Leaders' response to employee overqualification

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LEADERS' RESPONSE TO EMPLOYEE OVERQUALIFICATION: AN EXPLANATION OF THE CURVILINEAR MODERATED RELATIONSHIP

ABSTRACT

Despite the prevalence of employee overqualification in the workplace, most existing research has focused employee overqualification perceived by employees themselves or their coworkers, neglecting the views of leaders. Our study addresses this research gap by examining how leaders respond to their perception of employee overqualification and, in turn, how their responses affect employee behaviors. Drawing on conservation of resources theory, we suggest a moderated mediation curvilinear model. Specifically, leader perception of employee overqualification has an inverted U-shaped relationship with leader empowering behavior, and then leader empowering behavior is positively related to employees' voice but negatively related to employees' withdrawal behavior. In addition, leader perceived status threat moderates the curvilinear relationship, in such that the inflection point occurs at lower levels of employee overqualification when leader perceived status threat is high rather than low. We test this model using data from 286 employees and 73 teams in a steel company in China, and we find support for our hypotheses. Our study provides a novel perspective by examining employee overqualification from the view of leaders and reveals its curvilinear effect on leader empowering behavior.

Keywords: Employee overqualification, leader empowering behavior, employee voice, employee withdrawal behavior, curvilinear moderated mediation model.

INTRODUCTION

With the popularization of Higher Education and downturn of worldwide economic downturn, employee overqualification is increasingly common in contemporary organizations (Hu et al., 2015). Employees perceive that their skills, abilities, education, and experience are neither required nor utilized by one's job (Erdogan, Karaeminogullari, Bauer, & Ellis, 2020).

A large body of literature has examined the effect of employee overqualification, especially its negative effects such as decreasing employee job satisfaction (Arvan, Pindek, Andel, & Spector, 2019), OCBI and voice behavior (Erdogan et al., 2020) and leading to feelings of relative deprivation (Erdogan, Tomás, Valls, & Gracia, 2018) and counterproductive work behaviors (Liu, Luksyte, , Zhou, Shi, & Wang, 2015). Increasingly, a few studies have demonstrated the positive aspects of employee overqualification, such as promoting creativity (Luksyte & Spitzmueller, 2016) and performance (Hu et al., 2015), and reducing career distress (Ma, Ganegoda, Chen, Jiang, & Dong, 2020). However, the existing research mainly focused on employee overqualification from the perspective of the employees themselves (e.g., Deng et al., 2016; Luksyte & Spitzmueller, 2016; Ma, Ganegoda, Chen, Jiang, & Dong, 2020) or their peers (e.g., Hu et al., 2015), ignoring how leaders perceive the overqualification of their employees. The omission of leader perspective is problematic (Erdogan & Bauer, 2020). After all, leaders are the most powerful actors on a team, and they decide the job assignments of their employees, which partially determines the match between their abilities and their job requirements (Alfes, Shantz, & Van Baalen, 2016). Therefore, this study aims to fill in this research gap by examining leaders' responses to their perception of employee overqualification and the impact of these responses on employees.

To further explore this relationship, we utilize the conservation of resources (COR) theory. According to the COR theory, social stressors cause individuals to acquire and conserve resources

(Hobfoll, 1989, 2001). The possibility of gaining of new resources activates resource-acquisition motives. Meanwhile, the potential loss of resources activates resource-conservation motives (Hobfoll, 1989, 2001). Based on this theory, overqualified employees can be considered as social stressors for their leaders. Employees with low to moderate levels of overqualification have the ability to effectively deal with tasks and provide excellent performance (Chen, Kirkman, Kanfer, Allen, & Rosen, 2007; Srivastava, Bartol, & Locke, 2006), which triggers leaders' resource-acquisition motives. Thus, leaders will empower these employees to activate their initiative (Chen et al., 2007; Gao & Jiang, 2019; Srivastava et al., 2006; Zhang & Bartol, 2010) so that the employees can help their leaders obtain more resources (Chen et al., 2007; Hobfoll, 1988, 2001; Srivastava et al., 2006; Zhang & Bartol, 2010). However, team leaders might worry about losing control over too much overqualified employees, therefore their resource-conservation motives will be activated. Leaders will attempt to avoid losing resources by limiting their empowerment to employees (Hobfoll, 1988, 2001). Drawing on the COR theory, we argue that leaders' perception of overqualification of their employees has an inverted U-shape relationship with leader empowering behavior.

Furthermore, current studies show that perceived overqualification of employees has both positive effects (Erdogan & Bauer, 2009; Erdogan, Tomás, Valls, & Gracia, 2018; Maynard, Joseph, & Maynard, 2006) and negative effects on employees under certain conditions (Hu et al., 2015; Lin, Law, & Zhou, 2017; Luksyte & Spitzmueller, 2016). We consider how leaders' perception of employees' overqualification operates through leaders' empowerment to create both positive and negative reactions on employees. Specifically, from the leaders' empowerment perspective, we study two possible outcomes: employee voice, which is the voluntary expression of one's views or opinions about workplace matters with the intent to improve organizational or

unit functioning (Van Dyne & LePine, 1998); and employees' withdrawal behaviors, which involves actions intended to place physical or psychological distance between employees and their work environments (Rosse & Hulin, 1985). Voice focuses on the positive outcome of improving dysfunctional organizations (LePine & Van Dyne, 1998; Van Dyne, Ang, & Botero, 2003), whereas withdrawal behaviors involve the negative outcome of losses to companies (Berry, Lelchook, & Clark, 2011). The study of these outcomes can improve our understanding of the costs and benefits to the enterprise brought about by leaders' perception of the overqualification of employees.

