

Perceived overqualification and counterproductive work behavior: testing the mediating role of relative deprivation and the moderating role of ambition

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this study was to test the mediating role of relative deprivation in the relationship between perceived overqualification and counterproductive work behavior. In addition to testing this mediation, the authors posited that ambition would interact with perceived overqualification to predict relative deprivation and, through it, counterproductive work behavior.

Design/methodology/approach – Survey data collected from 181 employees were analyzed using the SPSS macro PROCESS to test the proposed moderated mediation model.

Findings – Results indicated that perceived overqualification positively associated with perceptions of relative deprivation, which were, in turn, positively related to counterproductive work behavior. This indirect relationship gained in strength with increasing levels of ambition.

Originality/value – By modeling and measuring relative deprivation, this study offers a direct test of the often-invoked relative deprivation explanation of the implications of perceived overqualification for counterproductive work behavior. The study also shows how ambition can have unintended consequences.

Keywords Perceived overqualification, Counterproductive work behavior, Relative deprivation, Ambition

Paper type Research paper

While in many developed countries the level of education continues to grow, demand for educated workers has stagnated or declined as a result of economic fluctuations and de-skilling work. These factors have led to a situation in which a growing number of the workforce is overqualified for their jobs (Vandeplas and Thum-Thysen, 2019). Research suggests that only about half of US college graduates work in a job that requires a college degree (Buckley, 2019). Likewise, over 30% of Canadian immigrants with a college degree are in occupations that are below their educational credentials (Richwine, 2018). Recent global overqualification rates ranged between 7.8 % in Finland to 37.7% in Mexico (OECD, 2017). Overqualification is also a matter of concern in Belgium, where our study was conducted. According to estimates from 2016, about 11% of Belgian employees have an educational attainment that is higher than that required by their job, and 28% are employed in a different field from what they have specialized in (OECD, 2017). In the European Union as a whole,



overqualification has steadily increased from 20.8% in 2008 to 22.7% of the working population in 2020 (Eurostat, 2020).

Not only the actual discrepancy between their skills and the requirements of their job – objective overqualification – but primarily the *awareness* of this discrepancy – perceived overqualification – is crucial to employee attitudes and performance. Perceived overqualification refers to “employee perceptions of surplus education, experience, and KSAs (knowledge, skills, and abilities)” (Maynard *et al.*, 2006 p. 509). Understanding the psychological consequences of working in a job for which one feels overqualified has become a central concern (Maynard and Parfyonova, 2013), and meta-analytic evidence shows that such perceptions are related to poorer health and well-being, reduced job-related attitudes (e.g. job satisfaction and organizational commitment) and higher turnover rates and more work-life conflict (Harari *et al.*, 2017; Liu and Wang, 2012). In fact, research suggests that the detrimental implications of perceived overqualification are similar to those of unemployment (McKee-Ryan and Harvey, 2011).

Concerns about the adverse consequences of perceived overqualification have prompted researchers to investigate its relationship with job performance, including counterproductive work behavior (Erdogan *et al.*, 2011; Van Dijk *et al.*, 2020). Counterproductive work behavior involves voluntary behaviors that are contrary to an organization’s legitimate interests, that violate significant organizational norms and that threaten the well-being of the organization or its members (Bennett and Robinson, 2000; Berry *et al.*, 2007; Marcus *et al.*, 2016). Counterproductive work behavior can be very costly to companies and society-at-large, with annual estimates exceeding \$1 trillion (Banks *et al.*, 2012). Not surprisingly, then, identifying the underlying causes of counterproductive work behavior is of considerable practical importance.

To date, relatively few studies have empirically examined the link between perceived overqualification and counterproductive work behavior. Harari *et al.*’s (2017) meta-analytic findings suggest a modest though variable positive relationship. A variety of explanations have been offered for this relationship, including the possibility that perceived overqualification erodes self-esteem, depletes resources and disturbs the employer-employee exchange relationship (Liu *et al.*, 2015; Luksyte *et al.*, 2011). An alternative explanation, rooted in relative deprivation theory (Crosby, 1976; Pettigrew, 2016; Smith and Pettigrew, 2015), is that overqualified employees feel disadvantaged compared to a relevant referent (e.g. a colleague, future self) and therefore engage in behaviors harmful to the organization. While relative deprivation theory is frequently cited and used as an underlying theoretical framework (Erdogan and Bauer, 2009; Hu *et al.*, 2015; Johnson and Johnson, 2000; Maynard *et al.*, 2015), it has received only limited empirical scrutiny. To date, one study has examined relative deprivation as a mediator of the effect of perceived overqualification (Erdogan *et al.*, 2018), but it did not examine relative deprivation as a mechanism to explain the relationship with counterproductive work behavior. Specifically, Erdogan *et al.* (2018) investigated whether relative deprivation mediates the relationship between perceived overqualification and outcomes such as career satisfaction, affect and life satisfaction. Thus, even though it has been hypothesized to be a key mechanism linking perceptions of overqualification to counterproductive behaviors, it remains unclear whether relative deprivation, in fact, mediates this relationship.

