

Lowering the Threshold for Feeling Mistreated: Perceived Overqualification Moderates the
Effects of Perceived Age Discrimination on Job Withdrawal and Somatic Symptoms

Maria del Carmen Triana

The University of Wisconsin-Madison

Tiffany Trzebiatowski

University of Massachusetts-Amherst

Seo-Young Byun

The University of Wisconsin-Madison

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Abstract

This study examines whether and how perceived overqualification affects the relationships between perceived age discrimination from one's supervisor and two outcome variables, job withdrawal and somatic symptoms. Using a paired sample (of employees and a paired participant who knew them well, $N = 235$), results show that employees who feel overqualified, compared to those who do not feel overqualified, react more negatively to perceived age discrimination by engaging in greater withdrawal behaviors and experiencing higher somatic symptoms. Findings extend both relative deprivation theory and the age discrimination literature by indicating that perceived overqualification is not only a trigger for relative deprivation, but also a factor that seems to lower an employee's threshold for tolerating discriminatory treatment. We conclude with a discussion on practical implications that incorporate strategies for reducing perceptions of age discrimination and overqualification.

Keywords: age discrimination, overqualification, job withdrawal, somatic symptoms, relative deprivation theory

Some of the most significant trends facing human resource (HR) managers today are the large number of younger workers entering the labor market, older workers delaying retirement, and reduced opportunities for career advancement (Society for Human Resource Management, 2013). HR managers play a critical role in placing these employees in the right job and providing an environment where all ages feel welcome. However, as the following two quotes illustrate, both the young and old feel they are “never the right age” (Duncan & Loretto, 2004).

In *Ryther v. KARE* (1997), a supervisor told his 53-year-old sportscaster that he ‘had bags under his eyes,’ was ‘an old fart,’ ... and ‘couldn’t handle the new technology’ (Dipboye & Colella, 2005, p. 208).

During my job search, I had much more of a challenge making myself look older ... using everything from fake reading glasses (to) more conservative clothing and carrying a briefcase (Armour, 2003, para. 39).

An increasingly age-diverse workforce contributes to a higher probability of perceived age discrimination and negative outcomes (Kunze, Böhm, & Bruch, 2011). We define age discrimination as treating employees differently based on age, regardless of which age category they belong to (Duncan & Loretto, 2004). Therefore, we consider age discrimination broadly, referring to potential discrimination against any age group as age discrimination is seen in all age groups and is reported as frequently for the young as for the old (Duncan & Loretto, 2004; Garstka, Hummert, & Branscombe, 2005; Hassell & Perrewé, 1993; Snape & Redman, 2003). Reports of age discrimination are major issues in the workplace because they negatively affect employee attitudes and behaviors (Ensher, Grant-Vallone, Donaldson, 2001; Kunze et al., 2011) including individuals’ psychological and economic well-being (Chou & Chow, 2005; Pascoe &

Smart Richman, 2009; Wood, Wilkinson, & Harcourt, 2008), organizational commitment (Snape & Redman, 2003), and work engagement (Bayl-Smith & Griffin, 2014).

Perceptions of age discrimination are also linked to costly employment discrimination lawsuits. For example, in 2015 the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) received 20,144 age discrimination charges seeking protection under the Age Discrimination in Employment Act that resulted in \$99.1 million in monetary benefits (EEOC, 2016a; 2016b). It is important to recognize more broadly that even if there are no laws that protect employees from age discrimination, perceptions of and reactions to perceived discrimination may be similar for employees across the globe (Dowling, 2013). Thus, actual claims only represent the “tip of the iceberg” of total perceived employment discrimination (Groth, Goldman, Gilliland, & Bies, 2002) and its impact on employee outcomes.

Despite its relevance and importance in organizations, age has been relatively underexplored in diversity and discrimination research compared to other demographic dimensions (e.g., McKay et al., 2007; Pascoe & Smart Richman, 2009; Triana, García, & Colella, 2010). While previous research has examined antecedents and consequences of perceived age discrimination (e.g., Enser et al., 2001; Snape & Redman, 2003), the purpose of this paper is to extend research by examining how the effects of perceived age discrimination on two dysfunctional outcomes, job withdrawal and somatic symptoms, differ across employees who feel overqualified and those who do not. Feeling overqualified, or perceived overqualification, refers to a state in which individuals think they have qualifications such as education and skills that exceed job requirements (Khan & Morrow, 1991). Drawing upon relative deprivation theory, which examines how people respond to the discrepancy between what they have and a subjective standard of outcomes to which they feel entitled (Crosby, 1984),

we propose that perceived age discrimination is more detrimental for employees who feel overqualified than those who do not. Employees who feel overqualified are more likely to have developed higher expectations about their jobs and the kind of treatment they deserve (Vaisey, 2006). Therefore, they are likely to have a lower threshold for tolerating unfair treatment, exhibiting stronger negative reactions toward age discrimination.

This study makes a theoretical contribution to relative deprivation theory (Crosby, 1976, 1984) as well as the age discrimination literature. Although relative deprivation theory has been used to explain the effects of perceived discrimination and perceived overqualification on employees separately in respective fields (e.g., Triana, Jayasinghe, & Pieper, 2015 for perceived discrimination; Liu & Wang, 2012 for perceived overqualification), they have not been considered together. We recognize this gap and extend both theories by shedding light on perceived overqualification as an important moderator that likely makes employees feel more deprived of fair treatment.

This study also makes a practical contribution. As the labor force continues to age (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2006) and it is becoming more common for employees from multiple generations to work together (Knight, 2014), age discrimination in the workplace must be understood and managed. Specifically, HR managers could benefit from an understanding of the expectations employees have about treatment based on their age and their job qualifications and how those expectations affect withdrawal behaviors and somatic symptoms. Developing a deeper understanding of the employee outcomes of age discrimination and overqualification may help alleviate the negative influence of perceived age discrimination and perceived overqualification on employees and organizations.

