-item scale, which comprises eight factors: selective staffing, training, decision making, participation, developmental opportunities, performance management, pay for performance, and promotional opportunities (e.g. 'In my ward, extensive training programs are provided for individuals in this public service job'). Empowering leadership was assessed through Ahearne, Mathieu, and Rapp (2005) 12-item scale (e.g. 'My manager allows me to make important decisions quickly to satisfy citizen needs'). Employee ratings of managers' empowering leadership were aggregated to generate a ward-level variable. This aggregation was justified by the  $r_{wg}$  average value of .79 [.72, .87], surpassing Klein et al.'s (2000) .70 cut-off point, along with the ICC1 and ICC2 values being .16 and .71 respectively (LeBreton and Senter 2008). These values exceeded the lower thresholds for ICC1 (.12, James 1982) and ICC2 (.60, Glick 1985).

Respondents were asked to indicate how often they had engaged in each of the behaviours (1 = never, 5 = very often) in Tims, Bakker, and Derks (2012) 21-item job crafting scale (e.g. 'I try to make my public service work more challenging by examining the underlying relationships between aspects of my job'). The use of normative public values was assessed through three items that Pandey et al. (2016) develop from Galloway and Edwards (1982) and Nalbandian and Edwards (1983). We invited employees to rate the salience of public values including equity (a fair allocation of resources), representation (responsiveness to all citizens), and individual rights (civil rights, property rights) in 'making major decisions about public services in your ward' (1 = 'of little importance'; 5 = 'extremely important'). Kim et al.'s (2013) 16-item scale was used to measure public service motivation (e.g. 'I believe in putting civic duty before self'). Control variables comprise employees' age, gender, education, and organizational tenure.

### **Analytic strategy**

Multilevel structural equation modelling was conducted using MPlus 7.2 for data analyses since the data were nested within wards (one manager per ward). Besides, recent analysis by Preacher, Zyphur, and Zhang (2010) suggested the use of multilevel structural equation models to surmount the limitations of traditional multilevel analysis in predicting mediation effects through multiple levels. The indirect effect was tested through the Monte Carlo simulation with 20,000 replications (Menges et al. 2017; Preacher and Selig 2012).

### **Common method variance**

Common method variance (CMV) bias was tested through the marker variable approach (Lindell and Whitney 2001). A marker variable (i.e. attitude towards social media usage), which was theoretically unrelated to other variables, was included into the measurement. In our research, all significant zero-order correlations remained significant after the marker variable was partialled out, which indicates the low CMV risk in the finding pattern. Moreover, the interactional effect in the current research model could not be an artefact of CMV but rather could solely be deflated by it (Siemsen, Roth, and Oliveira 2010).

## Results

### Measurement models

This section first presents the model-data fit, then provides support for discriminant validity through comparison of confirmatory factor analyses (CFAs) and comparison of the square root of the average variance extracted (AVE) values and correlations, and finally endorses construct reliability via composite construct reliability coefficients and AVE values.

The results from CFAs demonstrated a good fit between the hypothesized five-factor model and the data (Table 1). Fit indices such as Tucker–Lewis coefficient (TLI), incremental fit index (IFI), comparative-fit index (CFI), standardized root mean square residual (SRMR), and root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) were used to assess the model. The data-model fit was decent ( $\chi^2/df = 257.06/142 = 1.81 < 2$  (Carmines and McIver 1981), TLI = .95, IFI = .95, CFI = .94, > .90 (Tabachnick and Fidell 2001). The degree of misfit was tolerable, with SRMR = .052 and RMSEA = .057, under the relevant benchmark of .08 (Hu and Bentler 1999).

The results in Table 1 further revealed that the hypothesized five-factor model fitted the data remarkably better than any of the alternative models, lending evidence for the construct distinctiveness or discriminant validity. Moreover, discriminant validity was attained since the AVE value of each construct exceeded its correlations with the other constructs (Fornell and Larcker 1981) (Table 2).

The reliabilities of the scales were assessed through the composite construct reliability coefficients and AVE values (Table 2). Composite reliabilities ranged from .72 (for job crafting) to .83 (for employee use of normative public values), above the .70 cut-off point (Bagozzi and Yi 1988). AVE, which ranged from .52 (for discretionary HR practices) to .74 (for empowering leadership), surpassed the recommended threshold of .50 (Fornell and Larcker 1981).

