

# Mitigating work alienation in public sector service-delivery projects caused by perceived overqualification: the roles of empowering leadership and the psychological contracts

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The study investigates the nature of an understudied yet salient relationship between perceived overqualification (POQ) and work alienation in project management. It employs relative deprivation theory to propose two dimensions of the psychological contract, i.e. relational and transactional, as underlying mediating mechanisms and how empowering leadership mitigates the adverse effects of POQ.

**Design/methodology/approach** – To this end, in two waves, we surveyed 232 project members of three public-sector information and communication technologies (ICT) projects in Punjab, Pakistan. The data was analyzed using Partial Least Square Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM).

**Findings** – The key findings are: (1) POQ leads to work alienation, (2) relational and transactional contracts mediate this relationship, and (3) empowering leadership can mitigate the adverse effects of POQ in project management settings.

**Originality/value** – This research adds valuable insights to the scant POQ literature in public-sector project management settings. It also contributes by identifying the mediating role of relational and transactional psychological contracts and the moderating role of empowering leadership to mitigate the adverse effects of POQ in these settings.

**Keywords** Relative deprivation theory, Perceived overqualification, Work alienation, Psychological contract, Empowering leadership, Public sector project management, Public services management, Public sector projects

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

Perceived overqualification (POQ) occurs when employees consider that their qualifications, skills, and education exceed the job requirements (Erdogan and Bauer, 2011). Data shows that more than 41% of recent US college graduates are underemployed (Federal Reserve Bank of New York, 2024). In another survey of 114 countries, the International Labor Organization identified 258 million (28%) workers worldwide as being overqualified for their jobs. Due to the exclusion of certain countries, the actual figures can be much higher (International Labor Organization, 2020), thus insinuating the gravity of the problem. In today's work settings,



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overqualification is pervasive, and project professionals, though less affected, need to seek out relevant opportunities (Wilkinson, 2021).

In the literature on fast-paced project-based organizations, HRM issues (Samimi and Sydow, 2021), particularly perceived overqualification, have been largely overlooked. This is a significant oversight given the critical role of projects in contemporary organizations (Nieto-Rodriguez, 2021; Schoper *et al.*, 2018), including governments. Initiatives such as the one implemented by the Project Management Institute (PMI)'s Silicon Valley chapter (Khan, 2009) to create jobs for unemployed PMI members highlight the issue of overqualification, even in project management settings that typically offer better placements. This underscores the need for a comprehensive investigation into this issue. This scant attention becomes more acute regarding contract or temporary employment, which has increased worldwide (International Labor Organization, 2022; Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2023) and is the norm in project management. Specifically, according to the Project Management Institute, only 32% of organizations offer full-time, long-term employment to project staff; the remaining 68% outsource or contract them on a per-project basis (Plaky, 2023). In the public sector, contract employment is on the rise, too, due to its flexibility, cost-effectiveness, and the need for specialized skills that government agencies may lack (Punjab Resource Management and Policy Unit, 2009). Thus, the intentional focus of the current study is on the POQ in project-based organizations, especially public sector service delivery ICT projects run by the government itself.

As public and private sector employees differ in terms of their psychological contracts (Willem *et al.*, 2010) and behave differently (Baarspul and Wilderom, 2011), it becomes imperative to investigate the overqualification and its undesired effects as perceived by contract project members in public sector ICT-based service delivery projects. Thus, this investigation is timely as project management literature is (1) largely devoid of overqualification studies, with few mentioning it peripherally (e.g. Palmer, 1986 proposes public works projects to solve the problem of underemployment in Sudan; Rojansky, 1987, while discussing the postgraduate education in construction management, posits that construction companies equate overqualification as higher salary demands); (2) a few collecting data from employees working in the project management as well as other functions (Chu, 2020); and (3) a few mentioning it explicitly, see Table 1, (Zhang *et al.*, 2022a, b; Zheng *et al.*, 2023a, b). This lack presents an opportunity for the project management literature to evolve as a discipline, integrating novel concepts, bridging gaps between existing theoretical frameworks, and empirically validating these connections through a sample of project members from the public sector (McCalman, 2016).

Due to the scant overqualification literature in project management settings (see Table 1), we looked at the organizational behavior literature. This review revealed that the literature on POQ can be roughly categorized into three research streams. The first stream, the dominant one, finds that overqualified employees experience largely adverse outcomes (Erdogan and Bauer, 2021; Lee *et al.*, 2021; Zhang *et al.*, 2022a, b). The second one indicates that employees who feel overqualified can experience positive outcomes (van Dijk *et al.*, 2020; Fine and Nevo, 2008; Khan *et al.*, 2023) under the right organizational conditions. The third, a recent stream, points to the paradoxical nature of POQ and its potential resolution (Lee *et al.*, 2021). While the last two streams, i.e. the positive outcomes and the paradoxical nature of overqualification, are salient due to less focus on them, it is also a fact that overqualification is generally undesirable (Erdogan and Bauer, 2009, 2021). Thus, it will be valuable if the relevant moderators and the mediators impinging on the relationship between POQ and its adverse outcomes can be identified to better understand the nuances of the phenomenon. Moreover, such an investigation is also valuable for project management settings since none of the studies thus far explored POQ and its outcomes and the relevant moderators. An exception is a study by Chu (2020), which investigated the effects of congruence between self-POQ and

Reference	Context	Theoretical lens	Independent variables	Dependent variables	Mediator(s)	Moderator(s)	Key findings
Chu (2020)	Employees from multiple functional teams, including <i>project management</i> construction projects	(1) Equity theory, (2) self-categorization theory, and (3) similarity-attraction theory N-A	(1) POQ (2) Perceived co-worker overqualification	Organizational identification	Team-member exchange	N-A	(1) The greater the consistency between POQ and perceived co-worker overqualification, the higher quality of team-member exchange ensues; (2) Team-member exchange mediates the relationship between this congruence and organizational identification (1) POQ increases safety participation; (2) POQ dampens safety compliance by increasing occupational stress
Liang and Qiu (2021)	Construction projects	N-A	Task stressors: (1) job boredom; (2) job complexity (3) skill underutilization (4) POQ (5) job monotony Collective moral judgment focus on self	Safety behavior (safety compliance; safety participation)	Occupational stress	N-A	POQ strengthens the influence of moral disengagement on deviant behavior
Yuan <i>et al.</i> (2023)	Construction projects	Social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1989)	Empowering leadership	Deviant behavior	Moral disengagement	(1) POQ; (2) Performance-avoidance goal orientation	(1) Only high POQ, not the low and the average, amplifies the positive relationship between creative self-efficacy and project performance; and (2) both its high and low values, not the average, intensify the leader-member exchange and project performance positive link
Zheng <i>et al.</i> (2023a, b)	Construction projects	Conservation of resources theory (Hobfoll, 2011)	Empowering leadership	Project performance	(1) Creative self-efficacy, (2) leader-member exchange	POQ	(1) Only high POQ, not the low and the average, amplifies the positive relationship between creative self-efficacy and project performance; and (2) both its high and low values, not the average, intensify the leader-member exchange and project performance positive link

(continued)

**Table 1.**  
Key research on POQ  
in project management  
settings

Table 1.

