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Back to Work! Perceived Overqualification, Proactive Helping Behaviors, and Work Adjustment Among Reentering Mothers

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ABSTRACT

In the present study, we investigate the impact of perceived overqualification on the return-to-work process following maternity leave. Based on Person-Environment (P-E) fit theory's underutilized carryover mechanism, we hypothesized that returning mothers experiencing perceived overqualification would “carry over” their excess abilities to proactive helping behaviors when they feel socially integrated. In turn, we expected proactive helping behavior to foster successful work adjustment. Using three-wave data from 359 mothers returning to their previous jobs after maternity leave, we found that perceived overqualification was positively related to proactive helping behavior when social integration was high. Proactive helping behavior, in turn, was related to improved job satisfaction via enhanced work-related self-efficacy. We found evidence for a moderated sequential mediation in which perceived overqualification was indirectly related to improved job satisfaction via proactive helping behavior and work-related self-efficacy when social integration was high. Our study extends the perceived overqualification and work-adjustment literature by examining P-E fit theory's notion of carryover and its relation to work adjustment success after maternity leave. Practically, organizations can use our findings to facilitate mothers' organizational reentry, for example, by supporting the social integration of reentering mothers.

Over the past few decades, it has become more of a norm than an exception for women to reenter the workforce after childbirth, making them a highly relevant group in today's labor market. In the United States, for example, labor participation of mothers with children under 18 rose from 66.7% in 1990 to 79.6% in 2022 (U.S. Department of Labor 2022a, 2022b); similar trends are observed across Europe (Bundesamt für Statistik BFS 2016; Office for National Statistics 2022; Statistisches Bundesamt [Destatis] 2022) and East Asia (World Bank 2021). Retaining women in the labor force is essential, both to address growing (skilled) labor shortages (Karan and Asgari 2021; Levanon et al. 2014) and to promote a more gender-equal labor market

(Grandey et al. 2020). Despite these shortages, mothers often return to their previous workplace only to find that their core tasks have been reassigned to others, and they are instead given lower level tasks by employers wanting to provide a “soft landing” after maternity leave (Arena et al. 2023; Desjardins and Fortin 2025; Hideg et al. 2018; Wiese and Knecht 2015). Such practices highlight a central issue for returning mothers: Feeling overqualified. Perceived overqualification is defined as a situation where employees feel their skills, abilities, and qualifications exceed their job demands (Erdogan and Bauer 2021). Indeed, women with children are more likely to experience overqualification (Büchel and van Ham 2003; The Economist 2025) and are

The order of the fourth and fifth authors was determined alphabetically.

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often constrained to jobs below their skill levels due to childcare responsibilities and limited mobility (Kleven et al. 2019). However, research on how returning mothers' perceived overqualification impacts the return-to-work process after maternity leave remains limited.

In the present research, we connect the socialization and return-to-work after maternity leave literature to investigate how perceived overqualification impacts returning mothers' work (re-)adjustment. Uniting the overqualification and maternal reentry research domains is critical because, despite the urgency and relevance of a successful return to work, research findings informing policies and practices that facilitate a successful return to work after maternity leave are still relatively scarce (Joshi et al. 2015; Ladge and Greenberg 2015; Paustian-Underdahl et al. 2019; Thompson et al. 2022; Westrupp et al. 2016; Wiese and Heidemeier 2012). We draw from socialization process frameworks (e.g., Bauer and Erdogan 2011) to develop and test a theoretical model outlining the process of returning to work after maternity leave (i.e., work adjustment). Specifically, socialization frameworks expect various personal and situational factors to facilitate work (re-)adjustment (e.g., Bauer and Erdogan 2011). Based on this, we propose perceived overqualification as a novel—and highly context-relevant—factor that may have positive consequences for the return-to-work process.

To predict the consequences of perceived overqualification, one of the most widely used frameworks is Person-Environment (P-E) fit theory (e.g., Edwards et al. 1998). According to this theory, perceived overqualification constitutes a demands-abilities misfit, whereby employees' abilities exceed the respective job demands. P-E fit theory predicts that employees can react to this situation in two different, but not mutually exclusive, ways. The first, and most extensively studied, are strain-related reactions, defined as “deviations from normal functioning” (Edwards et al. 1998, 32), which are predicted to lead to adverse outcomes. Indeed, numerous studies have demonstrated a range of negative consequences associated with perceived overqualification, including lower job satisfaction, higher turnover intentions, and poorer health (for meta-analytical evidence, see Harari et al. 2017). Nevertheless, P-E fit theory also proposes a second type of reaction: individuals may react adaptively and proactively by “carrying over”

(Edwards et al. 1998, 34) excess abilities to tasks beyond the regular demands of the job (see also Yu 2013). In turn, such behavior may then foster more beneficial outcomes. Moreover, P-E fit theory posits that environment factors shape how individuals react to misfit—and for carryover to be possible, these environment factors need to be supportive (Edwards et al. 1998).

In the present study, we draw on this often-neglected carryover principle to propose that overqualified returning mothers can carry over their excess abilities by engaging in *proactive helping behavior*. In turn, we expect proactive helping behavior (i.e., voluntary efforts to support colleagues; Grant et al. 2009) to foster further individual and organizationally beneficial outcomes. Further, we argue that *social integration* will be an important environment factor that can enable proactive helping behavior. Social integration refers to the sense of being accepted and well-connected to coworkers (House et al. 1988), which provides both knowledge of whom to help and how (Spitzmuller and Van Dyne 2013; Weick and Roberts 1993), as well as the motivation to do so through forward-looking exchange (Blau 1964). As such, social integration would enable and motivate returning mothers to carry over their excess abilities (i.e., perceived overqualification) into engaging in proactive helping behavior.

In essence, the present study develops and tests a theoretical model (see Figure 1) in which we first propose that overqualified returning mothers will carry over their excess abilities by engaging in proactive helping behavior when social integration is high. Next, by linking the carryover principle with socialization process models (e.g., Bauer et al. 2007; Bauer and Erdogan 2011; Kammeyer-Mueller and Wanberg 2003; Saks and Ashforth 1997), we argue that proactive helping behavior will function as an active socialization behavior. We propose that proactive helping behavior fosters *work-related self-efficacy* (Bandura 1997), a critical proximal work-adjustment indicator that signals individuals' confidence in their task accomplishment (e.g., Bauer and Erdogan 2011; Gruman et al. 2006). In turn, work-related self-efficacy should be positively related to improved *job satisfaction*, a central indicator of work adjustment success and a widely studied outcome in the socialization literature (Bauer et al. 2007), associated with organizational functioning, employee well-being, and retention (Judge and Kammeyer-Mueller 2012; Judge et al. 2021).

