Perceived Overqualification: An Exploration of Outcomes

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The purpose of this study is to investigate the relationship between perceived overqualification (POQ) and relevant work behaviors and perceptions. Results indicate that POQ is related to lower job satisfaction and organizational commitment, and higher turnover intentions. Further research is needed to address POQ’s relationship to absenteeism and truancy.

Attracting, selecting, and hiring the best people is of utmost importance to organizations. Personnel create the work environment (Schneider, 1987) and selecting high performing employees offers companies a competitive edge (Salgado, Viswesvaran, & Ones, 2001). Additionally, numerous negative outcomes are associated with hiring ill-suited employees, such as decreases in productivity, lower profit margins, (Sagie, Birati, & Tziner, 2002; Salgado et al., 2001), and contagious employee withdrawal (Podsakoff, LePine, & LePine, 2007; Sagie et al., 2002) including employee turnover (McCulloch & Turban, 2007; Sagie et al., 2002; Zimmerman, 2008).

Understanding what leads to withdrawal behavior and turnover can help organizations take measures to prevent its occurrence. Previous research has examined the effect of both organizational variables such perceived organizational support (e.g., Eder & Eisenberger, 2008) and individual difference variables such as organizational identification (e.g., van Knippenberg, van Dick, & Tavares, 2007), job satisfaction (Crede, Chernyshenko, Stark, Dalal, & Bashshur, 2007; Hollinger, 1986; Iverson & Deery, 2001; Mobley, 1977; Podsakoff et al., 2007; Waters & Roach, 1971) and organizational commitment (Pinder, 1998). However, one seldom examined factor is the extent to which an individual believes he or she is overqualified for the job. According to self-reported assessments of recent graduates, overqualification is experienced by an estimated one-quarter of the population (Feldman & Turnley, 1995). The purpose of this study is to assess the influence of perceived overqualification (POQ) on work behaviors and attitudes.

Overqualification

Although others have defined excessive cognitive ability as a single overarching characteristic of overqualification (Fine & Nevo, 2008), it is better conceptualized more holistically in terms of knowledge, skills, abilities, and other necessary characteristics (KSAOs). Fine (2007) defines POQ as being “the degree to which individuals perceive themselves (or others) as possessing more than the required job qualifications” (p. 61). Similarly, Johnson and Johnson (2002) describe POQ as resulting from incongruence between job demands and employee competencies. Maynard et al. (2006) argue that POQ is more relevant than objective levels of overqualification for predicting withdrawal behaviors since the psychological state of the employee may exert more influence on behavior than actual overqualification levels. Johnson, Morrow, and Johnson (2002) also advise examining POQ, as opposed to objective overqualification, as it is a meaningful interpretation of the work environment by the employee.

Underemployment is any situation of lesser quality employment compared to an objective job standard (Fine & Nevo, 2008; Maynard et al., 2006). Underemployment includes over-education, over-experience, skill underutilization (Fine & Nevo, 2008), involuntary temporary work, involuntary part-time employment (Maynard et al., 2006), underpayment, and working outside one’s professional area (Fine, 2007). Although Johnson et al. (2002) consider overqualification and underemployment to be synonymous, overqualification is generally considered to be a subset of underemployment (Fine, 2007; Fine & Nevo, 2008; Maynard et al., 2006).

The person-job fit literature indicates that the stronger the match between the individual and his or her environment, the better the work outcomes (Kristol-Brown, Zimmerman, & Johnson, 2005; Maynard, Joseph, & Maynard, 2006). The match between job demands and worker abilities defines qualification fit; low levels of which may lead to POQ. In this study, we examine how individuals’ perceptions of POQ influence their behaviors in the work place. Specifically, we investigate the outcome variables: job satisfaction, work withdrawal, and organizational commitment.
Job Satisfaction. Job satisfaction is an individual’s subjective assessment of work that is shaped by his or her interpretations and perceptions of his or her working environment (Brayfield & Rothe, 1951; Ironson, Smith, Bramnick, Gibson, & Paul, 1989; Johnson & Johnson, 1996). Fine and Nevo (2008) found a negative relationship between POQ and job satisfaction (r = -.44) for customer service representatives. Johnson and Johnson (2002) looked at two components of POQ in relation to job satisfaction: perceived lack of growth opportunity and perceived mismatch of individual qualifications and job requirements. They found that both perceived lack of growth opportunity (r = -.57) and mismatch (r = -.33) were significantly negatively related to work satisfaction. Another study involving postal workers found that POQ had a negative effect on job satisfaction, with POQ accounting for 34% of the variance (Johnson & Johnson, 2002). In accordance with the findings of previous research, it is expected:

Hypothesis 1: POQ will be negatively correlated with job satisfaction.