Reference	Context	Theoretical lens	Independent variables	Dependent variables	Mediator(s)	Moderator(s)	Key findings
Zheng <i>et al.</i> (2023a, b)	Construction projects	Social information processing theory (Salancik and Pfeffer, 1978)	(1) Empowering leadership; (2) directive leadership	Innovative behavior	(1) Creative self-efficacy; (2) POQ	Leader-member exchange	(1) Creative self-efficacy mediates the link between empowering leadership and innovative behavior; (2) POQ negatively mediates the link between directive leadership and innovative behavior (3) High leader-member exchange moderates the indirect relationship between empowering leadership and innovative behavior via creative self-efficacy; (4) High leader-member exchange negatively moderates the indirect relationship between directive leadership and innovative behavior via POQ.
Zhu <i>et al.</i> (2024)	(Potential project) Teams in R&D companies	Social comparison theory	Coworker relative overqualification	(1) Knowledge seeking; (2) knowledge sabotage	(1) Benign envy; (2) Malicious envy	(1) Cooperative goal Interdependence; (2) Competitive goal Interdependence	When cooperation is the primary goal in an employee-coworker relationship and a coworker is perceived as more qualified, employees experience benign envy, which motivates them to seek knowledge from the coworker. Conversely, when competition is the primary goal, the same perception leads to malicious envy, encouraging employees to sabotage their coworker's knowledge
This study	Public sector ICT-based service delivery projects	Relative deprivation theory	POQ	Project members' work alienation	(1) Transactional and (2) relational psychological contracts	Empowering leadership	(1) Both types of contracts mediate the relationship between POQ and work alienation differently, and (2) empowering leadership ameliorates the deteriorated relational psychological contract owing to POQ.

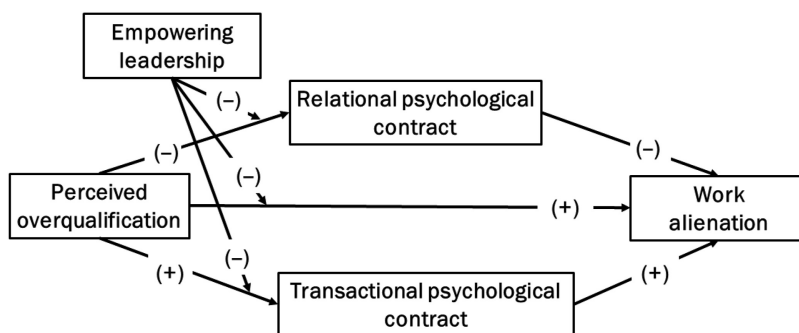
**Source(s):** Authors own creation

perceived co-worker overqualification on team-member exchange and, consequently, organizational identification. However, its respondents included employees from multiple functions, including project management.

Among the detrimental effects of POQ, the least researched is work alienation (for exceptions, see [Söylemez and Uslu, 2022](#); [Wang et al., 2019](#); [Yu et al., 2021](#)). On top of this, the current understanding of what transpires between POQ and work alienation is lacking, except for a recent study by [Söylemez and Uslu \(2022\)](#). Understanding the underlying mechanisms is essential (1) to better understand the nature of the relationship and (2) to mitigate adverse outcomes of POQ that lead to work alienation. The review of the literature on overqualification revealed that quite a few studies, to date, have identified organizational conditions that can alleviate the detrimental effects of overqualification (e.g. [Debus et al., 2020](#); [Erdogan and Bauer, 2009, 2021](#); [Johnson and Johnson, 1996](#)). Their results show that organization researchers can and should identify the right organizational conditions, i.e. theoretically and managerially relevant moderators, to mitigate the negative consequences of POQ.

To address the research gaps in project management and organizational behavior literature, the current research proposes the following research questions: (1) How does POQ affect project members' work alienation? (2) What can mitigate the negative consequences of project members' POQ? It proposes a psychological contract perspective using relative deprivation theory to understand the relationship between POQ and work alienation. Furthermore, it suggests that designing the right work environment, e.g. through empowering leadership, can alleviate the sense of deprivation of overqualified project members. As a result, the study finds that project managers with empowering leadership styles ameliorate project members' deteriorated relational psychological contract due to POQ.

This research contributes to the literature on POQ, psychological contracts, work alienation, leadership, and public-sector project management in four ways. Firstly, it discovers the nuances of the relationship between POQ and work alienation. This is important as, potentially, a sense of deprivation can make an overqualified member of the project alienated as existing empirical evidence points ([Fan and Wang, 2022](#); [Wang et al., 2019](#); [Yu et al., 2019](#)); yet few studies examined the indirect relationship between POQ and work alienation (for an exception, see [Söylemez and Uslu, 2022](#)). This limits the understanding of how perceived overqualification influences work alienation. To address this gap, the present study employs the relative deprivation theory ([Crosby, 1976](#)) to explore why overqualification affects work alienation (see [Figure 1](#) for the study's theoretical model). In doing so, the present study addresses a recent call to identify multiple mediators in a single study to understand the phenomenon of overqualification ([Erdogan and Bauer, 2021](#)).



Source(s): Authors' own creation

**Figure 1.**  
A psychological contracts model of perceived overqualification and work alienation

Secondly, it identifies a theoretically and managerially relevant moderator influencing the relationship between POQ and its outcomes. By examining empowering leadership as a moderator, the current study illustrates how organizations can benefit from project members who perceive themselves as overqualified. Specifically, project managers can mitigate the negative effect of POQ reflected in the deteriorated relational psychological contract by empowering overqualified project members.

Finally, most of the research conducted on overqualification has been in the business sector, and its investigation in the public sector has recently gained traction (Bao and Zhong, 2023; Chen and Chen, 2023; Cheng *et al.*, 2020; Huang *et al.*, 2022; Kulkarni *et al.*, 2015; Li *et al.*, 2020; Tsameti *et al.*, 2023; Varney, 2023) potentially due to the evidence that overqualification varies by employment status, i.e. self-employed workers, private employees, and government employees (Congregado *et al.*, 2016). Further, while the world economy is fast becoming the project economy (Nieto-Rodriguez, 2021; Schoper *et al.*, 2018), the overqualification research in project management settings is limited (Zhang *et al.*, 2022a, b; Zheng *et al.*, 2023a, b). This is astonishing, especially when the perception of overqualification can vary across the nature of the work, e.g. project-based vs. non-project, and potentially across the nature of the organizational context, i.e. public vs. private vs. not-for-profit sectors (Baarspul and Wilderom, 2011; Tsameti *et al.*, 2023; Willem *et al.*, 2010). Thus, we conducted the study in the context of public sector ICT-based service delivery projects, where more contractual employees are hired.

## Literature and hypotheses development

### *Overqualification research in project management*

We comprehensively reviewed the overqualification literature, specifically focusing on project management contexts. The research on perceived overqualification in project management settings is still in its infancy despite the considerable research in general work settings. Table 1 shows specifically the overqualification research in project management. Almost all the research is conducted on Chinese construction projects, with few exceptions (Chu, 2020; Zhu *et al.*, 2024). As Table 1 reveals, none of the studies investigated POQ as a focal construct, i.e. as an independent or dependent variable, except the mentioned studies (Chu, 2020; Zhu *et al.*, 2024). The first investigated the effects of the congruence between POQ and perceived co-worker overqualification (Chu, 2020). They collected its responses from various functional teams, not exclusively from project management, thereby diluting its focus on project management. In the second study (Zhu *et al.*, 2024), data was collected from teams in R&D companies that potentially use the project structure. Moreover, two studies (Yuan *et al.*, 2023; Zheng *et al.*, 2023a, b) investigated its moderating effect, while one studied its mediating effect. Given the severity of the overqualification issue, even in project management, it warrants academic attention.