### Hypothesis testing

Control variables demonstrated no significant associations with job crafting. The impacts of control variables are .04 ( $p > .10$ ), .05 ( $p > .10$ ), .09 ( $p = .08$ ), and .06 ( $p > .10$ ) for employees' age, gender, education, and organizational tenure respectively. The control variables together accounted for 3.4% of the variance in job crafting ( $R^2 = .034$ ,  $p > .10$ ).

This study aims to test three hypotheses H1, H2, and H3. Hypothesis H1 proposed that employee use of normative public values would mediate the relationship between discretionary HR practices and employee job crafting. To test this hypothesis, we estimated the direct relationship between discretionary HR practices and employee job crafting as well as the indirect relationship between discretionary HR practices and employee job crafting via employee use of normative public values. As displayed in Table 3, the direct relationship between discretionary HR practices and job crafting was significant and positive ( $\beta = .24$ ,  $p < .05$ ). The indirect effect of discretionary HR practices on employee job crafting through employee application of normative public values was .11 (SE = .07,  $p < .01$ ). The Monte Carlo test with 20,000 replications (Menges et al. 2017; Preacher and Selig 2012) demonstrated that the 95% confidence interval (CI) for the distribution of the product of coefficients ranged between .06 and .42, not containing zero. These results provided support for hypothesis H1 regarding

**Table 1.** Comparison of measurement models for variables.

Model	$\chi^2$	df	$\Delta\chi^2$	TLI	IFI	CFI	SRMR within	SRMR between	RMSEA	RMSEA 90% confidence interval
Hypothesized five-factor model: Employee use of normative public values, job crafting, and PSM at level 1 Discretionary HR practices and empowering leadership at level 2	257.06	142		.95	.95	.94	.052	.086	.057	(.051, .064)
Four-factor model: Employee use of normative public values, job crafting, and PSM at level 1 Discretionary HR practices and empowering leadership combined at level 2	366.48	146	109.42**	.91	.92	.92	.088	.143	.094	(.089, .099)
Three-factor model: Employee use of normative public values and job crafting combined, and PSM at level 1 Discretionary HR practices and empowering leadership combined at level 2	408.27	149	151.21**	.87	.87	.88	.102	.158	.105	(.101, .112)
Two-factor model: Employee use of normative public values, job crafting, and PSM combined at level 1 Discretionary HR practices and empowering leadership combined at level 2	425.19	151	168.13**	.77	.78	.76	.124	.172	.121	(.115, .127)
One-factor model: All variables combined	519.83	152	262.77**	.67	.67	.66	.136	.194	.138	(.131, .146)

\*\*  $p < .01$ .

Individual level (level 1) (N = 517); ward level (level 2) (N = 46).

the mediating role of employee use of normative public values in explaining the nexus between discretionary HR practices and employee job crafting.

Hypothesis H2 expected that discretionary HR practices would interact with empowering leadership in predicting employee enactment of normative public values.



**Table 2.** Correlation matrix and average variance extracted.

Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	CCR	AVE
<i>Individual level</i>													
1 Employee age	33.48	7.62	...										
2 Employee gender			.01	...									
3 Employee education			.04	.02	...								
4 Employees' organizational tenure	8.14	3.71	.06	.03	.02	...							
5 Employee use of normative public values	3.49	.51	.07	.05	.07	.04	(.84)					.83	.71
6 Job crafting	3.47	.44	.05	.06	.06	.07	.39***	(.81)				.72	.66
7 Public service motivation	2.14	.28	.07	.07	.08	.05	-.11	-.09	(.79)			.82	.62
<i>Ward level</i>													
8 Discretionary HR practices	3.39	.36	.04	.04	.06	.09	.23*	.25**	-.06	(.72)		.76	.52
9 Empowering leadership	3.53	.61	.05	.03	.07	.08	.37***	.31**	.09	.08	(.86)	.81	.74

Individual level (N = 517); ward level (N = 46).

CCR = Composite construct reliability, AVE = Average variance extracted.

Values in parentheses demonstrate the square root of the average variance extracted.

Standardized correlations reported \* p < .05; \*\* p < .01; \*\*\* p < .001.

