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Overqualification as misrecognition

Sergio R. Clavero  ¹ 

This paper aims to examine the phenomenon of overqualification by confronting two distinct notions surrounding what constitutes a praiseworthy achievement. On the one hand, the model that operates *de facto* in the contemporary labor market understands the notion of achievement in instrumental, competitive and individual terms. On the other hand, another model, which lays the foundation for workers' *demands* for recognition, is wider than the former one and considers workers' qualifications as standalone achievements. In my view, the experience of overqualification as misrecognition is based on the huge and ever-increasing amount of effort and resources that individuals must invest into their education and training processes, as well as on the fact that social institutions publicly and explicitly regulate, encourage and promote these processes. I conclude with a brief analysis of the main structural cause of this mismatch between demanded and obtained recognition, namely, the system is unable to generate enough social esteem to proportionally recognize the capacities that the system itself pushes workers to develop.

¹Institute for Culture and Society, University of Navarra, Navarra, Spain. email: sclavero@unav.es

Introduction

In one of the best-known passages from *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, Hegel warns that, “Despite an excess of wealth, civil society is not wealthy enough—i.e., its own distinct resources are not sufficient—to prevent an excess of poverty and the formation of a rabble” (Hegel, 1991: §245). In fact, this powerlessness is now even more pronounced and involves a second risk to citizens’ freedom that Hegel’s assertion fails to fully capture. Besides its incapacity to create enough *paid* jobs for all its members, civil society (in the particular sense in which Hegel uses this concept) is equally unable to create enough *qualified* jobs. As a result, a growing number of workers in Europe are overqualified for their jobs; in 2017, 22.7% of European workers with a post-secondary education were employed in jobs that did not require such an educational level. Since 2008, that number has increased by almost two percentage points (Eurostat, 2018: p. 25).¹

It goes without saying that this phenomenon is not equally widespread in all social groups. Indeed “in the EU [overqualification] is more prevalent among younger employees, females, individuals who were outside of the labor market (such as unemployed or inactive) prior to accepting their current employment and those in jobs with non-standard contractual arrangements (such as part-time, informal, and temporary agency contracts),” as well as “tertiary education graduates, particularly those who finished school in the post-crisis period [...] and from certain fields of study, including humanities, languages and arts and other social sciences” (Cedefop, 2015: p. 35). In contrast, overqualification’s prevalence is lower but still significant in other social groups, such as medium-qualified employees: 16% of them were overqualified in the EU in 2014 (Idem: 33).

This paper aims to examine this phenomenon (overqualification) from the perspective of recognition. In general terms, I understand overqualification here as the situation in which a qualified worker wishes to obtain a proportionally qualified job but is limited in doing so by constraints proper to the labor market. Thus, according to this generic definition, an overqualified worker is one who (1) possesses a higher qualification than required for the job he has and (2) would rather work in a job that actually matches his skill level, but is unable to find such a job for reasons beyond his control. In other words, an overqualified worker is a subject who, despite having acquired the necessary competences to work in a given skilled job, is forced to accept either unemployment or resignation towards accepting a lower-skilled job.

My argument here is divided into three main sections: (1) First, departing from Axel Honneth’s model, but also refining it, I analyze the way in which workers’ capacities are recognized *de facto* in the labor market.² More concretely, I point out that social esteem is granted in this sphere according to an idea of “praiseworthy achievement”³ which can be described as instrumental, competitive and individual. (2) In the second section, I argue that this notion of achievement is too limited and does not satisfy workers’ *demands* for recognition, as manifested in the existence of overqualified workers. These demands for recognition are based on a broader notion of achievement, one that is not reducible to purely instrumental, competitive considerations. (3) Finally, in the third section, I examine the main structural cause of overqualification, that is, the sense in which the system itself fosters this situation. More concretely, I argue that said system does not generate enough social esteem to proportionally recognize all the capacities that the system itself pushes workers to acquire.

Recognition in the sphere of work

When considering modern capitalism’s potential for the accomplishment of social freedom, Axel Honneth affirms that recognition in this sphere is granted according to the principles of

mutual respect and individual achievement [*Leistungsprinzip*] (Honneth, 2003: 139ff, 2004b, 2007: pp. 360–361, 2010b: 230ff, 2014: 176ff). In this regard, Honneth considers that, with the transition to modernity, “the esteem the individual legitimately deserved within society was no longer decided by membership in an estate with corresponding codes of honor, but rather by individual achievement within the structure of the industrially organized division of labor” (2003: p. 140). In other words, it is the worth of individual contributions to a shared goal what (at least ideally) is recognized in the market in the form of social esteem.