Withdrawal Behaviors. Sagie et al. (2002) have developed a progressive model of employee withdrawal behavior, which involves an ordered progression from psychological withdrawal to turnover. The first stage, psychological withdrawal, includes experiencing negative job attitudes and feelings. The second stage in the process is withholding effort, which is the first observable form of employee withdrawal. The model then proposes that the behavior degrades to showing up late, then to absenteeism, and eventually in turnover. The Sagie et al. (2002) model allows the stages to coexist and proposes that psychological withdrawal (e.g., job dissatisfaction and stress) typically precedes behavioral withdrawal (e.g., lateness and absenteeism). However, withdrawal behaviors can also influence job attitudes. For example, if a lack of effort elicits criticism from coworkers, then one’s job attitudes may be adversely affected by that criticism.

Hypothesis 2: POQ will be positively correlated with truancy (showing up late or leaving work early).

Hypothesis 3: POQ will be positively correlated with absenteeism.

To Sagie et al.’s model, we would add turnover intentions as a stage prior to turnover. Turnover intentions have been frequently shown to predict actual turnover (Mobley, 1977; Zimmerman, 2008) and the two constructs have similar relationships with variables such as performance and tenure (Carless, Fewings-Hall, Hall, Hemsworth, & Coleman, 2007). Additionally, POQ has been shown to relate to turnover intentions (Maynard et al., 2006).

Hypothesis 4: POQ will be positively correlated with turnover intentions.

Previous studies claim that POQ can be a source of job dissatisfaction which in turn may lead to higher turnover intentions and other work withdrawal symptoms (Johnson & Johnson, 2002). To further explore this assertion, job satisfaction will be tested as a mediator of the relationship between POQ and withdrawal:

Research Question (RQ) 1: Does job satisfaction mediate the relationship between POQ and turnover intentions?

RQ 2: Does job satisfaction mediate the relationship between POQ and absenteeism?

RQ 3: Does job satisfaction mediate the relationship between POQ and truancy?

Organizational Commitment. Organizational commitment is an individual’s psychological bond to the organization, which includes a sense of job involvement, loyalty, and a belief in the values of the organization (Salancik, 2003). High commitment is beneficial for both employers and employees, offering employees a sense of identity, satisfaction, and security (Pinder, 1998). Commitment has been conceptualized at both the organizational and the occupational levels. Further, distinctions exist among the types of organizational commitment such as calculative, attitudinal, affective, normative, and continuance commitment (Cooper-Hakin & Viswesvaran, 2005). Nonetheless, the most common conceptualization of commitment is in terms of three dimensions: affective, continuance, and normative (Allen & Meyer, 1990).

Affective organizational commitment (AOC) is experienced when an individual has a genuine desire to continue working for the organization. AOC relates to a sense of identification with the organization and a desire to remain a part of it. A 2005 meta-analysis by Cooper-Hakin and Viswesvaran found that AOC is positively related to job performance (ρ = .27) and negatively related to turnover (ρ = -.20). Previous findings also indicate that AOC is negatively related to POQ (Johnson et al., 2002; Maynard et al., 2006). Thus, we predict:

Hypothesis 5: POQ is negatively correlated with AOC.
Employees exhibit normative organizational commitment (NOC) when they remain with an organization in order to do what is responsible and morally right (Cooper-Hakin & Viswesvaran, 2005). NOC is related to a sense of duty and obligation (Meyer & Allen, 1997). According to a recent meta-analysis (Cooper-Hakin & Viswesvaran, 2005), NOC is negatively related to turnover ($\rho = -.16$) and has a small positive relationship with job performance ($\rho = .08$). NOC has also been found to be moderately correlated with POQ ($r = .24$; Johnson et al., 2002). However, unlike AOC some authors have suggested that NOC is a stable individual difference rather than a response to the organizational environment (Allen & Meyer, 1990, 1996). If NOC is a stable individual difference, it is unlikely to be affected by POQ or other aspects of the employment situation. Thus, we pose:

Research Question 4: Is POQ related to NOC?