In addition, the COR theory also indicates that social stressors are subjective (Hobfoll, 1989, 2011). Individuals appraise stressors as positive or negative depending on different resource signals (Hobfoll, 1989, 2011). In this study, we treat leader perceived status threat, which refers to the perception of challenges to a leader's status (Kellogg, 2012; Zhang, Zhong, & Oze, 2020), as a moderator. We theorize that the curvilinear effect of leader perception of employees' overqualification on leader empowering behavior is moderated by leader perceived status threat, which in turn exerts indirect effects of leader perception of employee overqualification on employees' voice and withdrawal behavior through leader empowering behavior.

By testing the curvilinear mediated moderation model, we make multiple contributions to the literature. First, previous research on overqualification mainly focuses on the perspective of employees themselves or their co-workers (e.g., Deng et al., 2016; Erdogan et al., 2018, 2020; Hu et al., 2015; Ma et al., 2020). To our knowledge, this is the first study on the effect of employee overqualification perceived by their leaders. Second, we use the COR theory to assess how leaders respond to the perceived overqualification of their employees through empowering behavior. This finding contributes to the literature on employee overqualification, leader empowerment, and the

COR theory. Third, whereas prior research either focuses on positive or negative outcomes of employee overqualification (Erdogan & Bauer, 2009; Erdogan et al., 2018, 2020; Hu et al., 2015; Lin et al., 2017; Luksyte & Spitzmueller, 2016; Maynard et al., 2006), we investigate employee voice as a positive result and withdrawal behavior as a negative outcome, which improves our understanding of how leaders' responses to their employees' overqualification create both costs and benefits. Fourth, we identify the leader's perceived status threat as a boundary condition for this relationship. This finding highlights the contexts under which leader's perception of employee overqualification affects leaders' coping strategies and in turn, employees' behaviors.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND HYPOTHESES

Perceived Overqualification and Leader Empowering Behavior

Leaders have to the power to design the group activities and arrange job tasks of their employees (Humborstad & Kuvaas, 2013). Therefore, leaders' perceptions of employee overqualification has great influence on their leading responses to overqualified employees and in turn, employee attitudes or behaviors in workplace. Our study uncovers the effect of employee overqualification from the perspective of leaders and focuses on leader empowering behavior as a strategy to cope with overqualified employees. Specifically, we argue that leader perceived overqualification of employees and leader empowering behavior have an inverted U-shaped relationship.

Leaders' empowerment is power-sharing behavior that strengthens employees' autonomy, increasing their confidence, promoting their participation, and enhancing the meaning of their work (Zhang & Bartol, 2010). The COR theory demonstrates that individuals are motivated to protect their current resources and acquire new resources based on their personal experiences

(Hobfoll, 1988, 2001). The potential gain of resources will arouse the resource-acquisition motives, while the potential loss of resources activates resource-conservation motives (Hobfoll, 1989, 2001). Leaders value certain levels of overqualification among their employees because these employees can provide excellent performance (Chen et al., 2007; Srivastava et al., 2006). Previous research has also shown that employees tend to bring out more creativity and OCB when they have low to moderate levels of overqualification (Lin et al., 2017). Leaders will grant these overqualified employees more power and autonomy not only to deal with work issues independently but also to take initiative in meeting performance goals and contributing more to organizations (Srivastava et al., 2006; Zhang & Bartol, 2010). This triggers the resource-acquisition motives of leaders, as they can gain more resources through the empowerment to these employees (Dong, Jiang, Rong, & Yang, 2020; Halbesleben, Neveu, Paustian-Underdahl, & Westman, 2014; Hobfoll, 1989, 2001). However, after a certain point of employee overqualification, leaders will limit their empowerment to these employees. Highly overqualification indicates that the large gap between employee surplus capacity and actual job requirements would be insurmountable even with leader empowerment (Lin et al., 2017). Existing research has also shown that highly overqualified employees believe it is useless to take efforts to change or improve current working conditions, leading to negative consequences (Lin et al., 2017). Under such conditions, leaders are more likely to associate highly overqualified employees with negative outcomes, such as turnover intention (Harari, Manapragada, & Viswesvaran, 2017; Maynard & Parfyonova, 2013), career dissatisfaction (Erdogan et al., 2018), and counterproductive behavior (Cheng, Zhou, Guo, & Yang, 2020). The potential losses for the organization stimulate the resource-conservation motives of leaders. Leaders might also worry these highly overqualified employees are out of their influence or would not follow their

workplace norms, therefore, will limit their empowerment to avoid losing resources (Halbesleben et al., 2014; Hobfoll, 1988, 2001). Therefore, while leaders are motivated to empower overqualified employees, this motivation decreases after a certain inflection point beyond which employees are perceived to be too overqualified.

Furthermore, the situational leadership model indicates that leaders empower employees based on their maturity and competence (Hersey & Blanchard, 1988). When leaders perceive employees to be overqualified, they will grant them more autonomy because they are competent and can handle work issues on their own (Chen et al., 2007; Hersey & Blanchard, 1988; Zhang & Bartol, 2010). However, when leaders perceive their employees to be highly overqualified, leaders might prefer not to empower them due to the serious mismatch between the employees' abilities and jobs requirements (Lin et al., 2017; Luksyte & Spitzmueller, 2016). Therefore, we posit the following:

Hypothesis 1: Leader perceived overqualification of employees has an inverted U-shaped relationship with leader empowering behavior.