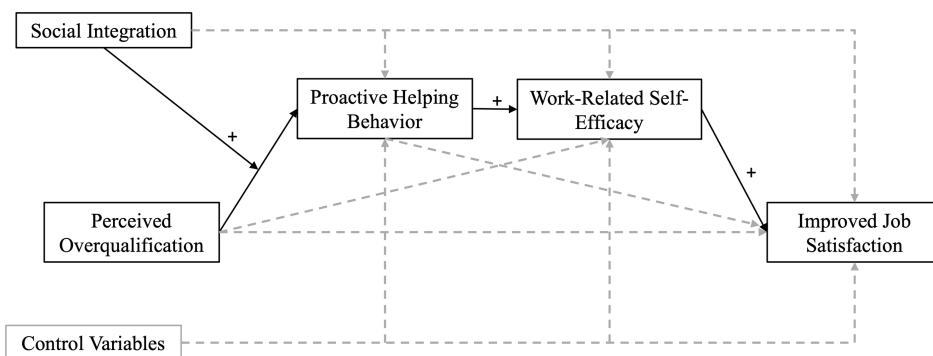


FIGURE 1 | Hypothesized model Note: This figure illustrates our conceptual and empirical model. Paths that were used as controls are displayed in gray. Social integration also includes the interaction term of perceived overqualification with social integration. The control variables included the baseline level of job satisfaction at T1, whether it was a woman's first reentry, maternity leave length, workload in percent, and level of education.

Our research makes several noteworthy contributions to both the literature on perceived overqualification and on the return-to-work after maternity leave. First, we advance the perceived overqualification literature by challenging the predominantly strain-based view on perceived overqualification. We do so by drawing on the carryover principle of P-E fit theory (Edwards et al. 1998) to explore how returning mothers' perceived overqualification can elicit proactive rather than strain reactions, provided that social integration is high. In doing so, we extend the limited literature examining carryover effects within P-E fit theory (e.g., Debus et al. 2020) and answer scholars' calls for research on more adaptive reactions to perceived overqualification (e.g., Erdogan and Bauer 2021; Luksyte and Spitzmueller 2016; van Dijk et al. 2020; Yu 2013), thereby providing a more balanced and nuanced understanding of perceived overqualification.

Second, by emphasizing the moderating role of social integration, we contribute to the growing relational perspective on perceived overqualification, which suggests that employees do not experience misfit in isolation, but rather within a social context that shapes their reactions (Deng et al. 2018; van Dijk et al. 2020). This perspective is particularly relevant for mothers returning to work after maternity leave, as many reenter their previous roles and are thus likely to draw on established social ties within the workplace. Taken together, our study recognizes that employees, particularly returning mothers in the present case, can proactively shape how they respond to misfit (see also Yu 2013), depending on the supportive social conditions.

Third, our study offers novel insights into the return-to-work after maternity leave literature. Returning to work can be demonstrably problematic, and for some women, it results in temporary or permanent withdrawal from the workforce (e.g., Paustian-Underdahl et al. 2019). Understanding how relevant experiences such as perceived overqualification can shape the work-adjustment process is therefore critical. By applying socialization process frameworks to this context (e.g., Bauer and Erdogan 2011), we extend their relevance beyond organizational newcomers to returning mothers. In doing so, we simultaneously connect both the socialization and perceived overqualification literatures and build on prior work advocating for their integration (Simon et al. 2019). Fourth, and relatedly, our study contributes to the broader literature on helping at work. For one, we provide a novel and diverse antecedent of helping behavior (Bolino and Grant 2016) in exploring how perceived overqualification and social integration interact. In addition, our paper explores how helping behavior not only benefits the recipient of help, but also the provider (e.g., Spitzmuller and Van Dyne 2013; Weinstein and Ryan 2010)—in our case, by facilitating the work-adjustment process of returning mothers. Specifically, our paper positions proactive helping behavior as an adjustment behavior, whereby returning mothers can strategically foster relational benefits (Spitzmuller and Van Dyne 2013) to facilitate their own reentry process.

Finally, our study has important practical implications for returning mothers, organizations, and policymakers. Understanding how experiences like perceived overqualification shape the return-to-work-adjustment process can inform efforts to better

support women's reentry after maternity leave. By demonstrating what overqualified returning mothers can actively do themselves (i.e., proactively helping coworkers) and what organizations can do (i.e., promote social integration) to foster women's successful reentry, we identify levers for improving reentry experiences. These insights can inform organizational practices aimed at fostering inclusive, supportive work environments, as well as broader policy initiatives focused on maternal workforce retention. Given ongoing societal efforts to reduce the gender pay gap—often linked to women's disproportionate exit from the workforce following childbirth (e.g., Cheung et al. 2022)—clarifying how to facilitate successful work adjustment is both timely and necessary.

1 | Hypothesis Development

1.1 | Perceived Overqualification and Proactive Helping Behavior: The Moderating Role of Social Integration

Following P-E fit theory, perceived overqualification is a situation where employees experience a misfit in which their abilities exceed the demands of their job (Edwards et al. 1998). Despite the focus of the overqualification literature on strain-related reactions to excess abilities (e.g., Erdogan and Bauer 2021; Harari et al. 2017), P-E fit theory suggests that employees can also adaptively and proactively react to this situation (Edwards et al. 1998) by engaging in “carry over” (Edwards 1996, 294). Here, employees transfer their excess abilities to another domain, different tasks, or activities (Edwards et al. 1998). According to P-E fit theory, carryover occurs only under certain conditions, primarily when environment factors enable the use of excess abilities (Edwards et al. 1998). Carryover can be expressed, for example, in the form of proactive behaviors, which constitute adaptive reactions to having excess abilities (Follmer et al. 2018; Yu 2013).

Proactive helping behavior, the focus of our study, is an important type of proactive behavior during work reentry whereby returning mothers can carry over excess abilities (i.e., perceived overqualification). Proactive helping behavior likely benefits both the reentering mother and other individuals in their goal attainment (Nielsen et al. 2009). More precisely, mothers returning to their previous company have valuable experiences and knowledge from their prematernity leave employment (e.g., Carlson et al. 2011; Little et al. 2015; Shipp et al. 2014). These experiences may allow them to carry over excess abilities by helping their colleagues in various organizational tasks requiring background knowledge. For example, they may possess knowledge of organizational procedures or can share best practice tips with coworkers. Returning mothers who feel overqualified are, therefore, in a unique position. They not only know the organization from prior employment but also possess an excess of skills and abilities that enable them to engage in proactive helping behavior.

