You think you are big fish in a small pond? Perceived overqualification, goal orientations, and proactivity at work

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Summary

Overqualification denotes situations in which job incumbents have higher qualifications than those required for the job. Drawing on the self-regulatory perspective, we proposed that employees’ perception of overqualification positively affects their proactive behavior through the mechanism of role-breadth self-efficacy and that this indirect effect is moderated by employees’ goal orientations. We tested our hypotheses through two studies. In Study 1, we found that perceived overqualification had a positive indirect effect on employees’ proactive behavior through role-breadth self-efficacy using a sample of 323 salespeople with a cross-lagged panel design. In Study 2, the multi-wave and multi-source data from 302 teachers confirmed the indirect effect and indicated that performance goal orientation and learning goal orientation moderated the indirect relationship. Copyright © 2015 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

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Overqualification denotes a situation in which an individual’s qualifications, such as education, work experience, and skills, are beyond the requirements of the job (Erdogan & Bauer, 2009; Maynard, Joseph, & Maynard, 2006). Overqualification is one of the most common forms of underemployment, that is, inadequate employment relative to some standards (Feldman, 1996). Due to the worldwide economic downturn during the early 21st century and a lack of job opportunities, overqualification has become a salient issue in developed regions such as the United States (e.g., Thompson, Shea, Sikora, Perrewé, & Ferris, 2013), Canada (Sadava, O’Connor, & McCreary, 2000), and Europe (Büchel & Mertens, 2004) and in developing countries such as China. According to statistics, 84 percent of Chinese employees have claimed that they were overqualified for their jobs to various extents (Randstad Workmonitor Global Press Report, 2012).

As a prevalent form of underemployment, overqualification has become a topic of interest to both labor economists and management researchers. Many scholars characterize overqualification as a negative phenomenon. Following Feldman’s (1996) seminal paper, researchers usually adopt perspectives such as relative deprivation theory, equity theory, or the stress and coping model to study overqualification (Feldman, 2011; McKee-Ryan & Harvey, 2011, for a review). Under these perspectives, empirical studies have predominantly focused on the negative results of overqualification, such as low job satisfaction (e.g., Johnson, Morrow, & Johnson, 2002), high turnover intention (e.g., Maynard et al., 2006), more counterproductive behavior (Luksyte, Spitzmueller, & Maynard, 2011), more withdrawal behavior (Maynard & Parfyono, 2013), and reduced physical and psychological well-being (e.g., Bolino & Feldman, 2000).

However, some recent conceptual research has indicated that the consequences of overqualification might vary across individuals depending on how they view their employment situations, with overqualification sometimes leading to positive outcomes (Erdogan, Bauer, Peiró, & Truxillo, 2011; Liu & Wang, 2012; Thompson et al., 2013). Overqualified employees can have higher control over their work and thus a higher probability of making a difference in the work place (Erdogan et al., 2011). Some empirical evidence supports this argumentation. Overqualified employees have been...
shown to exhibit higher supervisor-rated performance (Fine, 2007; Fine & Nevo, 2008) and task performance (Erdogan & Bauer, 2009; Holtom, Lee, & Tidd, 2002). Higher in-role performance may be largely attributed to the higher competence of overqualified employees, compared with others. However, we still know very little about how employees’ different views of their overqualification influence and lead to possible positive outcomes (Thompson et al., 2013).

The objective of this study was to investigate the bright side of overqualification, in addition to its underlying mechanism and boundary condition. A perception of overqualification implies a discrepancy in perceived qualifications and job requirements. However, employees with this perception may view the discrepancy from two different angles. They may consider it as the underutilization of their abilities and be depressed because the job tasks are routine and not challenging. In contrast, they may focus on their surplus job capacity and have a positive view of their job competence and efficacy. Previous studies have emphasized the underutilization perspective. In response to the call of some scholars (Erdogan et al., 2011; Thompson et al., 2013), we focus on the flip side of the coin and investigate employees’ positive perspective of overqualification, which may increase their felt competence in accomplishing a wider range of work activities beyond their job requirements, such as proactive behavior. Proactive behavior is the anticipatory and change-oriented behavior self-initiated by employees. Erdogan et al. (2011) suggested that overqualified employees have greater opportunities to expand their job scope and thus react proactively to existing systems. Maynard (2011) also posited that overqualified individuals may take proactive steps to change their work situations. Drawing on these insights and the self-regulatory perspective, we argue that employees who perceive themselves as overqualified devote more time and effort to engaging in proactive behavior through a heightened role-breath self-efficacy (RBSE). RBSE is employees’ self-efficacy in conducting a broader range of work activities beyond job requirement.

We also consider the effects of individual differences in goal orientations on how employees view and react to their overqualification. Maynard (2011) suggested that more dispositional variables should be considered in studying overqualification, as individual differences may play a crucial role in affecting employees’ feelings about and responses to overqualification. We postulate that employees’ goal orientations moderate the relationship between their perception of overqualification and RBSE and the relationship between RBSE and proactive behavior. A high performance goal orientation (PGO) directs individuals’ attention to their surplus capacity when they feel overqualified. In contrast, employees with a strong learning goal orientation (LGO) view their overqualification less favorably. Our empirical results suggest that PGO strengthens the positive relationship between perceived overqualification and RBSE and the link between RBSE and proactive behavior, whereas LGO impedes the positive effect of perceived overqualification on RBSE.

This study makes several contributions to the literature. First, it provides a new perspective from which to explore the potentially positive side of overqualification. Drawing on the self-regulatory perspective, we demonstrate the cognitive-motivational process through which overqualified employees may perform proactively. Second, we identify employees’ goal orientations as moderators of their reactions to perceived overqualification. Our results show that overqualified employees with a high performance orientation view their overqualification more positively and engage in more proactive behavior, whereas those who have a high learning orientation may not favor their perceived overqualification. Third, we focus on an important but relatively under-researched aspect of job performance—proactive behavior—as the outcome of overqualification. By integrating the literature on overqualification and that on proactive behavior, we identify new antecedents of employees’ proactive behavior. Finally, we conducted the present studies in China. The majority of the research on overqualification has been conducted in Western countries. Overqualification, however, may be even more widespread in developing countries (Erdogan & Bauer, 2009; Gorg & Strobl, 2003). This study draws attention to the issue of overqualification in Asian countries.