Leader Empowering Behavior, Employee Voice, and Withdrawal Behavior

There is a solid theoretical rationale for the contention that leader empowering behavior could stimulate employees' voice. Empowering leaders value their team members' autonomy (Ahearne, Mathieu, & Rapp, 2005; Zhang & Bartol, 2010). Employees who are granted autonomy feel released from bureaucratic constraints and free to express their thoughts (Zhang & Bartol, 2010). Likewise, leaders' empowerment conveys the value and importance of the work to employees, increasing their sense of competence in their job performance, which leads them to provide more constructive suggestions (Gao & Jiang, 2019). Moreover, empowering leaders express confidence in their employees' performance and grant fair consideration to employees'

ideas, allowing them to prioritize their work over other concerns and increasing their willingness to risk voicing their ideas (Detert & Burris, 2007; Milliken, Morrison, & Hewlin, 2003). Empirical research suggests that empowering leadership has a positive effect on employees' voice behaviors (Gao & Jiang, 2019; Raub & Robert, 2013). Thus, we posit the following:

Hypothesis 2. Leader empowering behavior is positively related to employee voice.

Leaders' empowering behaviors encourage employees' involvement and participation in decision-making, as they feel that their leaders trust their competence (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). In response to this recognition, employees are likely to approach their job responsibilities proactively (Spreitzer, 2007), which involves punctuality and attendance (Eder & Eisenberger, 2008). Likewise, when employees perceive that they are pursuing meaningful, shared objectives through clear processes that have been outlined by their leaders, they feel the obligation to help the organization rather than engaging in destructive activities (Schaubroeck, Lam, & Peng, 2011; Zhang & Bartol, 2010). Furthermore, empowering leaders signal that they value their employees' contributions and care for their autonomy. In response, employees are less likely to engage in withdrawal behaviors (Blau, 1964; Mills & Clark, 1982). Based on these arguments, we propose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3. Leader empowering behavior is negatively related to employee withdrawal behavior.

The Moderating Role of Leader Perceived Status Threat

Leader perceived status threat is related to challenges that may cause leaders to lose status (Kellogg, 2012; Zhang et al., 2020), which motivates leaders to adopt protective strategies. In this research, we argue that leader perceived status threat plays a moderating role in the relationship between leader perceived overqualification of employees and empowering behavior. That is,

changes in leader perceived threat status will shift the inflection point in the curvilinear relationship between employee overqualification and leader empowering behavior, such that inflection point would come at a lower level of overqualification when leaders perceive high rather than low threats to their status.

According to the COR theory, status threat is an important resource signal indicating the potential gain or loss of resources by leaders, and in turn influence leaders' interpretations of employee overqualification (Bendersky & Hays, 2012; Hobfoll, 1989; Zhang et al., 2020). Status threats perceived by a leader mainly come from the low status groups such as employees (Kellogg, 2012; Zhang et al., 2020). High status threat might signal the potential loss of resources, because leaders might perceive their organizational status was challenged or lose high influence over their overqualified employees (Kellogg, 2012; Morrison, Fast, & Ybarra, 2009; Scheepers, Ellemers, & Sintemaartensdijk, 2009; Zhang et al., 2020). When leaders perceive their status is under great threat, they tend to be more defensive towards overqualified employees (Kellogg, 2012), and their resource-conservation motives will be strengthened (Dong et al., 2020; Hobfoll, 1989, 2001). They will be more reluctant to empower overqualified employees and limit the autonomy of these employees to maintain their current resources (e.g., status or influence). High status threat diminishes the positive effect of employee overqualification on leaders' empowerment. The inflection point of the curvilinear path would come at a lower level of overqualification when leaders perceive significant threats to their status.

By contrast, when leaders perceive little or no threat to their status, they tend to believe they are sufficiently differentiated from their employees and have high influence over their employees (Kellogg, 2012; Morrison et al., 2009; Scheepers et al., 2009). They believe these overqualified employees will bring with more resources, such as higher team performance and constructive

suggestions. Under such conditions, leaders' resource-acquisition motives will be strengthened (Dong et al., 2020; Hobfoll, 1988, 2001). They will be willing to empower these overqualified employees to help them obtain more resources. Hence, reductions in threats to status amplify the positive effect of employee overqualification on leaders' empowerment. That is, when leaders perceive minor threats to their status, the inflection point of the curvilinear path occurs at higher levels of overqualification. Thus, we posit the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 4. Leader perceived status threat moderates the curvilinear relationship between perceived overqualification of employees and leader empowering behavior, such that the inflection point of the inverted-U curve occurs at lower levels of employee overqualification when perceived status threat is high.

An Integrative Model

Combining Hypotheses 1 through 4 leads to a first-stage moderated mediation relationship (Edwards & Lambert, 2007). Based on the COR theory, the interaction of overqualified employees and leaders' high status threat will strengthen the resource-conservation motives of leaders, meaning that the inflection point of the U-shaped relationship comes earlier (Dong et al., 2020; Hobfoll, 1989, 2001). Thus, the peak level of employees' voice (withdrawal behaviors) comes at relatively low (high) levels of overqualification. With increases in overqualification past this point, employees' voice (withdrawal behaviors) gradually decreases (increase).