Theory and Hypotheses

Relative deprivation theory explores the conditions under which people feel deprived of something, typically a standard or a particular outcome (Crosby, 1976, 1984). It states that there are five preconditions to experiencing deprivation: the focal individual (1) perceives that someone else has the outcome, (2) wants the outcome, (3) feels entitled to the outcome, (4) believes that it is feasible to obtain the outcome, and (5) does not feel personally responsible for his/her lack of the outcome. When these conditions are met, people feel deprivation which is known to result in job dissatisfaction, psychological stress, and an array of negative work-related attitudes and behaviors (Crosby, 1976). Studies on relative deprivation theory have traditionally taken one of two approaches to studying the source of deprivation: one may personally be deprived (called egoistic deprivation; Walker & Pettigrew, 1984), or one's social group may be deprived (called fraternal deprivation; Runciman, 1966; Scmitt, Maes, & Widaman, 2009). We focus on the less-often explored egoistic deprivation, which has a self-focus, and examine both perceived age discrimination from one's supervisor and perceived overqualification as sources of deprivation.

The Relationship between Age Discrimination and Withdrawal and Somatic Symptoms

Discrimination is defined as denying certain people equality of treatment based on their group membership (Allport, 1954). To perceive age discrimination from one's supervisor is to feel deprived of equal treatment because of one's age. Aside from being ethically wrong (Demuijnck, 2009; Dipboye & Colella, 2005; Jones, 1991), discrimination is also illegal. Employees of all ages desire equal, fair, and respectful treatment from their supervisors. Whether discrimination is perceived or actual, it is detrimental to the target (Triana, Trzebiatowski, & Byun, 2015). Perceiving age discrimination erodes job attitudes such as commitment (Snape &

Redman, 2003) and should similarly lead to a deterioration of other job attitudes (Goldman, Slaughter, Schmit, Wiley, & Brooks, 2008) as well as an increase in stress symptoms (Gee, 2002). Thus, we expect that perceived age discrimination at work will be positively related to job withdrawal (Lehman & Simpson, 1992; Volpone & Avery, 2013). Job withdrawal refers to neglecting one's job either psychologically or physically (Lehman & Simpson, 1992) and includes lack of effort (Koslowsky, 2009). Research finds job withdrawal is associated with higher turnover (Griffeth, Hom, & Gaertner, 2000; Mitra, Jenkins, & Gupta, 1992), a decrease in work standards (Shapira-Lishchinsky & Even-Zohar, 2011), and lost productivity for organizations (Eder & Eisenberger, 2008).

Neglecting one's job and putting little effort into one's work may be one way of detaching oneself from a negative situation or rectifying perceived mistreatment and feelings of deprivation. As employees experience age discrimination, they are likely to want to get even (Liu & Wang, 2012) through counterproductive behaviors (Liu, Luksyte, Zhou, Shi, & Wang, 2015; Luksyte, Spitzmueller, & Maynard, 2011) including job withdrawal. Age discrimination is also stigmatizing to employees, and both younger and older employees may respond to such stigma by reducing their job performance, being absent from work, or leaving the organization (Shore & Goldberg, 2005). Similarly, consistent with research showing a positive relationship between perceived discrimination and stress (Gee, 2002), we expect that perceived age discrimination, a job stressor, should be positively related to somatic symptoms. Somatic symptoms are defined as physical symptoms a person would be aware of, including a headache or an upset stomach (Spector & Jex, 1998). These predictions are aligned with Pascoe and Smart Richman's (2009) meta-analysis on perceived discrimination and its health outcomes which found that exposure to various types of discrimination is positively related to stress responses in the body.

The Moderating Role of Perceived Overqualification

We propose that the positive relationships between age discrimination from one's supervisor and both job withdrawal and somatic symptoms will be stronger for employees who feel overqualified than those who do not. Although studies have shown that perceived overqualification is negatively related to job attitudes (Erdogan & Bauer, 2009; Fine & Nevo, 2008; Johnson & Johnson, 1996, 2000), withdrawal behaviors (Maynard & Parfyonova, 2013), and health (e.g., Johnson & Johnson, 1997), how it interacts with other job stressors such as discrimination is not yet known. Research on age discrimination, in particular, has not yet explored the effect of perceived overqualification on employee outcomes in the context of age discrimination even though overqualification is often raised in employment discrimination cases (e.g., Lamber, 1993; Martucci & McAtee, 2004; Schellhardt, 1998, *The HR Specialist*, 2013).

When employees feel overqualified, they believe their jobs lack opportunities for challenging work and growth that match their ability and experience (Liu & Wang, 2012). This discrepancy between what they expect or think they deserve and the reality of the situation makes overqualified employees feel relative deprivation. Liu and Wang (2012) further state that perceived overqualification is associated with "a sense of unfairness in terms of adequate opportunity to perform" (p. 3). This indicates that perceived overqualification and age discrimination are logically related, both representing experiences of relative deprivation due to unfair treatment. Therefore, when employees are faced with age discrimination, those who feel overqualified would show greater negative responses in terms of job withdrawal and somatic symptoms than those who do not because they experience both of the stressors together, adding insult (i.e., perceived age discrimination) to injury (i.e., feeling overqualified).

Perceived overqualification is not only an additional source of relative deprivation but it

also reflects the standards on which employees assess their current jobs. According to relative deprivation theory, people's reactions to job conditions depend on how they compare what they experience at present with a subjective standard (Crosby, 1984; Feldman, Leana, & Bolino, 2002). Thus, even if various aspects of the working environment are the same, individuals may evaluate and react differently based on their own standards. Employees who feel overqualified, by definition, judge themselves to possess qualifications such as education, skills, and experience that are beyond their job requirements (Maynard, Joseph, & Maynard, 2006). Therefore, they are more likely to have higher expectations for what they deserve and to feel entitled to more challenges and recognition. That is, their subjective standards against which they judge their job conditions to be adequate would be higher and the threshold for tolerating unfair treatment would be lower than those who do not feel overqualified. Moreover, if they believe they are above the standard in terms of their qualifications but feel like they are being treated below the standard (i.e., perceive age discrimination), then this contradiction makes the mistreatment even more salient. In the case of age discrimination, although all employees desire fair treatment regardless of their age, employees who feel overqualified would experience greater relative deprivation, as manifested by job withdrawal and somatic symptoms because they may become more sensitive to and have a lower threshold for tolerating discriminatory treatment. We propose the following:

Hypothesis 1: The positive relationship between perceived age discrimination from one's supervisor and job withdrawal will be stronger for employees who feel overqualified for their jobs than for those who do not.