Theory and Hypotheses

Overqualification denotes a situation in which employees have more education, skills, work experience, and abilities (KSAs) than a job requires (Erdogan et al., 2011; Maynard et al., 2006). Perceived overqualification refers to
employees’ awareness that to what extent there is such a directional mismatch between their qualifications and job requirements (Erdogan & Bauer, 2009; Fine & Nevo, 2008; Liu & Wang, 2012). Starting from its inception, researchers have adopted different approaches to conceptualizing overqualification. First, there are distinctions between objective and perceived overqualification. Objective overqualification is usually measured by comparing employees’ education or a variety of skills with those stated in the job description/specification. Perceived overqualification refers to employees’ subjective feelings of being underutilized. While objective overqualification may seem to be a more accurate representation of overqualification, it fails to account for the fact that people with the same qualifications working in comparable positions often experience diverse levels of perceived overqualification (Erdogan et al., 2011; Luksyte et al., 2011). A perception of overqualification may not only derive from the objective employment situation but also be determined by other factors such as individual personality and comparison with peers (e.g., Buunk, Zurriaga, Gonzalez-Roma, & Subirats, 2003; Fine, 2007). Because it is the individuals’ perceptions of their employment situation that affect their behavior, most studies operationalize overqualification as employees’ perceptions (see Maltarich, Reilly, & Nyberg, 2011, for a review). Since we focus on the cognitive-regulatory mechanisms of how overqualification affects employees’ judgments and reactions, we conceptualize our focal construct as perceived overqualification. Second, researchers have used different theoretical perspectives, such as person–job (P–J) fit/misfit, relative deprivation, equity theory, and human capital theory (see McKee-Ryan & Harvey, 2011, for a review) to study perceived overqualification. These perspectives, however, all assume that perceived overqualification is undesirable (e.g., Erdogan & Bauer, 2009; Luksyte, 2011; Maynard et al., 2006). We take a slightly different view and argue that overqualification only represents individuals’ perception of a discrepancy that they have “more education, training, or experience than a job calls for” (Merriam-Webster Inc., 2004). While studies have generally focused on the negative side of this discrepancy, it is also possible that overqualified employees may appreciate their surplus KSAs and react to this discrepancy in a positive way. In the following sections, we delineate a moderated mediation model of the positive effect of perceived overqualification from a self-regulatory perspective.

A self-regulatory perspective addresses the purposive process through which individuals regulate their cognitions, emotions, and behavioral effort to manage their discrepancies and attain their personal goals (Carver & Scheier, 2001; Zimmerman, 2000). We argue that when individuals perceive they are overqualified and view the discrepancy positively (e.g., as a surplus of KSAs), their self-efficacy increases. Self-efficacy is a key self-regulatory variable defined as individuals’ beliefs in their abilities to succeed in a certain domain (Bandura, 1986; Vancouver, 2000). According to social cognitive theory of self-regulation (Bandura, 1986), we argue that RBSE, the self-belief that one can carry out a broader set of work tasks beyond job requirements, translates perceived overqualification into proactivity at work. In other words, RBSE mediates the relationship between perceived overqualification and proactivity at work.

Researchers have long argued that the self-regulatory processes of some individuals are effective while those of others are not, such that the effectiveness of self-regulation is contingent on individuals’ goals (e.g., Latham & Locke, 1991). Dweck and Leggett (1988) provided a framework of goal orientations to depict how individuals’ general goal preferences may affect the effectiveness of self-regulation. Drawing on the literature on goal orientation, we posit that PGO and LGO moderate the effectiveness of RBSE in translating perceived overqualification into proactivity at work. We delineate our theoretical framework below.

Perceived overqualification and RBSE

Drawing on social cognitive theory of self-regulation and especially the conceptualization of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1986; Gist & Mitchell, 1992), we propose that the perception of overqualification prompts RBSE. RBSE denotes employees’ feelings of being capable and competent to carry out a broader range of work tasks beyond the prescribed job requirements (Parker, 1998). In accord with other types of self-efficacy, RBSE implies a psychological state resulting from a positive evaluation of one’s competence. However, RBSE differs from specific types of self-efficacy in that it captures one’s judgment of one’s capabilities in accomplishing a variety of work activities. Using
salespersons as an example—those with high RBSE may feel competent to suggest to management on how to improve the quality of their products and better satisfy customer needs, which is beyond their usual job requirements of serving customers and selling products. Those with relatively low RBSE may not have such confidence.

Classical theorization on self-efficacy suggests that three types of assessments are involved in its formation (Gist & Mitchell, 1992). The first is an analysis of task requirements, for example, its complexity and controllability. The second is an assessment of the availability of resources and constraints for performing tasks. The third is individuals’ attribution of why a particular performance level occurred. These three types of assessments are all relevant to the formation of higher RBSE among employees who perceive themselves as overqualified. First, while analyzing task requirements, employees who consider themselves overqualified for their jobs may find their tasks rather simple and the prescribed requirements easy to fulfill. Individuals, however, are prone to actualizing themselves and exploiting their talents and potential within their jobs (Maslow, 1954; Porter, 1961, 1962). Thus, overqualified employees might look for a broader set of work tasks and evaluate the feasibility of these tasks based on surplus KSAs. This would lead to a higher evaluation of their RBSE. Second, those who perceive they are overqualified may feel that they have more resources (e.g., skill level and job controls) than constraints (e.g., job demands and work overload distractions) to perform extended roles when assessing their personal resources and constraints for performing work tasks. Finally, employees who feel they are more than qualified are likely to have better mastery of performing tasks beyond their job requirements or responsibilities and thus might receive more recognition and encouragement from others (Maltarich et al., 2011). Those who perceive themselves to be overqualified are more likely to attribute such positive experiences to their competence than to internal factors. These self-relevant informational cues are integrated to cultivate a higher RBSE (Bandura, 1988; Gist & Mitchell, 1992). In summary, employees who perceive they have a surplus of KSAs are more likely to engage in a broader range of tasks and feel competent in carrying them out. Thus, we hypothesize the following.

**Hypothesis 1:** Perceived overqualification is positively related to RBSE.

**Perceived overqualification and proactive behavior**

As a result of the heightened RBSE, we argue that overqualified employees may take more self-initiative and anticipatory actions to make a difference in their jobs, that is, engage in more proactive behavior. Proactive behavior is defined as the self-starting and future-focused actions that employees take to change and improve themselves or their work environments (Grant & Ashford, 2008; Griffin, Neal, & Parker, 2007). Examples of proactive behavior include taking charge, making suggestions, feedback seeking, and networking building (e.g., Crant, 2000; Grant & Ashford, 2008; Parker & Collins, 2010). Such behavior is an active performance component as individuals go beyond assigned tasks, develop their own goals, and adopt an anticipatory perspective to make changes (Frese & Fay, 2001). Employee proactivity is critical in today’s complex and uncertain work environments, as it allows individuals to master situations in advance and make a difference in their own initiatives (Griffin et al., 2007). Drawing on social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986) and the theoretical framework of proactivity (Aspinwall & Taylor, 1997; Parker, Bindl, & Strauss, 2010) under a self-regulatory perspective, we argue that perceived overqualification is likely to prompt proactive behavior through RBSE for two major reasons explained below.

First, the overqualified employees with higher RBSE may engage in more proactivity to cope with the discrepancy of overqualification. Researchers have long argued that individuals engage in self-regulatory processes to manage discrepancies and fulfill personal goals (e.g., Carver & Scheier, 2001; Zimmerman, 2000). In addition to sensing current discrepancies, people can also anticipate future discrepancies (Aspinwall & Taylor, 1997; Fay & Sonnentag, 2002), which may stimulate them to take actions to actively manage their discrepancies and promote changes. Perceived overqualification indicates a discrepancy that calls for change. Without coping and taking effective actions, it may deteriorate into a perception of being deprived by the employer (Erdogan & Bauer, 2009). If the employees can engage in proactive behavior and increase task variety and complexity to match their qualifications, doing so can
reduce this discrepancy. Engaging in proactive behavior is a coping mechanism that overqualified employees can use to overcome their psychological dissonance. Consistent with this “proactivity as coping” argument, Feldman (2011) suggested that individuals who view their overqualification as suboptimal might engage in more organizational citizenship behavior to change their current situations. Apart from a desire to enact change among employees who feel themselves to be more than qualified, the overqualified ones with higher RBSE are likely to be more effective in performing such coping mechanisms and taking corresponding actions. They have more psychological resources to reduce the discrepancy between desired and actual work conditions. Thus, they are more likely to overcome the possible negative feelings accompanying the discrepancy. Hence, we argue that overqualified employees with higher RBSE may exhibit more proactivity in their jobs. In support of our notion, Fay and Sonnentag (2002) found that stressors such as situational constraints and time pressure had a positive effect on personal initiative in a longitudinal field study. Ohly and Fritz (2010) also showed that being proactive at work is a way of coping with high job demands and undesirable work situations.