By contrast, the interaction of overqualified employees and low status threats will strengthen the resource-conservation motives of leaders, which causes the inflection point of empowerment to shift to the right (Dong et al., 2020; Hobfoll, 1989, 2001). Therefore, the peak level of employees' voice (withdrawal behavior) comes at a relatively high level of employee overqualification. After the highest point, employees' voice (withdrawal behaviors) gradually

declines (increase) as overqualification increases.

Hypothesis 5. The curvilinear interactive effect of leader perceived employee overqualification and status threats indirectly affect employee voice through the leader empowering behavior.

Hypothesis 6. The curvilinear interactive effect of leader perceived employee overqualification and status threats indirectly affect employee withdrawal behaviors through the leader empowering behavior.

METHODS

Sample and Procedure

We collected our data from a large steel company in southern China. The company enjoys a strong reputation in the steel industry, with branches located in several different districts of China. The first author of our paper contacted the CEO of the company and secured support for the study. We conducted our research with the leaders and employees working at the headquarters.

Prior to our study, we coded the questionnaires to match leader-employee dyads. We ensured that the responses were anonymous and were used for academic research only. Data were collected via web-based questionnaires at two time points with the help of the HR manager. At the first time point, we distributed questionnaires to 92 team leaders. About 86 team leaders completed the questionnaires for a response rate of 93.48%. These leaders evaluated their perceptions of employees' overqualification and status threats. At the second time point (one month later), we distributed questionnaires to these 86 team leaders and their 316 employees. Team leaders evaluated their employees' voice and withdrawal behaviors, while employees provided ratings of their team leaders' empowering behaviors. A total of 73 team leaders and 286 employees answered

the questionnaires; the response rates were 84.88% for team leaders and 90.51% for employees.

Among the final sample, the average age of employees was 42.02 (SD = 9.90). About 66.78% were male, and most of them had bachelor's degrees or higher (85.66%). On average, the employees had worked with their leaders for 5.10 years (SD = 5.72). Among the team leaders, the average age was 45.59 years (SD = 7.08). Most of the team leaders were male (86.30%) and had obtained bachelor's degrees or higher (98.63%).

Measures

Since the measures were originally developed in English, we translated these scales into Chinese following the translation-back-translation procedure suggested by Brislin (1986). The variables were measured with 7-point Likert scales, unless otherwise indicated (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*).

Leaders' perceived employee overqualification. Team leaders evaluated their perception of employees' overqualification with the 9-item scale developed by Maynard et al. (2006). A sample item was "The education level of this employee is above the education level required by his/her job" ($\alpha = 0.71$).

Leaders' empowering behaviors. Employees rated their team leaders' empowering behaviors with the 12-item scale developed by Ahearne et al. (2005). A sample item was "My team leader helps me understand how my objectives and goals relate to that of the company" ($\alpha = 0.95$).

Leader perceived status threat. Leaders reported their perception of status threat with a 3-item scale adapted from Zhang et al. (2020). A sample item was "Some of my followers may take sides to challenge my status" ($\alpha = 0.80$).

Employees' voice. Leaders evaluated employees' voice with the widely used scale from Van Dyne and LePine (1998). A sample item was "This employee develops and make

recommendations concerning issues that affect the group" ($\alpha = 0.92$).

Employees' withdrawal behaviors. Leaders evaluated employees' withdrawal behaviors with the 3-item scale from Eder and Eisenberger (2008). A sample item was "This employee takes undeserved work breaks" ($\alpha = 0.75$).

Control variables. We controlled for employees' gender and age. Previous research has shown that gender could potentially influence voice, as females were more likely to voice concerns than males (LePine & Van Dyne, 1998; Morrison et al., 2011). In addition, older employees might have more experience speaking out and, therefore, tend to voice concerns more often (Lam & Xu, 2019; Tangirala & Ramanujam, 2012). We also controlled for the tenure of leader-employee working relationships, as the leaders would have more accurate knowledge about their employees' level of overqualification if they had worked together longer. At the team level, we included leaders' gender and age as control variables for leader empowering behavior, as suggested by previous research (Tang et al., 2020).

Analytical Approach

Given the nested structure of our data (i.e., employees were nested within teams), we used Mplus 7.4 to test our hypotheses (Muthén & Muthén, 2015), which accommodates individual- and team-level effects simultaneously. Following the recommendations of Hofmann et al. (2000), the individual-level predictors were grand mean centered (Lin et al., 2016).

Our model specifies a curvilinear relationship between leaders' perceived employee overqualification (LPEO) and empowering behavior (Hypothesis 1), as shown in Equation 1.

$$\textit{Leader empowering behavior} = b_0 + b_1 LPEO + b_2\, LPEO^2 \quad (1)$$

Following the procedure suggested by previous research (Hu et al., 2019; Lin et al., 2017), the significance of the quadratic terms (b_2) was examined to test the inverted U-shaped relationship

between LPEO and empowering behaviors. The inflection point was calculated as: $-b_1/(2b_2)$.