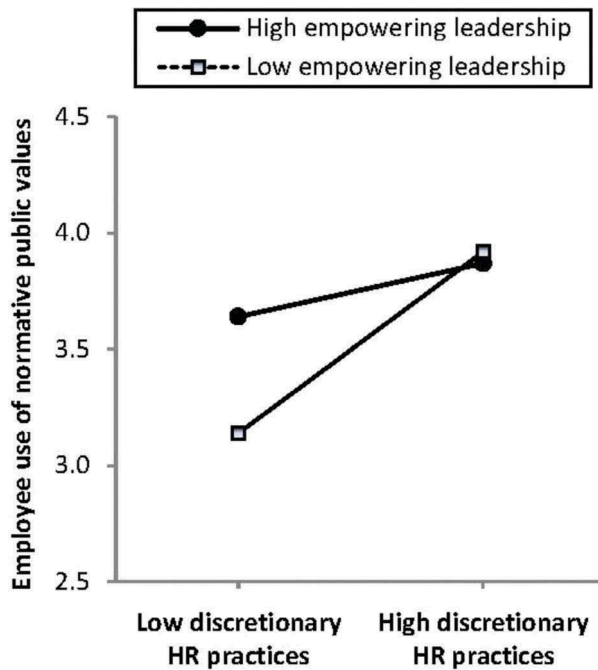
**Table 3.** Direct, indirect, and interactional effects.

Hypotheses	Description of paths	Path coefficients (Unstandardized)	Conclusions
<i>Direct effects</i>			
	Discretionary HR practices → Job crafting	.24* (.08)	Supported
	Discretionary HR practices → Employee use of normative public values	.29** (.09)	Supported
	Employee use of normative public values → Job crafting	.38*** (.16)	Supported
<i>Indirect effect</i>			
H1	Discretionary HR practices → Employee use of normative public values → Job crafting	.11** (.07) [95% CIs = [.06, .42]]	Supported
<i>Interactional effects</i>			
H2	Discretionary HR practices x Empowering leadership → Employee use of normative public values	-.26** (.05)	Supported
H3	Discretionary HR practices x Public service motivation → Employee use of normative public values	-.17* (.08)	Supported

Individual level (N = 517); ward level (N = 46).

Model fit:  $\chi^2 = 257.06$ ,  $df = 142$ ; TLI = .95; IFI = .95; CFI = .94; SRMR = .052; RMSEA = .057; \* p < .05; \*\* p < .01; \*\*\* p < .001. Standard errors are exhibited in parentheses.

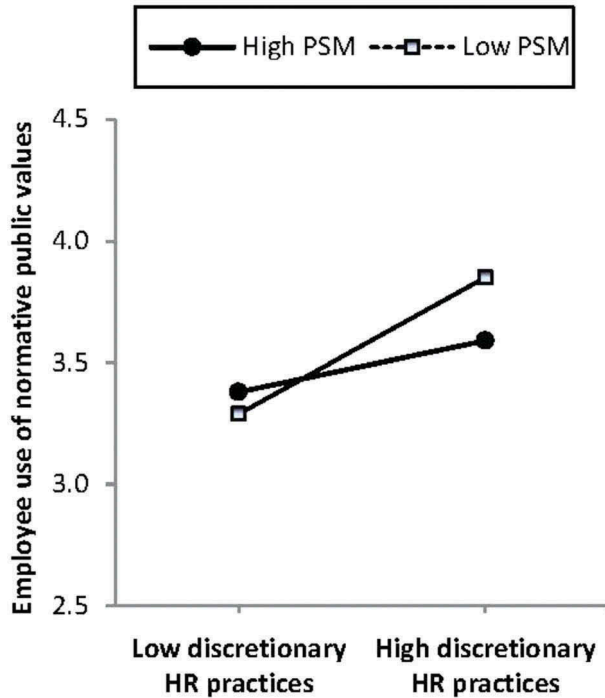
As exhibited in Table 3, the interaction term of the predictor 'discretionary HR practices' × the moderator 'empowering leadership' was significantly negative in the equation of employee use of normative public values ( $\beta = -.26$ ,  $p < .01$ ), lending credence to hypothesis H2. This interaction pattern was further assessed by testing the relationship between discretionary HR practices and employee use of normative public values at high (one SD above the mean) and low (one SD below the mean) values of empowering leadership (Aiken & West, 1991). The simple slope graph indicated that discretionary HR practices enhanced employee use of normative public values to a greater extent when empowering leadership was low (simple slope = .78,  $p < .01$ ) than when empowering leadership was high (simple slope = .23,  $p < .05$ ) (see Figure 2).



