ORIGINAL PAPER

The Interactive Effect of Perceived Overqualification and Peer Overqualification on Peer Ostracism and Work Meaningfulness

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Abstract

Integrating victim precipitation theory with the belongingness perspective of work meaningfulness, this study investigates the interplay among employee perceived overqualification, peer overqualification, and peer ostracism and examines how peer ostracism, in turn, leads to subsequent reduced work meaningfulness. In Study 1, a time-lagged field study of 282 employees, we found that employees who felt overqualified, while working with peers who were less overqualified, experienced more ostracism, which was associated with reduced levels of work meaningfulness. These findings were replicated in Study 2, using time-lagged multi-source data collected from 300 employees working in 51 teams. We discuss the theoretical and practical implications of these findings and identify directions for future research.

Keywords Perceived overqualification · Peer overqualification · Peer ostracism · Work meaningfulness

Introduction

Perceived overqualification (POQ), describes situations where people feel that they possess more knowledge, skills, abilities, education, or experience than are required for, or utilized in, their current job (Erdogan & Bauer, 2021; Erdogan et al., 2011a; Feldman, 1996). Due to the global recession and competitive job markets, POQ has become commonplace around the world (Luksyte et al., 2020; Mckee-Ryan & Harvey, 2011; Simon et al., 2019). Indeed, a recent estimate shows that about 48% of bachelor-degree holders are overqualified for their jobs (Rose, 2017); likewise, due to the over-supply of highly educated people, the number of overqualified Chinese university graduates has been increasing (Shen & Kuhn, 2013). POQ has important implications for employees, as studies have found that POQ is associated with psychological well-being (e.g., Bolino & Feldman, 2000), affective commitment (e.g., Maynard et al., 2006), job satisfaction (e.g., Arvan et al., 2019; Maynard & Parfyonova, 2013), task performance (e.g., Lee et al., 2021; Ma et al., 2020), counterproductive work behaviors (e.g., Liu et al., 2015; Luksyte et al., 2011), careers (Erdogan et al., 2018; Erdogan et al., 2020; Gkorezis et al., 2019; Ma et al., 2020) and turnover intentions (e.g., Erdogan & Bauer, 2009; Kraimer et al., 2009).

Several theoretical perspectives have been used to understand how POQ leads to negative outcomes through cognitions or emotions, such as equity theory (Adams, 1963), relative deprivation theory (Crosby, 1976), and person-job fit theory (Edwards et al., 1998). This self-focused perspective emphasizes that because overqualified employees possess superior knowledge, skills, and abilities than less overqualified employees who hold similar positions or have similar income around them, when they make comparisons, they tend to feel relatively deprived or experience feelings of inequity (e.g., Cheng et al., 2020; Feldman et al., 2002; Liu et al., 2015), prompting subsequent negative personal consequences.

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Although understanding how employees react to their own POQ through a self-focused perspective is important, as organizations have become increasingly reliant on teams to complete tasks (O'Neill & Salas, 2018), it is also crucial to adopt a relational perspective to understand how those who collaborate with overqualified employees may react to them and how such reactions can affect overqualified employees in return (e.g., Deng et al., 2018; Erdogan et al., 2020; Li et al., 2021). For example, in a team context, overqualified employees may display negative behaviors towards their peers (Liu et al., 2015), and these negative behaviors may make them a potential target of victimization (Aquino & Thau, 2009). However, as pointed out by Erdogan and Bauer (2021, p. 11), "studies examining the implications of overqualification for interpersonal relationships are still rare," and more research is needed to understand peer reactions to employee POQ and their broader implications for employees. In this research, we aim to address this limitation by extending our knowledge of the effect of POQ on interpersonal relationships.

Given that overqualified employees may be more dissatisfied and disagreeable, they could become the potential targets of workplace ostracism. Workplace ostracism refers to "the extent to which an individual perceives that he or she is ignored or excluded by others" at work (Ferris et al., 2008, p. 1348). Ostracism is prevalent in workplaces around the world and presents ethical challenges to organizations as it can lead to a variety of negative consequences (Lyu & Zhu, 2019; Yang & Treadway, 2018). Furthermore, when overqualified workers are ostracized, it is likely to make it even more difficult for them to experience their work as meaningful (Michaelson et al., 2014). Specifically, building on the belongingness perspective of work meaningfulness (Rosso et al., 2010), we anticipate that being ostracized will diminish work meaningfulness because ostracism thwarts individuals' sense of belongingness (Hartgerink et al., 2015; Sommer et al., 2001; Williams, 2007). We focus on work meaningfulness because, as noted by Yeoman (2014, p. 235), "meaningful work is of first importance because it is a *fundamental human need*, and that society ought to be arranged to allow as many people as possible to experience their work as meaningful through the development of the relevant capabilities." As such, fostering meaningfulness at work can be considered an ethical and moral issue. More practically, work meaningfulness has not only been identified by scholars as a determinant of desirable work-related outcomes (e.g., job satisfaction, job performance, work motivation and career development; see Lysova et al., 2019 for a review), but also has been recognized by companies as a crucial way to retain their employees (Deloitte, 2017).

Taken together, we utilize a relational perspective and develop a theoretical model proposing that employee POQ may be associated with peer ostracism, which in turn, leads to reduced work meaningfulness. Further, drawing on victim precipitation theory and the belongingness perspective of work meaningfulness, we argue that peer ostracism is influenced by the interaction of employee POQ and peer overqualification. Specifically, we suggest that employees who feel overqualified, and work with peers who feel low levels of overqualification, are more likely to be the target of peer ostracism; additionally, peer ostracism is likely to make it even harder for overqualified employees to find meaningfulness in their work. Figure 1 presents our theoretical model.

Our research makes several contributions to the literature. First, we extend the line of research on the relational perspective of POQ by integrating an ethical perspective. Specifically, we build upon recent studies (e.g., Hu et al., 2015) on the interaction of employee POQ and peer

Fig. 1 Theoretical model. *Note.* *POQ* perceived overqualification, *H1* Hypothesis 1, *H2* Hypothesis 2
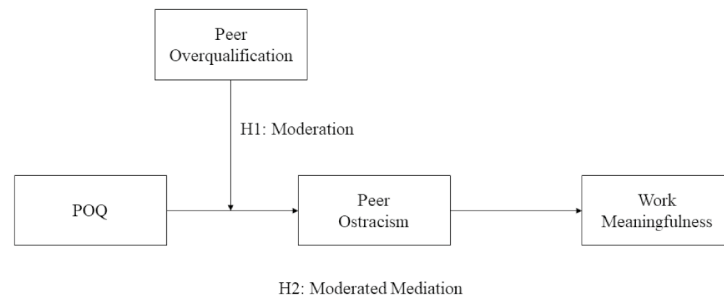
Note. POQ = perceived overqualification. H1 = Hypothesis 1. H2 = Hypothesis 2.