Second, overqualified employees with higher RBSE are more likely to engage in proactive goal setting and striving. Proactivity is a goal-driven process in which individuals engage in deliberate assessment of the likely outcomes of their proactive actions (Morrison & Phelps, 1999; Parker, Williams, & Turner, 2006). Employees typically experience a high degree of risk from engaging in proactive behavior. Using one’s personal initiative to improve work methods, for example, can often be met by resistance from others and the depreciation of the organization. Moreover, proactive behavior pulls personal time and effort from required tasks (Fuller, Marler, & Hester, 2012; Griffin et al., 2007). Individuals must feel confident that they can both initiate proactive behavior and deal with its consequences before they act. RBSE guarantees this type of “can do” proactive motivation (Parker et al., 2010; Parker et al., 2006). According to social cognition theory of self-regulation, a belief that one can be successful in doing something, or high self-efficacy, is especially important in proactive goal generation and pursuit. Individuals who feel capable of performing particular tasks tend to set more challenging goals (Bandura, 1991; Locke & Latham, 1990), exercise more effective and efficient task strategies (Wood, George-Falvy, & Debowsky, 2001), and persist in them (Lent, Brown, & Larkin, 1987). We argue that high self-efficacy in carrying out a broader range of work roles and tasks—RBSE—can promote the goal setting and striving of proactivity. Supportive evidence in the literature has shown that RBSE can predict employees’ active problem solving and idea implementation (Parker et al., 2006), personal initiative (Ohly & Fritz, 2007), and task proactivity (Griffin et al., 2007). Based on the above arguments, we hypothesize the following.

**Hypothesis 2**: Perceived overqualification has an indirect effect on proactive behavior through RBSE, in that perceived overqualification has a positive relationship with RBSE and RBSE has a positive relationship with proactive behavior.

**The moderating role of goal orientations**

Consistent with the focus on goals under a self-regulatory perspective, we further explore individual differences in goal orientations as a boundary condition of the proposed relationship among perceived overqualification, RBSE, and proactive behavior. Goal orientation denotes one’s general goal preferences and the directions of information seeking and processing in achievement situations (Deshon & Gillespie, 2005; Dweck & Leggett, 1988). Two types of goal orientations are distinguished in the literature. PGO reflects one’s desire to demonstrate competence and receive more positive or less negative judgments from others. LGO is characterized by a focus on learning new things and improving one’s abilities. Research has indicated that PGO and LGO are distinct dispositions in that individuals may hold various combinations of high and low levels of each goal orientation (e.g., Button, Mathieu, & Zajac, 1996; Janssen & Van Yperen, 2004).

According to the literature on goal orientation, individual differences in goal orientations are directly relevant to one’s evaluation of his or her competence, for example, RBSE. The effectiveness of the competence-related self-
regulation can be differentiated according to how competence is defined and evaluated among individuals with different focal goals (Elliot & McGregor, 2001). On the other hand, researchers have theorized that one’s decision to engage in proactivity is a function of self-confidence and goals/intentions (Locke, 1991; Crant, 2000). Whereas RBSE captures perceived competence, or the “can do” motivation, individuals also need goals, or the “desire to do” (e.g., desire to show competence and impress others), to engage in proactive behavior (Parker et al., 2010). In the subsequent sections, we propose that goal orientations may moderate both the relationship between perceived overqualification and RBSE (the first stage of the proposed indirect effect) and the link between RBSE and proactive behavior (the second stage of the proposed indirect effect).

Moderations at the first stage of the indirect effect
Research on goal orientations has indicated that individuals with different levels of PGO and LGO address the same situation with different concerns, seek different information, and thereby interpret and respond differently (see Deshon & Gillespie, 2005, for a review). Individuals interpret information in a given situation based on their focal concerns. People with high PGO are largely concerned with showing their ability and demonstrating good performance while those with high LGO pay more attention to whether they can constantly learn and grow. In terms of the competence-related self-regulation, people with different goal orientation profiles view and evaluate competence differently (Dweck & Leggett, 1988). People with high PGO evaluate competence mainly based on comparative performance, whereas those high on LGO evaluate competence largely based on whether they have acquired understanding and improved abilities (Elliot & McGregor, 2001). We posit that in the situation of perceived overqualification, individuals have different evaluations of their over-competence in carrying out a broader variety of work tasks—RBSE—depending on their goal orientations. Specifically, while overqualification may on average have a positive relationship with RBSE, this positive relationship is promoted by PGO and demoted by LGO.

Employees with high PGO approach tasks with a focus on performing well and demonstrating abilities. Given this focus, personal abilities that align with performance are rather salient informational cues for evaluating RBSE. For overqualified employees with high PGO, the positive side of the perceived discrepancy, that is, the surplus capacity, is highlighted. An emphasis on demonstrating high abilities renders high-PGO individuals who perceive themselves as overqualified to be highly self-confident in conducting a wide variety of tasks. PGO amplifies the positive effect of perceived overqualification on RBSE. In support of our contention, it has been suggested that low work requirements or demands can be linked to a high level of personal control among performance-oriented individuals, as they prefer to feel good about their abilities (Dweck, 1999; Van Yperen & Janssen, 2002).

In contrast, employees high on LGO desire to learn new things and develop abilities on the job. For individuals with a strong LGO, overqualification may be interpreted as fewer opportunities to perform challenging tasks and make improvements to a large extent. Accordingly, they are less likely to favor their overqualification in terms of a reflection of high competence and capability. Thus, the positive effect of overqualification on RBSE may diminish for high-LGO individuals. In contrast, perceived overqualification should exhibit a stronger positive effect on RBSE for individuals with low LGO, as they do not need to scan and evaluate whether they can learn new things from their jobs. They are already confident in their ability to be proactive when they perceive themselves as overqualified. As the desire for opportunities to perform challenging tasks is much lower, the perception and evaluation of their qualification and capacity directly contribute to whether they feel able to do much beyond what is required, as people with low LGO.

In summary, we propose the following moderating effects of PGO and LGO.

Hypothesis 3a: PGO moderates the positive relationship between perceived overqualification and RBSE, such that it is stronger when PGO is higher.