However, as mentioned before, whether returning mothers engage in proactive helping depends on the presence of supportive environment factors (Edwards et al. 1998), such as their levels of social integration at the time of reentry. We focus on

social integration for two reasons. First, social factors within returning mothers' environment—encompassing the interpersonal relationships surrounding the person (Muchinsky and Monahan 1987; van Vianen 2018)—are important to consider due to the social nature of proactive helping behavior. To help others, returning mothers require not just the abilities (i.e., perceived overqualification) but also the social environment that motivates them to help. Prior research has demonstrated the link between social factors (e.g., cohesion and task interdependence) and motivation to engage in helping (Grant 2007; Grant and Parker 2009; Ng and Van Dyne 2005). Second, social integration is relevant for returning mothers, because many return to familiar organizational settings and pre-established social networks (Wiese and Knecht 2015). As such, the level of social integration mothers experience at the time of their return to the organization partly reflects the social capital that was developed during their prematernity employment (Houston and Marks 2003). Having established the relevance of social integration, we next turn to our theoretical argument for how it moderates the relationship between perceived overqualification and proactive helping behavior.

High social integration indicates being part of high-quality social exchanges at work (e.g., Banks et al. 2014; Blau 1964). Social exchanges are influenced by the norm of reciprocity, meaning that the help and resources that reentering mothers *provide* to their coworkers may indicate that they will *receive* help and resources from their colleagues when needed (Spitzmuller and Van Dyne 2013). Providing help, in this context, is a type of forward-looking exchange, where an actor is assumed to act based on the expectation or anticipation of a future reward (Blau 1964; Cook et al. 2013). For returning mothers who feel overqualified, offering their excess abilities to colleagues may, for example, yield access to information about organizational changes that happened during their maternity leave.

Due to the numerous benefits associated with social exchanges (Banks et al. 2014), reentering mothers who perceive themselves to be overqualified are presumably strongly motivated to maintain and build upon their established level of social integration from their employment prior to their maternity leave. Therefore, we expect returning mothers to engage in proactive helping behavior as a type of forward-looking exchange strategy when social integration is high. Indeed, findings from the team–member exchange literature show that proactive helping behavior, and exchanging resources depend on whether a team has good interpersonal relationships (e.g., Hoegl and Wagner 2005; Tse et al. 2008). Conversely, when social integration is low, returning mothers who feel overqualified may lack the social support, opportunities, and motivation needed to engage in proactive helping. As such, perceived overqualification is likely not related to proactive helping, unless social integration is high. Taken together, we argue that returning mothers' perceived overqualification (i.e., having excess abilities) will be related to proactive helping behavior when social integration is high, as it facilitates forward-looking exchanges whereby individuals engage in proactive helping with the expectation of receiving future benefits.

Hypothesis 1. *Social integration will moderate the relationship between perceived overqualification and proactive helping behavior, such that the relationship will be positive and significant only when social integration is high, but nonsignificant when social integration is low.*

1.2 | Proactive Helping Behavior, Work-Related Self-Efficacy, and Adjustment Outcomes

Building upon socialization process models (e.g., Bauer and Erdogan 2011; Kammeyer-Mueller and Wanberg 2003; Saks and Ashforth 1997), we further propose that returning mothers' proactive helping behavior will positively and indirectly relate to improvements in work-adjustment outcomes over time via higher work-related self-efficacy. Extant socialization models regard work adjustment as a dynamic process unfolding over time (e.g., Bauer and Erdogan 2011) and allow us to consider proactive helping behaviors as a type of proactive behavior dynamically contributing toward improved adjustment success (e.g., Kammeyer-Mueller and Wanberg 2003). Proactive behaviors play an integral part in socialization process models as they prompt proximal adjustment (i.e., work-related self-efficacy) in the first step and, through that, improvement in more distal adjustment outcomes (i.e., improved job satisfaction; see, e.g., Bauer and Erdogan 2011; Kammeyer-Mueller and Wanberg 2003; Morrison 1993, 2002). In other words, as individuals engage in proactive behaviors and accumulate psychological resources, work-adjustment outcomes, such as job satisfaction, are expected to improve dynamically over time. Proactive behaviors are typically conceptualized as newcomer behaviors such as information and feedback seeking and relationship building (e.g., Bauer et al. 2007). However, reentering mothers already have established knowledge of their organization and tasks (Keller et al. 2021; Shipp et al. 2014; Wiese and Heidemeier 2012). In this case, we propose that proactive helping behavior is particularly relevant, as it is a behavior whereby returning mothers can facilitate their adjustment process.

We expect that proactive helping behavior will facilitate *work-related self-efficacy* in the first step. The construct captures individuals' confidence in being able to accomplish their work goals (Rigotti et al. 2008). It represents a key proximal (re-)adjustment indicator (e.g., Bauer et al. 2007; Kokubo et al. 2023) because work-related self-efficacy implies that employees know their tasks and feel confident that they can accomplish them (Feldman 1981). We posit that engaging in proactive helping behavior will positively relate to returning mothers' work-related self-efficacy as proactive helping fulfills functions like demonstrating one's abilities to colleagues (Buunk and Schaufeli 1999) and feeling more competent (Fisher et al. 1982). In line with this assumption, prior research has established a positive link between proactive helping behavior and more favorable self-evaluations, including self-efficacy (Giles and Eyler 1994; Hunter and Linn 1981). In fact, Jaeckel et al. (2012) demonstrated that providing support to others is related to higher self-efficacy beliefs among reentering mothers after maternity leave.

In a second step, we propose that work-related self-efficacy will facilitate improvements in *job satisfaction* over time. Job satisfaction is a key work-adjustment outcome, referring to “a pleasurable or positive emotional state resulting from the appraisal of one’s job or job experiences” (Locke, 1976, 1304). Job satisfaction is highly relevant for subjective well-being and performance and plays a role in affective spillover effects to other domains (Judge and Klinger 2008). There are three reasons why we expect work-related self-efficacy to facilitate improvements in job satisfaction along the work-adjustment process. First, based on social-cognitive theory (Bandura 1986), Judge and Bono (2001) suggested that individuals with high self-efficacy are more likely to attain desired outcomes at work due to feeling competent and successful, which ultimately leads to improved job satisfaction. Second, self-efficacious individuals should be more satisfied with their attainments because they are more likely to set goals that are “consistent with their values and aspirations” (Judge and Hurst 2008, 851). Through fulfilling such consistent goals, job satisfaction should increase. Third, McNatt and Judge (2008) have suggested that self-efficacy may promote better self-regulation in terms of affective and attitudinal responses. In turn, self-regulation relates to sustaining positive job attitudes and suppressing negative work-related thoughts (for empirical evidence of the self-efficacy-job satisfaction link, see Bozeman et al. 2001; Judge and Bono 2001; Rigotti et al. 2008). Accordingly, we propose that proactive behaviors will relate to improvements in job satisfaction over the work-adjustment process via higher work-related self-efficacy. Based on the above-outlined arguments, we propose:

Hypothesis 2. *Higher proactive helping behavior will relate indirectly to improved job satisfaction via higher levels of work-related self-efficacy.*

1.3 | Perceived Overqualification, Social Integration, and Work-Adjustment Outcomes: A Moderated Sequential Mediation

Based on the above reasoning, we propose a moderated sequential mediation process, whereby returning mothers’ perceived overqualification, provided that social integration is high, relates to proactive helping behavior in the first step, which in turn relates to work-related self-efficacy (as a proximal adjustment indicator) in the second step, and through that, to improved job satisfaction (as a distal adjustment success indicator). Such a moderated sequential mediation aligns with the process nature of both P-E fit theory and classic socialization frameworks (Bauer et al. 2007; Kammeyer-Mueller and Wanberg 2003; Saks and Ashforth 1997). Processes such as work adjustment represent a dynamic interplay of aspects related to the individual’s work situation (here: perceived overqualification) and environment factors (here: social integration) over time. This interplay leads to behavioral reactions (here: proactive helping behavior; Hypothesis 1), which, in turn, promote proximal adjustment (here: work-related self-efficacy) and, finally, contribute to changes in distal adjustment outcomes (here: increases in job satisfaction; Hypothesis 2). Based on an integration of P-E fit theory and socialization process models, we thus propose:

Hypothesis 3. *There will be a sequential indirect effect of perceived overqualification on improved job satisfaction via proactive helping behavior and work-related self-efficacy when social integration is high (vs. no indirect effect when social integration is low).*

Due to our focus on adaptive reactions to perceived overqualification in the present research, we explicitly hypothesize only the positive indirect effect of perceived overqualification via proactive helping behavior and work-related self-efficacy on job satisfaction. Nonetheless, previous research has consistently demonstrated a negative relationship between perceived overqualification and job satisfaction, in line with the strain-related perspective of P-E fit theory on perceived overqualification (see Harari et al. 2017). Individuals with perceived overqualification feel that their skills and potential are undervalued, which is associated with motivation loss and negative affective reactions (Erdogan and Bauer 2021; Harari et al. 2017), thereby undermining their job satisfaction. Based on these previous findings, we expect to also find a direct negative relationship between perceived overqualification and job satisfaction. In other words, we expect a suppression effect (MacKinnon et al. 2000), whereby perceived overqualification will relate both to *decreased* job satisfaction (directly) and indirectly to *improved* job satisfaction via proactive helping and higher levels of work-related self-efficacy. This is also in line with P-E fit theory’s proposition that strain- and carryover reactions can occur simultaneously (Edwards et al. 1998). Although we do not formally hypothesize this negative direct relationship between perceived overqualification and job satisfaction (due to our focus on adaptive rather than strain-related responses), we nonetheless expect and empirically model it.

2 | Method

2.1 | Sample and Procedures

Research materials, raw data, and analysis code are available at OSF via the following link [https://osf.io/w8tds/overview?view_only=742b1ca4a6e54c279dfc150dd84bc029]. We collected three-wave data among mothers who had reentered their workplace after maternity leave in the German-speaking part of Europe (Austria, Germany, and the German-speaking part of Switzerland). We contacted potential participants through organizations’ HR departments, equal opportunities offices, messenger boards and newsletters about parenting and childcare, newspapers, parental forums, and associations for working women. We offered personalized feedback reports as an incentive for participation among this hard-to-recruit population that experiences a multitude of (role) demands both in the work and family domain (Carlson et al. 2011; Jaeckel et al. 2012; Little et al. 2015; Matthews et al. 2014; Williams et al. 1991). After participants had signed up for the study and provided informed consent, we collected data across three time points, each separated by 3 weeks. This procedure aligns with recommendations to reduce common method bias by temporal separation of measurement (e.g., Podsakoff et al. 2012). The selection of a 3-week interval is based on recommendations for “shortitudinal” designs, which are suited for studying

dynamic processes such as the return to work after maternity leave, where shorter time lags are necessary (Dormann and Griffin 2015). This approach is consistent with similar time-lagged studies examining perceived overqualification and its outcomes (e.g., Deng et al. 2018; Luksyte et al. 2022).

As part of the first survey (T1), participants completed screening questions. To qualify for participation, participants had to provide consent, confirm their return to the same organization after maternity leave, and indicate a return to work between 2 weeks and 12 months ago. We chose a 2-week minimum reentry period to ensure a reliable assessment of perceived overqualification and a 12-month maximum, as most work-adjustment processes typically occur within the first year after job reentry (e.g., Bauer and Erdogan 2011; Chatman 1991). At T1, we assessed perceived overqualification, proactive helping behavior, social integration, and control variables (i.e., *maternity leave length, whether it was women's first reentry, workload in percent, and education*; please see below for more detail). At T2, we assessed proactive helping behavior, and at T3, work-related self-efficacy and job satisfaction were assessed. We also obtained the baseline measurement of job satisfaction at T1. Further analysis details are reported below.

Initially, 451 returning mothers agreed to participate in the study, met all selection criteria, and fully completed the T1 survey. At T2, 420 participants completed the survey, and at T3, 398 participants completed the survey. A total of 388 participants completed the surveys at all three time points. After excluding those who had completed the surveys at the wrong point in time or who had experienced special events during their participation that likely influenced the validity of our measurements (e.g., prolonged sickness, vacation time), our final sample size comprised 359 participants. This represents 79.6% of the initial 451 returning mothers who had agreed to take part in the study and 92.5% of those who completed the surveys at all time points. In our final sample, participants had an average age of 34.3 years ($SD = 3.7$), took an average maternity leave of 8.1 months ($SD = 6.2$), and had a contractual workload of 59.2% ($SD = 19.3$). The youngest child was, on average, 10.9 months old ($SD = 5.5$). A tertiary education degree (i.e., university) was obtained by 65.2% of participants, 17.5% obtained a degree from a university of applied sciences, 12.3% completed vocational training, and 5% obtained a high-school diploma. Participants had an average tenure of 6.3 years ($SD = 3.8$). We conducted a series of t - and χ^2 tests and found no difference between participants in the final sample ($N = 359$) and those who dropped out over the course of the study or did not fulfill our selection criteria ($N = 92$). More detailed results are available at OSF.