As such, it is also not surprising that little is known about for whom and under what conditions the effect of perceived overqualification on relative deprivation, and indirectly, on counterproductive work behavior, is more pronounced. This is particularly relevant given Harari *et al.*’s (2017) meta-analytic findings. These showed a very modest correlation between perceived overqualification and counterproductive work behavior (0.16) that varied considerably (CI 95%: 0.06; 0.26), all of which suggests the possible presence of boundary conditions of this relationship. Indeed, existing research suggests that reactions to perceived

overqualification differ according to employees' degree of identification with their company (Lin *et al.*, 2017), sensitivity to injustice (Liu *et al.*, 2015), goal orientation (Zhang *et al.*, 2016) and values regarding their work lives (Erdogan *et al.*, 2018; Maynard and Parfyonova, 2013). Yet we know very little about which individual difference variables might augment or attenuate the relationship with relative deprivation (for an exception, see Erdogan *et al.*, 2018) and, indirectly, with counterproductive work behavior. As such, more research is needed that examines who experiences stronger feelings of relative deprivation in response to perceived overqualification.

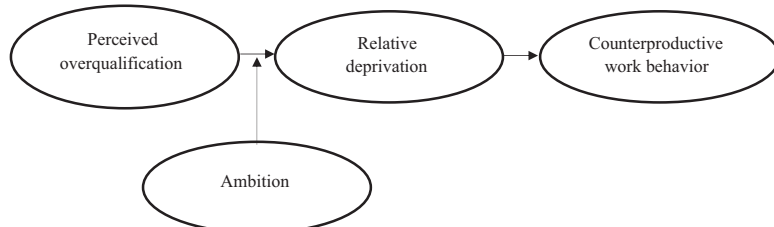
To contribute to solving the above-mentioned problems, we develop and test a model (depicted in Figure 1) examining why and for whom perceived overqualification relates more strongly to counterproductive work behavior. We empirically test whether relative deprivation mediates the relationship between perceived overqualification and counterproductive work behavior, thereby adding empirical evidence to the theoretical claim about the explanatory role of relative deprivation. Also, from a practical standpoint, knowledge of mediating variables will enable us to design interventions so that individuals perceiving overqualification do not engage in counterproductive work behavior but channel their energies in positive ways.

In addition, we introduce ambition as a moderator of the perceived overqualification-relative deprivation link. We argue that ambitious individuals attach particularly high value to the type of outcomes that they are missing when they perceive to be overqualified for their current jobs (Judge and Kammeyer-Mueller, 2012); thus, the discrepancy between where they currently are and where they want to be and feel entitled to be is likely larger. Consequently, compared with individuals low in ambition, highly ambitious individuals should feel more deprived as a result of perceiving overqualification. Importantly, if this hypothesis is supported, it means that while ambition is often considered an asset (Jones *et al.*, 2017), the prevalence of perceived overqualification could possibly make ambition a liability.

Theory and hypotheses development

The dominant view in the literature is that perceived overqualification is a deleterious phenomenon that may compel employees to engage, amongst other things, in counterproductive work behaviors (Harari *et al.*, 2017; Li *et al.*, 2017; Liu and Wang, 2012). A variety of explanations have been offered for the negative consequences of perceived overqualification, such as person-job misfit, organizational injustice and increased psychological distress (Harold *et al.*, 2016; Luksyte and Spitzmueller, 2016; Maynard *et al.*, 2006; Maynard and Parfyonova, 2013; Yu *et al.*, 2019). Yet another prominent explanation is that the negative outcomes flow from people's perception that they are deprived of something to which they are entitled, that is, a job that fits their qualifications (e.g. Erdogan and Bauer, 2009; Hu *et al.*, 2015; Johnson and Johnson, 2000; Maynard *et al.*, 2015). This explanation, rooted in relative deprivation theory (Crosby, 1976; Pettigrew, 2016; Smith *et al.*, 2012), is often invoked in overqualification research, but few studies have tested its proposed role by means

Figure 1. Research model of counterproductive work behavior as a function of perceived overqualification, mediated by relative deprivation and moderated by ambition



of explicitly modeling relative deprivation as an explanatory mechanism (Erdogan *et al.*, 2017; Erdogan *et al.*, 2018).

Relative deprivation as an explanatory mechanism

According to Smith and Pettigrew (2015), relative deprivation refers to “a judgment that one or one’s in-group is disadvantaged compared to a relevant referent [1], and that this judgment invokes feelings of anger, resentment, and entitlement” (p. 2). At the heart of relative deprivation theory is the proposition that the negative affect associated with the judgment of one’s status is not simply a function of one’s objective status – absolute deprivation – but varies with the subjective assessment of one’s status. Individuals may feel resentment not because they are objectively worse off than someone else or themselves at a different point in time but because they appraise the objectively disadvantageous situation as unfair. Research has consistently shown that absolute and relative deprivation does not perfectly coincide, and that relative deprivation is more important than absolute deprivation to understand a host of individual and collective outcomes, including physical health, prejudice and political violence (Smith *et al.*, 2012).