Hypothesis 3b: LGO moderates the positive relationship between perceived overqualification and RBSE, such that it is stronger when LGO is lower.
Moderations at the second stage of the indirect effect
Drawing on the theoretical foundation of self-regulation and proactivity (e.g., Crant, 2000; Parker et al., 2010), we further posit that PGO and LGO also moderate the relationship between RBSE and proactive behavior, that is, the second stage of the proposed indirect effect. Parker et al. (2010) identified “can do” motivation and “reason to do” motivation as the two key motivational states necessary for individuals to engage in proactive behavior in their conceptual framework of proactive motivation. A core tenet of the conceptualization is that individuals may have a high “can do” motivation, that is, positive expectations about successfully conducting certain proactive behavior but not engage in them because they find no compelling reason to do so, that is, a low “reason to do” motivation. Under this tenet, RBSE, which maps onto “can do” proactive motivation, can be a necessary but insufficient condition to prompt proactive behavior. Some reasons and meanings for engaging in proactive behavior would also be needed to put it into action. In support of this argument, Fuller et al. (2012) operationalized “reason to do” proactive motivation as felt responsibility of constructive change and found that it interacts with RBSE to predict taking-charge behavior. We propose that PGO and LGO map onto the “reason to do” motivation and are thus likely to interact with RBSE to predict proactive behavior.

Individuals with a strong PGO desire to gain favorable evaluations and avoid negative judgments of their competence. While RBSE indicates perceived competence of carrying out a broader range of tasks in a more proactive sense, PGO captures a desire to show competence or hide incompetence in front of others. Those with high PGO attach positive valence to proactive behavior if they have high RBSE, because they believe they can achieve it. In contrast, they attach negative valence to proactive behavior when their RBSE is low, as they do not believe they can successfully accomplish it. Taking these arguments together, we expect PGO to amplify the relationship between RBSE and proactive behavior.

In contrast, individuals with high LGO have a strong motive to learn new things and develop their capabilities constantly. Among those who believe they are able to perform a variety of work tasks (high on RBSE), high-LGO employees are likely to want to do so because they favor the opportunities to improve themselves while carrying out the novel and challenging tasks. For example, high-LGO employees may desire to improve work procedures, solve long-term problems, and interact with different stakeholders of the organization to improve their mastery. We propose that LGO may work as a “reason to do” proactive motivation that moderates the relationship between RBSE, the “can do” motivation, and proactive behavior. Based on the above arguments, we hypothesize the following.

Hypothesis 4a: PGO moderates the positive relationship between RBSE and proactive behavior, such that the relationship is more positive when PGO is high than when it is low.

Hypothesis 4b: LGO moderates the positive relationship between RBSE and proactive behavior, such that the relationship is more positive when LGO is high than when it is low.

Moderated indirect effect
The above hypotheses on the moderating effects at both stages of the indirect effect further indicate a moderated mediation model in that the overall indirect effect of perceived overqualification on proactive behavior via RBSE is moderated by PGO and LGO. Specifically, high PGO, due to strengthening the positive relationship between perceived overqualification and RBSE and the positive link between RBSE and proactive behavior, amplifies the overall indirect effect. However, because LGO is proposed to weaken the positive relationship between perceived overqualification and RBSE but strengthen the positive effect of RBSE on proactive behavior, these countervailing moderating effects are likely to counteract each other. Therefore, we posit the following moderated mediation hypothesis with PGO as a moderator but do not propose such a hypothesis with respect to LGO.
Hypothesis 5: PGO moderates the indirect effect of perceived overqualification on proactive behavior through RBSE, such that the indirect effect is more positive when PGO is high than when it is low.

We tested the above hypotheses in two studies. In Study 1, we aimed to make inferences of the relationships between perceived overqualification, RBSE, and proactive behavior by using a cross-lagged model design. In Study 2, we tested the full theoretical model depicted in Figure 1.

Study 1

Sample and procedures

We collected the data from a large electro-acoustic products company in South China. The company produces and distributes electro-acoustic products such as hi-fi devices, multimedia and communication earphones, and Bluetooth products. The data were collected as a part of a large-scale research project, whose content is independent of this study. We invited all sales representatives of the company to participate in this study. They were responsible for marketing and selling the electro-acoustic products to buyers. Their duties included meeting potential buyers, price negotiations, and providing high-quality customer services. The organization had not specified clear qualification requirements for such sales jobs. Thus, this sample was very appropriate for studying subjective overqualification, as the sales representatives had similar job content but diverse educational backgrounds and working experiences.

The survey data were collected through an online survey system at three time points, separated by two weeks. At Time 1, the sales representatives were asked to report their perceived overqualification, RBSE, and demographic information. Two weeks later (Time 2), they were asked to rate their perceived overqualification and RBSE again, using the same measures as those used at Time 1. Two weeks after Time 2 (Time 3), the immediate supervisors were asked to rate the proactive behavior of these sales representatives according to their performance in the previous month. Surveys were distributed to all 434 sales representatives via the online survey system. Three hundred and seventy-two representatives provided complete data at Time 1, with a response rate of 85.71 percent. Three hundred forty-one of the 372 sales representatives responded to the Time 2 surveys, with a response rate of 91.67 percent. At Time 3, we received supervisory ratings of the proactive behavior of the sales representatives. A souvenir worth about $US15 was given to each participant who finished all the surveys.

Theoretical Model

![Theoretical Model Diagram](image-url)
We only included matched and complete questionnaires in all three waves of the data collection in our analysis. The final sample consisted of 323 sales representatives. One hundred and sixty-four (50.8 percent) were female. Their mean age was 25.63 years (SD=4.52), and their average organizational tenure was 4.44 years (SD=1.51). Ten (3.1 percent) of these sales representatives had a primary school degree, 53 (16.41 percent) had a high school degree, 97 (30.03 percent) had an associate degree, 155 (47.99 percent) had a bachelor’s degree, and the remaining 8 (2.48 percent) had a master’s degree or above.

**Measures**

All scales were translated and back-translated from English to Chinese, using Brislin’s (1986) recommended procedure. All of the items were measured by 7-point Likert scales anchored from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

**Perceived overqualification**

We used the four-item measure of perceived overqualification developed by Johnson and Johnson (1996). A sample item was “My formal education overqualifies me for my present job”. Cronbach’s alpha was .76 for Time 1 measures and .75 for Time 2 measures.

**Role-breadth self-efficacy**

Role-breadth self-efficacy was assessed by the 10-item scale developed by Parker (1998). A sample item was “I feel confident in designing new procedures for my work area.” Cronbach’s alphas for Times 1 and 2 were .75 and .89, respectively.

**Proactive behavior**

Proactive behavior was measured by Belschak and Hartog’s (2010) three-item scale of pro-organizational proactive behavior. A sample item was “At work, this subordinate takes initiatives to suggest ideas for solutions for organization problems” (α = .84).

**Control variables**

Following previous research on proactivity at work (e.g., Hartog & Belschak, 2007; Parker et al., 2006), we controlled for employee gender, age, and organization tenure to avoid possible confounding effects. We further controlled for education level to have a more robust test for the specific effect of perceived overqualification (Peiró, Agut, & Grau, 2010). Employees’ trait negative affect was controlled to avoid the systematic influences of trait affectivity as mood and affect were found to affect individual proactivity (Bindl, Parker, Totterdell, & Hagger-Johnson, 2012). Negative trait affect was assessed using Watson, Clark, and Tellegen’s (1988) scale (α = .88).

