



Who thinks they're a big fish in a small pond and why does it matter? A meta-analysis of perceived overqualification

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ABSTRACT

We carried out a meta-analysis of perceived overqualification (POQ). Synthesizing twenty-five years of research ($k = 61$), we helped to clarify disparate and conflicting findings in the literature. Our results indicated that POQ was associated with job satisfaction ($\rho = -0.41$), organizational commitment ($\rho = -0.35$), turnover intentions ($\rho = 0.37$), job search behaviors ($\rho = 0.30$), and psychological wellbeing ($\rho = -0.26$). In terms of job performance, POQ was associated with CWB ($\rho = 0.16$) and self-ratings of OCB ($\rho = -0.25$), but not task ($\rho = 0.04$) or creative and innovative ($\rho = 0.04$) performance dimensions. Results further indicated that POQ was associated with education ($\rho = 0.08$), negative affectivity ($\rho = 0.11$), narcissism ($\rho = 0.09$), and objective overqualification ($\rho = 0.40$). Beyond providing estimates of population correlations, we addressed a number of important gaps in the literature, including the role of power distance as a moderator. Implications for research and practice are discussed.

Perceived overqualification (POQ) refers to the perception that one is working in a job that requires a lesser degree of education, experience, and/or knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) than what one possess (Erdogan & Bauer, 2009; Johnson & Johnson, 2000). Due to changes in both the composition of the workforce and the economy, overqualification has become a common and important issue (Erdogan, Bauer, Peiro, & Truxillo, 2011; McKee-Ryan & Harvey, 2011). For example, research suggests that nearly half of U.S. college graduates hold a job that does not require a college education (Vedder, Denhart, & Robe, 2013). In a study of British employees, Battu and Sloane (2002) observed incidences of overqualification for 20–30% of the sample, depending on ethnicity. Incidences of overqualification appear to be even higher among immigrants; Chen, Smith, and Mustard (2010) found that over 50% of Canadian immigrants sampled were overqualified for their jobs. Indeed, concern over overqualification has become a global phenomenon (Buchel & Mertens, 2004). In light of this, understanding the psychological experience of working in a job for which one is overqualified has become a central concern in the literature (Erdogan & Bauer, 2009; Maynard & Parfyonova, 2013).

POQ, rather than objective overqualification, comprises the bulk of the management and industrial-organizational psychology literature (Feldman, 1996; Liu & Wang, 2012) for the following reasons. First, it is perception rather than reality that bears implications for psychological responses to overqualification (Hu et al., 2015), making POQ a more proximal determinant of relevant outcomes than objective overqualification (Maynard & Parfyonova, 2013). Indeed, objective measures are deficient for understanding psychological experiences of overqualified workers, in that they “ignore the complexity of overqualification as experienced by the person” (Erdogan et al., 2011, p. 218). Second, job content varies between jobs with the same title, and it is difficult for indices of objective overqualification to capture this variation (Maltarich, Reilly, & Nyberg, 2011). Thus, consistent with the bulk of the literature, we emphasize perceived instead of objective overqualification.

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A critical pursuit in the POQ literature has been to understand its determinants and implications. This involves more clearly mapping the construct's nomological network, developing a clearer understanding of its correlates (Hu et al., 2015; Liu, Luksyte, Zhou, Shi, & Wang, 2015; Luksyte & Spitzmueller, 2016; Maynard, Joseph, & Maynard, 2006). At present, there exists a large body of literature that seeks to explicate and test theoretical predictions concerning these effects (Erdogan & Bauer, 2009; Liu & Wang, 2012; Maynard & Parfyonova, 2013). Nonetheless, the literature examining POQ is vast, covering a large array of correlates with many studies reporting divergent conclusions (McKee-Ryan & Harvey, 2011). At this point in the development of the literature, a quantitative review is needed to provide a comprehensive summary of the state of extant findings.