2.2 | Measures¹

All variables were measured on a 7-point rating scale ranging from (1) *Strongly disagree* to (7) *Strongly agree* unless otherwise noted. All measures were administered in German. For measures originally in English and without a German version, we followed Brislin's (1980) translation/back-translation procedure.

2.2.1 | Perceived Overqualification (T1)

Returning mothers' perceived overqualification was measured with the nine-item Scale of Perceived Overqualification (SPOQ) by Maynard et al. (2006) (e.g., "My job requires less education than I have.").

2.2.2 | Social Integration (T1)

To assess social integration, we used four items from Morrison (2002). One example item is "In the last three weeks, I felt accepted by my colleagues."

2.2.3 | Proactive Helping Behavior (T2)

Returning mothers' proactive helping behavior was measured using three items by Grant et al. (2009), which were adapted from Rioux and Penner (2001). An example item is "In the last three weeks, I proactively tried to find new ways in which I could support my colleagues." The items were assessed on a 7-point Likert scale from (1) *Never* to (7) *Always/very often*.

2.2.4 | Work-Related Self-Efficacy (T3)

Returning mothers' work-related self-efficacy was measured with the German four-item short version of the Occupational Self-Efficacy Scale by Rigotti et al. (2008); (for use of the same scale, see Hentrich et al. 2017 and Rigotti et al. 2020). An example item is "In the last three weeks, I mostly had multiple ideas to deal with occurring problems."

2.2.5 | Job Satisfaction (T3)

To measure employee job satisfaction, we used the three-item Michigan Organizational Assessment Questionnaire Job Satisfaction Subscale (MOAQ-JSS; Cammann et al. 1983; see Bowling and Hammond 2008; German version by Debus et al. 2023). An example item is "In the last three weeks, I was satisfied with my job."

2.2.6 | Control Variables

In line with prior research on reentry to the workplace after maternity leave (e.g., Grether et al. 2018; Thompson et al. 2022), we controlled for the length of maternity leave (in months), whether it was the first reentry or not, workload in percent, and level of education. These variables will likely affect our mediators and outcome variables (see Spector and Brannick 2011). Additionally, we accounted for the baseline measure (T1) of job satisfaction (T3) to model the change in job satisfaction from T1 to T3 as proposed in Hypothesis 2. By using this approach, we simultaneously address between-person variations in job satisfaction (cf. Ng and Wang 2019; van Gool et al. 2007), and account for the simultaneous measurement of the second-stage mediator and outcome (e.g., Debus et al. 2023).

TABLE 1 | Means, standard deviations, and zero-order correlations of study variables.

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Length of maternity leave (T1)	8.12	6.24	—									
2. First reentry (T1)	0.54	0.50	0.04	—								
3. Workload (%) (T1)	59.19	19.25	-0.04	0.04	—							
4. Level of education (T1)	5.36	1.03	0.02	-0.14**	0.12*	—						
5. Perceived overqualification (T1)	3.14	1.48	0.08	-0.07	-0.15**	-0.02	(0.94)					
6. Social integration (T1)	5.65	1.09	-0.12**	0.05	-0.03	-0.01	-0.27**	(0.91)				
7. Job satisfaction (T1)	5.17	1.28	-0.06	0.01	-0.02	0.06	-0.36**	0.52**	(0.91)			
8. Proactive helping behavior (T2)	4.02	1.11	0.04	0.11*	0.05	-0.13*	0.07	0.18**	0.09	(0.78)		
9. Work-related self-efficacy (T3)	5.26	0.95	-0.04	0.06	-0.01	-0.05	-0.07	0.32**	0.34**	0.17**	(0.88)	
10. Job satisfaction (T3)	5.21	1.23	-0.05	-0.04	-0.03	0.05	-0.32**	0.48**	0.69**	0.09	0.43**	(0.92)

Note: N = 359. Alpha reliabilities appear in the parentheses along the diagonal.

* $p < 0.05$.

** $p < 0.01$.

3 | Results

3.1 | Preliminary Analysis

Means, standard deviations, and correlations of the study variables are displayed in Table 1. We used the Mplus 8.5 software (Muthén and Muthén 1998–2012) for analysis.

3.2 | Confirmatory Factor Analysis

We performed confirmatory factor analyses (CFA) to examine the construct validity of all measures. Results showed that the proposed six-factor model, M_0 ($\chi^2(120) = 175.67$, $p < 0.001$; CFI = 0.99; TLI = 0.99; RMSEA = 0.04; SRMR = 0.03) [i.e., whereby perceived overqualification (T1), social integration (T1), proactive helping behavior (T2), work-related self-efficacy (T3), and job satisfaction (T3), as well as the baseline measure (T1) of job satisfaction all represent distinct constructs] fit the data better than an alternative five-factor model (M_1) in which social integration and proactive helping behavior were specified as one factor (covering social constructs), and work-related self-efficacy, job satisfaction and perceived overqualification as separate factors, M_1 ($\chi^2(125) = 486.02$, $p < 0.001$; CFI = 0.92; TLI = 0.91; RMSEA = 0.09; SRMR = 0.08). This model fit the data significantly worse ($\Delta\chi^2(5) = 310.35$, $p < 0.001$) compared to M_0 . Moreover, we also compared M_0 to a three-factor model (M_2), in which all measures loaded onto factors per whether they were measured T1, T2, or T3, M_2 ($\chi^2(132) = 2068.88$, $p < 0.001$; CFI = 0.59; TLI = 0.53; RMSEA = 0.20; SRMR = 0.13). M_2 fit the data significantly worse than M_0 ($\Delta\chi^2(12) = 1893.22$, $p < 0.001$). Taken together, the CFA results indicate that the measures used in the present study capture distinct constructs.

3.3 | Hypotheses Testing

We used multivariate path modeling to estimate the hypothesized model² in two steps. In the first step, we estimated a baseline model in which the endogenous variables proactive helping behavior, work-related self-efficacy, and job satisfaction were regressed on the control variables. The control variables were grand-mean centered (Cohen et al. 2003; Gielnik et al. 2018). Additionally, job satisfaction at T3 was regressed on job satisfaction at T1 to model the change in this outcome. As shown in Table 2, this baseline model accounted for 3.1% of the variance in proactive helping behavior, 0.7% in work-related self-efficacy, and 41.1% in job satisfaction. The baseline model provides the reference point for determining the incremental variance explained by the predictors specified in the hypothesized model (Hayes 2021).

In the second step, we added the hypothesized predictors to the path model to test our hypotheses. Here, perceived overqualification and social integration were both grand-mean centered and then multiplied to form the interaction term (Cohen et al. 2003). Compared to the baseline model, we additionally modeled the following paths: Proactive helping behavior (i.e., the first-stage mediator) was regressed directly on perceived overqualification, social integration (i.e., the moderator), the perceived overqualification \times social integration interaction

TABLE 2 | Unstandardized coefficients of the moderated mediation path model.