Another central element of relative deprivation is a sense of entitlement. An individual’s experience of relative deprivation entails the feeling that one deserves whatever it is one wants but does not have (Smith and Pettigrew, 2014; Smith *et al.*, 2012). This description may well apply to overqualified employees who, by definition, are deprived of optimal skill use. Since the opportunity to use one’s skills at work is an important prerequisite for employee motivation and well-being (Bakker and Demerouti, 2017; Crawford *et al.*, 2010), it is reasonable to assume that most overqualified employees [2] desire a job that better matches their skill set. Employees who feel overqualified may not only desire but also feel that they deserve a job that fits their skills. According to relative deprivation theory, the sense of entitlement stems from two types of disadvantaged comparisons: a comparison in which people contrast their current situation with their future and past selves and a comparison of their current situation with that of other people (Smith and Pettigrew, 2014; Smith *et al.*, 2012). Overqualified employees may feel disadvantaged because they realize that their current situation prevents them from reaching their full potential (i.e. future self), or that their situation is worse than that of coworkers whose jobs seemingly fit their qualifications (i.e. other people). Accordingly, perceiving oneself to be overqualified feeds into a feeling of relative deprivation.

The feeling of relative deprivation implies that people feel disappointed with what they have achieved, that they fall short of their expectations, do not get what they feel they deserve and, importantly, believe that the cause of this disadvantage lies outside of their own control. All of this together will prompt people to act out against others (whom they resent for being better off than they are) and against the organization (at which they are overqualified for their job). Indeed, prior research demonstrates that people who experience relative deprivation are more likely to engage in targeted deviant work-related and nonwork related behaviors, including absenteeism (Geurts *et al.*, 1994), bullying (Breivik and Olweus, 2006), and crime (Stiles *et al.*, 2000). Hence, overqualified employees who have experiences of relative deprivation will likely act out toward the organization, which is held accountable for the undeserved situation, and against their colleagues, whom they resent for being better off than they are.

Taken together, we argue that employees who feel overqualified will engage in social comparison processes, as a result of which they will experience relative deprivation. Relative deprivation, in turn, triggers behavior directed toward targets that people believe constitute sources of the resentment. The organization and the colleagues are not the actual sources of the overqualification or the deprivation, but they do form part of the comparison processes that lead people to feel overqualified and, subsequently, deprived. Hence, counterproductive

work behavior is an example of such behavior that people will target against those whom they resent.

H1. Relative deprivation mediates the relationship between perceived overqualification and counterproductive work behavior.

Ambition as a moderator

Ambition refers to “the persistent and generalized striving for success, attainment, and accomplishment” (Judge and Kammeyer-Mueller, 2012). Ambition is a middle-level personality variable, which means that it is activated in contexts relevant to the trait. Consequently, activated middle-level traits have more influence on behavior than decontextualized personality traits (Cantor *et al.*, 1987; Judge and Kammeyer-Mueller, 2012). While many things in life are worth striving for, ambition is mostly discussed in the context of work and careers (Boswell and Olson-Buchanan, 2007; El Baroudi *et al.*, 2017; Van Vianen, 1999). Highly ambitious individuals aspire to achieve a certain status or rank and are particularly interested in ensuring that their efforts are tied to tangible outcomes of success, such as promotion or pay raises (Judge and Kammeyer-Mueller, 2012). Because ambitious individuals set higher standards for themselves (e.g. high occupational levels, high-paying jobs, challenging assignments), they are generally more successful than their less ambitious counterparts (Jones *et al.*, 2017). Despite the benefits of ambition, we suggest that highly ambitious employees respond particularly negatively to the lack of attainment of their ambitious goals that is for them implied by perceived overqualification. Given the prevalence of overqualification (European Commission, 2018), this would imply that ambition might have a “dark side” such that it can be a liability as well as an asset.

The explanation of the moderating role of ambition rests in the fact that, as proposed by relative deprivation theory, people tend to make intrapersonal comparisons between where they currently are and where they believe they could be. Perceiving oneself to be overqualified means that people think that they currently are at a lower quality position than they deserve based on their qualifications. Such a perceived discrepancy has the potential to elicit feelings of deprivation, particularly if the individual perceiving the discrepancy cares strongly about the domain in which the discrepancy is perceived (Crosby, 1976; Smith and Pettigrew, 2015). Employees with low levels of ambition do not care much about rapid career advancement and do not attach much value to the benefits that go along with it, such as a high salary and status (Hogan, 1982; Hogan and Blicke, 2018; Jones *et al.*, 2017). Accordingly, less ambitious employees who believe that they are overqualified are unlikely to experience strong feelings of relative deprivation in response to this discrepancy. The opposite goes for employees with high levels of ambition. Perceived overqualification makes salient to ambitious employees how far they are removed from where they could potentially be in their career. That is, the discrepancy highlights that they have not made the advancements in their career that they particularly care about. As proposed by relative deprivation theory, because of the importance of these career outcomes to ambitious employees, they will be more likely to experience strong feelings of relative deprivation as a result of perceived overqualification.

H2. Ambition moderates the positive relationship between perceived overqualification and relative deprivation such that the relationship will be stronger at higher levels of ambition.