overqualification and extend their findings by explaining how the overqualification of both employees and peers influence the perceived ostracism of overqualified employees. We focus on how POQ, among employees who work with peers who do not also feel overqualified, leads to a more brutal experience, ostracism at work, which in turn, undermines work meaningfulness. Thus, whereas the central research question in Hu et al. (2015) speaks to how the interaction between POQ and peer OQ affects employees' in-role and extra-role performance, we focus on understanding how this interaction leads to an ethical outcome, namely, work meaningfulness. Our focus is important because work meaningfulness is an ethical issue concerning whether employees have a moral right to pursue meaningfulness at work and whether organizational have a moral obligation to establish the conditions for meaningful work to occur (Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009; Michaelson et al., 2014). Further, whereas previous research suggests that it is the diminished quality of work (e.g., in terms of skill underutilization) that makes overqualified employees' work less meaningful (Thompson et al., 2013), we explain how workplace interpersonal mistreatment (i.e., peer ostracism) may undermine the meaningfulness of work. Specifically, as a behavior that violates social moral norms and involves unethical encounters (Lyu & Zhu, 2019), we argue that workplace ostracism is a significant ethical mechanism linking POQ and work meaningfulness. Adopting a moral perspective not only extends previous work on the effects of the interaction between employee POQ and peer OQ, but also sheds important light on the moral implications of this interaction that can be particularly relevant and insightful to business ethics research and practice.

Second, extending prior studies that have relied upon other theories (e.g., equity theory, person-job fit theory) to understand the personal implications of overqualification, we provide an alternative theoretical account by using victim precipitation theory to understand how overqualification can have interpersonal implications that ultimately affect the employee's personal experience at work (i.e., work meaningfulness). By doing so, we adopt a novel and relevant theoretical perspective for understanding the emergence of work meaningfulness. As Lysova et al. (2019) noted, scholars should incorporate existing theories with prior research of meaningful work to propose testable hypotheses and conduct rigorous investigations to advance our knowledge regarding the antecedents of work meaningfulness. We answer this important call by explaining and examining how the interaction between employee and peer overqualification leads to work meaningfulness through workplace ostracism.

Third and finally, by examining when and how employees' POQ leads to peer ostracism, our study also adds to our understanding of the antecedents and boundary conditions of workplace ostracism. We propose that overqualified employees are likely to experience ostracism by their peers when those peers experience low levels of overqualification context. In doing so, we also address recent calls (e.g., Scott & Duffy, 2015; Wu et al., 2015) for more research on the antecedents of workplace ostracism and contribute to this line of inquiry (e.g., Bai et al., 2021; Christensen-Salem et al., 2020; Curtis et al., 2020; Quade et al., 2019) by revealing that employee POQ and peer overqualification interactively influence workplace ostracism.

Theory and Hypotheses

Perceived Overqualification

Overqualification can be objective (i.e., objective overqualification) or subjective (i.e., perceived overqualification), and they are related yet distinct constructs (Maltarich et al., 2011). Objective overqualification refers to the objective gap between individuals' qualifications and their formal job requirements (e.g., education, experience, cognitive ability) and is a better predictor of future mobility than POQ (Maltarich et al., 2011); in contrast, POQ captures the extent to which employees subjectively feel that they have more qualifications than their job requires. Relative to objective overqualification, POQ is a better predictor of current job-related perceptions and behaviors (Harari et al., 2017; Liu & Wang, 2012). Given our interest in understanding how overqualification influences individuals' current experience at work, we follow the recommendations of other scholars (e.g., Erdogan et al., 2011b) and focus on POQ as the focal construct of our model. Unless noted otherwise, then, overqualification refers to POQ. In addition, we define peer overqualification as the average overqualification level of one's peers.

POQ, Peer Overqualification, and Peer Ostracism

Victim precipitation theory is useful for understanding the relationship between POQ, peer overqualification, and peer ostracism. This theory was originally proposed in the domain of criminology, and it contends that to understand criminal acts, it is necessary to consider victims' characteristics and actions in addition to those of perpetrators (Amir, 1967; Curtis, 1974). Victim precipitation theory was later adopted by organizational scholars to understand workplace mistreatment (Dhanani et al., 2020; Tepper et al., 2006). Specifically, applied in the domains of management and organizational psychology, victim precipitation theory argues that victims either intentionally or unintentionally instigate potential perpetrators to interact with them in an aggressive manner, and individual characteristics or behaviors often serve as critical precipitating factors that trigger

victimization (Aquino & Bradfield, 2000; Henle & Gross, 2014; Tepper et al., 2006).

Victim precipitation theory suggests that there are two types of victims: submissive and provocative (Olweus, 1978). Submissive victims refer to individuals who have traits that make them appear passive, insecure, and vulnerable. Submissive victims likely trigger victimization because they are perceived by perpetrators as unable to defend themselves. The characteristics of being passive, anxious, and insecure signal to perpetrators that the victims are "safe targets" (Björkqvist et al., 1994). In contrast, provocative victims tend to become targets of victimization because their actions violate interactional norms and garner resentment (Olweus, 1978). Provocative victims are more likely to engage in behaviors that are hostile, resentful, or socially inappropriate, thereby provoking retaliatory behaviors from others (Aquino & Bradfield, 2000; Reknes et al., 2021). Thus, victims may unknowingly become the targets of victimization because of certain characteristics or because their actions provoke victimization from perpetrators.

Victim precipitation theory adopts a perpetrator's perspective by explaining how victims may also contribute to their own victimization (Aquino & Thau, 2009). Further, over the years, management studies using this theory as theoretical framework have increased (Cortina et al., 2018; Dhanani et al., 2020). For example, drawing on this theory, Wu et al. (2011) found that people who are low in agreeableness and extraversion are more likely to be ostracized; similarly, Kluemper et al. (2019) used this theory to argue that subordinates with low core-self evaluations are more likely to be the targets of abusive supervision. Studies have also revealed that employees who display negative affect (Felps et al., 2006) and engage in low levels of OCB (Aquino & Bommer, 2003) are more likely to be victimized.

POQ may serve as a precipitating factor for peer victimization because of the negative attitudes and behaviors associated with overqualification. POQ is a situation that elicits a feeling of relative deprivation, because overqualified employees are in a situation that is worse than the one they want or deserve (Feldman et al., 2002; Lee et al., 2021). This feeling of deprivation is relative and is generated based on comparisons with others, like peers at work. Thus, when overqualified employees are surrounded by peers who are not overqualified, overqualified employees are likely to feel that their actual situation is worse than the situation they desire or to which they feel entitled. Such assessments may generate negative attitudes (e.g., dissatisfaction, Harari et al., 2017), cognitions (e.g., relative deprivation, Erdogan et al., 2018) or emotions (e.g., anger regarding the situation; Liu et al., 2015a, and lead overqualified employees to act in negative ways, such as engaging in counterproductive work behaviors directed at others (Liu et al., 2015; Luksyte et al., 2011) or cynically

communicating their feelings of entitlement to their coworkers (Deng et al., 2018). These deviant behaviors, according to victim precipitation theory, violate interaction norms and could make overqualified employees more likely to fit the description of provocative victims. As a result, overqualified employees may elicit harmful or retaliatory behavioral responses from their peers (Scott et al., 2013), such as ostracism.