**Preliminary analysis**

We began by examining the factor structure of self-rated perceived overqualification and RBSE measured at the two time phases. For the data collected in Time 1, a two-factor structure where perceived overqualification items loaded on one factor and RBSE items loaded on another factor fitted the data well ($\chi^2(76) = 103.36; CFI = 0.97; RMSEA = 0.03; SRMR = 0.04$). The alternative model where all items loaded on one single factor had a significantly poorer fit ($\Delta \chi^2(1) = 262.98, p < .01$). The same pattern was observed for Time 2 measures. The hypothesized two-factor structure had a satisfactory fit ($\chi^2(76) = 162.04; CFI = 0.95; RMSEA = 0.06; SRMR = 0.05$), whereas a one-factor structure had poorer fit ($\Delta \chi^2(1) = 232.15, p < .01$). Based on the results of the confirmatory factor analyses (CFAs), we concluded that the perceived overqualification and RBSE items were measuring distinct constructs.
We also conducted multi-group CFAs to examine the measurement equivalence of both perceived overqualification and RBSE across the two time points following Vandenberg and Lance’s (2000) recommendations. We first conducted a multi-group CFA in which the loadings among items of perceived overqualification were constrained to be identical across Times 1 and 2. This model provided a good fit to the data, $\chi^2(7) = 25.12, p < .01; CFI = 0.97; SRMR = 0.06$, which suggested that perceived overqualification measures across the two periods achieved configural invariance. The multi-group CFA for RBSE also showed that the configural invariance model fit the data well, $\chi^2(79) = 199.90, p < .01; CFI = 0.93; SRMR = 0.06$. Overall, the results of multi-group CFAs indicated that the factorial structure and factor loadings of perceived overqualification and RBSE stayed the same across two time points, and it was appropriate to examine the relations among variables measured at different time points.

Analytic strategy

We collected the data of sales representatives’ perceived overqualification and RBSE in both Times 1 and 2 and used a cross-lagged panel data design (Cole & Maxwell, 2003; Finkel, 1995; Selig & Preacher, 2009) to investigate the relationship between perceived overqualification and RBSE. Proactive behavior, measured in Time 3, was set as the outcome of perceived overqualification and RBSE in Time 2. Figure 2 depicts the path analysis model. Because both overqualification and RBSE deal with employee perceptions of personal abilities and competence, it may be somewhat difficult to make clear inferences whether a high perceived overqualification leads to higher RBSE, or the other way around. The cross-lagged model had the advantage of testing both directions of causality simultaneously while controlling for the effects of the same variables at a previous time. Specifically, when simultaneously estimating the effects of Time 1 perceived overqualification on Time 2 RBSE and Time 1 RBSE on Time 2 perceived overqualification, the effects of Time 1 RBSE and perceived overqualification on their Time 2 counterparts were also controlled. We used MPLUS 7.2 software to analyze the cross-lagged data and test our hypotheses.

Results and discussion

Means, standard deviations, and correlations for the key variables are shown in Table 1. Figure 2 depicts the results of the overall path analysis. Perceived overqualification had a significant effect on RBSE ($\beta = .21, p < .01$), and the effect of RBSE on perceived overqualification was also significant ($\beta = .18, p < .01$). After controlling for possible reverse causation, perceived overqualification had a significant effect on

![Figure 2. Study 1: results of structural equation modeling.](image-url)
Thus, Hypothesis 1 was supported. Given the results of the path analysis, we estimated the indirect effect of perceived overqualification on proactive behavior through RBSE by testing the product of these two parameters \( \text{indirect effect} = .12, p < .01 \). We estimated the confidence interval of this indirect effect statistic using the bootstrapping method in the MPLUS program. With 2000 bootstrapping replications, the results showed that there was a significantly positive indirect relationship between perceived overqualification and proactive behavior via RBSE (the 95% CI was \([0.058, 0.186]\)). Thus, Hypothesis 2 was supported. In summary, these results provide support for our proposed indirect effect of perceived overqualification on proactive behavior through RBSE.

**Study 2**

In Study 2, we tested our theoretical model on the hypothesized indirect relationship with a different sample and the proposed moderating effects of PGO and LGO. We also explored the nature of proactive behavior by examining its different types: pro-self proactive behavior, which focuses on enhancing personal or career goals; pro-other proactive behavior, which is directed at goals related to the work group or colleagues; and pro-organizational proactive behavior, which focuses on having constructive effects on the organization (Belschak & Den Hartog, 2010; Grant & Ashford, 2008).

**Sample and procedures**

In Study 2, we collected data from teachers in six private high schools of an educational institute in South China. All six schools were comparable in terms of school size, social reputation, and number of teachers. In these schools, the teachers conducted classes independently and were responsible for student administrative affairs. Their supervisors had the authority and responsibility to inspect teachers’ performance and obtain feedback from different parties, such as students and their parents. We chose this sample for the following reasons. First, the Chinese education system only requires high school teachers to have a two-year or three-year community college education, yet many of the teachers in these schools have four-year university degrees and substantial experience. In our sample, around...
60 percent of the teachers had community college certificates, and the other 40 percent had a university degree or higher. The sample consisted of many teachers who were objectively overqualified. Second, the director of the educational institute governing these private schools invited us to conduct our study. He said that their schools hired many “overqualified” teachers, and he wanted to know whether it was good for the schools. Third, the teachers had plenty of room to be proactive at work. High school teachers have high autonomy and are required to constantly introduce classroom innovations.

With the help of the institute’s director and school principals, we invited all of the teachers in these six schools to participate in our study. With the help of the schools’ principals, 426 teachers and 86 supervisors agreed to fill out our surveys. The teachers self-reported their perceptions of overqualification, RBSE, goal orientations, and the controls while supervisors rated the teachers’ three types of proactive behavior. The data were collected via the same online survey system as Study 1 in two time phases with an interval of two weeks. In Time 1, we asked the teachers to report perceived overqualification, goal orientations, and control variables. We obtained data from 387 teachers, with a response rate of 90.85 percent for Time 1 survey. In Time 2, we only send surveys to Time 1 respondents. The respondents were asked to rate their RBSE, and the supervisors were asked to evaluate the respondents’ pro-self, pro-other, and pro-organizational proactive behavior. We then obtained data from 327 teachers and 83 supervisors, with a response rate of 84.50 percent for teachers and 96.5 percent for supervisors. A souvenir valued at about $US10 was given to each participant.

We only included matched and completed data in the final sample. Three hundred and two matched questionnaires were received from 302 teachers and 83 supervisors. Each supervisor rated two to six teachers. Among the teachers, 81 were men, and 221 were women. The mean age was 29 years (SD = 7.19), and the average organization tenure was 4.91 years (SD = 1.34). One hundred seventy-seven out of the 302 teachers had community college certificates; 117 had a university degree or above; and the other eight held a senior high school degree.

Measures

All of the surveys were translated and back-translated from English to Chinese, using Brislin’s (1986) recommended procedure. All of the scales were measured by 7-point Likert scales ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

Perceived overqualification

We used the nine-item measure of perceived overqualification developed by Maynard et al. (2006) in this study. An example item was “I have more abilities than I need in order to do my job.” Cronbach’s alpha for this scale was .84.

Goal orientations

Following previous research (e.g., Colquitt & Simmering, 1998; Phillips & Gully, 1997; Porter, Webb, & Gogus, 2010), we measured goal orientations using measures developed by Button et al. (1996). For PGO, a sample item was “I like to be fairly confident that I can successfully perform a task before I attempt it.” For LGO, a sample item was “I prefer to work on tasks that force me to learn new things.” Cronbach’s alphas for PGO and LGO were .84 and .90, respectively.