Above, we argued that perceived overqualification, through relative deprivation, will be positively associated with counterproductive work behavior. Hence, relative deprivation explains why perceived overqualification elicits counterproductive work behavior, and relative deprivation is the proximal driver of counterproductive behavior in our model. Furthermore, we argued that employees with high levels of ambition will develop stronger

feelings of relative deprivation in response to perceived overqualification than employees with low levels of ambition. Hence, we expect the positive link between perceived overqualification and relative deprivation to be stronger for employees with high levels of ambitions. The link between perceived overqualification and counterproductive behavior is carried by relative deprivation, and the latter is less strongly driven by perceived overqualification among those who are less ambitious. Therefore, the indirect relationship between perceived overqualification and counterproductive work behavior should also be more strongly driven by relative deprivation among highly ambitious individuals. Specifically, a highly ambitious overqualified individual will, be particularly, likely to exhibit counterproductive behavior, as they will experience higher levels of relative deprivation. In contrast, low ambitious individuals should feel relatively less deprived when perceiving oneself to be overqualified, meaning also a relatively less strong indirect relationships with counterproductive behavior.

- H3.* The indirect relationship between perceived overqualification and counterproductive work behavior that is attributable to relative deprivation is stronger at higher than at lower levels of ambition.

Methodology

Procedure and participants

Data for this study came from a cross-sectional survey administered to employees from diverse organizations in Belgium. We recruited participants via personal contacts, social media and snowball sampling. Our initial sample consisted of 247 respondents. We excluded data from 66 respondents who failed the attention check or had substantial missing data (>20%), leaving a final sample of 181. On average, participants were 32.92 years of age (SD = 10.73) and had 5.96 years (SD = 8.17) of job tenure. Of the 181 respondents, 103 (56.91%) were females. Most respondents had a bachelor's degree or higher (85%) and were currently full-time employed (91%). Respondents represented various organization types, including IT (17%), education (14%), government (12%), and commercial services (12%).

Measures

Unless noted otherwise, all items were measured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*).

Perceived overqualification was measured using the 9-item scale developed by [Maynard et al. \(2006\)](#). Sample items are: "My job requires less education than I have" and "I have job skills that are not required for this job." The Cronbach's alpha was 0.90.

Relative deprivation was measured using the 8-item scale developed by [Buunk et al. \(2003\)](#). Sample items are: "Others with whom I compare myself, have, in general, obtained more in their career than I have" and "At this moment, I have attained less in my career than I think I deserve." The Cronbach's alpha was 0.84.

Ambition was measured using a 6-item measure developed by [Rothwell et al. \(2008\)](#). Sample items are: "I have clear goals for what I want to achieve in life" and "I regard myself as highly ambitious." The Cronbach's alpha was 0.89.

Counterproductive work behavior was measured using the 10-item scale developed by [Kelloway et al. \(2002\)](#), which is a shortened version of the measure by [Bennett and Robinson \(2000\)](#). For all items, participants were asked, "How often do you . . ." Sample items are: "exaggerate about your hours worked" and "gossip about your coworkers" (1 = *never*, 5 = *always*). The Cronbach's alpha was 0.91. Consistent with previous research, a self-report measure of counterproductive work behavior was chosen. Self-report often provides a more accurate and valid assessment of counterproductive work behavior than other methods ([Bennett and Robinson, 2000](#); [Fox and Spector, 1999](#)).

Covariates. In addition to the substantive variables of interest in this study, we controlled for participants' age, gender, job tenure and educational level, as these variables may have modest relationships with counterproductive work behavior (e.g. Gruys and Sackett, 2003; Hershcovis *et al.*, 2007; Liu *et al.*, 2015) [3].

Results

Prior to hypotheses testing, we compared various measurement models via confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) in Stata/SE version 14.2. First, we tested a measurement model including four latent variables: perceived overqualification, relative deprivation, ambition and counterproductive work behavior. Scale items were used as indicators of the latent factors. The latent factors were allowed to correlate. We allowed two sets of errors to covary within factors, but not between factors in order to allow for covariance caused by high content overlap, similar wording and potential subfacets (Cole *et al.*, 2007). As shown in Table 1, the proposed four-factor model showed an adequate overall measurement fit, χ^2 (476) = 824.80, $p < 0.001$, comparative fit index (CFI) = 0.905, Tucker–Lewis index (TLI) = 0.895, root-mean-square error of approximation (RMSEA) = 0.06 and standardized root-mean-square residual (SRMR) = 0.09. All factor loadings were significant, indicating convergent validity. As shown in Table 1, comparing the proposed four-factor model with several alternative CFA models revealed that the hypothesized model fit the data considerably better than did any of the alternative models, confirming discriminant validity.

Table 2 shows the means, standard deviations, bivariate correlations and the internal consistencies of the scales included in the analyses. As can be seen from the table, perceived overqualification, relative deprivation and counterproductive work behavior were positively related to each other. Ambition was positively related to perceived overqualification and to relative deprivation. More educated participants reported higher levels of perceived overqualification, relative deprivation and counterproductive work behavior. Older employees and participants with higher levels of job tenure reported lower levels of perceived overqualification, relative deprivation and ambition.