Hypothesis 2: The positive relationship between perceived age discrimination from one's supervisor and somatic symptoms will be stronger for employees who feel overqualified for their jobs than for those who do not.

Method

Participants and Procedure

Employees and their paired participants were recruited to answer an Internet survey by StudyResponse, a survey panel service based at Syracuse University with a national panel of employed participants who agree to answer surveys on the Internet in exchange for small gift certificates to Amazon.com. Paired sample data was utilized as a second source of information on employee perceived age discrimination as well as employee perceived overqualification to address concerns of inflated self-assessments as discussed by Erdogan, Bauer, Peiró, & Truxillo (2011) and to reduce common method bias (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003). Paired sample data collected by StudyResponse has been used by other studies (e.g., Piccolo & Colquitt, 2006).

Existing panelists specified on StudyResponse's paired sign-up system whether they were interested in participating in a paired study and, if so, they provided contact information for a paired participant. Participants were considered eligible if they were employed U.S. residents who were willing to partake in a paired study. Paired participants were considered eligible if they knew the participant. Based on these criteria, StudyResponse invited 350 pairs to participate. They randomly sampled Caucasian panelists and oversampled African-American and Hispanic panelists to increase the demographic diversity of the sample to better reflect the U.S. workforce. A total of 334 employees answered the Phase 1 survey, for an initial employee response rate of 95%. For the paired participant survey, 281 paired participants responded, for an initial paired participant response rate of 80%. Of these, 257 paired participants completed all variables required for this study, resulting in a final paired participant response rate of 73%. Participants (employees and paired participants) were each given a \$13 gift certificate to Amazon.com in

exchange for their participation in Phase 1. A second survey was sent four months after the initial survey to the employees who completed Phase 1. A total of 253 employees completed all variables required for this study in Phase 2, for an overall response rate of 72% of employees who participated in both phases and had a paired participant complete a survey. Of these, 251 employees also had a matching survey returned by the paired participant with all variables of interest completed for this study. As there were 16 employees who quit their jobs over the four-month period between Phase 1 and 2, we discarded those cases. Thus, the final sample consists of 235 pairs of employees and paired participants. Employees were given a \$10 gift certificate to Amazon.com for participating in Phase 2.

Demographics for all invited employees were collected from StudyResponse and checks for non-response bias were conducted. There were no differences between invitees who did and did not respond in terms of sex [$\chi^2(1) = 1.58, p > .05$], racial majority/minority status [$\chi^2(1) = .27, p > .05$], or age, $t(348) = -1.60, p > .05$.

The data presented here were collected as part of a larger data collection effort. With the exception of demographic variables, there is no overlap between this study and other studies from the same data collection. Perceptions of employee age discrimination at work, employee overqualification, demographics, and other variables unrelated to this study were collected in Phase 1 of the employees' survey. The paired participant survey was administered at the same time as the employees' Phase 1 survey and included questions about perceived age discrimination against the employee, perceived overqualification of the employee, and other variables unrelated to the present study. The employees' Phase 2 survey, which took place four months later, asked employees about their job withdrawal behaviors and somatic symptoms as well as other variables not included in this study.

The mean age of employees was 39 years and 46% of the participants were male. All participants were employed; 84% held full-time jobs while 16% held part-time jobs. Employees were 69% Caucasian and 30% minority (8% Hispanic, 8% African-American, 6% Native American, 6% Asian, 2% other minority). These demographics roughly resemble the U.S. population as reported in the 2010 U.S. Census data (64% Caucasian, 16% Hispanic, 12% African-American, 5% Asian, 1% Native American, and 2% bi-racial; U. S. Census Bureau, 2012). Average full-time work experience was 17 years. Average tenure with the employer was 8 years. Finally, 69% had a bachelor's degree or higher.

Participants were employed across many occupations and industries: 18.70% in managerial and business jobs (compared to 10.9% for the U.S. population in the same year; Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2013), 10.8% in computer, engineering, and science (compared to 5% for the U.S. population), 11.80% in education, legal, community service, or arts (compared to 10.8%), 5.5% in healthcare (compared to 5.5%), 6.10% in service (compared to 20.4%), 3.70% in sales (compared to 10.4%), 19.90% in office and administrative (compared to 15.8%), 1.4% in farming (compared to .7%), 7.7% in construction (compared to 4.4%), 2.3% in maintenance and repair (compared to 3.8%), 2% in transportation (compared to 6.3%), and 10.1% other. Although our sample resembles the U.S. population for several occupations, we have a higher percentage of employees in managerial, computer, and administrative positions.

Regarding the paired participants, 55% were male while 45% were female. Demographics were: 71% Caucasian, 9% African-American, 7% Hispanic, 7% Native American, 5% Asian, and 1% unreported. Paired participants reported knowing the employees an average of 8.50 years and knowing them quite well (44% extremely well, 40% very well, 13% well, and 3% somewhat well). Of the paired participants, 32% reported currently living with the employees

while 68% did not. Fifty-seven percent said they currently worked in the same organization as the employees, 33% said they did not work in the same organization, and 10% said they used to work in the same organization. Paired participants were: 40% coworkers, 24% friends, 12% spouses, 9% supervisors, 7% relatives, 4% significant others, and 4% other relations.

Measures – Employees’ Survey, Phase 1

Perceived age discrimination. We wrote two items to be consistent with Allport’s (1954) definition of discrimination as being treated differently from others on the basis of one’s characteristics. The items are: “To what extent do you believe that your supervisor has discriminated against you on the basis of your age?” and “To what extent do you believe that your supervisor has treated you differently from others based on your age?” Employees answered these items on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = *to a small extent* to 5 = *to a large extent*). The Cronbach alpha reliability for this measure was good; $\alpha = .93$.

Perceived overqualification. Following Erdogan and Bauer (2009) we used the four-item measure of mismatch by Johnson and Johnson (1996, 1997). Items were “My formal education overqualifies me for my present job,” “My talents are not fully utilized on my job,” “My work experience is more than necessary to do my present job,” and “Based on my skills, I am overqualified for the job I hold.” Employees reported how much they agreed or disagreed with items on a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*). The reliability for this measure was $\alpha = .83$.