Ostracism refers to the extent to which individuals perceive that they are ignored or excluded by others (Williams, 2001). Accordingly, peer ostracism occurs when overqualified employees' peers ignore or exclude them, including not inviting them to lunch, leaving the area whenever they enter, and failing to return greetings (Balliet & Ferris, 2013; Ferris et al., 2008). Ostracism serves as a form of punishment and signals to employees that they have done something that is socially unacceptable by their peers (Ferris et al., 2008; Williams, 2007). Recent research shows that overqualified employees may interact with coworkers in an unpleasant manner that leads to an undesirable social image and less social acceptance (Deng et al., 2018). This pattern is also consistent with the idea of incivility spirals (Andersson & Pearson, 1999), which suggests that relatively trivial acts of incivility can "spiral" into more harmful behaviors. As a result, peers who are not overqualified might not invite overqualified employees to social events or ignore the ideas they propose in meetings as reactions to their unpleasantness.

In contrast, when overqualified employees are surrounded by similarly overqualified peers, they are less likely to feel deprived or entitled because they are in a situation that is also experienced by their peers. Being with peers who are also overqualified should reduce the likelihood that overqualified employees will feel relatively deprived and lead them to consider their overqualification status as legitimate (Erdogan et al., 2011b). As a result, overqualified employees are more likely to see their situation as acceptable (Hu et al., 2015) and less likely to exhibit the kind of negative attitudes and behaviors that tend to elicit victimization. That is, when overqualified employees are working in the context of high peer overqualification, they should see their own situation as more reasonable instead of exceptional and, thus, are less likely to experience negative feelings about their situation and act negatively toward their peers. The absence of these hostile acts enables overqualified employees to avoid being provocative victims and reduces the likelihood of peer ostracism.

Hypothesis 1: Peer overqualification moderates the relationship between employee POQ and peer ostracism, such that the relationship is stronger when peer overqualification is lower.

POQ, Peer Ostracism, and Work Meaningfulness

Work meaningfulness refers to the extent to which work is personally significant and worthwhile for an employee (Lysova et al., 2019; Pratt & Ashforth, 2003; Rosso et al., 2010). There are good reasons to anticipate that, through their interactive effect on peer ostracism, employee POQ and peer overqualification will subsequently influence employees' work meaningfulness. Rosso et al. (2010) suggested that one of the pivotal mechanisms that makes work meaningful is individuals' perceptions of belongingness. Belongingness refers to "a pervasive drive to form and maintain at least a minimum quantity of lasting, positive, and significant interpersonal relationships" (Baumeister & Leary, 1995, p. 497). Thus, belongingness is likely to play a central role in understanding how peer ostracism influences work meaningfulness. Indeed, people tend to perceive their work as more meaningful when they have the desirable affective experience of interpersonal connectedness (Rosso et al., 2010). Specifically, prior research suggests that supportive and reassuring interpersonal connections at work contribute to a sense of belongingness and togetherness, which in turn, lead to increased feelings of work meaningfulness (Blatt & Camden, 2007). Being ostracized, a stressful and isolating experience at work (Wu et al., 2012), thwarts individuals' sense of belongingness in several ways. First, being ostracized conveys to the affected employee that he or she has done something that is considered unacceptable by his or her peers, is unworthy of attention, and deserving of punishment (Ferris et al., 2008; Williams, 2007). Further, because ostracism represents a differentiation between the ostracized target and his or her peers, it diminishes the focal employee's identification with the group and fosters a sense dissimilarity with one's peers (Hu et al., 2015; Wu et al., 2016). Therefore, being ostracized may elicit a feeling that one does not belong to the group. In sum, peer ostracism undermines employees' sense of belongingness thereby making their work less meaningful (Demirtas et al., 2017; Pratt & Ashforth, 2003).

Our earlier arguments for the moderation hypothesis (i.e., Hypothesis 1) suggest that when overqualified employees are surrounded by peers who are not overqualified, they will experience a sense of deprivation and entitlement when making comparisons with their referent peers. These negative cognitions prompt them to act negatively towards their peers, which provokes ostracism from their peers in return. Such ostracism will in turn undermine work meaningfulness as it thwarts employees' sense of belongingness. In contrast, as we describe in our arguments for Hypothesis 1, when overqualified employees work with similarly overqualified colleagues, they are less likely to feel relatively deprived or entitled; instead, they should view their situation as legitimate and acceptable given the fact that their peers also experience overqualification. Without exhibiting aggressive or resentful behaviors that make them provocative victims, overqualified employees will receive less ostracism. As such, their sense of work meaningfulness will be maintained better compared to overqualified employees who stand out among their peers. To summarize, peer overqualification can put overqualified employees into situations where they are ostracized and feel disconnected from their peers; further, peer overqualification will moderate the indirect effect of POQ on work meaningfulness, thereby demonstrating a pattern of moderated mediation. Thus, we propose that:

Hypothesis 2: Peer overqualification moderates the indirect effect of employee POQ on work meaningfulness, such that the negative indirect effect is stronger when peer overqualification is lower.

Overview of Studies

We tested our hypotheses across two studies. In Study 1, we surveyed 282 employees at two points in time. In Study 2, we surveyed 300 employees working in 51 teams at two points. The goal of Study 2 was to replicate the findings of Study 1 using multisource team data; specifically, whereas Study 1 used focal employees' self-report measure of peer overqualification, in Study 2, we calculated peer overqualification using peers' ratings of their own POQ. In addition, in Study 2, we measured peer ostracism and work meaningfulness at two different points in order to minimize common method bias (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Furthermore, because the data collected in Study 1 were part of a larger research project, our measures were relatively short; however, in Study 2, we were able to use more lengthy measures.

Study 1

Sample and Procedure

Using the network of the first author, we approached the HR director of a department store in the retailing industry in northern China. After we detailed the purpose and procedures of the study, the HR director approved it with the request that all the responses should be confidential. After we agreed with the request, the HR director disseminated information about the study to employees within the company. Participation was completely voluntary. An invitation letter and a survey with questions measuring demographics, extraversion, agreeableness, task interdependence, POQ, and peer overqualification were distributed in sealed envelopes to 500 randomly selected employees. At Time 1, 412 employees responded (response rate = 82.4%). We asked participants to provide the first English letter of their

last name plus last four digits of their cell phone number as the unique study identifier. At Time 2, one month later, we contacted the HR director again and asked him to distribute the survey to the first-wave respondents. As a result, a total of 282 of these 412 employees responded to our invitation to complete a second survey, including measures of peer ostracism and work meaningfulness. We again asked participants to provide their identifiers, and used them to match the data. After matching the data, we removed these identifiers. The participants returned the surveys in sealed envelopes directly to the third author so no one from the organization had any access to the data in the entire process. Thus, all the responses remained confidential. The overall response rate was 56.4%. The average age of the participants was 32 years, and the average organizational tenure was 8 years. Among these employees, 33% held non-management positions, 37% were entry-level managers, 27% were mid-level managers, and 3% were senior-level managers.