Such social esteem is one of the three forms of recognition that Honneth considers to be essential for social reproduction, along with love and legal respect (1995: pp. 92–130). What is recognized in the sphere of love is the value of the subject’s particular needs, emotions and life project, whereas in the legal sphere it is the subject’s status as a morally autonomous person, bearer of rights. In turn, as already mentioned, what is recognized in the form of social esteem is the worth of the contributions made by the subject to the realization of socially shared goals. According to Honneth, the valuation system in this third sphere is socially established on the social interpretation of the content of these shared goals, which in turn determines what is considered a praiseworthy achievement and what is not (1995: pp. 126–127, 2003: 139ff). Regarding this particular sphere, Schaub and Odigbo (2019) have convincingly argued that Honneth’s taxonomy of recognition in the labor sphere must be expanded in order to include forms of (mis)recognition of both producers and consumers according to the principles of need, respect and esteem. For my part, in what follows, I will adopt a different but complementary approach by focusing on how workers’ demands are based on a definition of achievement that goes beyond the terms in which it is recognized *de facto* in the market.

Within this broad framework, it is important to emphasize a preliminary distinction that Honneth does not explicitly develop. As Hans-Christoph Schmidt am Busch points out (2010: pp. 263–265), we may distinguish between two different objects of social esteem in the labor market: on the one hand, the product of an individual’s activity and, on the other, the capacities that are necessary for that activity.⁴ For instance, a surgery is the product of a surgeon’s activity (and that of his team), whereas his medical knowledge and his ability constitute his capacities for performing that activity. Obviously, both are connected (product and capacity), but recognition of one without recognition of the other can occur. For instance, when hiring someone, the employer evaluates the worker’s capacities rather than the product of her activity (when hiring, the worker has yet to produce anything for the employer). The opposite might also be the case when a long-time employee obtains more recognition than a novice, even if the former has inferior capacities than the latter (he may have less energy than his younger counterpart, or he may be unfamiliar with new technologies, etc.). The veteran is recognized (in the form of homage, more work security, etc.) not for his capacities, but for his service throughout the years (see Voswinkel, 2012: 278ff). In short, when Honneth affirms that social esteem is directed to the subject’s “traits and abilities” (see for instance Honneth, 1995: p. 121), we should actually distinguish between the esteem given based on capacities and the esteem based on the product of someone’s activity. Although they are usually linked, they are not equivalent. This distinction is relevant here because my argument focuses on the recognition of workers’ capacities, not on the product of their activity.

The basic institutional form of recognizing these worker’s capacities in the labor market is found in their securing proportionally skilled jobs. Admittedly, there are other ways of

valuing these capacities, like a parent's pride in a child when she obtains a degree, but here I am interested in forms of recognition that are specific to the labor sphere since that is the particular domain in which overqualification takes place. Inside this sphere, there are other forms of recognition besides securing a position (for instance, monetary remuneration). It goes without saying that a worker in a proportionally skilled position that receives insufficient remuneration is not sufficiently recognized. However, here I focus specifically on the securing of such a job because the issue of overqualification is directly related to that particular form of recognition. In this sense, debate around the social valuation of each profession (see for instance Graeber, 2018), although certainly connected to the topic addressed here, does not directly affect my argument.

In analyzing the recognition that is *de facto* granted to the worker's capacities in the market, three main features should be highlighted, as follows:

1. In the first place, the subject's capacities are recognized as valuable in *instrumental* terms; they are considered valuable to the extent that they allow for the performance of activities that, in turn, contribute to the realization of a socially shared value. For instance, someone with a medical degree and several years of experience in hospitals is better prepared to perform a surgery than someone with no previous knowledge or experience in this area. In other words, capacities are not recognized as praiseworthy on their own, but only with regard to their efficiency in preparing the subject for performing an activity that in turn is useful for the realization of a social good (see Honneth, 1995: p. 122).
2. Second, recognition of our capacities in the market takes place not only in instrumental terms, but also in comparative ones (Schmidt am Busch, 2010: p. 270). In the context of a system like the market, this comparison usually has a *competitive* nature. In order to benefit from social esteem, my capacities must of course allow me to efficiently contribute to the realization of a social good, but this contribution must also be socially considered better than other people's contributions. My capacities will be socially esteemed in the market if they are considered more adequate than other workers' capacities for the performance of socially valued activities. For instance, someone may be considered to have better qualifications than other candidates when having a degree from university A instead of university B, speaking a foreign language with C level fluency instead of D, having E level empathy and flexibility instead of F, etc.
3. Finally, social esteem is granted in the labor market in *individual* terms (Honneth, 2003: 140ff). That is, the worker's capacities are valued as an achievement of the individual subject. Whereas legal recognition comes from what we have in common (as autonomous, responsible subjects, bearers of rights), social esteem is based on the personal contribution that each of us makes to the common good. In this sense, social esteem is granted according to a subject's individual merit, not according to class privilege. For instance, the personal capacity for designing buildings or performing surgeries is recognized instead of traits considered typical of a social class or hereditary among certain families.