Controls. Because lower status group members including women and racial minorities tend to experience more discrimination (Benokraitis & Feagin, 1995; Glick & Fiske, 1996; McConahay, 1983; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999), which is related to health outcomes (Gee, 2002), participants’ sex and race were controlled. Age was controlled for because it is related to

perceived age discrimination (Kessler, Mickelson, & Williams, 1999; Snape & Redmond, 2003) and this can result in health outcomes (e.g., Gee, 2002). Sex was coded as 0 = female and 1 = male. Race was coded as 0 = non-Caucasian and 1 = Caucasian. Age was measured in years as a continuous variable.

Measures – Employees’ Survey, Phase 2

Four months after Phase 1, employees answered questions about their job satisfaction, job withdrawal, and somatic symptoms. Employee self-reported measures are appropriate when employees themselves would know best about their own job attitudes and symptoms (Spector, 1994). This would include job withdrawal (e.g., daydreaming at work; Lehman & Simpson, 1992) and somatic symptoms (e.g., constipation; Spector & Jex, 1998).

Job withdrawal. Lehman and Simpson’s (1992) 12-item withdrawal scale was used to assess withdrawal from the work situation. Employees reported the frequency of withdrawal behaviors on a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = *never* to 7 = *very often*). The question started with the phrase “In the past four months, how often have you...” Sample items that followed included: been absent, chatted with co-workers about non-work topics, and taken longer lunch or rest breaks than allowed. The reliability of the scale was $\alpha = 0.96$.

Somatic symptoms. The Physical Symptoms Inventory (Spector & Jex, 1998) – consisting of 18 items where each item is a symptom – was used to assess somatic symptoms. Employees reported how often they experienced symptoms on a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = *never* to 7 = *all the time*). Employees were prompted with, “During the past 4 months how often did you have any of the following symptoms?” Sample symptoms included: an upset stomach or nausea, a backache, headache, eye strain, and tiredness or fatigue. The reliability was $\alpha = 0.97$.

Because we collected multiple variables from employees, we established discriminant

validity (i.e., that measures of constructs that theoretically should not be related to each other were, in fact, not related to each other) by comparing different plausible factor solutions using results from confirmatory factor analyses (CFA) in LISREL (8.80). A four-factor solution (perceived age discrimination, perceived overqualification, job withdrawal, and somatic symptoms) was an adequate fit for the data ($\chi^2 = 1595.86$, $df = 588$, CFI = .97, IFI = .97, SRMR = .06; Kline 2005). A four-factor solution was a better fit to the data than a three-factor solution with job withdrawal and somatic symptoms combined onto one factor ($\chi^2 = 2473.29$, $df = 591$, CFI = .94, IFI = .94, SRMR = .09; $\Delta \chi^2 = 877.43$, $df = 3$, $p < .05$). A four-factor solution was better than a two-factor solution with perceived age discrimination and overqualification loaded onto one factor and job withdrawal and somatic symptoms loaded onto a second factor ($\chi^2 = 2730.10$, $df = 593$, CFI = .94, IFI = .94, SRMR = .10; $\Delta \chi^2 = 1134.24$, $df = 5$, $p < .05$). It was also better than a one-factor solution ($\chi^2 = 2965.48$, $df = 594$, CFI = .93, IFI = .93, SRMR = .10; $\Delta \chi^2 = 1369.62$, $df = 6$, $p < .05$). We performed a second test of discriminant validity, a two-step approach developed by Anderson and Gerbing's (1988), that compares a model in which the estimated correlation between two variables (e.g., job withdrawal and somatic symptoms) is fixed to 1 against a model in which the correlation between the two constructs is freely estimated. A significantly lower chi-square value for the freely estimated model indicates that the two constructs are not perfectly correlated and that discriminant validity is achieved (Bagozzi & Phillips, 1982). Results (available from the first author) supported the discriminant validity of all possible two-way combinations of study variables.

Measures – Paired Participants' Survey

A second source of perceived age discrimination against the employee and employee overqualification was sought from the paired participant to corroborate the employee self-report.

The survey asked the paired participant to answer questions about the employee who invited them to complete the survey.

Perceived age discrimination against the employee. We modified the measure of employee self-reported age discrimination, making the referent “this person.” A sample item is “To what extent do you believe this person’s supervisor has discriminated against him/her on the basis of his/her age?” Paired participants answered these items on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *to a small extent* to 5 = *to a large extent*). The reliability of the measure was $\alpha = 0.94$. The correlation between employee self-ratings and paired participant ratings was .78 ($p < .01$).

Employee overqualification. We again used the four-item measure of mismatch by Johnson and Johnson (1996, 1997), but the referent was “this person” rather than “my.” Sample items are: “This person’s formal education overqualifies him/her for his/her present job” and “This person’s talents are not fully utilized on his/her job.” The reliability of the measure was $\alpha = 0.83$. Paired participants reported how much they disagreed or agreed on a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*). The correlation between employees’ self-ratings and paired participants’ ratings was .54 ($p < .01$).

We ran a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to establish the validity of the measures. A two-factor solution (perceived age discrimination against the employee, perceived employee overqualification) was a good fit for the data ($\chi^2 = 14.70$, $df = 8$, CFI = .99, IFI = .99, SRMR = .03; Kline 2005). A two-factor solution was a better fit than a one-factor solution ($\chi^2 = 344.43$, $df = 9$, CFI = .52, IFI = .53, SRMR = .25; $\Delta \chi^2 = 329.73$, $df = 1$, $p < .05$).

Hypothesis Testing

Table 1 contains means, standard deviations, and inter-correlations. The correlations are as expected. Employees’ perceived age discrimination was positively correlated to withdrawal

behaviors ($r = .63, p < .01$) and to somatic symptoms ($r = .51, p < .01$). Employees' perceived overqualification was also positively correlated to withdrawal behaviors ($r = .42, p < .01$) and somatic symptoms ($r = .26, p < .01$).