Measures

Given that the original measures were developed in English, we used the back-translation process to ensure the quality of the translation into Chinese (Brislin et al., 1973). All variables were measured on a 7-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*).

Employee POQ

At Time 1, employees assessed POQ using the 4-item scale developed by Johnson and Johnson (1996). A sample item is: "My work experience is more than necessary to do my present job" ($\alpha = .70$).

Peer Overqualification

At Time 1, the employees rated their peers' overqualification based on the modified version of Johnson and Johnson's (1996) scale (i.e., we changed the referent from "I" to "my peers"). A sample item is: "Based on my peers' skills, they are overqualified for the jobs they hold" ($\alpha = .71$). Hu et al. (2015) found that *focal* employees' ratings of peer overqualification were positively correlated with the average score of peer overqalification, indicating that *focal* employees have a good awareness of the overqualification experienced by their peers.

Peer Ostracism

At Time 2, we assessed peer ostracism using Ferris et al.'s (2008) 10-item workplace ostracism scale. We modified the referent from "others" to "my peers" to capture ostracism by

the focal employee's peers. A sample item is: "My peers left the area I entered" ($\alpha = .94$).

Work Meaningfulness

Work meaningfulness was evaluated with the 3-item scale developed by Spreitzer (1995). A sample item is: ''My job activities are personally meaningful to me'' ($\alpha = .82$).

Control Variables

Consistent with previous research on POQ and ostracism (e.g., Wu et al., 2015, 2016; Zhang et al., 2016), we controlled for demographic variables (e.g., age, organizational tenure, and job level). Research has also found that employee personality such as extraversion and agreeableness (Wu et al., 2011), and job characteristics such as task interdependence influence peer ostracism (Robinson et al., 2013); therefore, we controlled for these variables as well. We measured both extraversion (3 items, $\alpha = .71$) and agreeableness (3 items, $\alpha = .58$) with items from the Short-Form Big Five Inventory (BFI-S; Hahn et al., 2012). Task interdependence was measured with Campion et al.'s (1993) 3-item scale ($\alpha = .71$).

Results

Confirmatory Factor Analyses

We performed confirmatory factor analyses (CFAs) in Mplus 7 (Muthén & Muthén, 2017) before testing our hypotheses. First, we tested a seven-factor model with all of the latent variables measured in our study (including our control variables). The results showed that the seven-factor model provided good fit: $\chi^2[384] = 658.53$, CFI = .92, TLI = .91, RMSEA = .05, SRMR = .06. Further, we compared our baseline model with several alternative models. The competing model with the best fit indices was a six-factor model in which employee POQ and peer POQ loaded onto the same factor: $\chi^2[390] = 726.19$, CFI = .91, TLI = .89, RMSEA = .06, SRMR = .06. However, the χ^2 test showed that the seven-factor model was still significantly better than this alternative ($\Delta\chi^2 [\Delta df = 6] = 67.66$, $p < .01$). Further, we also examined a two-factor model, where variables measured at the same time points were combined into respective factors; however, this two-factor model provided poor fit for the data ($\chi^2[404] = 1575.10$, CFI = .67, TLI = .65, RMSEA = .10, SRMR = .12). Finally, we tested a one-factor model, in which the items for all variables loaded onto a single-factor; this model also yielded poor fit ($\chi^2[405] = 2068.10$, CFI = .54, TLI = .50, RMSEA = .12, SRMR = .14). In summary, the results of these analyses demonstrate adequate construct validity of the variables.

Descriptive Statistics

The descriptive statistics are shown in Table 1. To facilitate the interpretation of the results, variables were centered before creating products (Dalal & Zickar, 2012).

Hypothesis 1 predicted that peer overqualification moderates the relationship between employee POQ and peer ostracism, such that the positive relationship is stronger when peer overqualification is low. As shown in Table 2,

there was a significant negative interaction between employee and peer overqualification ($b = -.15$, $p < .05$); further, as shown in Fig. 2, the simple slope tests showed that the relationship between employee POQ and peer ostracism was significant and positive when peer overqualification was low ($b = .21$, $p < .05$), but it was not significant when peer overqualification was high ($b = -.10$, n.s.). Thus, Hypothesis 1 was supported.

Table 1 Means, standard deviations, reliabilities, and correlations in Study 1

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Age (T1)	31.85	6.84	–									
2. Organizational tenure (T1)	7.81	6.13	0.85**	–								
3. Job level (T1)	2.00	0.85	0.37**	0.37**	–							
4. Extraversion (T1)	5.09	1.04	0.19**	0.18**	0.23**	(0.71)						
5. Agreeableness (T1)	5.65	0.03	0.03	0.05	0.11	0.30**	(0.58)					
6. Task interdependence (T1)	5.47	0.92	0.05	0.00	0.06	0.24**	0.21**	(0.71)				
7. Employee POQ (T1)	4.84	0.86	0.18**	0.18**	0.24**	0.16**	0.17**	−0.04	(0.70)			
8. Peer overqualification (T1)	4.62	0.74	0.06	0.10	0.13*	0.14*	0.19**	0.09	0.50**	–		
9. Peer ostracism (T2)	2.11	1.04	−0.06	−0.08	−0.04	−0.07	−0.10	−0.11	0.08	0.12*	(0.94)	
10. Work meaningfulness (T2)	5.50	1.00	0.08	0.08	0.13*	0.43**	0.44**	0.22**	−0.09	0.06	−0.25**	(0.82)

$N = 282$. Reliabilities are shown in parentheses on the diagonal. Job level: 1 = non-management positions, 2 = entry-level managers, 3 = mid-level managers, and 4 = senior-level managers

SD standard deviation, *T1* Time 1, *T2* Time 2, one month after Time 1, *POQ* perceived overqualification

*$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$

**Table 2** Results of moderated regression analyses on peer ostracism

Variable	Peer ostracism (Time 2)					
	Step 1		Step 2		Step 3	
	b	s.e.	b	s.e.	b	s.e.
Constant	3.36**	0.70	3.68**	0.71	3.55**	0.70
Step 1 Controls						
Age	0.00	0.02	0.00	0.02	0.01	0.02
Organizational tenure	−0.01	0.02	−0.02	0.02	−0.02	0.02
Job level	0.00	0.08	−0.02	0.08	−0.04	0.08
Extraversion	−0.01	0.07	−0.02	0.07	−0.03	0.07
Agreeableness	−0.10	0.09	−0.14	0.09	−0.11	0.09
Task interdependence	−0.10	0.07	−0.11	0.07	−0.11	0.07
Step 2						
Employee POQ			0.05	0.07	0.05	0.07
Peer overqualification			0.14	0.07	0.16*	0.07
Step 3						
Employee POQ × peer overqualification					−0.15*	0.06
R^2	0.02		0.05*		0.07*	
ΔR^2	0.02		0.03*		0.02*	