Model	χ^2	df	χ^2/df	p	RMSEA [90% CI]	SRMR	CFI	TLI
<i>Measurement models</i>								
1. Four-factor model	824.80	476	1.73	<0.001	0.064 [0.056–0.071]	0.089	0.905	0.895
2. Three-factor model ^a	972.54	479	2.03	<0.001	0.075 [0.069–0.082]	0.095	0.866	0.852
3. Three-factor model ^b	1300.43	479	2.71	<0.001	0.097 [0.091–0.104]	0.120	0.777	0.754
4. Three-factor model ^c	1295.10	479	2.70	<0.001	0.097 [0.091–0.103]	0.120	0.778	0.756
5. Three-factor model ^d	1104.62	479	2.31	<0.001	0.085 [0.078–0.092]	0.109	0.830	0.813
6. Three-factor model ^e	1238.76	479	2.59	<0.001	0.094 [0.087–0.100]	0.124	0.794	0.773
7. One-factor model ^f	1893.21	482	3.93	<0.001	0.127 [0.121–133]	0.142	0.617	0.580

Note(s): RMSEA = root mean square error of approximation; SRMR = standardized root mean square residual; CFI = comparative fit index; TLI = Tucker Lewis index. CI = confidence interval

^aThis model combines, from the four-factor model, perceived overqualification and relative deprivation to form one factor

^bThis model combines, from the four-factor model, perceived overqualification and ambition to form one factor

^cThis model combines, from the four-factor model, relative deprivation and ambition to form one factor

^dThis model combines, from the four-factor model, relative deprivation and counterproductive work behavior to form one factor

^eThis model combines, from the four-factor model, perceived overqualification and counterproductive work behavior to form one factor

^fWe combined all measurement items into one grand factor

Table 1. Goodness-of-fit indices (maximum likelihood estimates) for the measurement models, $N = 181$

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Gender	1.57	0.50	—							
2. Age	32.92	10.73	0.10	—						
3. Job tenure (months)	71.69	97.91	0.14	0.76	—					
4. Educational level	3.93	1.30	0.02	-0.33	-0.33	—				
5. POQ	3.28	0.91	0.01	-0.30	-0.30	0.31	(0.90)			
6. Relative deprivation	3.00	0.77	-0.03	-0.20	-0.23	0.24	0.63	(0.84)		
7. Ambition	3.72	0.83	-0.02	-0.25	-0.29	0.10	0.19	0.21	(0.89)	
8. CWB	1.79	0.71	-0.09	-0.16	-0.10	0.35	0.45	0.57	0.09	(0.91)

Note(s): $r_s \geq 0.25, p_s < 0.001$; $r_s \geq 0.19, p < 0.01$; $r_s \geq 0.15, p_s < 0.05$. Gender: 1 = Male; 2 = Female. Educational level: 1 = primary education; 2 = secondary education; 3 = professional bachelor; 4 = academic bachelor; 5 = academic master; 6 = master-after-master; 7 = doctorate. POQ = perceived overqualification; CWB = counterproductive work behavior

Table 2. Means, standard deviations, internal consistencies (on the diagonal) and bivariate correlations among the study variables ($N = 181$)

Hypothesis testing

Total, direct and indirect effects. Counterproductive work behavior was regressed on perceived overqualification, relative deprivation and the covariates. The covariates age, gender, job tenure and educational level were included in the model simultaneously. The coefficients were estimated using ordinary least-squares regression. Table 3 presents the regression results. The total effect of perceived overqualification on counterproductive work behavior was 0.32 ($p < 0.001$) (95% CI: 0.21 to 0.42) (Table 3, model 3), which is in line with prior meta-analytic evidence. The path from perceived overqualification to relative deprivation was 0.52 ($p < 0.001$) (95% CI: 0.41 to 0.62) (Table 3, model 1), and the path from relative deprivation to counterproductive work behavior was 0.42 ($p < 0.001$) (95% CI: 0.41 to 0.62) (Table 3, model 4). In support of Hypothesis 1, the bootstrapped indirect effect of perceived overqualification on counterproductive work behavior through relative deprivation was 0.22 (95% CI_{boot} = 0.12 to 0.33). The direct effect of perceived overqualification (which controls for the effect of relative deprivation) on counterproductive work behavior was nonsignificant at 0.10 ($p = 0.11$) (95% CI: -0.02 to 0.22).

Conditional direct effect of perceived overqualification. To test for moderation of the effect of perceived overqualification on relative deprivation by ambition, we estimated an OLS regression model, predicting relative deprivation from perceived overqualification, ambition and their product term (along with age, gender, job tenure and educational level as covariates discussed above). In support of Hypothesis 2, the analysis showed that the effect of perceived overqualification on relative deprivation was dependent on ambition ($B = 0.13, p = .02$) (see Table 3, model 2). Figure 2 shows the interaction plot, which is consistent with our prediction: the relationship between perceived overqualification and relative deprivation was stronger for employees with high ($B = 0.59, t = 9.22, p < .001$) relative to low levels of ambition ($B = 0.37, t = 4.63, p < .001$). Johnson-Neyman analysis indicated that for respondents with (centered) ambition scores above -1.69 (uncentered score of 2.03), and the association between perceived overqualification and relative deprivation was positive and significant.