(Insert Tables 1 and 2 about here)

Table 2 contains the moderated hierarchical multiple regression analysis for variables used to predict withdrawal behaviors proposed in Hypothesis 1. Following Cohen, Cohen, West, and Aiken (2003), the variables in the interaction term were centered. As expected, Step 2 shows that perceived age discrimination is positively related to withdrawal behaviors ($\beta = .52, p < .01$). As shown in Step 3, the interaction of perceived age discrimination and perceived overqualification was significantly related to withdrawal behaviors ($\beta = .17, p < .01; R^2 = .46; \Delta R^2 = .02$). The interaction term explained an additional 2% of the variance beyond the controls and main effects, which is common for interaction terms (McClelland & Judd, 1993). The interaction was plotted at one standard deviation above and below the mean for both predictors (Aiken & West, 1991). See Figure 1A for the interaction plot. As expected, the positive relationship between perceived age discrimination from one's supervisor and job withdrawal is exacerbated when employees feel overqualified. A test of the simple slopes in Figure 1A shows that perceived age discrimination positively (and more strongly) predicts job withdrawal when employees feel overqualified ($\beta = .67, p < .01$) compared to when they do not feel overqualified ($\beta = .26, p < .05$). This supports Hypothesis 1.

(Insert Figure 1 about here)

Table 3 contains the moderated hierarchical multiple regression analysis for variables used to predict somatic symptoms proposed in Hypothesis 2. Step 2 shows that perceived age discrimination is positively related to somatic symptoms ($\beta = .48, p < .01$). The interaction term

of perceived age discrimination and perceived overqualification, shown in Step 3, was also significant and positively related to somatic symptoms ($\beta = .19, p < .01; R^2 = .29; \Delta R^2 = .03$).

Figure 1B shows the interaction plot. As predicted, the positive relationship between perceived age discrimination from one's supervisor and somatic symptoms is stronger when employees feel overqualified. A test of the simple slopes in Figure 1B shows that perceived age discrimination more strongly predicts somatic symptoms when employees feel overqualified ($\beta = .60, p < .01$) than when they do not ($\beta = .17, p > .05$). This supports Hypothesis 2.

(Insert Table 3 about here)

Supplemental Analyses

To corroborate our findings from employee self-reported data, we ran the same analyses for testing Hypotheses 1 and 2 using paired participant-reported measures for the independent variables, perceived age discrimination against the employee, and employee overqualification. Results (see Figure 2; tables available upon request) are very similar to those presented above and provide further support for Hypotheses 1 (Figure 2A) and 2 (Figure 2B). The positive relationships between paired participant-reported perceived age discrimination against the employee and both employee-reported job withdrawal and somatic symptoms are exacerbated when the paired participant feels that the employees are overqualified for their jobs. A test of the simple slopes in Figure 2A shows that perceived age discrimination against the employee predicts employee job withdrawal more strongly when the paired participant feels that the employee is overqualified ($\beta = .70, p < .01$) than when they say the employee is not overqualified ($\beta = .27, p < .01$). Similarly in Figure 2B, perceived age discrimination against the employee predicts employee somatic symptoms more strongly when the paired participant feels that the employee is overqualified ($\beta = .60, p < .01$) than when they say the employee is not

overqualified ($\beta = .26, p < .05$). By replicating our results using paired participant ratings of the independent variables, we demonstrate the robustness of our findings (Tsang & Kwan, 1999).

(Insert Figure 2 about here)

Discussion

We answer calls to clarify the relationship between age discrimination and withdrawal behaviors (Shore & Goldberg, 2005). One of the reasons behind a lack of understanding of this relationship in the literature may be inconsistent results due to missing moderators (Shore & Goldberg, 2005). We uncover perceived overqualification as one such moderator of this relationship. Consistent with the hypotheses, results show that perceived age discrimination has a stronger positive effect on withdrawal behaviors and somatic symptoms when employees feel overqualified than when they do not. Our findings suggest that a source of mistreatment at work (i.e., age discrimination) leads to harmful outcomes particularly for employees who feel overqualified.

Theoretical Implications

This study extends relative deprivation theory by demonstrating that perceptions of overqualification moderate the relationships between employees' perceived age discrimination and their withdrawal behaviors and somatic symptoms. Theoretically, this shows that an interactive effect exists between perceived deprivation of fairness to which one feels entitled (i.e., nondiscriminatory treatment) and overqualification (Erdogan & Bauer, 2009; Fine & Nevo, 2008; Johnson & Johnson, 1996, 2000). Feeling overqualified for one's job may strengthen an individual's feeling of entitlement to proper treatment and widen the gap between what they believe they should have but do not have, thus resulting in more deprivation (Crosby, 1984). These greater discrepancies seem to motivate counterproductive behaviors (i.e., job withdrawal)

and induce strain (i.e., somatic symptoms). This work suggests that relative deprivation theory should take into account perceived overqualification not only as a direct source of deprivation but also as a factor that is related to the subjective standard against which people judge other aspects of their jobs, which may result in increased dysfunctional behaviors and negative symptoms.

Our study also helps clarify *when* people feel personally deprived. We add to the less often studied egoistical deprivation, or feelings that one has personally been deprived. For years, researchers have observed that many people see discrimination toward their social group but not toward themselves. Crosby (1984) was the first to report this effect in a group of women who were underpaid relative to comparable male workers at the same company. While the women reported that sex discrimination was a large problem among working women, Crosby (1984, p. 75) describes that “Here then comes a jolt: the employed women in the study had virtually no sense of personal grievance.” This phenomenon, termed the “personal/group discrimination discrepancy” has been found in a number of studies (e.g., Taylor, Wright, Moghaddam, & Lalonde, 1990). Researchers have suggested that perhaps employees who feel discriminated against protect their self-esteem by denying their mistreatment (Crosby, 1984; Taylor et al., 1990). Our findings suggest that as the employee has less tolerance for deprivation (i.e., employees who feel overqualified), the employee cannot deny their own mistreatment. These findings imply that, at the individual level, when evidence of mistreatment accumulates and cannot be ignored, feelings of deprivation grow, and the effects on employee attitudes and somatic symptoms multiply.