$N = 282$. Unstandardized regression coefficients were reported

s.e. standard error, *POQ* perceived overqualification

*$p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$

Fig. 2 Interactive Effect of Employee POQ and Peer Overqualification on Peer Ostracism in Study 1. *Note. POQ* perceived overqualification, *Peer OQ* peer overqualification
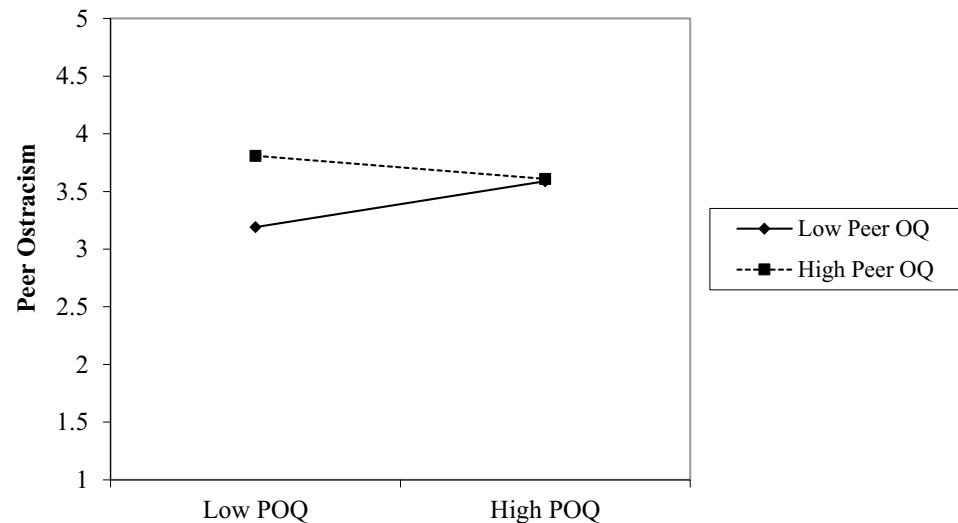
Note. POQ = perceived overqualification; Peer OQ = peer overqualification.

As shown in Table 3, the relationship between employee POQ and peer ostracism was significantly moderated by peer overqualification (Hypothesis 1 supported; Step 1), and the relationship between peer ostracism and work meaningfulness was negative and significant ($b = -.16$, $p < .05$; Step 2). As recommended by Edwards and Lambert (2007), we also examined the indirect effects. Moderated mediation is supported if the indirect effect of employee POQ on work meaningfulness via peer ostracism varies significantly between low (-1 SD) and high ($+1$ SD) levels of peer overqualification (Preacher et al., 2007). We obtained the 95% confidence intervals (CIs) with 5000 bootstrapping samples using Model 7 in PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2012). As shown in Table 4, the indirect effect was negative and significant (indirect effect = $-.03$, 95% CI = [$-.07$, $-.01$]) when peer overqualification was low, while the indirect effect was not significant when peer overqualification was high (indirect effect = .02, 95% CI = [$-.01$, 05]). The index of moderated mediation was .02, 95% CI = [.01, .05]. Thus, Hypothesis 2 was supported.

Study 2

Sample and Procedure

Using the professional network of the third author, we contacted the HR director of a manufacturing company in northern China. We described the study purpose and procedures to the HR director and obtained his approval to recruit participants in his company. An initial sample of 400 full-time employees working in 72 long-term,

functional teams were recruited. The teams were randomly selected. Data were collected at two points in time (separated by 3 months). At Time 1, we distributed the study announcement, consent forms, and surveys in sealed envelopes. Participants were assured that their responses would be confidential. A total of 355 employees returned their surveys (88.8% response rate), which included measures of demographics, task interdependence, POQ, and peer ostracism. Three months later, at Time 2, we contacted the HR director and asked him to send these first-wave respondents a follow-up survey in sealed envelopes. A total of 300 employees returned their surveys in envelopes, which included measures of extraversion, agreeableness, and work meaningfulness. Thus, the final matched sample included 300 employees (75% response rate) from 51 work teams. Their average age and organizational tenure were 34 and 10 years, respectively. Among these employees, 60% of them held non-management positions, 26% were entry-level project managers, 7% were mid-level project managers, and 2% were senior-level project managers. The sizes of their workgroups ranged from 3 to 7, with an average of 5.88 team members.

Measures

All variables were scored on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*), except for extraversion and agreeableness, which used a 9-point scale. As shown in Table 5, all of the scale alphas exceeded .80.

Table 3 Regression results for moderated mediation in Study 1

Variable	Peer ostracism (Time 2)		
	b	s.e.	t
Mediator variable model			
Constant	3.55**	0.70	5.06**
Age	0.01	0.02	0.49
Organizational tenure	− 0.02	0.02	− 1.14
Job level	− 0.04	0.08	− 0.52
Extraversion	− 0.03	0.07	− 0.40
Agreeableness	− 0.11	0.09	− 1.23
Task interdependence	− 0.11	0.07	− 1.60
Employee POQ	0.05	0.07	0.65
Peer overqualification	0.16*	0.07	2.20*
Employee POQ×peer overqualification	− 0.15*	0.06	− 2.41*

Variable	Work meaningfulness (Time 2)		
	b	s.e.	t
Dependent variable model			
Constant	2.26**	0.59	3.83**
Age	0.00	0.01	0.18
Organizational tenure	− 0.00	0.02	− 0.10
Job level	0.07	0.06	1.03
Extraversion	0.32**	0.05	6.20**
Agreeableness	0.48**	0.07	6.65**
Task interdependence	0.04	0.06	0.76
Employee POQ	− 0.23**	0.06	− 3.93**
Peer ostracism	− 0.16**	0.05	− 3.51**

$N = 282$

POQ perceived overqualification

$*p < .05.$ $**p < .01$

Table 4 Regression results for conditional indirect effect at different levels of peer overqualification in Study 1

Model	Peer OQ	Effect	Boot SE	BootLLCI	BootULCI
POQ–peer ostracism–work meaningfulness	+1 *SD*	0.02	0.01	− 0.01	0.05
	−1 *SD*	**− 0.03**	**0.02**	**− 0.07**	**− 0.01**

$N = 282$. Bootstrap sample size $= 5000$. The numbers in bold indicate significant estimates

SD standard deviation, *POQ* perceived overqualification, *Peer OQ* peer overqualification, *BootLLCI* bootstrap lower limit confidence interval, *BootULCI* bootstrap upper limit confidence interval

Employee POQ

At Time 1, overqualification was measured using Maynard et al.'s (2006) 9-item scale. A sample item was "I have job skills that are not required for the job" ($\alpha = .90$).

Peer Overqualification

We followed Hu et al.'s (2015) approach and calculated peer overqualification by averaging all of the same-group peers'

overqualification scores on Maynard et al.'s (2006) scale, excluding the *focal* employee's score.

Peer Ostracism

At Time 1, we assessed peer ostracism using Ferris et al.'s (2008) 10-item workplace ostracism scale. We modified the referent from "peers" to "peers on my team" or "my team members" to capture the ostracism by the focal employee's peers. A sample item was "peers on my team left the area I entered" ($\alpha = .97$).