**Figure 2.** Moderating effect of empowering leadership for the relationship between discretionary HR practices and employee use of normative public values.

Hypothesis H3 postulated that discretionary HR practices would interact with public service motivation to predict employee enactment of normative public values. The interaction term of the predictor ‘discretionary HR practices’ × the moderator ‘public service motivation’ was negative and significant for employee use of normative public values ( $\beta = -.17, p < .05$ ) (see Table 3), providing evidence for hypothesis H3. As the simple slope graph demonstrated (Figure 3), the variance that discretionary HR practices produced in employee use of normative public values was greater when public service motivation was low (simple slope = .56,  $p < .05$ ) than that when public service motivation was high (simple slope = .21,  $p < .10$ ). The empirical support for all the three hypotheses indicates that our research model, which is drawn upon theories from the private sector, holds valid in a public sector setting. Our results are consistent with the findings of few prior studies regarding the relationship between HRM practices and job crafting in the private setting (e.g. Guan and Frenkel 2018; Hu and McCune Stein 2019) as well as in the public sector context (e.g. Luu 2019).

For increasing the credibility of the findings, an alternative reversed model was fitted to the data. In the reversed model, job crafting functions as an independent variable and precedes employee use of normative public values, which precedes discretionary HR practices. The fit statistics of this model was worse than the fit of the hypothesized model:  $\chi^2/df = 363.57/149 = 2.44$ , TLI = .86, IFI = .87, CFI = .87, SRMR = .097, RMSEA = .103 (90% CI [.098, .109]),  $\Delta\chi^2_{(7)} = 106.51, p < .01$ , Akaike’s information criterion (AIC) = 3.1. Additionally, the model with the lowest AIC value tends to be the most favoured (Bentler 2004). Our hypothesized model hence provided a more apt representation of the data (AIC = 1.9) than did the reversed model.



**Figure 3.** Moderating effect of public service motivation for the relationship between discretionary HR practices and employee use of normative public values.

### Research implications

The study reported herein extends and enriches the public management literature. First, regardless of the salience of public employees' job crafting in enhancing the meaningfulness in public service tasks and proactively improving public services for citizens (Bakker 2015; Luu 2018a, 2019), research on job crafting in public organizations still has received less scholarly attention than that in the private sector (Audenaert et al. 2019a; Luu 2019). The current study advances this research stream in the public service area by investigating contextual and individual mechanisms underlying the crafting of public service job. Our findings provide further support for the relevance and salience of job crafting to the public sector as highlighted in few prior public management works (e.g. Audenaert et al. 2019a; Luu 2019) and indicate the desirability of public sector employees engaging job crafting for ongoing public service enhancements.

The existing job crafting literature has by and large focused on individual antecedents such as employees' proactive personality (Bakker, Tims, and Derks 2012; Plomp et al. 2016), dark personality traits (Roczniewska and Bakker 2016), regulatory focus (promotion focus and prevention focus) (Brenninkmeijer and Hekkert-Koning 2015), work experience, need for positive self-image, and need for human connection (Niessen, Weseler, and Kostova 2016). The current research adds to the growing but limited body of contextual precursors to job crafting especially in the public sector (Audenaert et al. 2019a; Luu 2019) by identifying discretionary HR practices as

a contextual catalyst for the effect chain leading to job crafting. As an organization's investment in employees' performance and career development beyond legal requirements (Shore and Shore 1995; Gavino, Wayne, and Erdogan 2012), discretionary HR practices focus on employee-oriented outcomes (Appelbaum et al. 2000; Wood and Ogbonnaya 2018) such as their job crafting for more work meaningfulness and public service enhancement.

Discretionary HR practices are relevant to job crafting due to their alignment with employee-centred HRM perspective (Wright and Boswell 2002). Different from management-centred HRM perspective that views employees as passive recipients of HR practices, employee-centred HRM perspective advocates the likelihood that employees can act as active or proactive members and they themselves proactively shape their actions through their perceptions and observations of HR practices (Lepak and Boswell 2012; McBride 2008; Meijerink, Bos-Nehles, and de Leede 2018). In line with this employee-centred HRM perspective, discretionary HR practices can function as a source of resources on which employees draw to 'craft' further job resources for the bottom-up job redesigning process.