Practical Implications

Our findings suggest a source of mistreatment at work (i.e., age discrimination) leads to

harmful outcomes particularly for employees who feel overqualified. Common ways to mitigate this problem include enforcing a zero-tolerance policy for discriminatory behavior and conducting age-diversity training. However, these suggestions may be difficult to implement in an increasingly global economy given cultural differences in perspectives of age and the wide variation in foreign laws surrounding age discrimination (Dowling, 2013). As such, companies need to consider workable policies, codes of conduct, or training modules that will translate to different contexts. For example, a multinational company could assess whether its affiliate organizations overseas openly discriminate on age (Dowling, 2013) while a conglomerate could assess whether a certain industry (e.g., technology) is more prone to discriminating based on age.

Based on such assessments companies may need to consider a more tailored approach to age discrimination training and policies. According to a Catalyst member benchmarking report (Pomeroy & Foust-Cummings, 2009), formal mentoring programs tailored to generation groups are used by 19% of firms. The way intergenerational relations are framed can affect perceptions and support for different age groups (Garstka et al., 2005). To be most helpful, intergenerational relations programs should not make comparisons between age groups, especially unfavorable ones. Through such training employers can convey standards of behavior and mitigate feelings of frustration.

One factor that contributes to employees feeling overqualified is that employees tend to overestimate their contributions at work. The theory of positive illusion suggests that employees may overestimate contributions or their qualifications as a way to self-enhance (Farh & Dobbins, 1989; Harris & Schaubroeck, 1988; Taylor & Brown, 1988; Taylor & Gollwitzer, 1995). To circumvent a cycle of positive illusion bias, employers could ask the employee to rate their own performance as one part of the performance appraisal process. Employers can then determine if

there are gaps between the self- and supervisor-rated performance. Moreover, if performance can be observed by others including peers, multiple sources of information could be collected to provide additional points of assessment. Comparing and contrasting performance feedback from various sources can help employees have a more realistic understanding of their qualifications and thus more realistic expectations about their advancement (Morrison & Robinson, 1997). To the extent that employees receive realistic performance feedback, they should be less likely to feel that they are overqualified for their jobs and have been deprived of proper treatment (Morrison & Robinson, 1997).

Companies could also provide enrichment opportunities to help overqualified employees stay engaged in their work. It is important for employers to recommend relevant training for employees, such as the development of leadership skills so that employees see a career path in the organization. If employees see no career advancement and no challenge in their jobs, they may become demotivated. For employees who feel overqualified, one possibility is for managers to lay out a career path and explain that their current position is a way to prepare them for a more advanced job in the near future. If managers do not have a promotion for the employee to move up, one possibility is to move an employee laterally to give them broader experience. These types of lateral moves can be explained to employees as an opportunity for them to gain a broader skill set which will then put them in a more advantageous position for future promotions.

Job enrichment opportunities may also be used to empower employees who feel overqualified. Having the opportunity to request more challenging work, expand their roles, or have more autonomy may help employees who feel overqualified to stay engaged. Common job enrichment techniques include allowing employees to plan their schedules, to decide how the work should be performed, to check their own work, and to learn new skills (Griffin, 1982). This

could be beneficial because research shows that feeling empowered attenuates the negative effects of perceived overqualification on employee attitudes (Erdogan & Bauer, 2009). Managers may also acknowledge employee skills and thank employees for their contributions to the workplace to reduce feelings of disappointment.

Another implication of our findings, which is worthy of more research in the future, is that younger managers can face challenges when managing employees who feel overqualified for their jobs. In the present study, we find a small but statistically significant negative correlation between participant age and the amount of reported perceived age discrimination. This means that the younger employees in our sample were slightly more likely to say they perceive age discrimination. Research shows that while it is becoming more common for older workers to report to younger supervisors, older workers expect less from younger supervisors than do younger workers (Collins, Hair, & Rocco, 2009). Younger managers can face challenges if older subordinates and coworkers resent them, or if they have moved into that managerial position from an area outside the company or from a different area in the organization rather than rising from within the ranks of the department in question. Young supervisors with a few years of managerial experience may have difficulty supervising people with 25 or 30 years of experience if those subordinates believe they are better qualified and/or could do a better job than their own manager. This speaks to the importance of having clear criteria for decision-making and promotion that are related to the skills needed to do the job. If the selection process is clear, transparent to employees, and based on valid job-related qualifications, then it should be easier for new supervisors to be accepted by their teams, regardless of how old they are.

Limitations and Future Research

One limitation of our study concerns the generalizability of our sample. Our results best

generalize to employees who hold white-collar jobs because of the high education levels of our participants. Less educated employees may react differently. For example, employees who work as dishwashers, housekeepers, cooks, or who work in small communities with few employment options may not question the extent to which their qualifications are in line with their job. Thus, perceptions of overqualification may not lead to feeling deprived if workers are glad to be employed. Although less-educated people were not highly represented in our sample, Goldman, Gutek, Stein, and Lewis (2006) state that non-representative samples still add value to discrimination research due to the topic's sensitive nature. Still, future research may replicate our results in samples with blue-collar workers or workers with lower education levels.

Another limitation is that we do not have an objective measure of overqualification. We utilized a subjective measure of overqualification because employee perceptions are what matters (Spector, 1994) and subjective overqualification is closely related to objective overqualification (Feldman et al., 2002; Liu & Wang, 2012). While we were not able to gather a truly objective measure of overqualification, we did survey another source (i.e., a paired participant) to corroborate reports of overqualification. We found that the self-report and other-report of employee overqualification were highly correlated ($r = .54, p < .01$). While we find support that what we are measuring may reflect actual overqualification, we cannot be sure whether positive illusion bias is affecting our overqualification measure (Taylor & Brown, 1988). Research that demonstrates subjective overqualification and objective overqualification as two separate and unique constructs maintains that each can add to the understanding of employee behavior (Maltarich, Reilly, & Nyberg, 2011). Therefore, we suggest that future research examine whether objective overqualification (collected from detailed job descriptions, employee qualifications from resumes, or company talent databases) has the same effect as subjective

overqualification on employee outcomes.

Future research should also examine the meaning of overqualification more closely. For example, someone who does not feel overqualified for their job may feel optimally qualified, minimally qualified, or not qualified at all. These different states of feeling overqualified may produce different outcomes and may be understood in the context of person-job misfit. However, while perceived overqualification may be related to person-job misfit, according to Liu and Wang (2012, p. 3):

“perceived overqualification is unique because it is not only an assessment of the match between the person and the job, but also an assessment of fairness in terms of opportunity to perform.... Therefore, a sense of unfairness (in terms of adequate opportunity to perform) is probably more closely associated with overqualification than other types of misfit between the person and the environment.”