In short, the recognition that is *de facto* granted in the market is based on a concept of "achievement" that has three features: *instrumentality, competitiveness and individuality*. Something is considered as meritorious (and therefore esteemed) or not according to these three criteria. In this regard, numerous authors

have warned about the dangers of such a meritocracy since it is often used as an argument for justifying certain social inequalities (see for instance Herzog, 2016: pp. 135–146; Sandel, 2020). In its most extreme form, said justification of social inequality is based on the fallacious argument that recognition in the labor market correlates with the subject's individual merit. Thus, if something is not recognized, it lacks merit, i.e., if a person does not have a job, then his capacities are not worthy of recognition. The main fallacy contained in this way of reasoning is found in assuming that only that which is in fact recognized is worthy of recognition. From this perspective, there is no such thing as unrecognized merit in the labor market. Any demand for recognition therein that is left unsatisfied is by definition an unjustified demand. When a person does not receive a particular recognition, he by extension does not deserve it (i.e., he has not done enough to deserve it) and, therefore, it is unfair of him to demand it. In this way, blame for misrecognition is not located in the system, but rather in the individual, who (allegedly) does not have anything sufficiently meritorious to offer in order to be recognized.

The fallacy implied in this kind of reasoning has led some authors to describe the contemporary meritocratic system as a "myth" (Jenkins, 2013; McNamee and Miller, 2009) and as an "ideology" (Elmgren, 2015; Girardot, 2011). In fact, Honneth himself has lamented that the aforementioned model overburdens the individual with excessive responsibility for achieving a thing (market success) that mostly depends on elements beyond her control (Honneth, 2004a: 473ff, 2014: pp. 250–253; Honneth and Hartmann, 2006: p. 54). Similarly, Nicholas H. Smith (2009: pp. 57–59) has argued that, if social esteem is granted according to the principle of individual achievement, then we should not overestimate its potential for fostering social integration.

For my part, I agree that this principle excessively burdens the subject, whether he succeeds or fails. The injustice here is that, despite making the subject responsible, this kind of recognition actually depends on elements that escape individual control and have nothing to do with individual capacities or activities. They include, among other things, the economic context, the number of people who have chosen the same career and have developed the same or similar capacities, knowing the right people, wage gaps when compared to other parts of the world, the development of new technologies that replace human workers, etc. In a nutshell, I agree that it is unfair that recognition in the market is granted in terms of merely individual achievement since every achievement therein always contains a robust social component (Herzog, 2016: p. 140).

At the same time, however, I think that critiques such as the ones from Honneth and Smith leave out important parts of this issue, namely, they focus on one of the features mentioned above (individuality) and leave aside the other two (instrumentality and competitiveness). In my view, the problem is not just that achievements are *de facto* considered individual, but also that they are *de facto* defined according to instrumental and competitive criteria. In what follows, I will argue that, in contrast to this notion of achievement, workers' (more particularly, overqualified workers') *demands* for recognition are based on a broader notion of achievement, one that is not restricted by the aforementioned instrumental and competitive considerations.

The acquisition of capacities as a praiseworthy achievement

Given the rapid pace of scientific and technological progress, as well as high degrees of specialization, today skilled jobs require increasingly advanced capacities to be performed properly. In turn, developing these capacities usually demands of the worker considerable time, money, effort, etc. Think for instance of someone who wants to become an architect in the UK; starting

from the moment he finishes his secondary school, he will need at least 7–8 years of additional education in order to be fully recognized by the Royal Institute of British Architects.⁵

For the worker, acquired capacities are an achievement on their own, something that should themselves be recognized. In this regard, two issues arise, including what makes people consider their capacities praiseworthy achievements and the notion of achievement behind this approach. When considering the former, three reasons must be mentioned, as follows:

1. First, the massive amount of time and resources (physical, intellectual, and financial) that the subject must invest to acquire capacities makes them a meritorious outcome, one that not everybody is able to achieve. That is, acquired capacities are not just a means to obtaining something else, but also a *result*. Admittedly, this first consideration does not seem to be enough, at least at first glance, since there are other endeavors that are equally time-consuming and demanding, but do not have attached the same expectations of recognition. This is the case, for instance, of a chess enthusiast who invests countless hours of his free time to improve his technique. However, in contrast to the chess enthusiast, the formation process of an architect or a doctor is explicitly oriented toward professional exercise and is heavily regulated and institutionalized. For instance, the acquisition of capacities in the medical field implies completing courses in recognized educational centers and passing certain state examinations in order to participate as a doctor in the labor market. Whereas the chess enthusiast chooses how to improve his technique and decides whether or not a given method is useful to him, students who want to acquire professional skills have much less room for choice. This is so because, to a large extent, society itself determines the steps to be taken, and certifies that those steps have indeed been correctly fulfilled (see for instance European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education et al., 2015). In other words, society itself (including schools and universities, governments, firms, etc.) dictates to the subject the capacities that are valuable (“in order to work as X, you need to do Y first”) and offers him the corresponding education.⁶
2. Secondly, in contrast with activities like chess, the contemporary sociocultural context urges the subject to undertake a long academic formation process. The subject is encouraged to apply himself and acquire high qualifications, either by educational institutions that require sufficient student numbers to survive (e.g., universities), by governments that insist on fostering higher education, or by a market system in which the requisites to secure a job increase and workers must compete among themselves to obtain available positions. For instance, one of the main goals associated with the Europe 2020 strategic program (launched by the EU in 2010 (European Commission, 2010)) involves seeing at least 40% of the 30–34 years old in Europe with some form of higher education; and this goal has indeed been accomplished. Thus, at least in the realm of public rhetoric, the subject is explicitly told that society values high qualifications and their acquisition.
3. Finally, we must also take into account that autonomously choosing a career that fits one’s particular interests and strengths is an important part of our culture’s hegemonic self-realization ideal, which society explicitly fosters (see Honneth, 1998: p. 769, 2004a). If the market is to be understood as a sphere in which we can truly pursue our private interests and simultaneously contribute to the common good, then allowing the subject to freely choose

how/what to learn and contribute seems to be an important requisite. In fact, it is not unreasonable to assume that one of the main reasons why a person would choose a particular career and undertake the corresponding educational program relates to the chance to develop the capacities that he finds most attractive and to implement them in the market. Admittedly, not all educational paths or contributions are equally valuable or deserve the same recognition just because a particular individual likes them, but the ones that are explicitly fostered, praised and considered as enabling of work by several social institutions should be expected to receive proper recognition. This is all the more so since, as mentioned, the training process is not a matter of personal choice, but rather is largely socially regulated through academic degrees, internships, language certificates, etc. (see for instance European Commission, 2018).

On the basis of these three factors, it is understandable that the worker develops a moral expectation of recognition regarding the value of his acquired capacities. More concretely, he may consider advancement through the training process as a praiseworthy achievement on its own since (1) it requires overcoming burdensome, socially determined demands and (2) it results in the acquisition of capacities that have been depicted to him as valuable.

This leads us to the second aforementioned issue, namely the notion of “achievement” found herein. In this regard, the previous explanation helps establish a neat contrast. On the one hand, the recognition granted *de facto* in the market operates according to a definition of achievement in instrumental, competitive terms (see previous section). In contrast, the recognition that workers demand is based on a broader notion of achievement, one that is not reducible to those terms. This broader meaning is linked to the subject’s invested effort and dedication, to the institutional nature of the process (its incentives, structure, deadlines, etc.), to the possibility of autonomously choosing how to contribute to the common good, and to the system’s growing demands.

Therefore, there are two models: on the one hand, a narrow definition of achievement that lays the foundation for the recognition that is granted *de facto* in the market and, on the other hand, a broader definition upon which workers’ *demands* for recognition are based. The broader definition expands the narrower one by considering workers’ capacities as valuable achievements on their own. In other words, they are considered worthy of esteem not just in instrumental and competitive terms (i.e., depending solely on their utility and on other candidates’ capacities), but rather absolutely as a result of a socialization process that demands time, energy, money, etc. of the subject. This does not mean that capacities are not *also* evaluated in instrumental and competitive terms even by workers themselves. The point here is rather that the value of these capacities (considered as achievements worthy of esteem) is not *only* measured in terms of instrumentality and competitiveness. In this sense, workers’ *demands* for recognition are based on an idea of achievement that is less dependent on external factors capable of modifying the capacities’ perceived utility (such as economic crises or technological revolutions).