For the moderation effect of leader perceived status threat (LPST) in the curvilinear relationship between LPEO and empowering behavior (Hypothesis 4), we followed the recommendations of Pierce and Aguinis (2013) to examine the shift between the inflection points with the following equation.

$$\textit{Leader empowering behavior} = b_0 + b_1 LPEO + b_2 LPEO^2 + b_3 LPST + b_4 LPST \times LPEO + b_5 LPST \times LPEO^2 \quad (2)$$

If b_5 is statistically significant, this indicates the moderating role of LPST in the inverted U-shaped relationship. Further, the inflection point was calculated as $-(b_1 + b_4 \times LPST)/2(b_2 + b_5 \times LPST)$. The shift in the inflection points was the difference between the values of the inflection point at high versus low levels of the moderators. Previous research has adopted the same approach to test moderated curvilinear effects (Hu, Zhang, Jiang, & Chen, 2019; Le et al., 2011).

To test the curvilinear moderated mediation effect, we follow previous research (Hu et al., 2019; Lin et al., 2017) and calculate the conditional instantaneous indirect effects at high versus low levels of the moderator (two standard deviations above the mean value). Since we hypothesized a linear relationship between leader empowering behavior and employees' voice, the equation can be written as follows:

$$\textit{Employee voice} = b_6 + b_7 (\textit{Leader empowering behavior}) \quad (3)$$

Combining Equations (2) and (3), we calculate the instantaneous indirect effect, denoted here as θ, as follows:

$$\theta = (b_1 + 2b_2 \times LPEO + b_4 LPST + 2b_5 LPST \times LPEO) \times b_7 \quad (4)$$

In Equation (4), θ is not a constant, but a function of the *LPEO* and *LPST*. As suggested by previous research (Hu et al., 2019; Le et al., 2011), if the difference in θ at high and low levels of

LPEO and LPST is significant (i.e., the 95% confidence interval does not include zero), this supports the specification of a curvilinear moderated mediation effect.

RESULTS

Preliminary Analysis

Table 1 shows the means, standard deviations, reliabilities, and correlations among the study variables. Leader empowering behavior had positive ($r = 0.40$, $p < 0.01$) and negative ($r = -0.22$, $p < 0.01$) correlations with employees' voice and withdrawal behaviors, respectively. These results provide preliminary support for our hypotheses. Prior to the hypothesis testing, we conducted confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to examine the distinctiveness of study variables, including LPEO, leader empowering behavior, leader perceived status threat, employees' voice and withdrawal behavior. Given the nested nature of our data, we conducted multi-level confirmatory factor analysis (ML-CFA) with Mplus 7.4 (Dyer, Hanges & Hall, 2005). ML-CFA allows for simultaneously examining the factor structure of the measured constructs at the within-and between levels (Dyer et al., 2005). We parceled leader perceived employee overqualification and employee voice into 3 indicators respectively, following the procedure suggested by Little, Rhemtulla, Gibson, and Schoemann (2013), since research has shown that increases in the size of covariance matrices due to more variables could lead to inflated goodness-of-fit statistics (Herzog, Boomsma, & Reinecke, 2007; Moshagen, 2012). By default, we set the factor loadings of the first indicators to the responding variables to 1 and the error terms at both within and between levels were set as independent (Lu, Li, Leung, Savani, & Morris, 2018). As expected, the five-factor model fit the data better than the alternative models ($\chi 2/df = 1.77$, CFI = .94, TLI = .92, RMSEA = .05) as shown in Table 1, justifying the distinctiveness of these constructs.

Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis 1 suggested the inverted U-shaped relationship between LPEO and leader empowering behavior. As shown in Table 3, after controlling for other variables, the squared term of LPEO was negatively related to leader empowering behavior (b = -0.21, $p < 0.01$). In Figure 1, we present a plot of the predicted curvilinear relationship, using a procedure suggested by Cohen, Cohen, West and Aiken (2003). As shown in Figure 1, LPEO had an inverted U-shape relationship with leader empowering behavior; the relationship is positive and increasing at low to moderate levels of LPEO, but the marginal effect declines when LPEO becomes higher. The inflection point was -0.30 ($-b_1/(2b_2)$ = -0.13/(2 × 0.21)). We also found significant differences between the slopes of the main effects before and after the inflection point (t = 22.84, $p < 0.01$). These findings support Hypothesis 1, which indicated a curvilinear main effect.

Hypothesis 2 proposed that leader empowering behavior was positively related to employees' voice. As shown in Table 3, the effect of leaders' empowering behaviors on employees' voice was significant and positive (b = 0.27, $p < 0.01$), supporting Hypothesis 2. Hypothesis 3, which suggested a negative relationship between leaders' empowering behaviors and employees' withdrawal behaviors, was also supported (b = -0.12, $p < 0.01$).

Hypothesis 4 suggested the moderating effect of leader perceived status threat in the curvilinear relationship between LPEO and leaders' empowering behaviors. As shown in Table 3, the interaction term between the square of LPEO and leader perceived status threat was significantly related to leaders' empowering behaviors (b = 0.23, $p < 0.01$). This moderating effect is displayed in the plot in Figure 2, which shows that the inverted U-shaped relationship between LPEO and leaders' empowering behaviors has a lower inflection point for leaders who perceived a higher level of status threat (the inflection point = -.04) rather than low (the inflection point = .02).

We then calculated the lateral shift quantity (Δ = -0.06, 95%CI = [-0.13 -0.002]). The results support Hypothesis 4.