Future research should help clarify the effects of more fine-grained levels of perceived overqualification and how they may relate to person-job misfit, especially in predicting withdrawal behaviors and somatic symptoms.

Further, while we focused on the supervisor as the instigator of discrimination, future research may focus on discrimination coming from others. While a supervisor is very important in an employee's experience at work, we acknowledge that discrimination may come from others as well, including coworkers and customers (Gettman, Gelfand, Leslie, Schneider, & Salvaggio, 2004; Schneider, Bowen, Ehrhart, & Holcombe, 2000). Future research may examine whether employees respond to perceived age discrimination and overqualification the same way when the instigator is a coworker or a customer. For example, would employees respond differently if the perpetrator had no formal authority over them? Future research may provide the answer to this

question and may highlight the role of power and authority in our theoretical model.

Finally, feeling overqualified may be related to other outcomes of interest beyond job withdrawal and somatic symptoms. Research on outcomes of perceived overqualification highlights both positive and negative outcomes such as lower job attitudes, higher voluntary turnover, and higher performance (Erdogan & Bauer, 2009). We believe that feeling overqualified can lead to other outcomes that are both negative and positive. For example, some people who feel overqualified become aggressive about their situation, engage in counterproductive work behavior, and even encourage others to do so as well. Alternatively, some employees who feel overqualified may never feel deprived. These latter employees may have reached a stage in their careers where they do not want more responsibility or stress because they have already achieved what they wanted to. Future research may examine whether, when, and why certain outcomes are more or less likely to stem from feeling overqualified.

Conclusion

Perceived age discrimination at work can affect employees of all ages (Duncan & Loretto, 2004). Regardless of their age, the potential exists for workers to feel deprived of fair treatment when they perceive age discrimination. While several studies examining relative deprivation have shown that one coping mechanism to perceived discrimination is to deny the mistreatment (Crosby, 1984; Taylor et al., 1990), we find that employees, especially those who feel overqualified show significantly more job withdrawal and somatic symptoms. Findings suggest that employers should implement a zero tolerance policy for age discrimination and be attentive to factors that could be seen as a deprivation of standards which employees feel they ought to have. Feelings of overqualification appear to lower an employee's threshold, or standard, for what they are willing to tolerate and this may ultimately hurt the company's productivity.

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Table 1

Means, Standard Deviations, and Inter-correlations^a

	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Sex ^b	-	-								
2. Race ^c	-	-	.03							
3. Age	39.48	9.65	-.08	.17**						
4. Perceived age discrimination (employee reported)	2.24	1.39	.31**	-.11	-.13*					
5. Perceived overqualification (employee reported)	4.80	1.46	.05	-.13*	-.16*	.44**				
6. Perceived age discrimination (paired participant reported)	2.24	1.38	.29**	-.16*	-.10	.78**	.36**			
7. Perceived overqualification (paired participant reported)	4.91	1.36	-.02	-.15*	-.05	.28**	.54**	.31**		
8. Job withdrawal	2.66	1.50	.27**	-.08	-.19**	.63**	.42**	.62**	.39**	
9. Somatic symptoms	2.92	1.42	.19**	-.09	-.05	.51**	.26**	.54**	.31**	.70**

^a $N = 235$; means and standard deviations are only reported for interval-scaled variables.

^b Sex was coded as 0 = female, 1 = male.

^c Race was coded as 0 = non-Caucasian, 1 = Caucasian.

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

Table 2

*Results of Moderated Hierarchical Multiple Regression Analysis for Predicting Job Withdrawal**(HI)^a*

Variables	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
<i>Control</i>			
Sex ^b	.26**	.09	.08
Race ^c	-.06	.02	.01
Age	-.16*	-.09	-.08
<i>Predictor (Employee-Reported)</i>			
Perceived Age Discrimination		.52**	.43**
Perceived Overqualification		.17**	.25**
<i>Interaction</i>			
Perceived Age Discrimination × Perceived Overqualification			.17**
<i>R</i> ²	.10**	.44	.46
ΔR^2		.34**	.02**

^a *N* = 235; standardized coefficients are reported; two-tailed tests.

^b Sex was coded as 0 = female, 1 = male.

^c Race was coded as 0 = non-Caucasian, 1 = Caucasian.

* *p* < .05.

** *p* < .01.

Table 3

Results of Moderated Hierarchical Multiple Regression Analysis for Predicting Somatic

Symptoms (H2)^a

Variables	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
<i>Control</i>			
Sex ^b	.19**	.04	.03
Race ^c	-.09	-.04	-.05
Age	-.02	.03	.03
<i>Predictor (Employee-Reported)</i>			
Perceived Age Discrimination		.48**	.38**
Perceived Overqualification		.04	.12
<i>Interaction</i>			
Perceived Age Discrimination × Perceived Overqualification			.19**
<i>R</i> ²	.05*	.26	.29
ΔR^2		.22**	.03**

^a *N* = 235; standardized coefficients are reported; two-tailed tests.

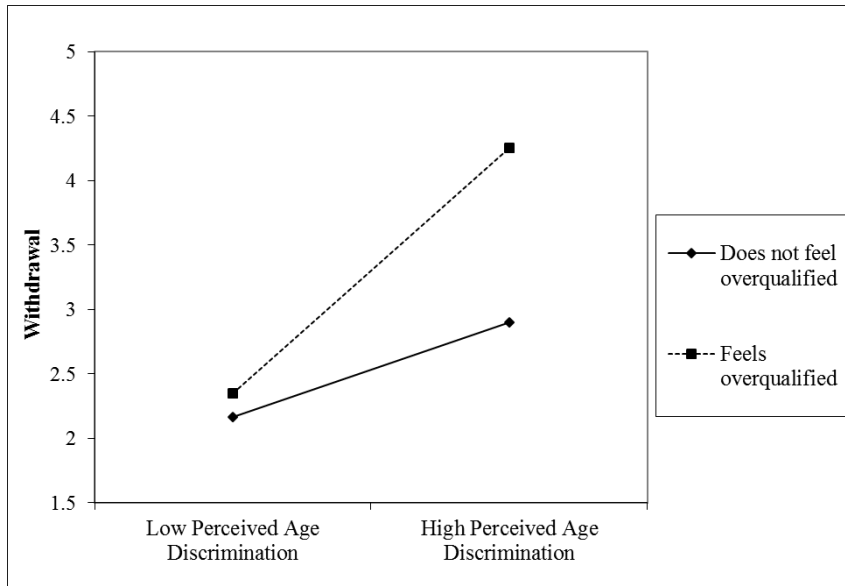
^b Sex was coded as 0 = female, 1 = male.