Variables	Proactive helping behavior (T2)				Work-related self-efficacy (T3)				Job satisfaction (T3)			
	Model 1		Model 2		Model 1		Model 2		Model 1		Model 2	
	Est.	SE	Est.	SE	Est.	SE	Est.	SE	Est.	SE	Est.	SE
<i>Intercept</i>	4.02**	0.06	4.06**	0.06	5.26**	0.05	4.88**	0.19	2.19**	0.20	1.09**	0.34
<i>Control variables (T1)</i>												
Length of maternity leave	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01	-0.01	0.01	0.00	0.01	0.00	0.01	0.00	0.01
First reentry	0.20	0.12	0.21	0.11	0.11	0.11	0.06	0.10	-0.11	0.10	-0.17	0.09
Workload in percent	0.00	0.00	0.01	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Education	-0.14*	0.06	-0.15**	0.06	-0.04	0.05	-0.03	0.05	0.01	0.05	0.03	0.04
<i>Baseline control variable (T1)</i>												
Job satisfaction									0.58**	0.04	0.50**	0.04
<i>Independent variables (T1)</i>												
Perceived overqualification			0.12**	0.04			0.00	0.03			-0.08*	0.03
Social integration			0.17**	0.06			0.26**	0.05			0.13**	0.05
<i>Interaction</i>												
Perceived overqualification × social integration			0.09**	0.03								
<i>First-stage mediator (T2)</i>												
Proactive helping behavior							0.09*	0.05			0.01	0.04
<i>Second-stage mediator (T3)</i>												
Work-related self-efficacy											0.29**	0.05
R^2	3.1%		11.2%		0.7%		11.3%		41.1%		44.4%	
ΔR^2			8.1%				10.6%				3.3%	

Note: $N = 359$. Model 1 represents the baseline model. Model 2 represents the full hypothesized model.

* $p < 0.05$.

** $p < 0.01$.

term, alongside the control variables. Work-related self-efficacy (i.e., the second-stage mediator) was regressed directly on perceived overqualification, social integration (i.e., the moderator), proactive helping behavior, alongside the control variables. Job satisfaction (i.e., the outcome at T3) was regressed directly on perceived overqualification, proactive helping behavior, social integration, alongside the control variables and the baseline measure of job satisfaction at T1. Work-related self-efficacy (i.e., the second-stage mediator) and job satisfaction were also regressed on social integration (i.e., the moderator) following Liu et al. (2015) and Gielnik et al. (2018). Compared to the baseline model, the hypothesized model explained an additional 8.1% of incremental variance in proactive helping, 10.6% in work-related self-efficacy, and 3.3% in job satisfaction.

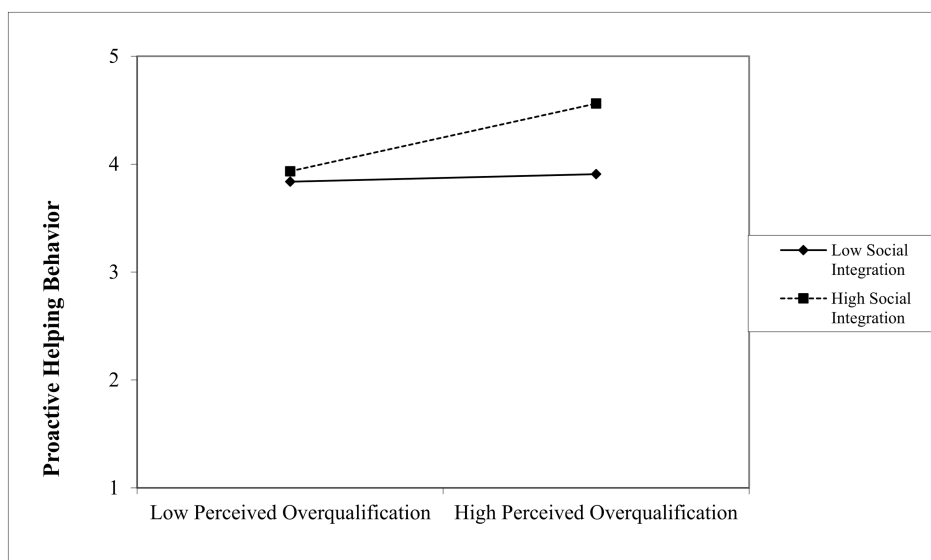
Unstandardized coefficient estimates for the estimated path model, R^2 , and ΔR^2 are displayed in Table 2. We used Monte Carlo simulations with 20000 replications (Selig and Preacher 2008) to obtain the confidence intervals (CI) to test the indirect effects proposed in Hypotheses 2 and 3. Table 3 summarizes their parameter estimates and corresponding CIs.

In Hypothesis 1, we predicted that the relationship between perceived overqualification and proactive helping behavior would be moderated by social integration in returning mothers, such that the relationship would be positive under high levels of social integration, but nonsignificant under low levels of social integration. In line with our assumption, the perceived overqualification × social integration interaction

TABLE 3 | Unstandardized estimates and bias-corrected confidence intervals of indirect path coefficients of the moderated mediation model.

Variables	Indirect effect	
	Estimate	Bias-corrected 95% CI
Perceived overqualification → Proactive helping behavior		
<i>Moderator social integration</i>		
High social integration	0.21	$p < 0.001$
Low social integration	0.02	$p = 0.638$
Overall interaction effect	0.09	$p = 0.005$
Proactive helping behavior → Work-related self-efficacy → Job satisfaction		
<i>Indirect effect</i>	0.03	[0.0015, 0.0557]
Perceived overqualification → Proactive helping behavior → Work-related self-efficacy → Job satisfaction		
<i>Moderator social integration: Conditional indirect effects</i>		
High social integration (HSI)	0.0056	[0.0003, 0.0132]
Low social integration (LSI)	0.0006	[-0.0023, 0.0040]
Difference between HSI and LSI conditions	0.0050	[0.0001, 0.0128]

Note: Significant (conditional) indirect effects and differences between conditional indirect effects for high (+1 SD) versus low (-1 SD) values of social integration are in bold.

**FIGURE 2** | Social integration moderates the relationship between perceived overqualification and proactive helping behavior.

term was significantly related to proactive helping behavior ($\gamma = 0.09$, $p = 0.005$). Figure 2 graphically depicts the interaction effect. Simple slope tests (see Table 3) showed that when social integration was high (1 SD above the mean), the relationship between perceived overqualification and proactive helping behavior was positive and significant ($\gamma = 0.21$, $p < 0.001$). When social integration was low (1 SD below the mean), there was no relationship between perceived overqualification and proactive helping behavior ($\gamma = 0.02$, $p = 0.638$). Thus, Hypothesis 1 was supported.