### *POQ and work alienation*

Overqualification is a phenomenon wherein an employee's education, skills, and expertise exceed those required by the job (Khan and Morrow, 1991). If the feeling of overqualification is about oneself, it is called POQ. As pointed out in the previous section, overqualification is generally undesirable due to its adverse attitudinal and behavioral outcomes (Erdogan and Bauer, 2021; Feldman, 1996). Among these outcomes, a relatively less investigated is work alienation (Mottaz, 1981; Seeman, 1991). In this regard, Yu *et al.* (2021) and Wang *et al.* (2019) find that overqualified incumbents feel alienated from their work. Alienation from work is a psychological state in which employees are estranged from their jobs because their employment cannot fulfill their expectations (Banai and Reisel, 2007; Seeman, 1991).

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Overqualified employees can feel that their potential cannot be realized in their current work, leading to inefficacy and a lack of accomplishment (Schaufeli *et al.*, 2009). Consequently, they can think they are wasting their time, energy, and capabilities in their present job, which can lead to distress (Johnson and Johnson, 1996). To relieve it, they can isolate themselves from their work, work situation, co-workers, self, and the organization (Nair and Vohra, 2010). The literature on the meaning of work shows that having little or no control over the work can alienate the employees (Wrzesniewski and Dutton, 2001). Conversely, perceived control over the situation can mitigate the feeling of relative deprivation (Abrams *et al.*, 1999). One of the outcomes of POQ is relative deprivation (Lee *et al.*, 2021). When individuals overqualified for their current positions fail to secure higher positions that match their qualifications and skills, while others with similar qualifications hold better positions, they may feel a loss of control and relative deprivation. This can lead to their alienation from their work (Lee *et al.*, 2021; Söylemez and Uslu, 2022). Thus, based on the above literature and using the relative deprivation theory as a theoretical lens, the present research proposes the following hypothesis:

H1. Project members' PQ is positively related to their work alienation.

Despite the empirical evidence in the discussion leading to H1, the link between the perception of overqualification and work alienation should be further explored to manage work alienation and other outcomes better. For this, understanding the role of mediators is paramount. In this regard, job stress, satisfaction, organizational commitment, and perceived control can mediate this relationship. However, there is little empirical evidence on the role of these mediators except for a recent study by Söylemez and Uslu (2022), which found evidence for relative deprivation and mastery experience as the mediators. To further illuminate the link between POQ and work alienation, the present study proposes relational and transactional psychological contracts as mediators.

#### *POQ and the psychological contracts*

The psychological contract is "individual beliefs, shaped by the organization, regarding terms of an exchange agreement between individuals and their organization" (Rousseau, 1995, p. 9). Researchers studying the idiosyncrasies of psychological contracts have classified them mainly into *transactional* and *relational*, the two ends of a contractual continuum (Rousseau, 1989, 1995). The focus of a transactional contract is on short-term and monetizable exchanges. It is exemplified by a fixed salary, limited personal involvement, fixed timeframe, use of existing skills, and unambiguous terms (Rousseau, 1995). In contrast, a relational contract is characterized by open-ended relationships, considerable investments by employees and employers, a higher level of interdependence, and higher barriers to exit (Rousseau, 1995). As a result, it provides considerable flexibility to both parties (Rousseau and Parks, 1993). In other words, while a transactional psychological contract is characterized by economic and utilitarian exchange, a relational contract is akin to social exchange and is characterized by mutual trust, commitment, and relationship building (Dulac *et al.*, 2008; Lester *et al.*, 2007).

Building on the prior research that investigated mainly the adverse effects of POQ (e.g. Luksyte *et al.*, 2011) and guided by the relative deprivation (Crosby, 1976) and psychological contract (Rousseau, 1995) theories, the present research contends that POQ boosts the transactional psychological contract but dampens the relational one. Overqualified incumbents feel relative deprivation when comparing themselves with their counterparts who have similar or less knowledge, skills, and abilities but are drawing better benefits. Consequently, they perceive their current job as (1) one that doesn't match their qualifications and (2) as a hurdle to better opportunities elsewhere. Due to this, they can consider their

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commitments with employers as transactional rather than relational (Feldman, 1996). Alternatively stated, overqualified incumbents are more inclined to perceive employment agreements in transactional terms. As a result, they fulfill their responsibilities in exchange for monetary remuneration or other tangible rewards (Shore *et al.*, 2006). This form of contract, which stresses the tangible aspects of the engagement, such as work for compensation, is incompatible with organizational strategies aimed at producing a highly committed workforce (Uen *et al.*, 2009). Conversely, overqualified incumbents are unlikely to positively evaluate the prolonged relationships with the organization potentially because of the poor person-job fit and temporary commitment (Rezvani *et al.*, 2016). This can potentially result in a lower evaluation of the relational psychological contract. Thus, the current study proposes the following hypotheses:

- H2. Project members' POQ is negatively related to (a) a relational psychological contract and positively to (b) a transactional psychological contract.

### *Psychological contracts and work alienation*

Psychological contracts predict a host of job attitudes and behaviors. However, different types of psychological contracts tend to provide varied results (Agarwal and Gupta, 2018; Bal *et al.*, 2013). For instance, Bal *et al.* (2013) found that relational and transactional psychological contracts are positive and negative predictors of employee engagement, respectively. According to the social exchange theory (Blau, 2017), human relationships are constructed based on two-way exchange (give and take), but this does not always indicate that the exchanges are balanced. In the social exchange process, reciprocity and expectations are critical. As both psychological contracts vary regarding reciprocity and expectations, they will have differing relationships with work alienation.

Relative deprivation theory (Crosby, 1976) can help explain how both psychological contracts (relational and transactional) relate to work alienation. In the case of the relational psychological contract, employees who believe they have a relational contract with their employer expect to receive certain benefits, such as job security and career development opportunities, as part of a long-term relationship with the organization. When these expectations are not met, employees may perceive themselves as being deprived of what they believe they deserve, leading to dissatisfaction (Turnley and Feldman, 2000) and work alienation. In contrast, when they evaluate the relational psychological contract as intact due to the positive social exchange with the organization, they can feel less work alienation. Extant research also points to a similar assertion. In a relational contract, employees feel a high level of integration and identification with the organization and the ensuing exchange relationship (Millward and Hopkins, 1998). Due to this identification, a high relational psychological contract can mitigate work alienation.

Alternatively, in the case of the transactional psychological contract, employees who believe they have a utilitarian and monetary transactional contract with their employer expect to receive certain rewards, such as fair pay and benefits, in exchange for their performance. When the rewards are not provided, employees may perceive themselves as deprived of what they believe they deserve, leading to feelings of injustice, dissatisfaction, and work alienation. In fact, when both parties respect the transactional psychological contract, employees may still feel alienated at work, especially when they compare themselves to others benefiting from it. This can lead employees to see the organization as a place where they have little or no attachment (Millward and Hopkins, 1998). Accordingly, in this type of contract, employees' identity is constructed from their distinguished abilities and competencies (Millward and Hopkins, 1998), which they consider to be transferable to jobs in other organizations. As they don't consider themselves to belong to the focal organization, the transactional contract can foster work alienation.



Overall, the relative deprivation theory suggests that work alienation arises from employees' perceptions of being deprived of what they believe they deserve or what they see others receiving. This can occur in both relational and transactional psychological contracts, where employees have certain expectations or obligations that their employer does not meet. As a result, they may experience a sense of disengagement from their work. However, both the psychological contracts (relational and transactional), as discussed earlier, can differ in their relationship with work alienation. In sum, the current study posits that a relational psychological contract ameliorates work alienation, whereas a transactional one worsens it. Thus, we propose the following hypotheses:

- H3.* (a) A relational psychological contract is negatively related, and (b) a transactional psychological contract is positively related to work alienation as perceived by project members.