^c Race was coded as 0 = non-Caucasian, 1 = Caucasian.

* *p* < .05.

** *p* < .01.

A) Withdrawal



B) Somatic Symptoms

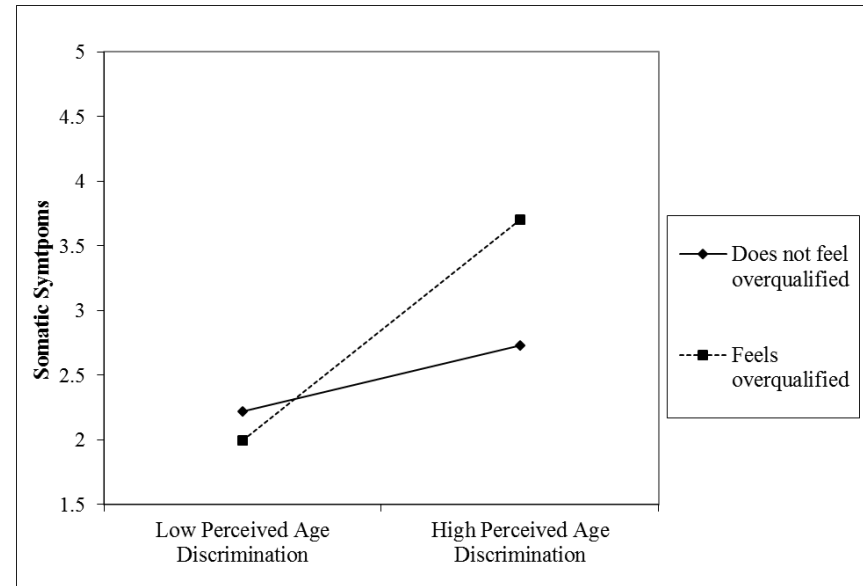
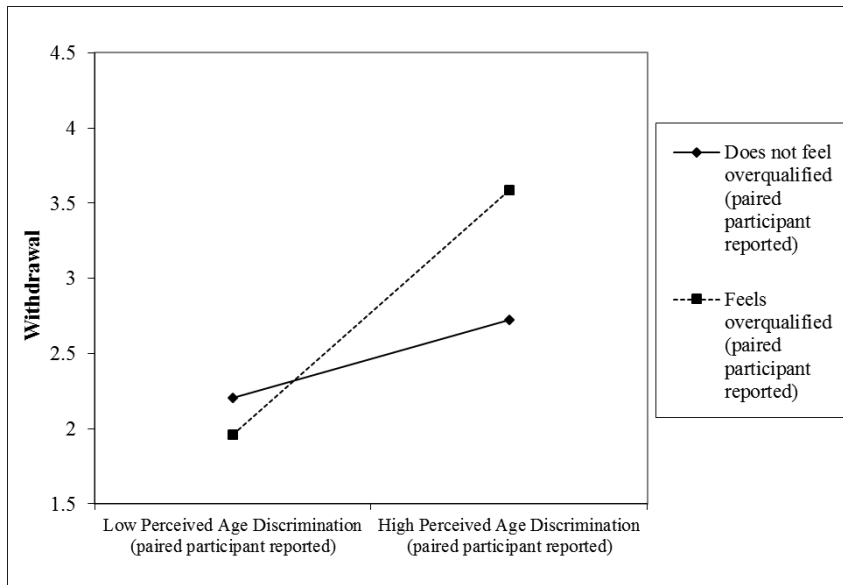


Figure 1. Interaction effect of employee-reported perceived age discrimination and perceived overqualification predicting employee-reported job withdrawal and somatic symptoms.

A) Withdrawal



B) Somatic Symptoms

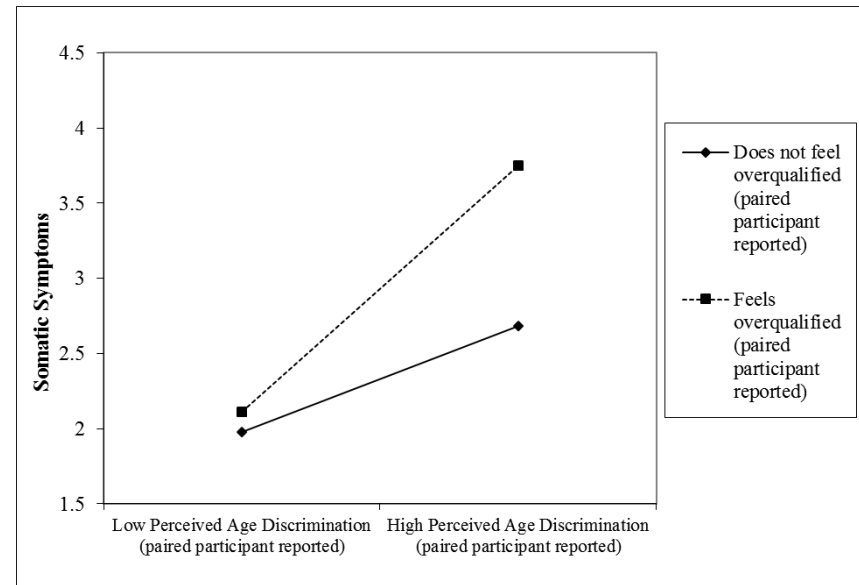


Figure 2. Interaction effect of paired participant-reported perceived age discrimination against the employee and perceived overqualification of the employee predicting employee-reported job withdrawal and somatic symptoms.