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Overeducation, perceived career progress, and work satisfaction in young adulthood

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ABSTRACT

Some people work in occupations that require lower levels of education than their attained education, and these “overeducated” workers tend to be less satisfied than those who work in occupations that match their attained education. This study sought to extend the previous finding by answering the following previously unexplored questions: (1) Does the association depend on the level of attained education?; and (2) Does perceived career delay account for overeducated workers’ lower work satisfaction? Data from U.S. young adults (the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Study) showed that the association between overeducation and work satisfaction was limited to severely overeducated workers with bachelor’s or graduate degrees and moderately overeducated workers with high school degrees. These people also assessed their career progress more negatively, which accounted for their lower work satisfaction. Analysis of marginal effects demonstrated that among people with bachelor’s degree, the effect of severe overeducation was strong enough to cancel out the benefit of holding the degree to improve work satisfaction.

1. Introduction

Completing a higher level of education generally increases the chance of attaining a high-status occupation, but some people come to hold occupations that only require lower levels of education than the levels they completed. Since the expansion of college education, social scientists have voiced concerns about these “overeducated” workers (Freeman, 1976). In the United States, the rate of overeducation has steadily increased since 1970’s (Vaisey, 2006), and 12% of male workers and 10% of female workers are overeducated for their occupations, according to a study based on the 2000 census (Rubb, 2014).¹ The recent trend of bifurcation in the labor market further increased concerns for overeducated workers (Bracke, van de Straat, & Missinne, 2014).²

Overeducation is a form of education-occupation mismatch, which represents excess education for the occupation, and undereducation represents the opposite form, which represents insufficient education. Like previous studies, this paper focuses on overeducation, rather than undereducation, because it has more serious consequences for society, employers, and workers. At the societal level, the presence of

overeducated workers in the labor market indicates the underutilization of worker skills, which in turn limits the country’s ability to achieve its economic potential. For employers, the presence of overeducated workers presents a risk of low productivity at the firm because overeducated workers show worse performance (Tsang, 1987), more frequent engagement in workplace deviance (Luksyte, Spitzmueller, & Maynard, 2011), and higher turn-over rates (Maynard, Joseph, & Maynard, 2006) than appropriately educated workers. Regarding consequences for workers, sociologists initially proposed that overeducation radicalizes young people’s political attitudes (Blumberg and Murtha, 1977), but subsequent research generally provided little support for this proposition (e.g., Burris, 1983). Consequently, the amount of sociological research on overeducation has declined since then (Vaisey, 2006). Nonetheless, economists and labor scholars and some sociologists have continued to show interest in overeducation because it has important implications for workers including their earnings and work satisfaction (e.g., Sánchez-Sánchez & McGuinness, 2015; Vaisey, 2006) as well as their health (Bracke et al., 2014).

The present study focuses on worker satisfaction as the outcome and seeks to extend the existing literature in two ways. First, past studies

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¹ Rubb (2014) reported separate estimates of overeducation rates based on different measures. Those we mentioned in the text are based on the calculation of required education using the mean education in each occupation. When the mode is used to calculate required education, 28.5% of men and 23.2% of women were classified as overeducated. We discuss the difference between these measures in the methods section.

² Freeman (1976) initially defined overeducation by the declining economic return of college degree, but the subsequent research in the area focused on misplacement of workers in occupations that require lower levels of education than their attained levels.

investigated the overall impact of overeducation across different levels of attained education or limited the analysis to people who hold same educational degrees. Instead, we consider the possibility that the impact of overeducation on work satisfaction varies by the level of attained education. Second, although a few underlying mechanisms have been proposed to explain the effects of overeducation, those mechanisms mostly remain untested. In this study, we investigate whether a perception of delayed career progress accounts for lower satisfaction among overeducated workers.

2. Overeducation and work satisfaction

Studies have consistently shown that overeducated people are less satisfied with their work than those who hold occupations that match their levels of attained education. Many of these studies used European data (Battu, Belfield, & Sloane, 2000; McGuinness & Sloane, 2011; Sánchez-Sánchez & McGuinness, 2015; Verhaest & Omeij, 2009), but several U.S. studies have reported the same pattern (Arum & Roksa, 2014; Burris, 1983; Hersch, 1991; Tsang, Rumberger, & Levin, 1991). Some of these studies further showed that satisfaction is particularly low among workers who are severely overeducated (i.e., people who have entered occupations that require much lower levels of education than they attained). One exception to these U.S. findings is Vaisey, 2006 study based on General Social Survey, which showed that the effect of overeducation is limited to women.