On the grounds of this broader notion of achievement, workers consider the capacities they acquire in the training process as praiseworthy achievements, and demand that they be recognized in the form of proportionally skilled jobs. From this perspective, when their capacities/achievements are not proportionally recognized, the injustice done to overqualified workers consists in neglecting the satisfaction of their justified moral demands for recognition. These workers may feel that, despite having done their part (i.e., developing sufficient skills to do a given job), they are denied the corresponding social esteem for reasons beyond their control.

Some might object that *the chance* to compete for a skilled job is in itself a proportional form of recognition. From this point of view, overqualified workers can demand a chance to compete for proportionally skilled jobs, but they cannot demand guaranteed hiring. In my view, three arguments may be raised against this objection. (1) As I will explain in the next section, competition itself is based on a tricky dynamic since the worker must invest more and more resources and make greater and greater sacrifices in order to have a *real* chance at achieving his goal. In other words, the chance to compete is increasingly harder to materialize. This circumstance not only benefits those with more resources (money, time, etc.), but it also makes each particular qualification less likely to actually be competitive in the market (Markovits, 2019). (2) The materialization of the chance to compete is heavily dependent on conditions that are external to the subject himself. In this sense, it is fair to question an increasingly complex system that puts the burden on the subject and, at the same time, demands more and more of him in exchange for a vague chance to compete. (3) Finally, one may wonder if the problematic nature of this phenomenon consists precisely in transforming a mere chance (without any material content) into an allegedly satisfactory form of recognition. The chance to compete seems rather like an ideological form of recognition in the Honnethian sense of the concept (Honneth, 2007; see also Smith, 2011: pp. 103–105), namely, it constitutes a promise of greater autonomy and self-realization than the institutional context is actually able to provide.

As I mentioned at the beginning of this paper, overqualified workers constitute a large group in the contemporary Western labor market. For instance, coming back to the example of architects in the UK, in 2017, 28.8% of recent engineering technology and architecture graduates (and 20.8% of non-recent graduates) were overqualified (Office for National Statistics, 2019). Ultimately, these numbers reveal that there is a mismatch between the social esteem that is available *de facto* in the market and that which would be necessary to proportionally recognize all workers in that field. The next section is devoted to analyzing the main structural cause of this problem, that is, to examining the sense in which overqualification is a pathology derived from the system's very dynamics. More concretely, I will clarify the sense in which the system is unable to produce enough social esteem to adequately satisfy the demands for recognition that it generates.

The main structural cause of the problem

Several elements contribute to the existence of a high number of overqualified workers in contemporary Western economies, as they favor a mismatch between the number of skilled positions and the number of workers with adequate skills to fill them at any given moment. Indeed, overqualification usually happens when all the skilled positions in a given field are already filled and the remaining skilled workers are forced to remain unemployed or accept a lower-skilled job.

Since the problem boils down to a mismatch between supply and demand among the skilled workforce (there is more supply than demand), it can be examined from both sides of this coin. In terms of supply, several factors, such as women's integration into the labor market and compulsory schooling, have contributed to a substantial increase in candidates for skilled positions. In Europe, the percentage of the population with a high level of training has risen (Eurostat, 2018: pp. 96–98). In turn, this has caused a decline in "underqualification" and an increment in overqualification in European countries (although this last connection is not equally direct in all countries (Vandeplas and Thum-Thysen, 2019: p. 8)). For its part, demand is strongly linked to the *efficient* satisfaction of consumers' needs such that the number of

vacant positions at any given moment mainly depends on how much the corresponding product or service is consumed. In other words, job creation is a dependent variable. On the one hand, heterogeneous factors such as economic crises or growing environmental awareness may influence consumption patterns. On the other hand, the third industrial revolution (or even the so-called fourth one) is changing the landscape of efficient production. Both factors combine to create new trends that require different (or even more advanced) skills for the satisfaction of needs. Change is so quick nowadays that, as reports from a variety of institutions often highlight (González Vázquez et al., 2019: 29ff; OECD, 2018: pp. 20–21; WEF, 2016: pp. 3–6), skills once in high demand can become insufficient (or even unattractive) just a few years later.⁷