To examine the curvilinear indirect effects specified in Hypotheses 5, we multiplied the effect size of the interaction of LPEO-squared and LPST on leaders' empowering behaviors by the effect of leaders' empowering behaviors on employees' voice (see Table 4). The difference in θ for high LPEO when LPST was high versus low was 0.47 (95%CI = [0.05, 0.88]). Similarly, the difference in θ for low LPEO when LPST was high versus low was -0.78 (95%CI = [-1.71, 0.16]). The difference between the two values was significant (Δ =1.24, 95%CI = [0.04, 2.45]). This finding supports Hypothesis 5.

We followed a similar procedure to test Hypothesis 6, which suggested the curvilinear moderated mediation indirect effect between LPEO and employees' withdrawal behaviors. As shown in Table 4, the difference in θ for high LPEO when LPST was high versus low was -0.20 (95%CI = [-0.40, -0.002]). Similarly, the difference in θ for low LPEO when LPST is high versus low was 0.20 (95%CI = [-0.07, 0.47]). The difference between the two values was significant (Δ = -0.40, 95%CI = [-0.79, -0.01]). Therefore, Hypothesis 6 was supported.

DISCUSSION

We tested the curvilinear mediated moderation for the joint effect of leader perceived employee overqualification and status threats on leader empowering behavior, employee voice and withdrawal behavior. Leader perceived employees' overqualification had an inverted U-shape relationship with leader empowering behavior. Leader empowering levels were higher at intermediate levels than at low and high levels of perceived employee overqualification. Leader perceived status threat moderated the relationship between their perceived employee

overqualification and empowering behavior. When status threats were high, the inflection point occurs at lower levels of employee overqualification. Leader empowering behavior ultimately affected voice and withdrawal behaviors. These findings have both theoretical and practical implications.

Theoretical Implications

First, our study contributes to the overqualification literature by adding the perspective of leaders. Previous research on perceived employee overqualification focuses on employees themselves or their coworkers (Deng et al., 2016; Erdogan et al., 2018, 2020; Gkorezis, Erdogan, Xanthopoulou, & Bellou, 2019; Hu et al., 2015; Luksyte & Spitzmueller, 2016; Ma et al., 2020; Simon, Bauer, Erdogan, & Shepherd, 2019); little attention is paid to the role of leaders who determine their employees' job arrangements and shape their attitudes towards the enterprise (Alfes et al., 2016). Our research answers the call for a new perspective on overqualification by examining how leaders' view of employee overqualification effect their leading strategies (Erdogan & Bauer, 2020). This perspective extends previous conceptual approaches that only focus on how employees react to their perceived overqualification.

Secondly, we used the COR theory to identify leaders' empowering behavior as a strategy used by leaders to cope with overqualified employees to maximize their resources (Hobfoll, 1989, 2001). We focused on leaders' empowerment, which was previously absent from the perceived overqualification literature (Erdogan & Bauer, 2020). We emphasize that perceived overqualification ha an inverted U-shaped relationship with leaders' empowerment, which shows how leaders' resource-conservation and resource-acquisition motives influence their empowerment. This finding illuminates the complex nature of leader-employee interactions and provides a novel view of how overqualified employees influence leaders' reactions. Moreover, the

majority of prior research uses either the relative deprivation theory or person–job fit theory to explain how individuals respond to overqualification (Erdogan et al., 2018, 2020; Erdogan & Bauer, 2009, 2020; Liu et al., 2015; Luksyte, Bauer, Debus, Erdogan, & Wu, 2020; Smith & Pettigrew, 2015; Arvan et al., 2019). We provide a novel perspective by drawing on the COR theory and show that leaders adopt different strategies to gain and protect their own resources in response to their employees' overqualification.

Third, our study enriches the literature by introducing status threats to leaders as a moderator. From the perspective of the COR theory, status threats are an important resource signal to leaders (Dong et al., 2020; Hobfoll, 1989, 2001). We found that high levels of status threats reduce the positive influence of overqualified employees on leaders' empowerment (Kellogg, 2012; Zhang et al., 2020). This adds to our knowledge of how leaders acquire and preserve their resources by empowering overqualified employees when their status is under threat (Kellogg, 2012). Furthermore, by testing the curvilinear mediated moderation model, we provided additional evidence that overqualification results in both positive (voice) and negative (withdrawal) outcomes for organizations under certain conditions. We contribute to the research on outcomes of overqualification and highlight a new direction that focuses on the dual effect of overqualification. Likewise, these findings expand the COR theory by identifying how context matters.

Fourth, we have also demonstrated that leader empowering behavior leads to employees' voice and reduces withdrawal behaviors. On the one hand, our findings are consistent with previous literature suggesting that leaders' empowerment is positively related to employees' voice (Gao & Jiang, 2019; Raub & Robert, 2013). On the other hand, we advance the literature by directly examining the effect of leader empowering behavior on employee withdrawal behavior, which has been omitted in previous studies. The result that empowerment exerted negative effects

on employees' withdrawal behavior is consistent with prior research showing that leader empowering behavior leads to employee behaviors such as turnover intentions, counterproductive behaviors, cyberloafing, and absenteeism (Cheng et al., 2020; Kim, Beehr, & Prewett, 2018; Lorinkova & Perry, 2017).