#### *Relational and transactional psychological contracts as mediators*

While some research has investigated the direct effect of overqualification on work alienation (Wang *et al.*, 2019; Yu *et al.*, 2021), there is little research on the underlying mechanisms (for an exception, see Söylemez and Uslu, 2022). This paucity suggests identifying the mechanisms can not only advance the understanding of the impinged relationship, but can also shed light on what managers can potentially do to thwart the negative outcomes of POQ (Anderson and Winefield, 2011). Thus, we contend that psychological contracts (relational and transactional) mediate the relationship between POQ and work alienation differently.

Due to their relative deprivation, overqualified employees may not view their working ties with the organization as long-term, trust-based, and reciprocal; instead, they can consider their psychological contract as short-term and transactional. Moreover, in the project-based working environment, as in the present study, organizations do not need long-term commitments from their project members, who trade in job security and commitment for short-term economic gains. Thus, overqualified project members working in project-based organizations can be more inclined to form a transactional psychological contract, which can increase work alienation. On the other hand, overqualified incumbents do not make prolonged relations with their organizations due to their relative deprivation and poor person-environment fit (Kristof-Brown *et al.*, 2005). This can result in a lower evaluation of relational psychological contracts, lowering work alienation.

In sum, a relational psychological contract reflects the quality of the working relationship, and a transactional one focuses largely on the economic exchange. The former can mediate the relationship between POQ and work alienation by serving as a source of motivation and support for the employee. Thus, if the employer can create a positive working relationship with the employee, it can alleviate the negative effects of POQ and prevent work alienation. In contrast, the overqualified project members can consider the transactional psychological contract unfair due to their relative deprivation. This can further exacerbate the negative effects of POQ and increase the likelihood of work alienation. Building on these arguments, we advance the following hypotheses:

- H4a.* Relational psychological contract positively mediates the relationship between project members' POQ and their work alienation such that the increase in the perception of overqualification decreases the relational psychological contract, which in turn decreases work alienation.

- H4b.* Transactional psychological contract positively mediates the relationship between project members' POQ and their work alienation such that an increase in the perception of overqualification leads to an increase in the transactional psychological contract, which in turn leads to a rise in work alienation.

*The moderating role of empowering leadership*

Apart from unearthing the underlying processes between POQ and work alienation, research should also answer the question: What can organizations do to mitigate the negative effects of POQ? To date, quite a few studies have identified the conditions that can alleviate the detrimental effects of overqualification. For instance, the availability of emotional support in one's life (Johnson and Johnson, 1997), psychological empowerment (Erdogan and Bauer, 2009), and autonomy (Debus *et al.*, 2020) mitigate the negative effects of POQ. A recent review article on overqualification (Erdogan and Bauer, 2021) concludes that POQ negatively affects interpersonal relationships, which can alienate the overqualified employees from their co-workers, potentially due to a sense of deprivation. This tendency, they contended, can be alleviated when overqualified employees have political skills or have a sense of motivation due to belongingness to the organization. To conclude, the above studies show that organization researchers can and should identify the right organizational conditions, i.e. theoretically and managerially relevant moderators, to mitigate the negative consequences of POQ. To address this concern, the present research proposes empowering leadership as a managerially relevant moderator that can minimize the negative outcomes of POQ.

Employees have more opportunities for self-direction and independent decision-making when their supervisors empower them (Vecchio *et al.*, 2010). With increasing workplace freedom, individuals with overqualification can have opportunities to experiment with novel and productive work approaches, such as job crafting (Debus *et al.*, 2020). As such, they can use their abilities to escape the rut and find creative solutions to problems (Shalley and Gilson, 2004). In so doing, individuals who perceive overqualification may appreciate and value their work under the right conditions. This contention aligns with existing research (Erdogan and Bauer, 2009), which finds that overqualification's detrimental effects can be mitigated by psychological empowerment. Thus, the current study argues that overqualified project members can witness less work alienation in the presence of empowering leadership. Moreover, relative deprivation theory supports this argument in that when their supervisor empowers them, the project members can feel less deprived and consequently can feel less alienated from their work.

Moreover, building on the work by Kahn (1990), the current study argues that the interaction of POQ and empowering leadership can help people meet their psychological conditions of meaningfulness, safety, and availability. When their supervisors empower the overqualified project members, they can (1) experience meaningfulness in their role performances as it incentivizes them to engage with their work; (2) feel safe as they can consider the job situation trustworthy, secure, and predictable; and (3) make themselves available for the role performances since they can consider themselves to possess the physical, emotional, and psychological resources. Thus, empowering leadership can offset the negative consequences of overqualification, such as work alienation, and the overqualified employee can experience less work alienation. Therefore, the current research proposes the following hypothesis:

*H5a.* Empowering leadership moderates the positive relationship between project members' POQ and their work alienation such that this relationship weakens in the presence of empowering leadership.

As discussed earlier, POQ can lead to feelings of relative deprivation (Lee *et al.*, 2021) because employees can compare their qualifications to those of their colleagues or to industry standards and can feel that they are not being adequately recognized or rewarded for their abilities. As a result, their relational psychological contract can suffer. In this context, empowering leadership can potentially moderate the relationship between POQ and relational psychological contracts by reducing the sense of relative deprivation. Empowering leaders who provide support, delegate authority, and create opportunities for growth and

development can help employees feel valued and respected, even if their job requirements do not fully utilize their qualifications. Moreover, existing research found leaders' support inspires confidence in subordinates, allowing them to feel capable, autonomous, and confident in their ability to give their fullest to work and the organization (Zhang and Bartol, 2010). This can reduce the perception of relative deprivation and improve the relational psychological contract, as employees feel that their employer acknowledges and rewards their contributions.

Furthermore, empowering leadership can reduce the comparison standard against which employees evaluate their situation. Empowering leaders can create a positive work environment where employees feel that their work is meaningful and they are contributing to the organization. This can shift the comparison standard from external factors (such as industry standards or colleagues) to internal factors (such as personal growth and development). By creating a positive internal comparison standard, empowering leadership can reduce the negative effects of POQ on the relational psychological contract.

In summary, relative deprivation theory suggests that POQ can lead to a deteriorated relational psychological contract, and empowering leadership can potentially moderate the relationship by reducing the sense of relative deprivation and shifting the comparison standard from external to internal factors. This can lead to an improved relational psychological contract. In contrast, as argued earlier, POQ can foster the transactional psychological contract. In the presence of empowering leadership, this positive relationship can weaken due to the shift in the focus from external to internal and ameliorated relative deprivation. In situations characterized by low-empowerment leadership and high transactional contracts, without career development, overqualified project members are less likely to go beyond their duties, resulting in high transactional rather than relational contracts. Thus, we propose the following hypotheses:

- H5b.* The negative relationship between project members' POQ and the relational psychological contract is moderated by empowering leadership, such that the intensity of this relationship weakens in the presence of empowering leadership.
- H5c.* The positive relationship between project members' POQ and the transactional psychological contract is moderated by empowering leadership, such that the intensity of this relationship weakens in the presence of empowering leadership.

## **Methodology**

This section explains the population, sample, procedure, and measurement instruments for data collection.

### *Sample and procedure*

The present research employs a time-lagged cross-sectional survey method to collect the data and test the hypotheses. As argued earlier, there is a paucity of overqualification research in project management, especially in public sector projects. This research intentionally focuses on the ICT projects run by the Government of Punjab, the largest province of Pakistan. Specifically, the data was collected from public sector ICT-based service delivery projects under the Annual Development Programs scheme of the Government of Punjab.