Several mechanisms have been proposed to explain the effects of overeducation on work satisfaction. First, researchers have considered the possibility that the effects of overeducation merely reflect a selection process—people who tend to express dissatisfaction with work come to hold jobs that require less education. The argument is plausible because work satisfaction is somewhat stable within individuals and may be partly influenced by personal characteristics such as personality traits and levels of human capital and social capital (Brown, Charlwood, & Spencer, 2012). However, researchers have used propensity score matching models and fixed effect models to demonstrate that the effects of overeducation on work satisfaction persists beyond the selection process (McGuinness & Sloane, 2011; Verhaest & Omeij, 2009). Second, psychologists conceptualize overeducation as a form of “person-environment misfit,” which invoke negative psychological states such as boredom (e.g., Maynard et al., 2006). Consistent with this argument, skill mismatch is a more direct predictor of work satisfaction than education-occupation mismatch (Green & Zhu, 2010; McGuinness & Sloane, 2011). Third, overeducation may cause a sense of relative deprivation. As people evaluate the amount of rewards they receive, they compare themselves to others, and their choice of the comparison referent has strong impact on the ways in which they respond to the rewards (Merton, 1938). Overeducated workers may feel deprived when they compare themselves to others who have the same levels of education but hold occupations that match the education levels (Erdogan & Bauer, 2009). Therefore, overeducation may create a sense of unfairness.

The fourth mechanism, our focus in this paper, is cognitive dissonance caused by the contradiction between aspired and attained occupations. Through socialization in educational institutions, people develop a “habitus” or an orientation to future actions (Bourdieu, 1990). Occupational aspirations are one of such orientations, and overeducation causes cognitive dissonance by contradicting the orientation (Vaisey, 2006). This argument is consistent with Lesniski’s (1961) more general proposition regarding “status inconsistency”: discrepancies across different dimensions of social statuses, including education level and occupation status, increase dissatisfaction. Our argument is also consistent with Locke’s (1969, 1970) theory that work satisfaction does not directly mirror objective work rewards or work conditions because people who have the same jobs may be satisfied with the jobs to different degrees, depending on their expectations. We argue that people may develop such expectations through socialization

at educational institutions. In the U.S., not many people achieve their career aspirations they have initially developed because they are too ambitious (Reynolds, Stewart, Macdonald, & Sischo, 2006) and because they do not align their goals to the levels of education that they have receive or will receive (Schneider & Stevenson, 1999). This phenomenon is rooted in the strong cultural emphasis on socioeconomic success in the U.S. (Cohen-Marks & Stout, 2011; Hochschild, 1995), which may also intensify the psychological impact of overeducation.

We test this argument by focusing on perceptions of career progress. Workers may evaluate their current jobs by considering various aspects, but we argue that the degree to which the current jobs give them a sense of progress toward their career goals is particularly important for young adults, who are quickly learning realities of the labor market and constantly assessing their likelihood of achieving the career goals. In Add Health, respondents were asked to describe their current jobs by choosing one of the following four options: part of their long-term goals, preparation to the goals, unrelated to their goals, or do not have goals. If overeducation lowers work satisfaction through causing cognitive dissonance between aspired and attained occupations, overeducated workers should be less likely than adequately educated workers to describe their current jobs as part of their goals, and this response pattern should be linked to lower work satisfaction.

In a broader literature on occupational attainment, scholars have measured occupational attainment objectively by assessing the match between occupational aspirations that people report in adolescence and attained occupations that they report in adulthood (Hardie, 2014; Reynolds, Burge, Robbins, Boyd, & Harris, 2007). Although such measures have an advantage of increasing objectiveness and reducing bias, they would be limited for the current investigation. Many people change their occupational aspirations during adolescence and early 20’s (Shu & Marini, 2008), and some of these changes take place through socialization in educational institutions as mentioned above. They continue to change their career goals even after their transition to the labor market as they face constraints and flounder across different occupations (Rindfuss, Cooksey, & Sutterlin, 1999; Staff, Harris, Sabates, & Briddell, 2010). In this process, they change their work values (what qualities they look for in their work) by increasing appreciation of the qualities that they have in the current jobs and giving up the qualities that they do not have (Johnson, 2001). These findings indicate that some young people have only recently developed the career goals that they have currently. In this sense, not attaining the career goal that one developed in adolescence may not necessarily represent a failure to the person. The measure we use in this study is based on self perceptions of career progress and therefore minimizes this problem. Further, the subjective aspect of the measure is in line with the argument’s emphasis on cognitions although it does not directly measure cognitive dissonance.

Within the overeducation literature, some studies have examined whether overeducation impacts career trajectories by using objective measures such as subsequent employment status, occupational status (or prestige), and earnings. These studies produced mixed results with some studies showing that overeducation in young adulthood is temporary (Sicherman, 1991) and others demonstrating its persistence over time (e.g., McGuinness & Sloane, 2011; Sloane, Battu, & Seaman, 1999). Despite the abundant research that examined objective markers of career progress, little attention has been paid to perceptions of career progress at the current state. Perceived career progress is strongly linked to whether they feel they have fully transitioned into adulthood (Arnett, 2001; Mortimer, Vuolo, Staff, Wakefield, & Xie, 2008). It also has important implications for workers’ commitment to their current jobs and to their employers (Huiras, Uggen, & McMorris, 2000) as well as decisions about career development strategies (Heinz, 2002). Thus, perceived career progress has its own theoretical values as an outcome, in addition to its potential role as a mediator for the association between overeducation and low work satisfaction.

As we examine the effects of overeducation on perceived career

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