Practical Implications

Our findings also have important practical implications. First, leaders should accurately evaluate employees' abilities and qualifications. Our results showed that leaders' perception of employee overqualification will influence their strategies in coping with these employees (e.g., leader empowering behavior). Therefore, it is necessary for leaders to have more accurate ratings of employees' qualifications and their fit with jobs to optimize job assignments. For example, leaders can timely communicate with their employees and learn about feedback on employees' job performance. Organizations can also arrange qualification examination and provide results to leaders to help leaders have more objective and accurate information about employees' level of overqualification.

Second, the negative side of the inverted U-shaped relationship indicates that organizations should avoid recruiting too much overqualified employees. When employees are low to moderate overqualified, leaders can grant autonomy to maximize their value, such as task crafting, job rotation, and career design, as leaders' empowerment would lead to more employee voice and fewer withdrawal behaviors. However, leaders restrict their empowerment to highly overqualified employees to avoid losses to the organization, resulting in less employee voice and more withdrawal behaviors. Preferably, mismatches should be avoided during the recruitment and hiring processes. Overall, leaders should help employees to achieve person-job fit, instead of controlling them by limiting their autonomy.

Third, organizations should eliminate leaders' perception of status threat, as such perceptions will cause leaders to constrain their empowerment to talented employees to preserve their private resources. This can also indirectly strengthen negative outcomes for the enterprise, such as decreasing employees' voice or increasing their withdrawal behaviors. Therefore, organizations can take measures to dispel their concerns about status threat. For example, organizations should express their confidence in these leaders' abilities and show respect. They can also encourage leaders to obtain additional resources to maintain their status, such as through their networking abilities (Zhang et al., 2020).

Limitations and Future Directions

Despite the theoretical and practical implications of our study, several limitations remain to be addressed in future research. First, we cannot infer a causal relationship in this study. Although we collected data from multiple sources at different time points and used CFA to avoid common method bias, our field study was not designed to identify causal relationships. Future research should include experiments to test causality.

Second, future research could consider other mediators and moderators to enrich our understanding of leaders' responses to employees' overqualification. We adopted the COR theory to argue that low to moderate overqualification would arouse leaders' resource acquisition motives, while higher employee overqualification would arouse leaders' resource conservation motives. However, we did not directly examine the specific resource acquisition and conservation motives of employees. Future research could use experiments to uncover the resource acquisition and conservation motives underlying the curvilinear relationship between leaders' perceived employee overqualification and leaders' empowering behaviors. In addition, this study only considers leaders' empowering behaviors as a response strategy and leaders' perceived status threat as a

moderator. Previous research has shown that leadership self-efficacy, that is, leaders' perceived capability to perform their roles, is derived from previous leadership experiences and can further influence leadership effectiveness (Ng, Ang, & Chan, 2008). Accordingly, we suggest that employees' overqualification might influence leaders' self-efficacy; alternatively, leadership self-efficacy may affect the extent to which leaders will empower overqualified employees. We could examine the role of leadership self-efficacy or other potential mediators and moderators in later research.

Third, we conducted our study with a sample from China, therefore the generalizability of our findings might be limited. Traditional Chinese culture is characterized by hierarchy and order (Farh, Hackett, & Liang, 2007). Leaders tend to remain in control rather than decentralize their power to their employees. Despite this, we find that leaders empowered employees with low or moderate levels of overqualification, suggesting that the results are relatively robust. Nonetheless, future research can retest our findings in other cultural settings.

CONCLUSION

Our study reveals that leaders' perception of overqualification of employees has an inverted U-shaped relationship with leader empowering behavior. Leader empowering behavior is then positively related to employees' voice but negatively related to employees' withdrawal behavior. Furthermore, leader perceived status threat moderates the curvilinear relation between the perceived overqualification of employees and leader empowering behavior. The curvilinear interactive effect of perceived overqualification and status threats indirectly affects voice and withdrawal behavior through leader empowering behavior.

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Table 1 Means, standard deviations, and correlations among variables.

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Level 1 (*N*=286)									
1. Employee gender	.67	.47							
2. Employee age	42.02	9.90	.08						
3. Leader-employee tenure	5.10	5.72	.03	.93**					
4. Leader perceived employee overqualification	3.16	.71	-.14*	-.09	-.11	(.71)			
5. Leader empowering behavior	5.47	1.11	.02	-.17**	-.16*	-.07	(.95)		
6. Employee voice	5.16	1.04	.09	-.05	-.06	-.15*	.40**	(.92)	
7. Employee withdrawal behavior	1.31	.53	19**	.13*	.12**	-.04	-.22**	.04	(.75)
Level 2 (*N*=73)									
1. Leader gender	.86	.35							
2. Leader age	45.59	7.08	.03						
3. Perceived status threat	4.04	1.34	.19	.09	(.80)				

Note. Reliability estimates (α) are on the diagonal.

*$p < .05$; **$p < .01$ (two-tailed). Gender: 0 = Female, 1 = Male

Table 2 Results of confirmatory factor analysis.

Models	$\chi 2/df$	$\Delta \chi 2$	CFI	TLI	RMSEA
Model 1: Five-factor model	1.77		.94	.92	.05
Model 2: Four-factor model (LEB and withdrawal behavior combined to one factor)	2.600	156.69**	.86	.83	.08
Model 3: Three-factor model (LEB, withdrawal behavior and employee voice combined to one factor)	6.30	679.83**	.52	.43	.14
Model 4: Two-factor model (LEB, PEO, withdrawal behavior and employee voice combined to one factor)	6.60	73.541**	.49	.40	.14

Note. LEB= Leader empowering behavior, PEO = Perceived employe overqualification

Table 1 Results of Mplus analyses.