In Hypothesis 2, we predicted that proactive helping would be indirectly related to improved job satisfaction via work-related

self-efficacy in returning mothers. Table 3 summarizes parameter estimates and corresponding CIs for the indirect effects. In line with our expectations, there was a significant indirect effect of proactive helping behavior on improved job satisfaction via higher levels of work-related self-efficacy, $\gamma = 0.03$, 95% CI = [0.0015, 0.0557]. Thus, in support of Hypothesis 2, proactive helping behavior was related positively to changes in job satisfaction, implying improved job satisfaction through higher levels of work-related self-efficacy.

To test Hypothesis 3, we estimated indirect effects at conditional values of the moderator (i.e., 1 SD above and below the mean of social integration) and corresponding differences, as displayed

in Table 3. In line with our expectations, there was a significant difference between values of conditional indirect effects for high vs. low social integration for the effect of perceived overqualification on changes in job satisfaction through higher levels of proactive helping behavior and work-related self-efficacy, $\gamma = 0.005$, 95% CI = [0.0001, 0.0128]. At high levels of social integration, the sequential indirect effect was positive and significant, implying that perceived overqualification was related to an increase in job satisfaction via higher levels of proactive helping behavior and work-related self-efficacy ($\gamma = 0.0056$, 95% CI = [0.0003, 0.0132]). At low levels of social integration, the sequential indirect effect was not significant ($\gamma = 0.0006$, 95% CI = [-0.0023, 0.0040]). Thus, Hypothesis 3 was supported. Further, perceived overqualification was directly related to a decrease in job satisfaction ($\gamma = -0.08$, $p = 0.023$). This finding is consistent with the expected suppression effect, given that the indirect effect of perceived overqualification (via proactive helping and work-related self-efficacy) on changes in job satisfaction was positive. Additionally, the conditional total effect at high levels of social integration was negative and significant ($\gamma = -0.07$, $p = 0.036$). These results suggest that strain reactions to perceived overqualification occur simultaneously with adaptive reactions and imply that the strain reactions outweigh the adaptive reactions.

3.4 | Supplementary Analysis

3.4.1 | Social Integration as an Ongoing Phenomenon

In our theoretical model, we proposed and empirically tested social integration as a moderator of the relationship between perceived overqualification and proactive helping behavior. Social integration may also be seen as an ongoing phenomenon that potentially affects other stages of our model as well. Accordingly, we tested whether social integration moderates the second stage (proactive helping \rightarrow work-related self-efficacy) and third stage (work-related self-efficacy \rightarrow improved job satisfaction) of the sequential mediational chain we proposed in this paper. We retested the moderated sequential mediation chain proposed in Hypothesis 3, specifying social integration as a second and third-stage moderator in two steps.

3.4.1.1 | Second-Stage Moderation. First, we tested social integration as a second-stage moderator. To begin, we tested whether there was a significant effect of the interaction of social integration \times proactive helping behavior on work-related self-efficacy (i.e., the second-stage mediator). Results demonstrated a significant interaction effect, $\gamma = 0.07$, $p = 0.048$. Next, we estimated indirect effects (i.e., perceived overqualification \rightarrow proactive helping \rightarrow work-related self-efficacy \rightarrow job satisfaction) at conditional values of the moderator (i.e., 1 SD above and below the mean of social integration) and corresponding differences by estimating indirect effects. There was no significant difference between values of conditional indirect effects for high vs. low social integration for the effect of perceived overqualification on improved job satisfaction through proactive helping behavior and work-related self-efficacy, $\gamma = 0.005$, 95% CI [0.0000, 0.0121]. Thus, we found no second-stage conditional sequential mediation effect of perceived overqualification on improved job satisfaction. This is most likely due to the simple interaction effect of social integration \times proactive helping

on work-related self-efficacy being only slightly below the 0.05 threshold. As such, social integration did not moderate the second stage of the indirect effect of perceived overqualification via proactive helping and work-related self-efficacy on improved job satisfaction.

3.4.1.2 | Third-Stage Moderation. Second, we tested social integration as a third-stage moderator. The interaction term of social integration \times work-related self-efficacy (i.e., the third-stage mediator) was not significantly related to changes in job satisfaction, $\gamma = -0.08$, $p = 0.069$. Given that the simple interaction effect was nonsignificant, we did not proceed with estimating the conditional indirect effects. This result implies that social integration does not moderate the third stage of the sequential mediation model.

3.4.2 | Reverse Causation Between Social Integration and Proactive Helping

In our main model, we examined the moderating effect of social integration (at T1) on the relationship between perceived overqualification and proactive helping behavior. However, it is also conceivable that proactive helping behavior increases social integration over time, given that social exchanges both drive and are driven by social integration (Blau 1964; Ng and Van Dyne 2005). To address the possibility of reverse causation, we conducted a supplemental cross-lagged panel analysis (Kearney 2017), given that we assessed social integration and proactive helping at both Time 1 and Time 2. In the cross-lagged model, social integration and proactive helping at Time 2 were each regressed on social integration and proactive helping at Time 1. The correlations of both exogenous and endogenous variables were freely estimated.

The results showed that only the autoregressive paths were significant: social integration at Time 1 significantly predicted social integration at Time 2, $b = 0.81$, $p < 0.001$, and proactive helping at Time 1 significantly predicted proactive helping at Time 2, $b = 0.60$, $p < 0.001$. Importantly, over and above these autoregressive effects, there was no significant cross-lagged effect of social integration at Time 1 on proactive helping at Time 2, $b = 0.04$, $p = 0.18$, nor of proactive helping at Time 1 on social integration at Time 2, $b = 0.06$, $p = 0.14$. These findings indicate that, within the timeframe of our study, there was no evidence of reverse causation.

3.4.3 | Time Since Reentry as a Control Variable

Our sample includes women who have reentered their jobs between 2 weeks to 12 months prior. Therefore, we conducted additional analyses testing time since reentry (measured in months) as a control variable (to ensure that our observed effects are not due to the time that passed since reentry) and moderator (to ensure that the effects do not depend on a short vs. longer time since reentry; modeling paths on all endogenous variables) in separate models. The results for all hypotheses remained unchanged. For parsimony, we did not include this variable in the final model. Detailed results from these additional analyses are available on OSF (S1 and S2) at [https://osf.io/w8tds/overview?view_only=742b1ca4a6e54c279dfc150dd84bc029].