There is an important distinction worth mentioning here. Claiming that the number of skilled positions depends on consumers' needs is not entirely accurate. Indeed, not all needs or demands *actually* count in this calculus; instead, it only considers the ones that the consumer (or a subsidiary figure, e.g., a government, a NGO, a patron, etc.) can and wants to fund. This leads to an apparently paradoxical situation: sometimes society does need skilled workers to satisfy the needs of all its members, and those skilled workers are indeed available, but society does not have enough resources (or is unwilling to invest them) to fund these needs. This is the case, for instance, of Spain's public health system. A forecast from the Spanish Ministry of Health approximates that, by 2025, Spain will have a 12% deficit in the number of medical specialists (Barber Pérez and González López-Valcárcel, 2019: p. 143). At the same time, the number of vacancies for *Médico Interno Residente* (medical residency) is restricted and some students cannot obtain one. In this situation, a lack of funds (or of the will to so invest them) may preclude those workers from being hired, even if there are available, well-prepared candidates to fill created posts.

The distinction between needs and *funded* needs means that, in order for everybody to receive the social esteem they deserve, the system would have to create a sufficient amount of *funded* needs. In other words, the amount of social esteem available in a system depends on the amount of available wealth and the will to spend or invest it. High rates of overqualification reveal that, at present, social esteem is a scarce good, that is, that it incites more demand than supply. As usually happens when a good's demand exceeds its supply, its price increases. Thus, since demand outweighs supply when it comes to social esteem, the "prize" associated with it increases such that workers have to "pay" more and more for it.

Given the scarcity of social esteem, the system's competitive dynamics foster a race among workers to acquire ever more and better qualifications. Thus, throughout the last few decades, workforces in Western countries have experienced what Randall Collins calls a process of "credential inflation" (Collins, 2013: pp. 51–52), that is, as the average level of education in these countries increases, and given the relative scarcity of social esteem, people are pushed to accumulate additional and more advanced certifications. In other words, since more and more people obtain advanced training in a context that lacks proportional growth of skilled jobs, the relative value of their education decays, forcing them to accumulate new certifications in order to compensate for the decreased value of their previous ones. An overabundance of skilled workers implies that each subject must push herself to add as many entries to her CV as possible in an attempt to differentiate herself from other candidates and become attractive to potential employers (see, for instance, the competitive environment described in Brooks, 2001). It goes without saying that people with more economic resources have the upper hand in this competition since they can invest more time, money, etc. At the same time, this process also deepens the divide

between high and low-skilled workers (see Wilson, 1997) and (interestingly) makes certain middle-skill jobs harder to fill (Fuller and Raman, 2017).

As a result of increasing competence, the requirements for securing a position become more demanding, and so emerges a process of constant increment of acquired capacities on the part of those seeking a skilled job. In some cases, the candidate may even be required to possess a level of qualification that is higher than the level of many of the workers that already actually occupy the same kind of position. For instance, according to a study, in 2015 in the USA, 67% of job offers for “Supervisors of Office Workers” demanded a “bachelor’s degree” from the candidate; in contrast, just 34% of the workers that already occupied this position possessed such a degree (Idem: p. 10). Interestingly, the opposite paradox also exists—sometimes, possessing high skills may be a disadvantage for a candidate, who may be rejected for being “too qualified” for the job.⁸

In this context, obtaining social esteem becomes an increasingly demanding process that is progressively harder to materialize. More and more requisites (aggregate formation, experience, etc.) are needed in order to have an actual chance of “winning the race” and obtaining proportional recognition. It should also be noted that the investment herein is non-refundable, that is, if the subject does not secure a proportionally skilled position, he does not get his time, money or effort back. Admittedly, “individuals with higher qualifications and skills are generally found to be more likely to enjoy superior labor market and social outcomes” (Cedefop, 2015: p. 29). So it could be argued that, when skilled workers obtain a position that is not proportionally skilled, there is still a reimbursement of their investment in the form of social esteem. However, the point here is that, even in those cases, a part of their capacities is not proportionally recognized and, therefore, they do not fully recover their investment (to a greater or lesser extent, depending on the case).

In short, we are dealing with a system that (1) operates according to a notion of achievement understood in instrumental, competitive and individual terms, one that differs from the notion that workers themselves hold, and (2) recognizes subjects’ capacities (grants them social esteem) primarily through the granting of a proportionally skilled position. Further, (3) it promotes increased levels of average training among its members but (4) it does not generate enough social esteem to proportionally recognize that training. (5) As a result, it drives up the “price” of social esteem, pushing its own members to “pay” ever more, that is, to invest more and more time, money, etc. to improve their qualifications in an effort to stand out. Finally, (6) it does not adequately reimburse the investments of candidates that “lose” the social esteem “race.”