The nexus between HRM practices and job crafting that has been largely explored in the private sector (e.g. Guan and Frenkel 2018; Hu and McCune Stein 2019) holds valid for the public service context through our findings. Our findings are further consistent with those of few previous studies examining the impact of HRM practices on employees' crafting of public service tasks (e.g. Luu 2019). However, future research should grasp further insights into the difference in the degree to which discretionary HR practices impact job crafting in the public versus private sector. Further, despite our findings grounded on the public sector context, we should note some limits for the extent of application of discretionary HR practices or development of job crafting in public organizations with rigid structures and policies. For instance, public organizations may limit employee involvement to decisions that the institutional framework permits. In public organizations, employees may be granted opportunities to discuss their performance assessment with managers or train new employees, but may have less opportunities to influence assigned work objectives or participate in the selection of new employees or interviewing candidates. In addition, employees may craft their public service tasks through seeking public service-related knowledge and skills as well as support, advice, and feedback from managers and colleagues, and learning how to deal with task demands from managers and colleagues. Public service employees may, however, be less likely to craft their tasks by participating in new projects beyond their organizations or avoiding the interactions with citizens. These limits of the application of discretionary HR practices and development of job crafting in the public sector should be further explored in future research.

Second, our research not only integrates the HRM and job crafting research streams but also advances them by testing a mediation mechanism of employee use of normative public values. This finding is consonant with a strategic HRM perspective that highlights the role of HRM practices in building human capital (e.g. abilities and values) among employees to promote their performance (Jiang, Chuang, and Chiao 2015). It is also in line with the infusion pathway lens (e.g. Pandey et al. 2016) that public values can be assessed, modified, advanced, and enacted through engaging public employees in HRM activities (Knies et al. 2018). Our study further indicates that even though public employees already embrace normative public values when entering the public service work, discretionary HR practices are still crucial in enhancing the integration of normative public values in public employees' decision making and in turn activating their crafting of public service tasks.

Moreover, job crafting research has tended to unpack the direct impact of HRM practices on job crafting (e.g. Batistič et al. 2016; Jia et al. 2020; Khatri, Gupta, and Varma 2017) or the indirect effect of HRM practices on job crafting channelled by psychological or motivational mediators such as self-efficacy, harmonious passion (Chen et al. 2017), felt responsibility, or trust (Lee et al. 2019). Differently, to our best knowledge, our study is among the first in the generic management literature as well as in the public management literature to unravel the role of an instrumental variable (i.e. a behavioural variable that promotes a positive behavioural outcome), namely employee use of normative public values, as a mediation channel for the impact of HRM practices on job crafting.

Our narrative regarding normative public values not only adds to the public personnel management literature, but also provides added contribution, to a certain extent, to the generic HRM literature. Since public values are espoused and enacted in some industries such as healthcare (Kjeldsen 2012; Yoon and You 2019), the mediating mechanism of employee use of normative public values can be generalizable to both public and private healthcare sector. Some public values such as representation (i.e. responsiveness to citizens or customers) and equity can exist in both public and private organizations (Van der Wal, De Graaf, and Lasthuizen 2008) and thus can be applicable to private sector settings. Respect for individuals' property and civil rights in the public sector can be comparable to respect for consumer rights (Chaudhary 2017) (e.g. serviceability and social justice) in the private sector (Van der Wal, De Graaf, and Lasthuizen 2008). Private sector organizations can hence utilize discretionary HR practices to promote values such as responsiveness and equity towards customers and respect for consumer rights, and in turn shape job crafters in customer service.

Third, in line with Chuang, Jackson, and Jiang (2016) view of leadership as a substitute for formal HRM system that turns around the substitutes-for-leadership perspective (Kerr and Jermier 1978), we find that empowering leadership can create a contextual condition that facilitates employee use of normative public values and in turn job crafting. Though the strategic HRM literature and empowering leadership research stream separately demonstrate implications for employee enactment of values (Arrowsmith and Parker 2013; Luu and Rowley 2015; Raub and Robert 2010) and engagement in job crafting (Luu 2019; Kim and Beehr 2018, 2020; Thun and Bakker 2018), these two research streams have travelled parallel paths. By unravelling the interaction between discretionary HR practices and empowering leadership, our research builds the bridge between these two scholarship domains, thereby complementing existing job crafting research that has focused merely on the effects of leadership or HR practices.