To secure the respondents' participation, the project team members were provided with essential information such as the study's goals, benefits, and the voluntary nature of the participation, as well as pledges of anonymity. The projects mentioned above were specifically chosen since project members (equivalent to grade 16 and above [1]) working in mature projects are more likely to experience POQ, psychological contracts, work

alienation, and empowering leadership. The projects included: (1) a project to ensure secure, peaceful, and prosperous cities of the province (a safe city project); (2) a management information system of the Home Department; and (3) revamping of the province's Highway Patrolling Police under the Directorate of Monitoring. In each project, project team members report to their respective project managers, who in turn report to the relevant head of the department. For instance, in Project 1, the project manager reports to the Inspector General Police, the head of Police; in Project 2, the project manager reports to the manager of Management Information Systems; and in Project 3, the project manager reports to the Director General Directorate of Monitoring. All the relevant heads report to the Home Secretary.

The data were gathered in two phases to address common method variance bias (CMV) and explore causality. In the first phase (*t1*), 550 questionnaires were distributed via in-person visits to the project field officers, and they were requested to report their responses about their own POQ and empowering leadership behaviors of their bosses. Each participant was allotted a distinctive code so that responses could be accorded and tallied with their later response in a second phase. After about a month, 338 questionnaires were received, with approximately a 61.45% response rate. Afterward, *t2* data gathering was conducted, and 338 questionnaires, consisting of psychological contracts and work alienation, were sent to the participants. Out of the 338, 250 questionnaires were received back, 18 of which were incomplete and thus were dropped from the analysis. As a result, 232 valid questionnaires, with a response rate of 68.639%, were used for final analysis. After the two-phase data collection exercise, we received data from 77, 75, and 80 project team members for projects 1, 2, and 3, respectively. There were no questions about the respondents' confidentiality in the questionnaire. The sample characteristics are shown in Table 2. When the study was conducted, all the study participants had contract employment. However, they were likely to be made permanent depending on their performance and the project's current stage. For instance, at the end of the project, either the project team members' services are terminated or made permanent in the respective department.

Demographic	Statistic
<i>Gender</i>	
Male	66.4%
Female	33.6%
<i>Age</i>	35 years (mean)
<i>Experience</i>	
Less than 1-year	10.3%
1–5	27.6%
6–10	28.9%
11–15	24.1%
16 and above years	9.1%
<i>Qualification</i>	
Secondary School Certificate (10 years of schooling)	7.3%
Intermediate (12 years of schooling)	11.2%
Bachelors (14 years of schooling)	29.7%
BS/Masters (16 years of schooling)	40.5%
MS/M.Phil. and above (18 years of schooling)	11.2%

**Table 2.**

Sample characteristics

**Source(s):** Authors' own creation

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### Measures

All the constructs (see [Appendix](#) for all the items) were measured by adapting pre-developed measurement scales on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). POQ was measured using the 9-item scale developed by [Maynard et al. \(2006\)](#). A sample item is “Someone with less education than myself could perform well on my job.” The 8-item scale of work alienation by [Nair and Vohra \(2010\)](#) was employed to assess work alienation. A sample item is “I do not enjoy my work.” The 9-item and 7-item scales by [Raja et al. \(2004\)](#) were employed to measure relational and transactional psychological contracts, respectively. A sample scale item of the relational psychological contract is “I expect to gain promotion in this organization with the length of service and effort to achieve goals.” A sample item for the transactional psychological contract scale is “My commitment to this organization is defined by my contract.” Empowering leadership was assessed using a 12-item scale ([Zhang and Bartol, 2010](#)). An example item is, “My manager helps me understand how my objectives and goals relate to that of the organization.”

### Analysis and results

The current research employs Partial Least Square Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) using WarpPLS 8.0 to analyze the hypothesized relationships because of the complexity of the proposed framework ([Hair et al., 2011](#)). The PLS-SEM method, increasingly popular for testing path-analytical models, considers measurement errors when aggregating indicators to calculate latent variables. This contrasts with covariance-based SEM, which overlooks measurement errors and computes a weighted aggregation of latent indicators ([Kock, 2019](#)). [Kock \(2019\)](#) argues that measurement errors should be considered additional indicators, and latent variables should be calculated alongside actual indicators and their associated measurement errors. Ignoring these errors can lead to bias. Models that compute latent variables without considering measurement errors tend to weaken the path coefficients’ true values ([Kock, 2019](#); [Sarstedt et al., 2014](#)). Furthermore, PLS-SEM simplifies the model estimation process by adopting flexible assumptions, thereby enhancing theoretical parsimony ([Hair et al., 2011](#)).

In PLS-SEM, the sample size must be more than ten times the maximum number of paths affecting an endogenous variable ([Hair et al., 2011](#)). The maximum number of arrows was 8, pointing at work alienation. It comprised one independent variable (POQ), two mediating variables (relational psychological contract and transactional psychological contract), and three arrows of a moderator (empowering leadership). Therefore, the final sample size of 232 exceeds 80, essential for analysis. Moreover, no substantial variance was found in early and late responses as well as across the three projects.

### Measurement model

Normally, PLS models are tested in two stages. First, the measurement model is assessed to evaluate the constructs’ validity and reliability. Convergent validity was examined using values of factor loadings and average variance extracted (AVE). As [Table 3](#) indicates, factor loadings and AVEs exceeded 0.50; hence, convergent validity exists ([Bagozzi and Yi, 1988](#)). Divergent validity was assessed by comparing the square root of AVE with the relevant correlational construct so that the values of square root of AVE exceeded the correlations’ values ([Fornell and Larcker, 1981](#)). As can be seen, [Table 4](#) shows that the square roots of AVEs exceeded its pertinent correlational construct; thus, divergent validity exists. To achieve sufficient reliability, the values of composite reliability (CR) and Cronbach’s alpha must exceed 0.70 ([Hair et al., 2019](#); [Nunnally and Bernstein, 1994](#)). [Table 3](#) illustrates that CR and Cronbach’s alpha values exceeded 0.70, ensuring the scales’ reliability.

Item	POQ	WA	EMPL	TPC	RPC	SE	<i>p</i> value
<i>POQ</i>							
POQ_01	0.742					0.053	<0.001
POQ_02	0.762					0.053	<0.001
POQ_03	0.703					0.053	<0.001
POQ_04	0.738					0.053	<0.001
POQ_05	0.705					0.053	<0.001
POQ_06	0.755					0.053	<0.001
POQ_07	0.757					0.053	<0.001
POQ_08	0.794					0.053	<0.001
POQ_09	0.642					0.054	<0.001
<i>Work alienation</i>							
WA_01		0.679				0.054	<0.001
WA_02		0.768				0.053	<0.001
WA_03		0.820				0.052	<0.001
WA_04		0.750				0.053	<0.001
WA_05		0.721				0.053	<0.001
WA_06		0.792				0.053	<0.001
WA_07		0.743				0.053	<0.001
WA_08		0.781				0.053	<0.001
<i>Empowering leadership</i>							
EMPL_01			0.718			0.053	<0.001
EMPL_02			0.810			0.052	<0.001
EMPL_03			0.722			0.053	<0.001
EMPL_04			0.679			0.054	<0.001
EMPL_05			0.712			0.053	<0.001
EMPL_06			0.721			0.053	<0.001
EMPL_07			0.671			0.054	<0.001
EMPL_08			0.700			0.053	<0.001
EMPL_09			0.717			0.053	<0.001
EMPL_10			0.709			0.053	<0.001
EMPL_11			0.704			0.053	<0.001
EMPL_12			0.639			0.054	<0.001
<i>Transactional psychological contract</i>							
TPC_01				0.691		0.053	<0.001
TPC_02				0.770		0.053	<0.001
TPC_03				0.797		0.053	<0.001
TPC_04				0.784		0.053	<0.001
TPC_05				0.720		0.053	<0.001
TPC_06				0.707		0.053	<0.001
TPC_07				0.723		0.053	<0.001
<i>Relational psychological contract</i>							
RPC_01					0.754	0.053	<0.001
RPC_02					0.810	0.052	<0.001
RPC_03					0.762	0.053	<0.001
RPC_04					0.720	0.053	<0.001
RPC_05					0.694	0.053	<0.001
RPC_06					0.663	0.054	<0.001