Finally, continuance organizational commitment (COC) is commitment one feels toward the organization because the costs of leaving the organization are high (Cooper-Hakin & Viswesvaran, 2005; Hrebiniak & Alutto, 1972; Morrow, 1993). Meta-analytic analyses of COC have shown a negative relationship with job performance ($\rho = -.12$) and, interestingly, a negative relationship with turnover ($\rho = -.25$; Cooper-Hakin & Viswesvaran, 2005). Limited research is available regarding the relationship between POQ and COC, thus we pose:

Research Question 5: Is POQ related to COC?

Method

Participants

College students may experience intellectual overqualification because of their typical desire for flexible, part-time work and their lack of experience and educational credentials. Participants were students at a large mid-Atlantic university who were enrolled in an introductory psychology class. The registration process required participants to be employed at the time of data collection, resulting in a sample of 120 job incumbents. Fifty-four percent of the incumbents were female and 77% reported themselves to be Caucasian, 9% African-American, and 4.5% Asian, Hispanic, and other.

Procedure

The study was structured as an online survey. Participants signed up in order to partially fulfill a class research requirement. The survey was administered through SurveyMonkey.com and participants had unlimited time to complete the questionnaire.

Measures

Perceived Overqualification. The Scale of Perceived Cognitive Overqualification (PCOQ; Fine & Nevo, 2008) is a nine item Likert-type scale ($\alpha = .83$) and was used to assess POQ. Example questions include “I feel that I could easily handle more difficult work” and “I am able to do my job without too much thinking”.

Work Withdrawal. Turnover intentions were measured with a single-item measure “how often have you seriously considered quitting your present job?” originally created and used by Spector (1985). Unofficial records of absenteeism and truancy were also both acquired through self-report. These items were phrased “how often do you voluntarily not show up to your present job?” and “how often do you arrive late to, or leave early from, your present job?” The frequency anchored response options were 1=more than once a week, 2=once a week, 3=once every few weeks, 4=once a month, 5=once every few months and 6=never.

Job Satisfaction. Job satisfaction was measured via a five item scale developed by Brayfield and Rothe (1951). The coefficient alpha for this sample was .88.

Organizational Commitment. AOC, COC, and NOC were measured using scales developed by Allen and Meyer (1990). Each scale contained eight items and coefficient alpha values in this sample were: AOC $\alpha = .76$, COC $\alpha = .73$, and NOC $\alpha = .75$

Results

As can be seen by the correlations among the study variables in Table 1, Hypothesis 1 (POQ would negatively correlate with job satisfaction) was supported. Conversely, the positive relationships proposed between POQ and truancy (Hypothesis 2) and absenteeism (Hypothesis 3) were not supported by the data. The final facet of withdrawal was turnover intentions, which was hypothesized as being positively related to POQ (Hypothesis 4). This proposed relationship was supported by the data. The three measures of withdrawal were significantly and positively correlated with each other with coefficients ranging from .18 to .34.

Mediation analyses as outlined by Baron and Kenny (1986) were conducted to determine if job satisfaction mediates the relationship between POQ and turnover intentions (RQ 1). In the first step of the analyses, POQ was a significant predictor of turnover intentions [$\beta = .24$, $t(118) = 2.71$, $p < .05$]. In the second step, POQ was found to be significantly
related to job satisfaction ($\beta = -.33$, $t(118) = -3.76$, $p < .05$). In the third step, both job satisfaction and POQ were included as predictors of turnover intentions. The third model found that while POQ became insignificant, the beta-value of job satisfaction increased $[\beta = -.52$, $t(117) = -6.32$, $p < .05$, $R^2 = .30]$. A sobel test showed that the mediated effect was significant ($z = 3.32$, $p<.001$). Mediation analyses for absenteeism and truancy were not possible as those variables did not correlate significantly with POQ (see Table 1).