Table 5 Means, standard deviations, reliabilities, and correlations in Study 2

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Age (T1)	34.22	7.37	–										
2. Organizational tenure (T1)	10.02	8.24	0.83**	–									
3. Job level (T1)	1.48	0.73	0.13*	–0.01	–								
4. Extraversion (T2)	6.35	1.59	–0.01	–0.01	0.12*	(0.93)							
5. Agreeableness (T2)	6.45	1.65	0.01	0.06	0.03	0.47**	(0.94)						
6. Task interdependence (T1)	4.73	1.28	–0.06	–0.03	0.09	0.23**	0.34**	(0.81)					
7. Team size	5.88	1.32	–0.08	–0.08	–0.04	0.07	–0.02	–0.13*	–				
8. Employee POQ (T1)	4.08	1.02	0.01	0.12*	–0.01	–0.04	–0.01	–0.00	0.04	(0.90)			
9. Peer overqualification (T1)	4.08	0.71	0.08	0.12*	0.02	–0.11*	0.02	–0.11*	0.05	0.48**	–		
10. Peer ostracism (T1)	2.81	1.47	0.10	0.11	0.23**	–0.03	–0.12*	–0.14*	0.18**	0.17**	0.17**	(0.97)	
11. Work meaningfulness (T2)	4.68	1.05	–0.23**	–0.23**	0.11	0.32***	0.35***	0.44**	–0.09	–0.05	–0.11	–0.28**	(0.94)

N = 300 employees in 51 teams. Reliabilities are shown in parentheses on the diagonal. Job level: 1 = non-management positions, 2 = entry-level managers, 3 = mid-level managers, and 4 = senior-level managers

SD standard deviation, *T1* Time 1, *T2* Time 2, three months after Time 1, *POQ* perceived overqualification

$*p < 0.05$, $**p < 0.01$

Work Meaningfulness

At Time 2, work meaningfulness was measured with the 10-item Work and Meaning Inventory developed by Steger et al. (2012). The measure captures the extent to which employees perceive that their work has meaning, enables to them finding greater meaning in life, and contributes to the greater good. A sample item was "I have a good sense of what makes my job meaningful" ($\alpha = .94$).

Control Variables

We included the same control variables as in Study 1. We measured both extraversion and agreeableness using Shafer's six-item scale (Shafer, 1999) ($\alpha = .93$ for extraversion; $\alpha = .94$ for agreeableness) and task interdependence using Campion et al.'s (1993) 3-item scale ($\alpha = .81$). In addition, we controlled for group size in Study 2 because it may influence employees' comparisons with their peers (Hu et al., 2015; Lam et al., 2011; Vidyarthi et al., 2010).

Results

Confirmatory Factor Analyses

We conducted Multilevel CFAs before testing the hypotheses. Due to the small sample size-to-parameters ratio (below 5, Bentler & Chou, 1987), we followed previous recommendations (Little et al., 2013) to create parcels for latent variables. Specifically, we created three parcels for work meaningfulness based on its three dimensions. In addition, we used the procedures proposed by Landis and colleagues (Landis et al., 2000) to create parcels for POQ and peer ostracism. Through this process, we created two parcels for POQ and peer ostracism. The results revealed that the six-factor model provided good fit: $\chi^2[320] = 433.69$, CFI = .98, TLI = .96, RMSEA = .03, SRMR$_{within}$ = .05, SRMR$_{between}$ = .12. The best competing model was a five-factor model in which task interdependence and work meaningfulness were combined into one factor: $\chi^2[330] = 65.08$, CFI = .93, TLI = .90, RMSEA = .06, SRMR$_{within}$ = .05, SRMR$_{between}$ = .10, but the fit for this model was significantly worse than the six-factor model's fit ($\Delta\chi^2 [\Delta df = 10] = 216.39$, $p < .01$). Therefore, the construct validities of our theoretical variables were supported by the results.

Descriptive Statistics

Table 5 shows the means, standard deviations, reliabilities, and correlations among the variables. Notably, POQ was positively related to peer ostracism ($r = .17$, $p < .01$), and peer ostracism was negatively related to work meaningfulness ($r = -.28$, $p < .01$).

Hypothesis Testing

Because employees were nested in teams (Kozlowski & Klein, 2000), their responses on the outcomes may lack independence and be biased (Bliese, 2002). Therefore, we calculated the inter-class correlation coefficients (ICC; Bliese, 2000) and found that the ICC for work meaningfulness was 0.43. To account for this non-independence and to avoid inflated effect sizes and spurious findings, we followed recent recommendations and tested all hypotheses using the "sandwich estimator" (Muthén & Muthén, 2017), or cluster-robust standard errors (CR-SE, McNeish et al., 2017). This modeling method is often used for cluster samples in which the clusters are independent but the observations within a cluster are not. In Study 2, the observations were nested within teams. Therefore, we used the sandwich estimator to account for the team-level clustering by including the syntax TYPE=COMPLEX in the Mplus 7 software. This estimator can take account of the nonindependence of observations resulting from cluster sampling and correct the potential bias in estimation that may result from potential sampling differences, and it has been shown to provide a robust estimation of standard errors (Liu et al., 2015). An advantage of this method is that it requires a smaller number of assumptions with the benefit that estimates take clustering of data into account. This method has been widely employed in organizational behavior research (e.g., Barclay & Kiefer, 2019; De Cremer et al., 2018; Hussain et al., 2019). All the analyses were performed in Mplus 7.

Hypothesis 1 predicted that peer overqualification moderates the relationship between employee POQ and peer ostracism. As shown in Model 2 of Table 6, peer overqualification negatively moderated relationship between employee POQ and peer ostracism ($b = -.21$, $p < .05$). Further, we plotted the interaction between employee POQ and peer overqualification. As shown in Fig. 3, after accounting for control variables and main predictors, employee POQ was positively related to peer ostracism when peer overqualification was low ($b = .38$, $p < .01$), but it was not related to peer ostracism when it was high ($b = -.04$, $n.s.$); thus, Hypothesis 1 was also supported in Study 2.