Conditional indirect effect of perceived overqualification. We estimated the conditional indirect effects and tested, using a bootstrap CI, whether the indirect effect of perceived overqualification on counterproductive work behavior through relative deprivation differs

Outcome	Relative deprivation				Counterproductive work behavior			
	Model 1		Model 2 (conditional direct effect model)		Model 3 (total effect model)		Model 4 (indirect effect model)	
	<i>b</i>	95% CI	<i>b</i>	95% CI	<i>b</i>	95% CI	<i>b</i>	95% CI
Constant	3.08***	[2.79, 3.38]	3.07***	[2.78, 3.36]	2.06***	[1.76, 2.36]	2.02***	[1.75, 2.30]
Age	0.00	[-0.01, 0.02]	0.00	[-0.01, 0.02]	-0.01	[-0.02, 0.01]	-0.01	[-0.02, 0.00]
Gender	-0.05	[-0.23, 0.13]	-0.06	[-0.23, 0.12]	-0.17	[-0.35, 0.01]	-0.15	[-0.32, 0.02]
Job tenure	0.00	[-0.00, 0.00]	-0.00	[-0.00, 0.00]	0.00	[-0.00, 0.00]	0.00*	[0.00, 0.01]
Education	0.03	[-0.05, 0.10]	0.02	[-0.05, 0.10]	0.14***	[0.07, 0.22]	0.13***	[0.06, 0.20]
POQ	0.52***	[0.41, 0.62]	0.48***	[0.37, 0.59]	0.32***	[0.21, 0.42]	0.10	[-0.02, 0.22]
RD							0.42***	[0.29, 0.56]
Ambition			0.07	[-0.05, 0.18]				
POQ × ambition			0.13*	[0.02, 0.26]				
<i>R</i> ²	0.40***		0.42***		0.28***		0.41***	
<i>F</i>	<i>F</i> (5, 175) = 23.35		<i>F</i> (7, 173) = 18.29		<i>F</i> (5, 175) = 13.69		<i>F</i> (6, 174) = 19.86	

Table 3. Ordinary least squares regression model coefficients (standard errors in parentheses; $N = 181$)

Note(s): In all models, the lower order variables were mean centered prior to estimation to render all coefficients interpretable within the range of the data. CI = confidence interval; POK = perceived overqualification; RD = relative deprivation. Models 1–4 are unstandardized regression coefficients with OLS R^2 . * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

from zero at specific values of ambition (Preacher *et al.*, 2007). We did so by using PROCESS version 2.15 (model 7) with 10,000 bootstrap estimates for the construction of 95% bias-corrected CIs for the conditional indirect effects. Age, gender, job tenure and educational level were again included as statistical controls. The point estimates and 95% CIs for the conditional indirect effect can be found in Table 4. The results indicated that the positive indirect effect of perceived overqualification on counterproductive work behavior through relative deprivation was more pronounced for individuals with higher levels of ambition (point estimates increasing from 0.154 to 0.251). The index of moderated mediation was 0.06 (95% CI_{boot}: 0.01 to 0.13), indicating that the indirect effects at different levels of the moderator are indeed different from each other. Consistent with Hypothesis 3, these results indicated that the indirect positive effect of perceived overqualification on counterproductive work behavior through relative deprivation was stronger for those with high levels of ambition.

Supplementary analysis

Aside from the empirical validation of our hypotheses, we performed a supplementary analysis, using PROCESS (model 58, 10,000 bootstrap samples), to test the possibility that ambition acts both as a first-stage and second-stage moderator by simultaneously moderating the relationship between perceived overqualification and relative deprivation and between relative deprivation and counterproductive work behavior. After all, it could be argued that employees who feel deprived and with high ambitions that are not properly realized could be particularly inclined to engage in counterproductive work behavior as a way to get rid of negative feelings surrounding these feelings of unrealized ambitions [4]

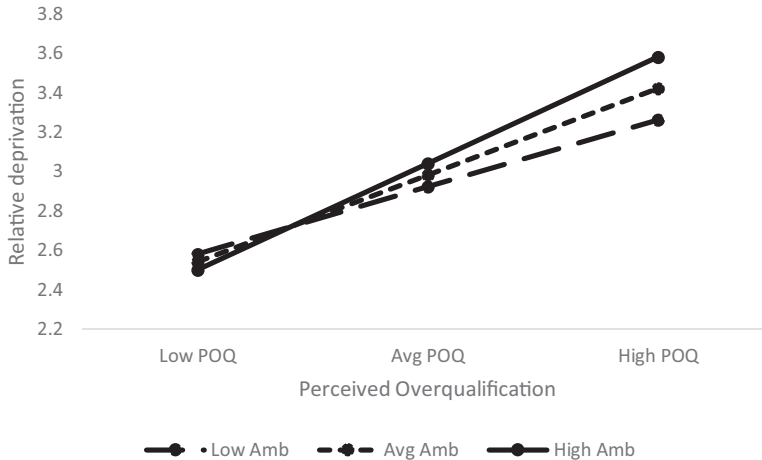


Figure 2. The interaction between perceived overqualification (POQ) and ambition (Amb) on relative deprivation

Ambition	Point estimate	95% bias-corrected bootstrap confidence interval
Relative deprivation		
Low (-0.83; 2.89 before centering)	0.154	0.077 to 0.259
Moderate (0; 3.72 before centering)	0.202	0.114 to 0.305
High (0.83; 4.55 before centering)	0.251	0.140 to 0.379

Note(s): 10,000 bootstrap samples

Table 4. Conditional indirect effects of perceived overqualification on counterproductive work behavior through relative deprivation at levels of ambition (N = 181)