Our finding unveils that discretionary HR practices and empowering leadership may substitute for each other's influence on employee use of normative public values and that utilizing both may not necessarily result in better outcomes than utilizing either one alone. Nonetheless, in our study, the positive nexus between discretionary HR practices and employee enactment of normative public values was attenuated by high empowering leadership but remained significant. This partial substitution between discretionary HR practices and empowering leadership indicates that discretionary HR practices may still be helpful for promoting public employees' use of normative public values and in turn job crafting, even when leaders adopt empowering leadership. One potential explanation for this phenomenon resides in Mintzberg's (1979) view that even in organizations where decision making is delegated,

formalization through HR practices is vital for clarifying goals and providing guidance (Organ and Greene 1981) as well as augmenting the value derived from decentralization (such as through empowering leadership) (Chuang, Jackson, and Jiang 2016).

Albeit our finding is consistent with Chuang, Jackson, and Jiang (2016) substitutive effects of HRM systems and leadership, we should acknowledge that other types of HR practices and leadership may interact in different ways, for instance in a synergistic rather than substitutive way (Bowen and Ostroff 2004). In addition, the interplay between HRM systems and leadership may be contingent on the outcomes of interest and influenced by other facets of work tasks and organizational context (Chuang, Jackson, and Jiang 2016), which more research efforts should delve deeper into.

Moreover, this finding regarding the moderating impact of empowering leadership on employee use of normative public values and in turn job crafting in the public sector lends further credence to the magnitude of empowering leadership in granting public employees power to enact normative public values in their decision making and in turn proactively craft their public service jobs under rigid structures (Audenaert et al. 2019a). Empowering leadership is deemed to be more effective than transactional leadership in the current public setting (Audenaert et al. 2019). Through building the self-leadership capabilities among followers (Sims and Manz 1996), empowering leadership may have a more straightforward impact on employee use of normative public values and job crafting than transformational leadership (Audenaert et al. 2019a). Future research should provide further evidence for these views through comparative analyses of the moderating effects of empowering leadership versus transformational and transactional leadership on the application of normative public values and job crafting behaviour among public sector employees.

Fourth, through the confirmed interactive effects of employees' public service motivation and discretionary HR practices on employee use of normative public values and in turn job crafting behaviour, our research provides further insights into the role of public service motivation as a boundary condition for job crafting models. High in public service motivation, employees are navigated by motives comprising attraction to policy-making, commitment to the public interest and civic duty, compassion, and self-sacrifice (Perry and Wise 1990). Even in the absence of contextual conditions (e.g. discretionary HR practices), these motives are strong resources that drive employees to tolerate or overcome austerity measures within public organizations (Audenaert et al. 2019a) to enact normative public values in fulfilling their civic duty and devoting to serving citizens. Further, in juxtaposition with contextual conditions behind job crafting as presented above, our study indicates to public managers that job crafting behaviour among public employees is a function of distal contextual factors (e.g. discretionary HR practices), proximal contextual factors (e.g. empowering leadership), and intrinsic factors (e.g. public service motivation).

Last, with a research model of discretionary HR practices and job crafting built on Western theorizing in the private sector that holds true for an Asian public service context (Vietnamese public organizations), our study further extends the HRM-job crafting research stream to the public sector in a non-Western context. Our research hence addresses Luu (2019) call for studies in more Asian public sector settings for this HRM-job crafting relationship that has been primarily investigated in the private sector (e.g. Guan and Frenkel 2018; Hu and McCune Stein 2019) or in the Western countries (e.g. Federici, Boon, and Den Hartog 2019; Meijerink, Bos-Nehles, and de Leede 2018). Nevertheless, the impact of cultural values and characteristics of governance structures in Asian public service contexts have not been investigated in our study as well as prior

studies (e.g. Luu 2019). Future research should not only extend our model to other Asian public sector contexts but also decipher if cultural values such as collectivism and power distance can influence public sector employees' responsiveness to discretionary HR practices and engagement in proactive crafting of public service tasks.

### ***Practical implications***

The findings of this study indicate that public organizations should consider building discretionary HR practices to drive employees to craft their public service tasks. It is crucial to build a process for setting goals and appraising public service performance. Formal discussions on public service goals and professional career goals arm employees with a distinct line of sight between their developmental goals and how their public service work adds value to the public organization. Employees will realize and value opportunities available to them through the communication of public service career-promotion criteria and options.