We followed the method recommended by Preacher et al. (2007) to estimate the moderated mediation effects (i.e., Hypothesis 2). We also applied the bootstrapping approach in R with 20,000 replications to obtain estimates of bias-corrected confidence intervals (CI) (Preacher & Selig, 2012). Hypothesis 2 proposed that peer overqualification moderates the indirect effect of employee POQ on work meaningfulness via peer ostracism, such that the indirect effect is stronger when peer overqualification is lower than when peer

**Table 6** Results of the theoretical models in Study 2

	Peer ostracism (T1)				Work meaningfulness (T2)			
	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
	b	s.e.	b	s.e.	b	s.e.	b	s.e.
Intercept	1.23	1.24	1.30	1.20	3.48**	0.62	3.66**	0.61
Control variables								
Age (T1)	0.00	0.02	− 0.01	0.02	− 0.01	0.01	− 0.01	0.01
Org. tenure (T1)	0.02	0.03	0.03	0.03	− 0.03	0.02	− 0.02	0.01
Job level (T1)	0.50*	0.20	0.54*	0.22	0.08	0.07	0.16*	0.07
Extraversion (T2)	0.00	0.07	0.00	0.07	0.09*	0.04	0.09*	0.04
Agreeableness (T2)	0.00	0.02	− 0.06	0.07	0.12**	0.04	0.11**	0.04
TI (T1)	− 0.12	0.09	− 0.12	0.08	0.30**	0.07	0.28**	0.07
Team size	0.27*	0.12	0.29*	0.12	− 0.04	0.06	0.00	0.05
Independent variables								
Employee POQ(T1)	0.18	0.11	0.17	0.09	− 0.02	0.07	0.01	0.07
Peer OQ (T1)	0.05	0.17	0.04	0.15	− 0.00	0.07	0.01	0.07
Interaction term								
POQ×Peer OQ			− 0.21*	0.09	0.04	0.03	0.01	0.04
Mediator								
Peer ostracism (T1)							− 0.15**	0.05
R^2	0.16**		0.20**		0.40**		0.44**	
ΔR^2	0.16**		0.04*		0.40**		0.04*	

$N = 300$ employees in 51 teams

T1 Time 1, *T2* Time 2, three months after Time 1, *TI* task interdependence, *POQ* overqualification, *Peer OQ* peer overqualification

*$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$

Fig. 3 Interactive Effect of Employee POQ and Peer Overqualification on Peer Ostracism in Study 2. *Note. POQ* perceived overqualification, *Peer OQ* peer overqualification
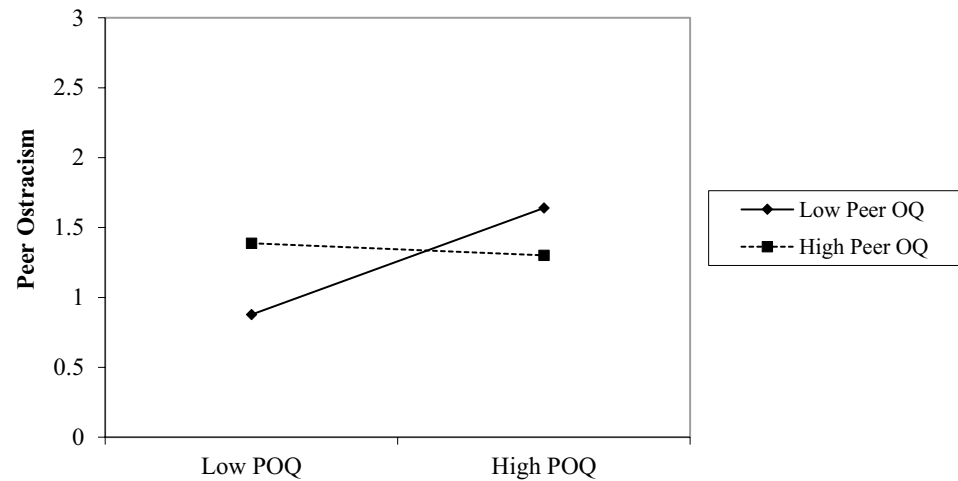
Note. POQ = perceived overqualification; Peer OQ = peer overqualification.

overqualification is higher. As shown in Table 6 (Model 4), after accounting for control variables and main predictors, peer ostracism was significantly and negatively related to work meaningfulness ($b = -.15$, $p < .05$). The results of the moderated mediation effects are presented in Table 7. As shown in Table 7, the indirect effect of employee POQ on work meaningfulness via peer ostracism was significant and negative when peer overqualification was low (i.e., -1 SD; $b = -.057$, 95% CI [$-.106$, $-.019$]), but it was insignificant when peer overqualification was high (i.e., $+1$ SD; $b = .006$, 95% CI [$-.025$, .040]). The difference of the indirect effects was significant ($\Delta b = .064$, 95% CI $= [.017, .124]$). Hence, Hypothesis 2 was supported.

Discussion

Responding to recent calls for research on implications of overqualification on interpersonal relationships (e.g., Erdogan & Bauer, 2021), we integrated the victim precipitation theory with the belongingness perspective of work meaningfulness to propose that when peer overqualification is low, employee POQ will lead to higher levels of

peer ostracism. Moreover, we theorized that peer ostracism would, in turn, lead to poor work meaningfulness. Our hypotheses were supported in both Study 1 (which relied on self-reported data collected at two points in time) and Study 2 (which relied on multisource data collected at two points in time), thereby providing strong support for our model.

Theoretical Implications

Our findings have several theoretical implications. First, the reactions of the peers to overqualified employees have generally been under-investigated in the overqualification literature (cf. Erdogan & Bauer, 2021). Indeed, noting the lack of research attention on the role of coworkers in the overqualification literature, Deng et al. (2018) suggested that "the nature of the relationship between perceived overqualification and employees' relations with their coworkers has been neglected" (p. 3). This is an unfortunate omission given that the impact of overqualification does not occur in isolation, but is embedded in the relationship between employees and their peers (Hu et al., 2015), an idea that is consistent with the central tenets of relative deprivation theory (Crosby, 1976). The current study addresses this

Table 7 Results of the moderated mediation model

	Indirect effect	
	Estimate	Bias-corrected 95% CI
POQ → peer ostracism → work meaningfulness		
High peer overqualification (+1SD)	0.006	[−0.025, 0.040]
Low peer overqualification (−1SD)	**−0.057**	**[−0.106, −0.019]**
Difference between low and high peer overqualification	**0.064**	**[0.017, 0.124]**

Bootstrap samples = 20,000. The numbers in bold indicate significant estimates

CI confidence interval, *POQ* perceived overqualification

limitation by establishing peer ostracism as a social consequence and work meaningfulness as a subsequent personal outcome. Specifically, our findings show that employee POQ leads to peer ostracism when peer overqualification is low, and in turn, peer ostracism undermines the meaningfulness of employees' work. Our findings are consistent with previous research (e.g., Deng et al., 2018; Hu et al., 2015) in that employee POQ has social implications and those implications are influenced by peer overqualification. However, whereas Deng et al. (2018) examined the role of interpersonal influence in gaining social acceptance, we explored how the overqualification of both employees and peers influence the ostracism of overqualified employees. Further, like Hu et al. (2015), we examined the implications of the interaction between employee POQ and peer overqualification, but in contrast to their study, we focused on how POQ, among employees who work with peers who do not also feel overqualified, leads to ostracism, which in turn, undermines work meaningfulness. In these ways, our research enriches the overqualification literature by extending prior research that explores the social implications of overqualification.