Variable	Leader empowering behavior				Employee Voice		Withdrawal behavior	
	b	SE	b	SE	b	SE	b	SE
Control variables								
Employee gender	.00	.14	.00	.15	.07	.13	.20**	.05
Employee age	-.02**	.01	-.03	.01	-.00	.01	.00	.01
Leader-employee tenure	-.02	.01	.00	.01	-.01	.01	.00	.01
Leader gender	-.15	.23	.12	.25	-.09	.35	.07	.11
Leader age	.00	.01	.00	.01	.01	.01	.00	.01
Main variables								
LPEO	-.13	.10	-.00	.28	-.31**	.11	-.04	.04
LPEO-squared	-.21**	.07	-1.13**	.39	-.04	.07	-.03	.04
LPST			-.11	.17	-.11	.17	-.06	.05
LPEO × LPST			-.05	.06			.	
LPEO-squared ×LPST			.23**	.08				
Leader empowering behavior					.27**	.10	-.12**	.05
Level-1 residual variance	1.08**	.14	1.03**	.13	.54**	.10	.24**	.05
Level-2 residual variance	.07	.07	.09	.09	.40**	.14	.01	.55

Notes. Unstandardized coefficients are reported, SE = standard error. LPEO = Leader perceived employee overqualification, LPST = Leader perceived status threat; *$p < .05$; **$p < .01$.

Table 2 The results of conditional indirect effect.

LPEO	Low	High	
LPEO →Leader empowering behaviors→Employee voice			
Moderator High	.62*	-.66 †	
Moderator Low	.1.40 †	-1.12*	
Difference	-.78[-1.71, .16]	.47*[.05, .88]	1.24*[.04, 2.45]
LPEO →Leader empowering behaviors→Employee withdrawal behavior			
Moderator High	-.26 †	.28 †	
Moderator Low	-.46 †	.48*	
Difference	.20[-.07, .47]	-.20*[-.40, -.002]	-.40*[-.79, -.01]

LPEO = Leader perceived employee overqualification

The simple slopes for a curvilinear relationship Y = b0 + b1 × X + b2 × X2 are calculated as Y / X = b1 + 2 × b2 ×X, where b1 and b2 are unstandardized regression

coefficients.

† $p < .10$, *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$.

Figure 1 The relationship between leader perceived employee overqualification and leader empowering behaviors

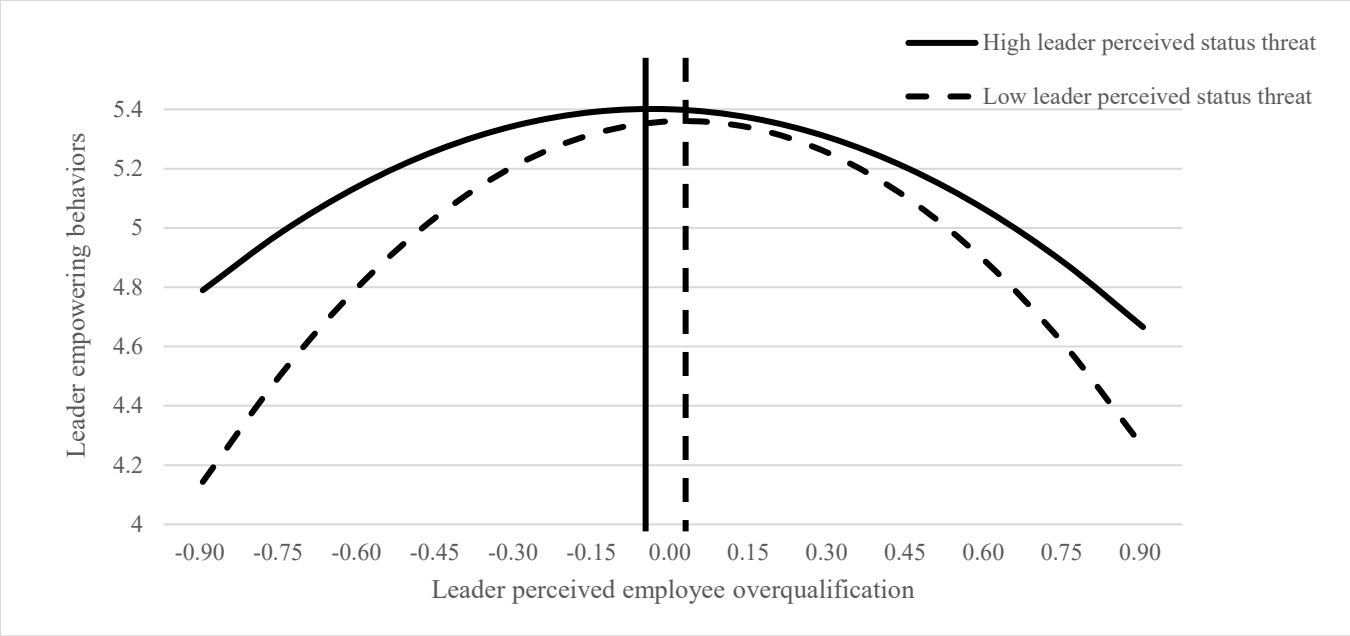

Figure 2 The moderating role of leader perceived status threat in the relationship between leader perceived employee overqualification and leader empowering behaviors