Public organizations should promote decision-making practices at all levels. Managers in public organizations should be aware that management practices such as granting of power can complement to the limitations of the bureaucracy of institutional procedures (Demircioglu 2018). Organizations should provide training in critical thinking, problem solving, and decision making for employees, as well as an established process for reviewing decisions. Along with this training, public organizations should empower employees to craft their public service tasks. Further, since the finding regarding the mediation effect indicates that an effective way to promote job crafting is via stimulating employee's enactment of normative public values, managers should encourage and grant employees autonomy to serve citizens with responsiveness, equity, and respect for their constitutionally guaranteed rights.

Due to the interaction between discretionary HR practices and empowering leadership, while such HR practices may take time to be established, empowering leadership can serve as a cost-efficient way to nurture employee use of normative public values and in turn job crafting. Managers should be trained and encouraged to exercise the granting of power to followers. Moreover, while leading employees in an empowering manner, managers should examine their level of public service motivation. As our findings indicate, public service motivated employees are inclined to guide their own behaviours in public service activities and less influenced by empowering leadership. Hence, public managers should rely on employees who are already high in public service motivation and direct their empowering efforts to enhance the enactment of normative public values and job crafting among employees who express low levels of public service motivation.

### ***Limitations and future research paths***

This study has some limitations. One of its limitations is its time-lagged research design without investigation into the cross-lagged relations between the independent and dependent variables (Kasl and Jones 2003). This research is therefore unable to provide information regarding causal relationship between discretionary HR practices and employee job crafting through employee use of normative public values. This limitation should be surmounted through future explorations into cross-lagged effects of the hypothesized causal order versus cross-lagged effects of the reverse to the hypothesized causal order (Epitropaki and Martin 2005).

The current data collected through perceptual measures may not reflect the actual practices in the workplace. Discretionary HR practices, for instance, can be gauged through HRM reports. Job crafting can be more objectively measured through observations or reports from supervisors or co-workers. Additionally, self-report data exposed the research results to CMV risk (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, and Podsakoff 2012). Nonetheless, CMV threat was proved to be minimal in this study through the marker variable test (Lindell and Whitney 2001), the interactional effect tests (Siemsen, Roth, and Oliveira 2010), as well as the multi-wave data collection process through multiple respondents (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, and Podsakoff 2012).

Our dataset was built from public sector employees working in wards based in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. Albeit this participant sample is rather analogous to the public sector employee population in Vietnam in terms of some demographic attributes such as age and gender as discussed in the research methods section, the generalizability of the current findings should be enhanced through the replication of our research model in other cities and provinces of Vietnam. Our research model focuses on employees' job crafting as an individual outcome of discretionary HR practices in the local-level governments. Future research should further examine this relationship in other types of public organizations such as central government agencies, public educational institutions, public healthcare organizations, and state-owned enterprises, as well as in not-for-profit and voluntary organizations.

This research model should be extended to the effects of discretionary HR practices on job crafting at the team level in response to the recent call for investigations into a broader spectrum of potential antecedents of team job crafting (Mäkikangas, Bakker, and Schaufeli 2017). Besides, the confirmed relationship between discretionary HR practices and job crafting in our study suggests that other proactive behaviours such as idiosyncratic deals (i-deals) (Luu and Rowley 2015; Rosen, Slater, and Johnson 2013) can be integrated as individual outcomes into research models of discretionary HR practices. Due to their investment in employees' performance and development beyond legal requirements (Gavino, Wayne, and Erdogan 2012), discretionary HR practices provide employees with empowerment for i-deals to achieve higher flexibility in their work. The current research model further indicates the strong bond that discretionary HR practices may foster between employees and the organization (reflected through employee commitment to the use of normative public values). The future research models should hence include other bonding mechanisms such as psychological contract (Conway and Briner 2009; Guo, Gruen, and Tang 2017) that may mediate the nexus between discretionary HR practices and job crafting.

Other employee attributes that relate to job crafting such as adaptability (Wang, Demerouti, and Le Blanc 2017) or knowledge acquisition (Luu 2019) should be explored as individual contingencies for the impact of discretionary HR practices on employee job crafting. Furthermore, since some employees self-select into public sector employment due to extrinsic rewards rather than PSM (Park and Word 2012), employees' extrinsic motivation may influence the relationship between discretionary HR practices and their use of normative public values in a different manner from PSM. The moderating role of employee extrinsic motivation should be thus examined in the future research.

## Disclosure statement

Authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.



## Notes on contributor

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