Second, we used victim precipitation theory to understand the effects of employee POQ on work meaningfulness. In doing so, our model extends earlier research by revealing peer ostracism as an intervening mechanism between POQ and work meaningfulness. Victim precipitation theory suggests that people with certain salient characteristics or behaviors are more likely to be victimized. Applying this theory to understand the implications of POQ in a team or group context, our findings suggest that when overqualified employees stand out from the rest of the group, it can lead to devastating social consequences in terms of peer ostracism, and ultimately reduced work meaningfulness. Thus, whereas previous theories about the negative consequences of POQ have often emphasized the role of inequity and employees' evaluations of their own POQ, our theory and findings suggest that peer ostracism that makes work less meaningful may explain, in part, why feeling overqualified can have negative consequences for overqualified employees. In future work, researchers interested in meaningfulness at work could consider other theoretical perspectives that could be used to identify additional mediators that might enable us to further understand the mechanism between work meaningfulness and its antecedents. For example, according to social rank theory (Gilbert, 1989), overqualified employees may pose a status threat to their coworkers and thus draw more overt workplace aggression, such as incivility or social undermining, that might reduce their sense of work meaningfulness.

Third, our model extends overqualification research by incorporating a significant work experience—namely, work meaningfulness—into the overqualification literature. Previous overqualification research has primarily focused on attitudinal or performance outcomes, such as job satisfaction, turnover intention, in-role performance, and OCB (Harari et al., 2017; Liu & Wang, 2012). However, given its moral and ethical implications, it is also important to increase our understanding *when* and *how* POQ may contribute to work meaningfulness, as it is impactful on pivotal work-related outcomes (Lysova et al., 2019). By demonstrating that POQ can affect influence the meaningfulness of work, our study expands the nomological network of overqualification and broadens our understanding of overqualification and its effects.

Finally, by showing how the interaction of employee POQ and peer overqualification influences peer ostracism, we also contribute to the growing literature on ostracism's antecedents and boundary conditions. This is important because, despite the harmful effects of workplace ostracism (Robinson et al., 2013), our understanding of what leads people to ostracize others in the workplace needs to be advanced. Recent studies have found that ethical leadership (Christensen-Salem et al., 2020), ethical comparisons (Quade et al., 2019), social norms (Curtis et al., 2020), and abusive supervision (Bai et al., 2021) could involve workplace ostracism. By addressing the limitation that "neglecting its [ostracism's] antecedents represents an oversight in need of correction" (Wu et al., 2015: p. 52), our examination of POQ and peer overqualification extends this line of research on the antecedents of workplace ostracism and contributes to our knowledge of when ostracism occurs in groups and how ostracism can potentially be reduced.

Practical Implications

Our study has important implications for practice. In particular, our studies highlight the importance of examining work meaningfulness as an ethical outcome of perceived overqualification. Given that employees may exit the organization due to low perceptions of work meaningfulness (Arnoux-Nicolas et al., 2016), probing the antecedents of work meaningfulness is key for organizations to retain employees, particularly those with high qualifications. Most critically, our research indicates that POQ may lead to ostracism and have negative implications for individuals' meaningfulness of work depending on peers' average level of overqualification.

First, managers need to be aware of the negative social implications of POQ in the workplace. Specifically, our findings indicate that the presence of high POQ employees in a work group may warrant special managerial attention because such employees are more likely to be potential targets of interpersonal mistreatment, or more specifically, peer ostracism. For this reason, managers may want to engage in tactics that can prevent employees from feeling overqualified and deprived in the first place, which should reduce the likelihood that they will be ostracized and find their work less

meaningful. Prior studies suggest that this can be accomplished by providing mentoring opportunities or i-deals (Luksyte & Spitzmueller, 2016) or by allowing employees to engage in job crafting (Lin et al., 2017).

Second, our results suggest that team composition also plays a role in understanding why overqualified employees are ostracized. In order to mitigate these negative effects, then, organizations might consider additional interventions (e.g., workshops or consultations on workplace relationships) when teams consist of members with different levels of qualifications. In this way, organizations may be able to ensure that the negative social consequences of overqualification might be mitigated, thereby reducing the occurrence of workplace ostracism and its associated implications. By doing so, overqualified employees would be able to experience their work as more meaningful.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

Our study is not without limitations. First, although we offer a theoretical rationale building on previous research findings, we did not investigate the mechanisms between POQ, peer POQ, and peer ostracism. However, we did find support for our hypotheses, across two samples and using different measures, which lends at least some support for the theoretical mechanisms we described. Nevertheless, there are other possible explanations that we did not explore. For instance, POQ may serve as a proxy for job performance and negative behaviors towards peers. As such, it may be that high/low-performing employees, rather than high POQ employees, are those who are more likely to be the targets of ostracism by peers in the team. Thus, although our arguments are theoretically sound and supported by previous research findings, future studies should explore the role played by job performance and negative behaviors in explaining how POQ leads to ostracism.

Second, our data were collected in China, which has a collectivist culture. As Hu et al. (2015) and Luksyte et al. (2020) noted, POQ may be more prevalent in cultures that are high in individualism. Moreover, the social dynamics related to POQ and peer overqualification may be different in collectivist work teams, where standing out from the group is less acceptable, than in individualistic ones where being different is viewed more favorably (Triandis, 2001). Thus, future research should also replicate our model in more individualistic cultures to provide better generalizability. In addition, we used a convenience sample that was recruited using the network of the research team; thus, future research should replicate or extend our findings using a more representative sample.

Third, although we collected data at two points in time in Study 2, it is still difficult to draw causal conclusions from our research. Therefore, future studies should employ longitudinal designs with repeated measures to better capture the causality between the variables in our model. It might also be possible to assess the causal links in our theoretical model using experiments or experimental vignette methodology (Aguinis & Bradley, 2014) that manipulate perceptions of overqualification. Further, because perceptions of overqualification could vary depending on the tasks and projects that employees are working on, it is also possible that our model could be investigated using experience sampling methodology, as this dynamic, within-person approach can be useful for examining interpersonal interactions (Fisher & To, 2012).

Finally, based on victim precipitation theory, we argued that overqualified employees may engage in behaviors that provoke victimization. In future research, it would be useful to measure and assess the mediating role of these precipitating behaviors. Further, while the choices of moderators and mediators were driven by theories, alternative moderators and mediators may also play a role in linking POQ and work meaningfulness. For example, distrust among group members could play an important role because when interpersonal trust is violated, people react negatively to those who violated their trust and display harmful behaviors toward them, such as ostracism (Scott et al., 2013). Support provided by the organization and family may also act as substitutes that satisfy employees' need to belong (Scott et al., 2014), which in turn, may mitigate the negative impact of ostracism and restore their sense of work meaningfulness. Therefore, future research should continue to explore other relevant moderators and mediators.

Conclusion

In this paper, we used victim precipitation theory to investigate how the interaction between perceived overqualification and peer overqualification affects peer ostracism and how peer ostracism, in turn, leads to reduced work meaningfulness. Across two studies, we found that overqualified employees working with peers whose overqualification level is low perceive more peer ostracism, which is associated with lower levels of work meaningfulness. Given the increasing importance of meaningful work and its implications for ethical organizations (Michaelson et al., 2014), we hope that our study will stimulate additional work that increases our understanding of the broader social implications of overqualification.

Declarations

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