**Table 3.**  
Validity and reliability

(continued)

Item	POQ	WA	EMPL	TPC	RPC	SE	<i>p</i> value
RPC_07					0.784	0.053	<0.001
RPC_08					0.604	0.054	<0.001
RPC_09					0.749	0.053	<0.001
AVE	0.539	0.574	0.504	0.552	0.532	–	–
Cronbach's $\alpha$	0.892	0.893	0.910	0.864	0.889	–	–
CR	0.913	0.915	0.924	0.896	0.910	–	–
$R^2$	–	0.476	–	0.264	0.151	–	–
Adj. $R^2$	–	0.458	–	0.259	0.145	–	–
Full Col. VIF	1.943	1.896	1.242	1.636	1.370	–	–

**Source(s):** Authors' own creation

**Table 3.**

While the issue of common method variance bias (CMV) was tackled by collecting data on  $t1$  and  $t2$ , CMV and multicollinearity were checked statistically. Full collinearity variance inflation factor (VIF) was employed to test CMV and multicollinearity. Table 3 shows that the values of full collinearity VIF are in the acceptable range (<3.3), confirming the data does not have CMV and multicollinearity (Kock and Lynn, 2012). This statistic is a more traditional and possibly a better method to test CMV (Kock and Lynn, 2012) and multicollinearity (Lindell and Whitney, 2001).

Table 4 contains means, standard deviations, and correlations of the variables. The low and medium correlations reveal relationships among the variables, allowing for further analysis.

### Structural model

Before testing the hypotheses, the structural model's fit with the data was ensured through several model fit and quality indices provided by WarpPLS (see Table 5). These indices include average path coefficient (APC), average R-squared (ARS), average adjusted R-squared (AARS), average block variance inflation factor (AVIF), average full collinearity variance inflation factor (AFVIF), and the Tenenhaus' GoF (Tenenhaus *et al.*, 2005). The values of APC ( $\beta = 0.165, p = 0.001$ ), ARS ( $\beta = 0.297, p < 0.001$ ), AARS ( $\beta = 0.287, p < 0.001$ ), AVIF (1.186, ideal), AFVIF (1.458, ideal), and Tenenhaus GoF (0.485, large) reveal the structural model's fit with the data. This shows that we can test the hypotheses. Table 6 presents the results of the hypotheses. Thus, among the direct relationships, POQ had a: positive relationship with work alienation ( $\beta = 0.470, p < 0.001$ ), H1 supported; a negative relationship with relational psychological contract ( $\beta = -0.301, p < 0.001$ ), H2a supported; a positive relationship with transactional psychological contract ( $\beta = 0.492, p < 0.001$ ), H2b supported. Similarly, as expected, the relational psychological contract had a negative relationship with work alienation ( $\beta = -0.245, p < 0.001$ ), H3a supported. In contrast, the transactional one had a nonsignificant relationship with work alienation ( $\beta = 0.089, p = 0.067$ ), and H3b was not supported.

Both the mediating hypotheses, i.e. H4a and H4b, are supported. Specifically, transactional psychological contract ( $\beta = 0.081, p = 0.027$ ) and relational psychological contract ( $\beta = 0.081, p = 0.026$ ) positively mediated the relationship between POQ and work alienation. Finally, for the moderating effects, empowering leadership: (1) couldn't moderate the direct relationship between POQ and work alienation ( $\beta = 0.059, p = 0.159$ ), H5a not supported; (2) negatively moderated the negative relationship between POQ and relational psychological contract ( $\beta = -0.215, p < 0.001$ ), H5b supported. That is, empowering leadership weakens the burdening effect of POQ on relational psychological contract (see Figure 3); (3) couldn't

**Table 4.**  
Correlations and  
descriptive statistics

Construct	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. POQ	3,256	0,962	(0,734)									
2. Work alienation	2,970	0,975	0,618***	(0,758)								
3. Empowering leadership	3,336	0,866	0,266***	0,127*	(0,71)							
4. Transactional psychological contract	3,289	0,957	0,498***	0,434***	0,308***	(0,743)						
5. Relational psychological contract	3,046	0,912	-0,26***	-0,412***	-0,051	-0,394***	(0,729)					
6. Gender	-	-	0,12*	0,066	0,078	0,006	0,063	1				
7. Age	1,964	0,883	0,082	0,075	0,126*	0,098	-0,091	0,193***	1			
8. Qualification	3,411	1,064	0,125*	0,078	0,097	0,046	0,03	-0,101	0,176**	1		
9. Marital status	1,832	0,614	0,078	0,018	0,142*	0,023	-0,078	0,126*	0,485***	0,111	1	
10. Experience	2,829	1,113	0,012	0,091	0,22***	-0,03	-0,076	0,024	0,431***	0,399***	0,257***	1

**Note(s):** \*\*\* $p \leq 0,001$ , \*\* $p \leq 0,01$ , \* $p \leq 0,05$ ; Square roots of average variances extracted (AVEs) shown on diagonal  
**Source(s):** Authors' own creation



moderate the positive relationship between POQ and transactional psychological contract ( $\beta = 0.065, p = 0.136$ ), H5c not supported. Figure 2 shows the results of the path analysis.

## Discussion

The present research aims to identify the underlying mechanisms between project members' POQ and their work alienation and a boundary condition that can mitigate the adverse effects of POQ. To do so, it develops an integrated framework that draws upon relative deprivation theory and psychological contract theory to propose relational and transactional psychological contracts as mediators between the two. Moreover, it proposes empowering leadership as a contextual variable to mitigate the negative effects of POQ (see Figure 3).

The finding that the more overqualified project members perceive themselves to be, the more alienation they feel from their work agrees with the limited existing research investigating the relationship between POQ, work alienation, and work meaningfulness (Söylemez and Uslu, 2022; Wang *et al.*, 2019; Yu *et al.*, 2021; Zhao and Ma, 2023). In other words, those who believed they possessed more knowledge, expertise, and skills than their positions required were less likely to feel meaning and an emotional connection to their work. Thus, POQ can be a bane if it is not well-managed.