Role-breadth self-efficacy

Role-breadth self-efficacy was again assessed by the 10-item scale developed by Parker (1998). Its Cronbach’s alpha in this study was .90.

Proactive behavior

We used Belschak and Den Hartog’s (2010) scale to measure pro-self, pro-other, and pro-organizational proactive behavior. A sample item for pro-self proactive behavior was “At work, this subordinate takes initiatives to realize
his/her personal goals at work.” A sample item for pro-other proactive behavior was “This subordinate takes initiatives to take over colleagues’ tasks when needed even though s/he is not obliged to.” A sample item for pro-organizational proactive behavior was “At work, this subordinate takes initiatives to suggest ideas for solutions to organization problems.” Cronbach’s alphas for these three scales were .91, .91, and .91, respectively.

Control variables
As in Study 1, we controlled for employee gender, age, organization tenure, education, and trait negative affect in Study 2 to avoid possible confounding effects. Trait negative affect was assessed using the Watson et al. (1988) scale (α = .88).

Preliminary analysis
To gather insights into the variance of perceived overqualification, our focal variable, in this sample, we took education as an indicator of objective overqualification and conducted a one-way analysis of variance of perceived overqualification with respect to education. Teachers who held an educational degree higher than the job requirements were compared with those whose degrees were just what was required by the job. We found that the perception of the overqualification of the former subgroup (M = 4.79) was significantly higher than that of the latter subgroup (M = 4.45) (F = 10.55, p < .01). The results indicated that the perceptions of overqualification of the participants in our sample were partially due to their educational backgrounds. However, other factors, such as working experiences, may also play a role in affecting teachers’ perceptions of overqualification.

Given that perceived overqualification, RBSE, PGO, and LGO were all self-rated by the teachers, a series of CFAs were conducted to examine whether employees’ ratings on their self-report measures captured distinctive constructs. For all of CFAs, we created three parcels of items for each scale by randomly grouping items into three parcels per scale. The results of the CFAs showed a good fit for the hypothesized four-factor structure, χ²(48) = 76.43; CFI = 0.99; RMSEA = 0.04; SRMR = 0.03. All of the indicators loaded on their respective latent factors significantly. An alternative three-factor model was specified by combining perceived overqualification and RBSE as one factor. This three-factor model fit the data significantly worse than the original four-factor model, Δχ²(3) = 687.83 (p < .01). We also specified another three-factor model by combining PGO and LGO as one factor, and it also fit the data significantly worse than the original four-factor model, Δχ²(3) = 201.57 (p < .01). Based on the results of the CFAs, we concluded that the four scales were measuring distinct constructs.

Analytic strategy
In this study, proactive behavior ratings were nested within supervisors. We first tested for non-independence in the data by conducting a one-way analysis of variance on the supervisor ratings of proactive behavior (Bliese, 2000). The results indicated that there was significant between-group variances for pro-self proactive behavior (F = 2.74, p < .01), pro-other proactive behavior (F = 7.52, p < .01), and pro-organizational proactive behavior (F = 6.67, p < .01). The intraclass correlation coefficients (ICC(1)) were .32 for pro-self proactive behavior, .63 for pro-other proactive behavior, and .58 for pro-organizational proactive behavior. The results suggested that the data in this study had a clear nested structure. Thus, we used the multilevel module of the Mplus 7.2 software (Muthén & Muthén, 2012) for the overall model estimation, which allowed us to control for group-level variance and non-independence. In our analysis, perceived overqualification, goal orientations, RBSE, the control variables, and the two interactions between perceived overqualification and goal orientations were our Level 1 variables. The intercept of supervisor-rated pro-self, pro-other, and pro-organizational proactive behavior was allowed to vary randomly across groups at Level 2. Because we did not intend to estimate any random effect except the y-intercept, we grand-mean-centered all of our Level 1 variables (Hofmann & Gavin, 1998).
We first tested our hypothesized indirect effect, specifying all three types of proactive behavior—pro-self, pro-other, and pro-organizational—as dependent variables in the path analysis model. To test the indirect effect in this study with a multilevel data structure, we first calculated the effect size of the indirect effect as the product term of the path coefficients of RBSE on perceived overqualification and proactive behavior on RBSE, estimated in the multilevel path analysis. Then we tested the statistical significance of the indirect effect using the Monte Carlo method of parametric bootstrapping recommended by Preacher, Zyphur, and Zhang (2010).

We then ran a dual-stage moderated mediation model with PGO and LGO as moderators of the relationships of both perceived overqualification–RBSE and RBSE–proactive behavior and with pro-organizational proactive behavior and pro-other proactive behavior (Edwards & Lambert, 2007; Liu, Zhang, & Wang, 2012). Because significant relationships with perceived overqualification and RBSE were not revealed, pro-self proactive behavior was not included in this moderated mediation model testing out of parsimony. Running analyses with and without pro-self proactive behavior yielded identical findings. To test the significance of our proposed moderated indirect effect with multilevel data, we used the approach suggested by Bauer, Preacher, and Gil (2006). We controlled for the Level 2 variance and focused on all of the variables at Level 1 to assess the extent to which our proposed indirect effect was conditional on different levels of PGO and LGO.

Results and discussion

Table 2 presents the means, standard deviations, and correlations for all of the variables. However, the simple correlations should be interpreted cautiously because they do not account for the nesting effect regarding the relationships involving supervisor-related pro-self, pro-other, and pro-organizational proactive behavior. Multilevel modeling is needed to reveal the true magnitude of the relationships.

Following the multilevel modeling method discussed before, we first used Mplus 7.2 to run a path analysis of a simple indirect effect model of perceived overqualification on pro-self proactive behavior, pro-other proactive behavior, and pro-organizational proactive behavior through RBSE as an intervening variable, after accounting for the control

<table>
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<th>Variables</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>1</th>
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<th>4</th>
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<th>10</th>
<th>11</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Gendera</td>
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<td>2. Age</td>
<td>29.00</td>
<td>7.19</td>
<td>−.33</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Educationb</td>
<td>3.37</td>
<td>0.55</td>
<td>−.07</td>
<td>−.15</td>
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<td>4. Organization tenure</td>
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<td>1.34</td>
<td>−.21</td>
<td>.41</td>
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<td>5. Negative affectivity</td>
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<td>0.75</td>
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<td>.01</td>
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<td>6. Perceived overqualification</td>
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<td>−.00</td>
<td>.16</td>
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<td>7. Performance goal orientation</td>
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<td>.09</td>
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<td>8. Learning goal orientation</td>
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<td>.56</td>
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<td>9. RBSE</td>
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<td>−.12</td>
<td>−.09</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>−.16</td>
<td>.22</td>
<td>.36</td>
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<tr>
<td>10. Pro-self PB</td>
<td>4.65</td>
<td>1.18</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>−.07</td>
<td>−.12</td>
<td>−.03</td>
<td>−.13</td>
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<td>.07</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.91</td>
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<tr>
<td>11. Pro-other PB</td>
<td>4.68</td>
<td>1.25</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>−.06</td>
<td>−.11</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>−.07</td>
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<td>.15</td>
<td>.53</td>
<td>.91</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Pro-organizational PB</td>
<td>4.52</td>
<td>1.30</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>−.03</td>
<td>−.13</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>−.17</td>
<td>−.04</td>
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<td>.11</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>.53</td>
<td>.61</td>
<td>.91</td>
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</table>

Note: N = 302; values on the diagonal in parentheses are Cronbach’s alpha coefficients. A correlation ≥|12| is significant at the p < .05 level; a correlation ≥|15| is significant at the p < .01 level.