Given this situation, a question inevitably arises, namely, can we really say that the modern market is a system in which the individual can embody her freedom? It seems clear that, in the present context, the answer is no, or at least not completely, as exemplified by the existence of numerous overqualified workers. Delving a bit deeper, another key question in this regard refers to the ultimate source of the problem. Is the market as such a faulty system, one that does not allow us to realize our freedom? Or does the problem rather consist in a deviation of the recognition promises implicit in market relations? Contrasting answers to this question can be found in Honneth (2010b: pp. 225–229, 2014: 176ff), Jütten (2015) or Schmidt am Busch (2008). Applied to the issue of overqualification, we can ask if this phenomenon is the result of a lack of social provision (due to mismanagement, spurious interests, ideological mechanisms of domination, etc.) or rather the consequence of the market’s very structure. The answer to this complex question will determine the kind of initiatives that are demanded and undertaken, but this is still an unresolved

problem. In fact, in one of his most recent books, Honneth himself has endeavored to refine his own position, arguing for a renewal of the socialist movement based on a redefinition of the idea of social freedom (Honneth, 2017).

It goes without saying that this debate exceeds the limits of this paper. It is equally impossible to thoroughly examine here the concrete measures that might offer solutions to this problem. However, the analysis conducted so far does help clarify the approach that underlies each alternative. If the problem can be traced back to a lack of social provision, then we should focus on measures that help people develop the “right” skills and increase their funded investment/consumption, or even measures that decouple the sphere of work from the sphere of funded investment/consumption. So, for instance, reduction of the workday or better distribution of social expenditure could help mitigate the problem by contributing to the generation of more social esteem in the form of skilled work. That kind of solution does obviously help, but it does not seem to be enough or even fully feasible under current systemic conditions. By contrast, if the market system itself is the real problem, then we should try to make social esteem less dependent on the modern principle of individual, instrumental, competitive merit expressed in work. That could be done both by modifying that principle and by looking for other forms of recognition that are not linked to the idea of market success (for instance, privileges or cultural creations that expressly manifest recognition of the subject’s capacities). Both alternatives aim to help the system generate enough social esteem, and to grant it according to principles that allow for proportional recognition of all of its members’ capacities. Indeed, the main goal here is to generate recognition according to (or “in response to”) workers capacities, instead of forcing capacities to be the ones that adapt to the esteem generated by the system. In other words, the system should work for individuals and their recognition, not the other way around.

Conclusion

This paper has principally aimed to examine the phenomenon of overqualification as a situation of misrecognition of workers’ capacities. First, starting mainly from Honneth’s theory, but refining it in some key respects, I described how the labor market recognizes capacities *de facto* as praiseworthy achievements according to instrumental, competitive and individual terms. I then explained that this notion of achievement does not satisfy workers’ *demands* for recognition. Indeed, to the extent that their capacities are the result of a long, expensive, socially regulated process (promoted by the system itself), the workers come to consider them as praiseworthy achievements on their own. This expectation is disappointed when a scarcity of skilled positions forces skilled workers to settle for positions below their level of formation. These problems arise from the modern meritocratic system and are due not only to the fact that merit is interpreted *de facto* in individual terms, but also to the fact that it is interpreted *de facto* in instrumental and competitive terms. Finally, I pointed to the main structural cause of the problem, namely that the system does not generate enough social esteem to proportionally recognize the capacities that the system itself pushes workers to acquire. As a result of this scarcity, workers are forced to “pay” more and more for social esteem, and many of them end up being overqualified (i.e., not proportionally recognized).

In this paper, I focused on the situation of overqualified workers. However, introducing the necessary nuances in each case, the adoption of a broader notion of achievement (beyond instrumental, competitive and individual terms) helps shape better approaches to and analyses of other situations that feature a lack of proportional social esteem. This includes the recognition of domestic work (see Honneth, 2007: pp. 357–361; Rössler, 2007)

and of workers who find that the so-called “specter of uselessness” (Sennett, 2006: 83ff.) haunts them, e.g., older workers who face challenges finding a job after a certain age, workers displaced by new technologies, and those whose jobs are no longer deemed useful.