Index	Value	Criteria
Average path coefficient (APC)	0.165, $p = 0.001$	$p < 0.05$
Average R-squared (ARS)	0.297, $p < 0.001$	$p < 0.05$
Average adjusted R-squared (AARS)	0.287, $p < 0.001$	$p < 0.05$
Average block VIF (AVIF)	1.186	Acceptable if $\leq 5$ , ideally $\leq 3.3$
Average full collinearity VIF (AFVIF)	1.458	Acceptable if $\leq 5$ , ideally $\leq 3.3$
Tenenhaus GoF (GoF)	0.485	small $\geq 0.1$ , medium $\geq 0.25$ , large $\geq 0.36$
Sympson's paradox ratio (SPR)	0.846	Acceptable if $\geq 0.7$ , ideally = 1

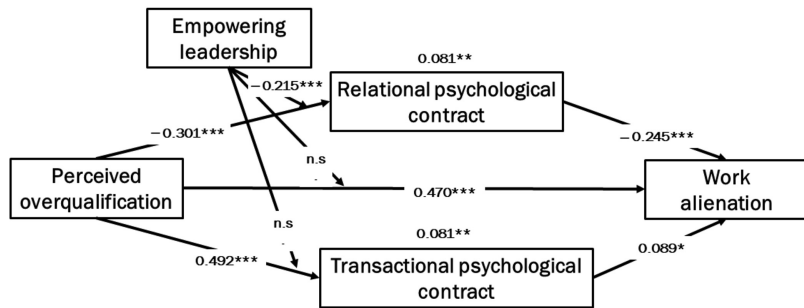
Source(s): Authors' own creation

**Table 5.**  
Model fit and quality indices

Path	$\beta$	SE	$p$	Result
H1. POQ $\rightarrow$ Work alienation	0.470	0.055	<0.001	Supported
H2a. POQ $\rightarrow$ Relational psychological contract	-0.301	0.057	<0.001	Supported
H2b. POQ $\rightarrow$ Transactional psychological contract	0.492	0.055	<0.001	Supported
H3a. Relational psychological contract $\rightarrow$ Work alienation	-0.245	0.057	<0.001	Supported
H3b. Transactional psychological contract $\rightarrow$ Work alienation	0.089	0.059	0.067	Not supported
H4a. POQ $\rightarrow$ Transactional psychological contract $\rightarrow$ Work alienation	0.081	0.042	0.027	Supported
H4b. POQ $\rightarrow$ Relational psychological contract $\rightarrow$ Work alienation	0.081	0.042	0.026	Supported
H5a. Empowering leadership*POQ $\rightarrow$ Work alienation	0.059	0.059	0.159	Not Supported
H5b. Empowering leadership*POQ $\rightarrow$ Relational psychological contract	-0.215	0.058	<0.001	Supported
H5c. Empowering leadership*POQ $\rightarrow$ Transactional psychological contract	0.065	0.059	0.136	Not Supported

Source(s): Authors' own creation

**Table 6.**  
Results of the hypotheses



Note(s): (1) \* $p < 0.10$ , \*\* $p < 0.05$ , and \*\*\* $p < 0.001$

(2)  $\beta$ s shown on the variable are mediating effects

Source(s): Authors' own creation

Figure 2.  
Path analysis results

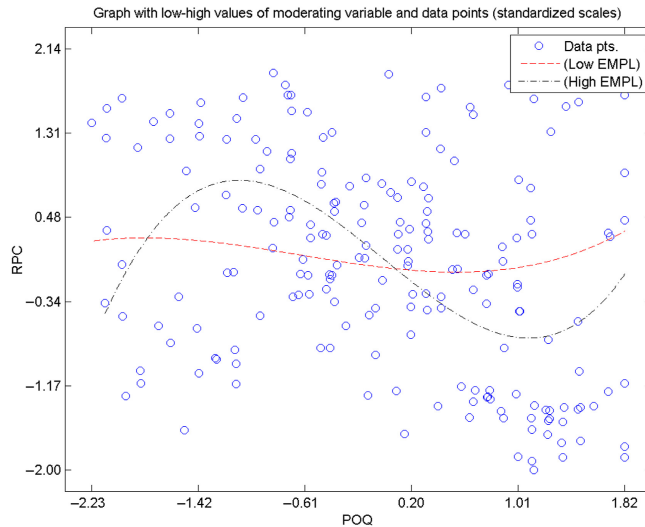


Figure 3.  
Moderating effect of  
empowering leadership  
on the link between  
POQ and relational  
psychological  
contract (RPC)

The results also showed that project members' POQ had a negative relationship with relational psychological contracts and a positive one with transactional psychological contracts (H2). This means that if project members perceive themselves to be overqualified, they see their interactions with employers in a more transactional rather than a long-term relational psychological contract perspective. For the downstream effect of both psychological contracts, the relational psychological contract averts work alienation, whereas the transactional psychological contract fosters work alienation (H3). Furthermore, the present research identified both types of psychological contracts, i.e. relational and transactional, as mediators between POQ and work alienation (H4). This way, it explains the intricacies of the relationship between POQ and work alienation. While no research has specifically investigated the mediating effects of psychological contracts between POQ and work alienation, Uen *et al.* (2009) identified their mediating role between the commitment-based HR system and role behavior. Nonetheless, several studies have investigated the mediating effect of *psychological contract breach* between POQ and its adverse outcomes

(e.g. [Fan and Wang, 2022](#); [Zhang et al., 2022a, b](#)). To address this paucity, the present research has explained the POQ—work alienation link by identifying both types of psychological contracts as mediators. In so doing, it proposes that POQ influences psychological contracts, not just their breaches.

Despite the salience of the relationship between POQ and work alienation, very little research has endeavored to unearth the mediating mechanisms between the two (for an exception, see [Söylemez and Uslu, 2022](#)). Therefore, the present research is a pertinent step in this direction. The above findings, both the direct and the mediating effects, imply that overqualified project members consider that their focal organizations have not met their expectations. Thus, they form a *low relational psychological contract*, which makes them feel that they could be fired as soon as they are no longer needed, enhancing the feeling of estrangement from their work. Concurrently, overqualified project members consider that their organizations are taking a utilitarian approach toward them, resulting in an *increased transactional contract*, which, in turn, alienates them from their work. In this way, the present research explains the relationship between POQ and work alienation.

If managers somehow can improve overqualified project members' perception of their relational psychological contract with the firm, it can mitigate the adverse outcomes of POQ, e.g. work alienation. This is where we propose a managerially relevant moderator, i.e. empowering leadership, that can assuage the downside of POQ (H5). To do this, the present research identified the mitigating effect of empowering leadership on the negative relationship between POQ and relational psychological contract (H5b). Specifically, the findings revealed that the relational psychological contract improved for the project members who believed they possessed more knowledge, skills, and abilities than their roles required, provided they had an empowering leader. This finding is consistent with existing research that identified the moderating effect of psychological empowerment in mitigating the negative consequences of POQ. For instance, [Erdogan and Bauer \(2009\)](#) found psychological empowerment to ameliorate the negative impact of POQ on job satisfaction, intentions to remain, and voluntary turnover. Recently, in a student sample, serving as a student leader mitigated the negative consequences of POQ on organizational identification and personal accomplishment ([Xu and Hu, 2024](#)). In sum, while not a panacea, empowering leadership can ameliorate the pains of overqualification.

### *Theoretical implications*

This study contributes to the literature on overqualification in organizational behavior, particularly project management, in at least three ways. First, using relative deprivation theory, this study argued work alienation to be a pertinent adverse outcome of perceived qualification. This way, it corroborated the relatively recent research ([Söylemez and Uslu, 2022](#); [Wang et al., 2019](#); [Yu et al., 2021](#)), which identified work alienation as a pertinent outcome of POQ. Second, in line with a prior study ([Lukšyte et al., 2011](#)), which identified employee cynicism and psychological contract, both relational and transactional, as mediators to explain why overqualified employees display counterproductive work behavior; the present research advanced the knowledge in overqualification literature by explaining why overqualification and work alienation relate. It does so by proposing relational and transactional psychological contracts as mediators using relative deprivation theory as a theoretical lens. This finding is crucial as relatively few studies have identified mediators between POQ and work alienation. As an exception, [Söylemez and Uslu \(2022\)](#) found relative deprivation and mastery experience as mediators between the two.