RBSE, role-breadth self-efficacy; PB, proactive behavior.

[a] 1 = male; 2 = female.
[b] Dummy coded: 1 for primary school, 2 for high school, 3 for community college certificate degree, 4 for bachelor degree, and 5 for master degree or above.

variables. The results of the path analysis showed that perceived overqualification was positively related to RBSE ($\gamma = .22, p < .01$). Thus, Hypothesis 1 was supported again in this study. RBSE was shown to be positively related to pro-organizational proactive behavior ($\gamma = .12, p < .05$) and pro-other proactive behavior ($\gamma = .16, p < .05$), but not significantly related to pro-self proactive behavior ($\gamma = .02$, not significant (n.s.)) after controlling for the control variables and random supervisor-level variance. The indirect effect of perceived overqualification on pro-organizational proactive behavior through RBSE was .03, with a 95% Monte Carlo CI [0.004, 0.058]. The indirect relationship between perceived overqualification, RBSE, and pro-other proactive behavior was .04, with a 95% Monte Carlo CI [0.005, 0.073]. The indirect effect of perceived overqualification on pro-self proactive behavior was not significant (indirect effect = .01, n.s.). The results implied that through RBSE, perceived overqualification had a positive relationship with pro-organizational proactive behavior and pro-other proactive behavior, but not with pro-self proactive behavior.

We then tested the moderating effects of PGO and LGO, which are summarized in Figure 3.

**Moderation of the first-stage indirect effect**

Hypotheses 3a and 3b state that PGO/LGO strengthens/weaken the positive relationship between perceived overqualification and RBSE. The results show that the interaction between perceived overqualification and PGO was significantly and positively related to RBSE ($\gamma = .14, p < .05$), and the interaction between perceived overqualification and LGO had a significant negative relationship with RBSE ($\gamma = -.17, p < .05$). We plotted the moderation effects of PGO and LGO, respectively, in Figure 4a and b, and conducted simple slope tests (Aiken & West, 1991). Figure 4a shows that perceived overqualification had a stronger positive relationship with RBSE when employees were high in PGO (simple slope = 0.26, $p < .01$) than when they were low in PGO (simple slope = 0.01, n.s.). In contrast, Figure 4b implied that employees’ perceived overqualification was more positively related to RBSE when LGO was low (simple slope = 0.29, $p < .01$) than when LGO was high (simple slope = −0.02, n.s.). Thus, Hypotheses 3a and 3b were supported.

**Moderation of the second-stage indirect effect**

Hypotheses 4a and 4b consider the second-stage moderations, which deal with the link between RBSE and proactive behavior. As Figure 3 shows, PGO significantly moderated both the relationship between RBSE and pro-organizational proactive behavior ($\gamma = .20, p < .05$) and the link between RBSE and pro-other proactive behavior ($\gamma = .17, p < .05$).
However, the interaction between RBSE and LGO was not significantly related to either pro-organizational proactive behavior ($\gamma = -0.09$, n.s.) or pro-other proactive behavior ($\gamma = -0.05$, n.s.). We generated Figure 5a and b to graphically illustrate the positive moderating effect of PGO on the link between RBSE and pro-organizational proactive behavior and pro-other proactive behavior. Figure 5a indicates that RBSE had a stronger positive relationship with pro-organizational proactive behavior when PGO was high (simple slope $= 0.32$, $p < .01$) than when it was low (simple slope $= -0.03$, n.s.). The pattern was the same for pro-other proactive behavior; that is, RBSE was more positively related to pro-other proactive behavior when PGO was high (simple slope $= 0.33$, $p < .01$) than when it was low (simple slope $= 0.03$, n.s.). Thus, Hypothesis 4a was supported, but Hypothesis 4b was not supported.

### Moderated indirect effect

Table 3 provides the results of Hypothesis 5, which referred to the moderating effect of PGO on the indirect effect of perceived overqualification on proactive behavior through RBSE. As Table 3 shows, the indirect effect
of perceived overqualification on pro-organizational proactive behavior was stronger when PGO was high (indirect effect when PGO was high = .08, p < .05; indirect effect when PGO was low = .00, n.s.). The difference between the indirect effects at high versus low levels of PGO was .08 with a 95% Monte Carlo CI of [0.021, 0.153]. Similarly, the indirect relationship of perceived overqualification and pro-other proactive behavior was stronger when PGO was high (indirect effect when PGO was high = .09, p < .05; indirect effect when PGO was low = .00, n.s.). The difference between the above indirect effects was .09 with a 95 CI of [0.023, 0.162]. Thus, Hypothesis 5 was supported. The employees’ perceptions of overqualification had a stronger positive relationship with pro-organizational and pro-other proactive behavior through RBSE when the overqualified employees had higher PGOs.

Although we did not develop hypotheses for the overall moderation of LGO on the indirect effect given the hypothesized opposite moderation pattern in Stages 1 and 2, we conducted a supplementary moderated path analysis to explore the pattern. Table 3 shows that perceived overqualification had a stronger positive effect on pro-organizational and pro-other proactive behavior through RBSE when the employees had lower LGOs.
Overall Discussion

In this study, we considered perceived overqualification from a new angle and investigated its possible positive outcomes. Drawing on a self-regulatory perspective, we posited that perceived overqualification may have a positive effect on employee proactive behavior through RBSE and that this indirect effect is contingent on individuals’ goal orientations. We conducted two studies to test our hypotheses. Based on a sample of 323 sales representatives, we found that perceived overqualification had a positive indirect effect on proactive behavior through a heightened RBSE after controlling for the reversed effect of RBSE on a perception of overqualification. With a sample of 302 teachers, we confirmed the positive indirect effect of perceived overqualification on two types of proactive behavior via RBSE. Through RBSE as a channeling mechanism, perceived overqualification positively affected pro-organizational and pro-other proactive behavior, but not pro-self proactive behavior. We further found that PGO amplified the abovementioned indirect effect because PGO strengthens both the relationship between perceived overqualification and RBSE and the link between RBSE and pro-organizational and pro-other proactive behavior. Meanwhile, LGO weakened this indirect effect because LGO interfered with the positive relationship between perceived overqualification and RBSE. We did not find LGO to have a moderating effect on the relationship between RBSE and proactive behavior.

Theoretical implications

The findings of this study have several noteworthy theoretical implications. First, in response to the call for an exploration of the bright side of employee overqualification and a separation of good and bad underemployment (Thompson et al., 2013), we show that perceived overqualification, a specific type of underemployment, can positively influence employee pro-organizational and pro-other proactive behavior through a heightened self-efficacy.
to initiatively carry out a broader range of work tasks. A large body of previous studies, nevertheless, has shown evidence of the negative outcomes of perceived overqualification, that is, lower job satisfaction and commitment, higher turnover intention, reduced well-being, and more deviant behavior (see Liu & Wang, 2012, for a review). These studies have generally assumed that overqualification breeds undesirable work conditions. Although perceived overqualification implies a discrepancy between one’s surplus ability and inadequate ability utilization, we argue that this discrepancy is not necessarily negative. Our results indicate that this discrepancy can also fuel employees to both feel good about their capabilities and do good to the organization. The results of this study imply that perceived overqualification can foster pro-organizational and pro-other proactive behavior, which substantially benefit organizations in transferring human capital into competitive advantages (Fuller et al., 2012).