(Fox and Spector, 1999). The results showed that both interaction terms were significant: ambition did not only strengthen the effect of perceived overqualification on relative deprivation ($B = 0.13$, $SE = 0.06$, $p = 0.02$) but also the effect of relative deprivation on counterproductive work behavior ($B = 0.15$, $SE = 0.07$, $p = 0.02$). When probing the interaction between ambition and relative deprivation, the results showed that the relationship between relative deprivation and counterproductive work behavior was stronger for employees with high ($B = 0.56$, $t = 8.59$, $p < 0.001$) relative to low levels of ambition ($B = 0.30$, $t = 3.19$, $p < 0.01$). Johnson-Neyman analysis indicated that for respondents with (centered) ambition scores above -1.26 (uncentered score of 2.46) the association between relative deprivation and counterproductive work behavior was positive and significant. These findings suggest that ambitious employees who believe to be overqualified not only *develop* stronger feelings of relative deprivation but also *react* more strongly to experiences of relative deprivation.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to test

- (1) The mediating role of relative deprivation in the link between perceived overqualification and counterproductive work behavior.
- (2) The moderating role of ambition in the direct link between perceived overqualification and relative deprivation, and
- (3) The moderating role of ambition in the indirect link to counterproductive work behavior. Our findings suggest that relative deprivation indeed mediates the perceived overqualification-counterproductive work behavior relationship. Moreover, we found that ambition interacted with perceived overqualification to influence relative deprivation and, through it, counterproductive work behavior. Interestingly, a supplementary analysis showed that ambition also strengthened the effect of relative deprivation on counterproductive work behavior. The findings of our study generate important implications for theory and practice.

Contributions to theory and research

Although previous research linking perceived overqualification to work attitudes and behavior has invoked relative deprivation as the underlying mechanism, so far only one study empirically tested this mechanism (Erdogan *et al.*, 2018). To the best of our knowledge, until now, relative deprivation has not been tested as a mechanism explaining the relationship between perceived overqualification and counterproductive work behavior. Consequently, we conducted this study to put the relative deprivation theoretical account of perceived overqualification to an empirical test. In line with theoretical predictions, experiences of relative deprivation acted as a mediator in the perceived overqualification-counterproductive work behavior relationship. As such, this study enhances our understanding of the mechanisms underlying this relationship and extends prior research that has identified other mechanisms such as person-job fit, burnout and psychological contract breach (Liu *et al.*, 2015; Luksyte *et al.*, 2011).

Relative deprivation theory is particularly useful in predicting deviant work behaviors. According to Smith and Pettigrew (2014), deprivation drives resentment that prompts people to act out against what/whom they believe is a source of their deprivation and to engage in retaliatory behaviors (Frijda *et al.*, 1989; Scherer *et al.*, 2001). Our study provides evidence of the implications of perceived overqualification-driven relative deprivation on counterproductive work behavior. This finding is important because, in the context of

perceived overqualification, until now, the link of relative deprivation with deviant work behaviors has never been empirically tested. As such, our study complements the work by [Erdogan et al. \(2018\)](#) who found relative deprivation to associate with subjective well-being and career satisfaction, which, contrary to anger-driven responses, are positive, low-arousal experiences ([Lazarus, 1991](#)).

Our findings, together with those of [Erdogan et al. \(2018\)](#), demonstrate that perceptions of overqualification may indeed prompt employees to believe that they deserve better. It has been argued that this sense of entitlement emerges as a result of comparisons with referent others, most notably coworkers, and that working with others who are not overqualified will result in a greater sense of entitlement ([Hu et al., 2015](#)). Most (perceived overqualification) researchers define relative deprivation as an *interpersonal* comparison between the comparer and another person. Consistent with relative deprivation theory ([Smith and Pettigrew, 2014](#)), we argued that people can also engage in an *intrapersonal* comparison, comparing themselves to a past or future self and experiencing relative deprivation. While it was beyond the scope of this study to empirically test this proposition, the above is just one example of how a close reading of relative deprivation theory may spur new lines of inquiry in this area.

In addition to investigating the explanatory mechanism of how overqualification is related to counterproductive work behavior, another theoretical contribution of this study involves identifying individual differences in the strength of this mediating mechanism. Specifically, we found that the individual difference variable of ambition is likely to influence the degree to which perceived overqualification relates to feelings of relative deprivation. Ambitious individuals typically have a desire for status and promotions ([Jones et al., 2017](#)) and to get ahead ([Hogan, 1982](#); [Hogan and Blickle, 2018](#)). Hence, they will experience more relative deprivation when placed in jobs for which they feel overqualified. Relative to those who are low in ambition, perceiving overqualification means a greater discrepancy between one's current status and one's desired status for those who are highly ambitious because they attach greater value to these outcomes. In line with this reasoning, we indeed found that relative deprivation increases for highly ambitious individuals who feel overqualified.