Data availability

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analyzed during the current study.

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Notes

- 1 It should be noted that there is no universally accepted method for overqualification measurement (see for instance Vandeplass and Thum-Thysen, 2019: 6ff). This results in some differences in the numbers, depending on the study (hence the difference between the numbers mentioned above and the ones that appear for instance in OECD, 2018). As for this phenomenon’s growing proliferation, a 2015 report from the European Center for the Development of Vocational Training (a European Union agency) warned that “those graduating after 2008 are twice as likely to be overqualified for their first job as those graduating in the 1990s” (Cedefop, 2015: p. 7). Finally, it does not appear that overqualification is a short-term situation; for instance, according to the Office for National Statistics, in 2017, 29.2% of graduates in the UK were still overqualified for the job they had five years after graduating (Office for National Statistics, 2019).
- 2 This approach, however, does not mean that I defend Honneth’s position, developed in his well-known debate with Nancy Fraser, regarding how the market’s dynamics should be analyzed (Fraser and Honneth, 2003; see also Deranty, 2009: 404ff; Forst, 2011; Schmidt am Busch, 2010: pp. 258–263; Smith, 2011; Zurn, 2003, 2015: 130ff). That is, I do not intend to commit myself to the strong claim that conflicts over redistribution are ultimately to be understood as moral struggles for recognition.
- 3 In the absence of a more suitable alternative, I use here the word “achievement” to translate the German term *Leistung* since it is usually employed in translations of Honneth’s works. However, it should be noted that “achievement” differs slightly from *Leistung*. Hence, within this paper the word “achievement” should be understood in the sense of *Leistung*, that is, as referring to what a person performs rather than to what she actually accomplishes.
- 4 In fact, Schmidt am Busch distinguishes between “esteem related to specific skills” and “esteem related to socially useful achievements.” Since “achievement” is the chosen translation in this paper for “*Leistung*” (see above), and given that my argument intends to prove that workers consider their capacities as standalone achievements, I have tried to avoid possible misunderstandings here by using “products of activity” (understood in a broad sense, not just as *material* products). In my opinion, this change does not substantially modify Schmidt am Busch’s distinction since he himself uses “forms of work” and “performing such work” when referring to the “achievements” that he distinguishes from “capacities.”
- 5 <https://www.architecture.com/education-cpd-and-careers/how-to-become-an-architect>.
- 6 The acquisition of some particular skills is not so socially regulated and does not have such a clear professional orientation but is nevertheless increasingly valued in the labor market. Indeed, so-called “soft skills” (flexibility, empathy, the ability to adapt to different tasks and teams, etc.) are becoming increasingly important in this sphere, including among leadership positions within companies (Honneth, 2010a: pp. 216–219; Honneth and Hartmann, 2006: 45ff.; Janoski and Lepadatu, 2014: p. 68; Marques, 2013: p. 164). In this article, however, I leave these skills aside since they are not necessarily oriented toward the labor market and their acquisition process notably differs from that of “hard skills,” at least to date (although the trend seems to be shifting with the proliferation of courses, institutionalized seminars, tests, etc. that supposedly help develop and measure soft skills).
- 7 One of the most alarming dynamics at present corresponds to the mismatch between the capacities taught in educational institutions and the ones that employers ultimately demand. Indeed, many firms and institutions lament that sometimes the capacities acquired during the training process are not the “right” ones or are insufficient, especially those related to new technologies (Blázquez et al., 2020: p. 53; González Vázquez et al., 2019: pp. 35–36). Paradoxically, this mismatch can result in workers who are considered highly skilled, but that nevertheless do not possess the skills that employers demand for certain high-skilled positions. In this regard, it is worth repeating that the training process is socially regulated and its configuration is not up to the individual subject. This situation presents a problem, which is different from the one I mainly focus on in this paper (the lack of sufficient social esteem), namely, when

the system generates social esteem that its members cannot obtain. Here, all the participants in the system (workers, employers, customers, etc.) lose and nobody benefits. However, the core of the problem remains the same, since here again social esteem is not generated according to the subjects’ qualifications, but the other way around: the capacities are the ones that must be adapted to the kind and amount of social esteem that is generated by the system.

- 8 <https://elpais.com/economia/2020-10-11/navantia-rechaza-contratar-a-una-ingeniera-por-estar-demasiado-preparada-para-el-puesto.html> (in Spanish).

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Competing interests

The author declares no competing interests.

Additional information

Correspondence and requests for materials should be addressed to S.R.C.

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