In addition, by identifying goal orientations as moderators of the effect of perceived overqualification on proactive behavior through RBSE, our results emphasize that how one feels and reacts in the same overqualified work conditions depends on his or her general goals. Research in psychology has long shown that different goal orientations (i.e., performance goals vs. learning goals) create different frameworks from which to interpret and respond to achievement situations. We find that overqualification may be interpreted more favorably for individuals focusing on performance goals rather than learning goals. This favorable interpretation then has a positive effect on individuals’ RBSE. However, a strong LGO itself can equip employees with a heightened RBSE ($\gamma = .25, p < .01$), which suggests that a focus on learning new things constantly on the job may help individuals with high LGO develop higher self-efficacy in exploring novel and challenging tasks, no matter how many work-related skills and qualifications they perceive themselves to have (Parker et al., 2010; Phillips & Gully, 1997). The empirical results suggest that LGO may act as a substitute for perceived overqualification. Perceived overqualification should contribute less to RBSE for individuals high on LGO. Our results also indicate that a motive for showing competence and impressing others, that is, PGO, fuels employees with a higher level of RBSE to engage in more proactive behavior that benefits others and the organization. However, we do not find that a focus on learning constantly and improving abilities, that is, LGO, interacts with RBSE—the “can do” motivation—to predict proactive behavior. This may be because there is a lack of matching between the content of “reason to do” and “can do” motivations here for LGO and RBSE. LGO captures the motive to improve competence, whereas RBSE may direct individuals to better use their current competence (Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Parker et al., 2010). Our findings extend the theory of goal orientations. Whereas LGO has been widely found to be linked to a variety of positive employee outcomes, our results suggest that over-qualified employees can benefit the organization more if they have a higher PGO.

Another noteworthy implication is that we empirically identify perceived overqualification as a distal antecedent of proactive behavior. Scholars and practitioners increasingly view employees as active agents of the organization. In the modern organization, employees set goals and take actions to shape their working conditions. Parker and Collins (2010) underlined that employees are devoted to proactive actions, which are conscious, motivated, and goal directed. They suggested that we look to motivation and self-regulation theories to understand proactivity at work. Accordingly, we integrate the literature on overqualification and proactive behavior from a self-regulatory perspective. Our findings suggest that for overqualified employees, effective self-regulation is crucial in enacting constructive behavior within the organization proactively rather than being distracted by suboptimal working conditions. RBSE, as a “can do” proactive motivation, is positively related to pro-organizational and pro-other proactive behavior, but not to pro-self proactive behavior. Our empirical results also support the argument that RBSE captures the self-efficacy that drives efforts to carry out broader task activities on the job, which is different from the self-efficacy that drives efforts to seek a job, that is, job search self-efficacy (Parker et al., 2010).

**Practical implications**

The findings of this study also offer insights to business practitioners. On the one hand, our results indicate that overqualification does not necessarily imply relative deprivation or talent left to rust. Employees can leverage their surplus qualifications to feel good and do good. Through their self-efficacy to do broader tasks, they can actively
make a prosocial difference (e.g., Grant & Ashford, 2008; Parker & Collins, 2010). Doing so fuels them with a sense of worth in society and prompts better performance ratings and the respect of others (Grant & Berg, 2011). We argue that the results of overqualification may vary depending on whether the individuals prefer to be small fish in a big pond or big fish in a small pond. Individuals may engage in more job search behavior once they find themselves overqualified (Maynard & Parfyonova, 2013). Nevertheless, our results suggest that individuals pay more attention to their surplus abilities, if any, rather than inadequate working conditions, and capture opportunities to accomplish more tasks proactively. Ultimately, effort pays off.

On the other hand, our findings suggest that managers and recruiters differentiate among overqualified or underemployed individuals. In practice, recruiters often express hesitation in hiring apparently overqualified candidates because they are a high risk. Managers worry that the underemployed workers may leave the organization at any time (Maynard, Taylor, & Hakel, 2009). However, our research findings substantiate that overqualified employees might actually benefit the organization through their surplus talents and perceived competence in their expanded roles. Erdogan et al. (2011) also suggested that overqualified employees might present unique advantages to hiring organizations. To retain and motivate these employees, supervisors need to consider ways to provide them with more challenging assignments and empower them with enlarged roles and increased involvement (Erdogan & Bauer, 2009; Luksyte et al., 2011). We suggest that a more supportive climate be built for overqualified employees to encourage them to take more initiatives.

Limitations and future research agenda

We investigated goal orientations as moderators of the outcomes of overqualification. However, we did not test the roles of PGO and LGO in affecting the perception of overqualification. Previous studies have revealed that goal orientations are predictors of perceived competence, feedback seeking, and so on (e.g., VandeWalle & Cummings, 1997). It should be noted that LGO has been found to be positively related to types of proactive work behavior, such as taking charge and innovation (Parker & Collins, 2010). We found that LGO had a positive relationship with RBSE. There is also the possibility that individuals high on LGO might be more sensitive to certain types of underemployment, that is, overqualification, whereas PGO might make individuals more sensitive to other types of underemployment, that is, underpayment. Future studies could further investigate the roles of goal orientations on how employees view their jobs and respond to their work conditions.

We explored the positive outcome of perceived overqualification and its underlying mechanism. In the future, researchers could investigate the roles of voluntary or involuntary work status on the outcomes of overqualification or underemployment. Maynard (2011) stated that a frequent assumption in the literature is that employees always prefer to use their skills, experience, and formal education or always desire higher pay. Nevertheless, there are certain individuals who voluntarily work in jobs that pay much less than they could otherwise earn due to a sense of calling or real interests (e.g., Holland, 1996). Furthermore, Maltarich et al. (2011) proposed “intentional mismatch” to capture how some underemployed individuals may be volitionally devoted to their jobs in less complex work roles or lower positions or pay to better fit their diverse set of needs, for example, pursuing tasks of real interest or spending more time with family. They argued that the results obtained from these employees could be quite different. In summary, it is true that overqualification or underemployment can turn into deprivation in some cases, but it can also bring about positive results. We believe that the fullest understanding of overqualification will be derived from works that consider both sides of the issue. Further research could examine the broader set of outcomes of different types of underemployment.

Finally, we took an individual-based approach to study how individuals with different goal orientations would view the same overqualified work conditions and regulate themselves effectively. However, these employees are subject to the influence of social contexts. Contingent factors may play a crucial part in turning overqualification into real advantages. For example, Erdogan and Bauer (2009) found that psychological empowerment could fuel overqualified salespersons to bring about higher sales performance. Organizations should actively empower
overqualified employees to use their potential. In addition to dispositional variables, future research may examine more contextual variables as moderators, for example, organizational structure and culture, to find out how employers or managers can capture the potential positive outcomes of overqualification.

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