Moreover, our results showed that the interaction between ambition and perceived overqualification was relevant to the mediation mechanism. That is: the link between perceived overqualification and counterproductive work behavior through relative deprivation was stronger at higher levels of ambition. Thus, ambition as an individual difference factor plays an important role in the process resulting from employees feeling overqualified for their job. Our study contributes to the literature on perceived overqualification and its outcomes by identifying an individual difference as a boundary condition. In their review of perceived overqualification literature, [Liu and Wang \(2012\)](#) mention several individual-level moderators of the perceived overqualification-outcomes relation, such as justice sensitivity and empowerment. Our study corroborates their model in the sense that we found an individual-level moderator and contributes to their model by showing that ambition, as a middle-level contextualized personality trait, is such a moderator. This trait was not mentioned yet in their model and could be added as an important boundary condition for the relationship between perceptions of overqualification, relative deprivation and outcomes. The results from the supplementary analyses also attest to the importance of ambition as a moderator: relative to their less ambitious counterparts, ambitious employees were more likely to act upon their feelings of deprivation by engaging in counterproductive work behavior. We interpret these results as indicating that ambitious employees who are unable to fully employ their skills and abilities not only believe they deserve better but are also more likely to act out against their employer. The results show that while ambition is typically considered a beneficial personal characteristic, it may also

have its detriments in making people more susceptible to feelings of overqualification and resentment.

Limitations and future research directions

The results of this study should be interpreted in the context of its limitations. Although the placement of variables in the causal sequence was theoretically derived, the use of a cross-sectional design limits our ability to draw causal inferences. Future research should use a longitudinal design to confirm the causal chain and to examine potential reciprocal associations over time, such as a mutually reinforcing effect between perceptions of overqualification and feelings of relative deprivation. In addition, relative deprivation theory proposes that people tend to react to an undeserved situation with anger, which causes them to engage in counterproductive work behavior. As we did not directly measure anger in our study, future research should include measures of discrete emotions to further refine the causal chain.

Second, reliance on self-report data from a single source raises concerns of common method bias. In order to reduce the possibility of common method variance, we followed the recommendations for questionnaire design as suggested by Podsakoff *et al.* (2003). In addition, we tested for the presence of common method variance. The results show that common method variance is unlikely to be a serious problem in our study. Also, the fact that we found support for interactions argues against common method variance as potential reason for the study results. On a conceptual level, the study variables are difficult to measure in any other way than through self-report questionnaires, as for example feelings of overqualification and relative deprivation are inherently subjective and bound to the individual. Nonetheless, we recommend future studies to also look at other ways of measuring some of the study variables. For example, ambition could perhaps be measured by using peer or supervisor ratings or by implicit measures such as an implicit association test (cf. Brunstein and Schmitt, 2004), and it would also be interesting to include objective measures of overqualification to see how that fits into the overqualification – relative deprivation – outcomes chain.

Third, the correlation between perceived overqualification and counterproductive work behavior was larger in our study than in others (Harari *et al.*, 2017). Indeed, we also found that this link was moderated by ambition suggesting that there may be considerable variation in the strength of this association across studies, samples and contexts. This variability also calls for future research and theorizing on moderators of the direct and indirect relationships between perceived overqualification and counterproductive work behavior, and perhaps our relative deprivation account can contribute to novel research ideas in this area.

Practical implications

From a practical standpoint, knowledge of mediating variables will enable us to design interventions so that individuals perceiving overqualification do not engage in counterproductive work behavior but channel their energies in positive ways. Perceived overqualification may be itself difficult to change when a person stays in the same job. However, our results indicate that perceptions of overqualification may turn into a sense of being deprived, which then may turn into counterproductive behaviors. Hence, these findings would suggest that the detrimental outcomes of perceived overqualification could be mitigated by intervening in the mediating mechanism, feelings of relative deprivation.

Relative deprivation is subjective, and it is based on a sense that the person does not deserve this unfavorable situation and/or that this situation came about because of unfair treatment by the organization. It is thus experienced as unfair and as beyond their own control. Instead of trying to change people's perceptions of overqualification, a promising possibility could be to

try to change their feelings of relative deprivation by explaining that processes and procedures are fair (cf. Cropanzano and Randall, 1995). It is possible that allowing overqualified employees to have more autonomy and opportunities for skill development could prevent or reduce feelings of relative deprivation that predict counterproductive behavior. We believe that based on our findings and extant theory on relative deprivation such interventions are warranted, but at the same time should be carefully monitored and researched for their effectiveness. Hence, while our findings do not speak to these interventions directly, intervening in these variables has the potential, based on theory, to reduce or prevent employees' experiences of relative deprivation by intervening in the mediating mechanism.

A similar implication for practice concerns our findings on the role of ambition. We found that highly ambitious individuals who feel overqualified are particularly prone to react with feelings of deprivation and with counterproductive behavior. Thus, a key implication for interventions preventing counterproductive work behavior would be to ensure that these highly ambitious individuals do not feel overqualified and deprived and to support them in reaching their overarching goals. After all, ambitious employees are important for organizations, making it crucial to channel their ambition in positive rather than counterproductive ways. This could be achieved by offering avenues to exercise ambition in other areas, helping to re-focus their energies.

Notes

1. People can also compare themselves to a past or future self, and experience relative deprivation (Smith and Pettigrew, 2014).
2. We acknowledge the possibility that some employees may (temporarily) want a job that is below their qualifications, for instance because they see it as a springboard to a better position.
3. The finding patterns remain the same if we remove these control variables.
4. We are grateful to our reviewers for this suggestion.

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