Hypothesis 5 proposed that POQ is negatively correlated with AOC, which was supported (see Table 1). RQs 5 and 6 inquired into the relationship between POQ and both NOC and COC. Significant negative correlations were found between POQ and both NOC and COC (see Table 1).

**Discussion**

In this study POQ was related to job satisfaction, commitment, and turnover intentions. Conversely, POQ was not significantly related to absenteeism and truancy. There are several potential reasons that POQ was not related to absenteeism and truancy. First, absenteeism and truancy are behaviors whereas satisfaction, commitment, and turnover intentions are job attitudes (or intentions). It is possible that POQ has a smaller effect on actual behaviors as compared to attitudes and intentions, as attitudes are a more proximal outcome than the distal behaviors (Sagie et al., 2002). A second possibility is that absenteeism and truancy were assessed via single-item measures which typically have lower reliability than scale scores (Wanous, Reichers, & Hudy, 1997). Also, although promised confidentiality, respondents may have been hesitant to admit actual withdrawal behaviors due to social desirability or fear of entrapment. It is also possible that some participants may underestimate their own frequency of absenteeism and truancy. In the future, objective or supervisory measures of withdrawal would be useful in exploring relationships with POQ.

The results suggest that POQ was negatively related to job satisfaction. Incumbents may be more satisfied with positions for which they feel they are adequately qualified, rather than overqualified. This finding may be due to the desire of incumbents to seek challenge through their work (Hackman & Oldham, 1976). In some cases, they may experience frustration, and therefore lower satisfaction, from not using the knowledge, skills, and abilities they have worked to acquire. This finding is in accordance with the findings of Fine and Nevo (2008) who found a negative relationship between job satisfaction and POQ among customer service representatives. The results provide further support for this relationship in a sample of employees in a diverse number of occupations.

The findings indicate that POQ is negatively related to the three types of organizational commitment. AOC was the only type of organizational commitment hypothesized to be related to POQ, and it did produce the strongest correlation coefficient of the outcome variables included in this study. This result implies that POQ may lead to negative emotional interpretations about one’s work organization and therefore decreased desire to stay with the organization. POQ was also found to be related to NOC and COC. The finding with NOC suggests that POQ may influence employee’s perceptions of circumstances of when it is morally right to leave an organization. Additionally, the relationship with COC indicates that POQ is associated with situations in which the incumbent perceives the costs of leaving the organization as being high, however this finding may be influenced by context given the current economic recession. It is important to note that the zero-order correlations computed do not provide enough information to determine cause and effect, therefore further research is needed to clarify these relationships.

Finally, this study provides evidence for POQ being positively related to turnover intentions, suggesting that individuals who experience POQ may desire more challenge through positions for which he or she feels more adequately qualified. With turnover being a significant cost for organizations, this finding suggests that employers may benefit from avoiding hiring job candidates who are overqualified for a particular position. A useful avenue for future research would be to investigate the relationship between POQ and actual turnover.

Our meditational analyses provide evidence that the relationship between POQ and turnover intentions is fully mediated by job satisfaction. While causal attributions must be limited due to the study design, we suspect that POQ leads directly to job dissatisfaction, which in turn causes turnover intentions.

**Limitations**

The external validity of the findings would benefit from employees that are employed on a full-time basis. Undergraduate students may have limited work experience that would inherently limit the generalizability of this study. The common source bias resulting from all variables being gathered from the job incumbent is also a limitation of this study. It would also be useful for future research to investigate supervisory or peer ratings of withdrawal behavior.
as well as actual turnover in addition to turnover intentions.

Summary

While further research is needed, this study has provided preliminary information regarding the outcomes of POQ. The results suggest that POQ is associated with negative work-related attitudes and intentions about which the literature has been silent. These findings should encourage researchers to further investigate the effects of POQ in the workplace.

References


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Table 1

*Intercorrelations between POQ and the outcomes*

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<td>6. Turnover Intentions</td>
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*Note. N = 120 for all variables. *p < .05. **p < .01.*