Finally, the current study contributes to overqualification, leadership, and psychological contract literature by showing how empowering leadership can mitigate the adverse effects of POQ reflected in the reduced relational psychological contract. In particular, it shows that

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empowering-leaders of overqualified project members can improve the latter's relational psychological contract. This is an essential contribution to the body of literature on overqualification that proposes remedies to manage the detrimental effects of overqualification (Alfes *et al.*, 2016; Bochoridou and Gkorezis, 2024; Erdogan and Bauer, 2009; Lee *et al.*, 2021; Ma *et al.*, 2020; Wu *et al.*, 2015; Zhao *et al.*, 2021). While Erdogan and Bauer (2009) identified psychological empowerment to ameliorate the negative effects of overqualification on job satisfaction, intentions to remain, and voluntary turnover; the present research found empowering leadership to mitigate the negative impact of overqualification on the relational psychological contract. Employees may feel psychological empowerment for a host of reasons (Seibert *et al.*, 2011), the present research's finding, the moderating effect of empowering leadership, is essential from the theoretical perspective as well. Empowering leadership positively affects psychological empowerment (Cheong *et al.*, 2019), thus showing the former as an intervention to inculcate the latter.

### *Practical implications*

As overqualification is prevalent in today's organizations, its detrimental effects and their mitigation is little understood in project management. To address this, the present research informs practice, in particular the project management practice, that: (1) overqualified project members, owing to their POQ, experience alienation from their work; (2) this experience is due to the reason that POQ inhibits overqualified project members' trust, loyalty, and long-term commitment towards the organization (i.e. reduced relational psychological contract), while, at the same time, it is also because of their perception of a utilitarian and transactional nature of the psychological contract with their employers; and (3) empowering-leaders can mend the deteriorated trust, loyalty, and long-term commitment of the overqualified project members reflected in the improved relational psychological contract. In sum, managers can empower their overqualified subordinates to manage their POQ.

The ameliorating effect of empowering leadership implies that overqualified workers can be a valuable asset to a firm if they are well-managed (Liu *et al.*, 2015). As a result, managers should not shy away from hiring overqualified candidates provided they are managed well, such as by empowering them to make them potentially valuable. While managers should be aware that overqualified employees may come with risks, like a high turnover (Bao and Zhong, 2023; Luksyte and Spitzmueller, 2015), they should be aware that staff who feel overqualified may benefit the organization. Moreover, this study shows that managerial actions and organizational structures can influence the outcomes of POQ. Thus, project organizations should encourage positive leadership styles, e.g. empowering leadership, to boost the engagement of overqualified project members who feel alienated. As such, they should provide more autonomy and empowerment to the workforce (Cheong *et al.*, 2016, 2019; Erdogan and Bauer, 2009; Lee *et al.*, 2018; Spreitzer, 1995).

## **Conclusion**

### *Key takeaways*

The primary goal of this study was to investigate how POQ influences work alienation. Another goal was to understand how empowering leadership can mitigate the adverse effects of POQ. To realize these goals, the present research found that POQ and work alienation are positively related. In addition, psychological contracts, both relational and transactional, mediate this relationship. Specifically, POQ gives rise to work alienation by (1) decreasing the relational psychological contract and (2) increasing the transactional psychological contract. Lastly, empowering leadership mitigated the negative relationship between POQ and the relational psychological contract.

### *Limitations and future research directions*

Besides its contribution, the current study is not free from limitations. First, the study's sole focus on POQ and its effects on public sector projects, wherein project members generally work on contract, is a distinctive feature. Nonetheless, it can raise questions about its generalizability to other settings. Future research, therefore, should replicate the model, especially in projects undertaken by permanent project members in the public, private, and nonprofit sectors. Second, while other leadership styles can also impact the outcomes of the project members' perceptions of overqualification, the current study's focus has entirely been on the moderating role of empowering leadership only. Therefore, exploring the influence of other leadership styles and contextual factors in future studies would be fascinating. Third, the current study concentrated on POQ and how it affected project members at an individual level only. The potential effects of overqualification on job outcomes, e.g. at the group level (Hu *et al.*, 2015), and multilevels, are little understood. Thus, the downstream impact of overqualification at the group or organizational level should be further investigated. Lastly, while we didn't find significant differences among the POQ, psychological contract, work alienation, and the perception of empowering leadership across the three projects, it can be worthwhile to broaden the dataset to multiple projects and include projects specifically focused on public-private partnerships.

### **Note**

1. All permanent government employees, federal and provincial, are hired on the basic pay scales (BPS). It ranges from BPS-1 to a maximum of BPS-22. The typical educational requirement for BPS-16 is a bachelor's degree.

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## Appendix

### *Perceived overqualification*

- 1 My job requires less education than I have
- 2 The work experience that I have is not necessary to be successful in this job
- 3 I have job skills that are not required for this job
- 4 Someone with less education than myself could perform well on my job
- 5 My previous training is not being fully utilized on this job
- 6 I have a lot of knowledge that I do not need in order to do my job
- 7 My education level is above the education level required by my job
- 8 Someone with less work experience than myself could do my job just as well
- 9 I have more abilities than I need to do my job

### *Work alienation*

- 1 I do not enjoy my work
- 2 Facing my daily tasks is a painful and boring experience
- 3 Work to me is more like a chore or burden
- 4 I feel estranged/disconnected from myself
- 5 I often wish I were doing something else
- 6 Over the years I have become disillusioned about my work
- 7 I do not feel like putting in my best effort at work
- 8 I do not feel connected to the events in my workplace

(continued)

**Table A1.**  
Measurement scales

*Relational psychological contract*

- 1 I expect to grow in this department
- 2 I feel part of a team in this department
- 3 I have a reasonable chance of promotion if I work hard
- 4 To me working for this department is like being a member of a family
- 5 The department develops/rewards employees who work hard and exert themselves
- 6 I expect to gain promotion in this department with the length of service and effort to achieve goals
- 7 I feel this department reciprocates the effort put in by its employees
- 8 My career path in the department is clearly mapped out
- 9 I am motivated to contribute 100% to this department in return for future employment benefits

*Transactional psychological contract*

- 1 I work only the hours set out in my contract and no more
- 2 My commitment to this department is defined by my contract
- 3 My loyalty to the department is contract specific
- 4 I prefer to work a strictly defined set of working hours
- 5 I only carry out what is necessary to get the job done
- 6 I do not identify with the department's goals
- 7 I work to achieve the purely short-term goals of my job

*Empowering leadership*

- 1 My project manager helps me understand how my objectives and goals relate to that of the project and the department
- 2 My project manager helps me understand the importance of my work to the overall effectiveness of the project and the department
- 3 My project manager helps me understand how my job fits into the bigger picture
- 4 My project manager makes many decisions together with me
- 5 My project manager often consults me on strategic decisions
- 6 My project manager solicits my opinion on decisions that may affect me
- 7 My project manager believes that I can handle demanding tasks
- 8 My project manager believes in my ability to improve even when I make mistakes
- 9 My project manager expresses confidence in my ability to perform at a high level
- 10 My project manager allows me to do my job my way
- 11 My project manager makes it more efficient for me to do my job by keeping the rules and regulations simple
- 12 My project manager allows me to make important decisions quickly to satisfy customer needs

**Table A1.****Source(s):** Authors' own creation**About the authors**

Dr Tariq Hameed Alvi has published in premier journals such as Electronic Commerce Research and Applications, the Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Management, and Asian Journal of Business Ethics, and the Academy of Management Conference. His diverse research interests include marketing, business ethics, and organizational behavior.

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