Meta-analysis is the appropriate methodology for advancing our understanding of POQ at this point for the following reasons. First, as already noted, a substantial number of studies into the construct have been carried out. The literature has become so vast that it cannot be adequately interpreted through narrative reviews or other means often utilized (e.g., so-called “cognitive algebra” where readers attempt to mentally integrate findings from multiple studies; Valentine, Piggot, & Rothstein, 2010). More appropriate is to use psychometric meta-analysis to estimate precise values of population effect sizes and quantitatively index the variability that remains in relationships across studies once accounting for the effect of statistical artifacts (Ones, Viswesvaran, & Schmidt, 2017; Schmidt & Hunter, 2014; Viswesvaran, Ones, Schmidt, Le, & Oh, 2014).

Second, although it might appear that POQ's relationships with various correlates are consistent across studies, this is not the case (Liu & Wang, 2012; McKee-Ryan & Harvey, 2011). For example, findings related to job performance and wellbeing are incredibly mixed, varying in both direction and magnitude. The same can be said for individual differences in education, age, gender, and certain personality traits. Application of meta-analytic methods will allow us to account for the impact of statistical artifacts, generating a better understanding of population effects.

In order to evaluate theoretical models of POQ, predictions derived from these frameworks must be evaluated against empirical data. Clarifying mixed findings in the literature by accounting for statistical artifacts allows for a more robust test of said predictions and evaluation of competing frameworks. Finally, discussed in greater detail later, we utilize meta-analytic methods to address critical gaps in our understanding of POQ, including the testing of moderating effects. Study level moderators (e.g. the cultural dimension of power distance, discussed later) can be studied through a quantitative review, even if no primary study has examined the impact of that moderator. Indeed, even in instances where POQ's relations are in the same direction, substantial variability exists and the magnitude of these effects can vary across levels of untested moderators (Erdogan & Bauer, 2009; Erdogan et al., 2011). In short, our comprehensive meta-analysis of POQ correlates has important implications for the literature and advances existing narrative reviews (e.g., Liu & Wang, 2012).

1. Perceived overqualification

1.1. Theoretical frameworks

1.1.1. Relative deprivation

Much of the POQ literature has drawn upon relative deprivation theory (RDT; Feldman, Leana, & Turnley, 1997). As individuals pursue education, gain experience, and develop their knowledge and skills, they do so expecting that it will result in the attainment of a particular type of job; namely, one that utilizes that education, experience, knowledge, and/or skill (Rose, 2005; Vaisey, 2006). When the job that they ultimately hold fails to meet these expectations, the experience of deprivation (relative to their expectations and to those who are perceived as working in a job that matches their qualifications) and resulting frustration and anger leads to negative psychological consequences (Johnson & Johnson, 1996; Liu & Wang, 2012; Maynard et al., 2006). The RDT perspective suggests that variables associated with the development of knowledge and skills (e.g., education), objective circumstances (i.e., objective overqualification), and individual differences pertaining to perception of one's abilities and circumstances (e.g., negative affectivity, narcissism) can account for POQ. The RDT perspective also suggests that that the experienced anger and frustration directed at one's employer would lead to poor job attitudes.

1.1.2. Person-environment fit

Person-environment (P-E) fit speaks to the notion that beneficial psychological outcomes occur when employees' work situations are compatible with their needs and qualifications (Schneider, 2001). Particularly relevant is person-job fit, which falls under the larger umbrella of person-environment fit. Person-job fit speaks to a match between an employee's (a) KSAs and job requirements (i.e., demands-abilities fit) and (b) needs or preferences and their jobs (i.e., needs-supplies fit; Edwards, 1991). Because overqualification reflects an instance of poor demands-abilities fit, overqualified workers would be expected to experience negative attitudinal outcomes (e.g., poor job satisfaction, organizational commitment; Maynard et al., 2006). The poor fit could also lead employees to desire a stronger fit elsewhere, thus resulting in turnover intentions and job search behaviors (Maynard & Parfyonova, 2013).

1.1.3. Organizational justice theory

Organizational justice theory is built around the antecedents and implications of two types of subjective justice perceptions: *distributive justice* (i.e., fairness of distribution of outcomes) and *procedural justice* (i.e., fairness of processes used to distribute outcomes). POQ can be characterized as a distributive injustice. Distributive injustices are typically understood through equity theory (Greenberg, 1990). A distributive injustice exists when individuals believe there is a discrepancy between the ratio of their inputs (e.g., pay) to outputs (e.g., effort) and the perceived ratio of inputs to outputs of others (Adams, 1965). In relation to POQ, Liu and

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