4 | Discussion

Perceived overqualification is an important, yet underexamined issue among working mothers, especially during the return to work after maternity leave. By drawing on the underexplored carryover mechanism in P-E fit theory (Edwards et al. 1998), we investigated the joint role of perceived overqualification and social integration in contributing to work adjustment success after maternity leave. In doing so, we connected the literature on perceived overqualification with the work adjustment after maternity leave literature. Our findings revealed that when returning mothers who perceive themselves as overqualified feel socially integrated, they can carry over their excess abilities (i.e., perceived overqualification) by engaging in proactive helping behavior toward colleagues three weeks later. In line with our assumptions, perceived overqualification did not contribute to proactive helping behavior when social integration was low. In turn, proactive helping behavior emerged as a beneficial, proactive behavior related to improved job satisfaction three weeks later via higher work-related self-efficacy. Our study provides empirical evidence for perceived overqualification's adaptive role in the work-adjustment process by facilitating proactive behavior. In line with our expectations and earlier findings related to strain-related outcomes of perceived overqualification, we also found a parallel direct effect of perceived overqualification on *decreased* job satisfaction. This suggests a suppression effect (MacKinnon et al. 2000) whereby perceived overqualification relates both *directly* to decreased job satisfaction and *indirectly* (via proactive helping and work-related self-efficacy) to improved job satisfaction at the same time. This finding highlights that adaptive and strain reactions to perceived overqualification may co-occur rather than being mutually exclusive (Debus et al. 2023). However, considering that the total effect of perceived overqualification on changes in job satisfaction was negative, the strain pathway seems to outweigh the adaptive pathway.

4.1 | Theoretical Implications

Our findings contribute to the literature on perceived overqualification and work adjustment in several ways. First, our findings extend the predominant conceptualization of perceived overqualification as a phenomenon that elicits mainly strain-related reactions (Erdogan and Bauer 2021; van Dijk et al. 2020). We do so by drawing on P-E fit theory to show that perceived overqualification can relate to adaptive reactions like carryover (Edwards et al. 1998), in parallel to strain-related reactions. Thereby, we responded to calls for research on the adaptive side of perceived overqualification (Deng et al. 2018; Thompson et al. 2013; van Dijk et al. 2020). Other studies have examined beneficial and immediate behavioral outcomes of perceived overqualification from a job crafting theory perspective (Lin et al. 2017; Zhang et al. 2021) and a self-control theory perspective (Chu et al. 2021; Zhang et al. 2016). Our study extends these earlier approaches by demonstrating that P-E fit theory (e.g., Edwards et al. 1998), a frequently used theory within the perceived overqualification literature, offers a more holistic theoretical framework for investigating opposing reactions to perceived overqualification. Unlike narrower models, P-E fit theory enables the concurrent

prediction of adaptive *and* strain-related reactions to perceived overqualification. As such, we contribute toward a theoretical approach that takes a more integrative view of reactions to perceived overqualification, thus complementing initial evidence going into this direction (e.g., Debus et al. 2020, 2023; Körner et al. 2025; Lin et al. 2017).

Second, our investigation of social integration as a contextual boundary condition rooted in P-E fit and social exchange theories builds on and contributes to the growing literature taking a relational perspective on perceived overqualification. By investigating social integration, we aligned with van Dijk et al.'s (2020) and Deng et al. (2018)'s call to extend the perceived overqualification literature with research on the role of the social context (e.g., the work group) in which employees are embedded—given that research often treats perceived overqualification as if it were happening in a social vacuum. Prior studies have already pointed to the importance of social boundary conditions (e.g., social acceptance, Deng et al. 2018; proportion of overqualified workers in a group, Hu et al. 2015). We extend these findings by demonstrating that perceived overqualification relates to proactive helping behavior under high levels of social integration. In our supplemental analyses, we further found no evidence that social integration moderated any subsequent stages of the adjustment process. These null findings underscore the robustness of our theoretical model and imply that social integration mainly serves as a lever to enable proactive adjustment behavior. In contrast, the positive downstream benefits of proactive adjustment behavior on proximal and distal adjustment success seem to occur irrespective of the levels of social integration. Thus, while social integration enables the initiation of proactive behavioral responses, the downstream benefits of engaging in such adjustment behavior are not contingent on social integration. This is consistent with prior evidence on the generally robust positive effects of helping behavior on self-efficacy and job attitudes (e.g., Bolino and Grant 2016).

Third, our study contributes to the growing literature on the return-to-work process after maternity leave by introducing perceived overqualification as a meaningful yet underexplored factor that can shape the work-adjustment process after maternity leave. While extant studies have highlighted various factors, such as providing and receiving social support, intentional self-regulation, or leave length that positively relate to a diverse set of adjustment outcomes (e.g., Jaeckel et al. 2012; Shipp et al. 2014; Swider et al. 2017; Wiese and Ritter 2012), little attention has been paid to the role of perceived overqualification. This is surprising, given that several factors, such as childcare related mobility constraints and reassignment of lower level job tasks upon return, make the experience of perceived overqualification plausible and likely for many returning mothers (Kleven et al. 2019; Wiese and Knecht 2015). We address this gap by looking at when and why perceived overqualification relates to adjustment success (i.e., improved job satisfaction), thereby connecting the perceived overqualification and socialization literatures. Previous research connecting these literatures highlighted the potential adverse effects of perceived overqualification on autonomy perceptions, affect, and turnover intentions (Simon et al. 2019). Our study extends this work by adding a novel perspective and demonstrating how and under which circumstances adaptive and

beneficial reactions during work adjustment can be elicited. Further, by drawing on classic socialization frameworks (e.g., Kammeyer-Mueller and Wanberg 2003) and introducing proactive helping behavior as a beneficial, proactive socialization behavior, we demonstrate the applicability of socialization frameworks to groups beyond traditional newcomers such as mothers returning to work after maternity leave.

Fourth, we contribute to the broader literature on helping at work by highlighting its relevance for work re-adjustment after maternity leave. Helping behaviors are an integral part of organizational life, serving many functions—often at the margins of formal roles, yet central to how work gets done (Grant and Patil 2012). In line with calls for more diverse antecedents and outcomes of helping (Bolino and Grant 2016; Fisher et al. 2018), our findings suggest that the contextual need to reintegrate after maternity leave can motivate returning mothers to leverage their excess skills (i.e., perceived overqualification) and, when socially integrated, engage in helping not just for others' benefit but as a strategy to support their own adjustment. In this context, helping is theoretically suggested to enhance visibility and reputation (Bolino and Grant 2016; Leary and Kowalski 1990) and to help secure relational benefits that facilitate reentry (Spitzmuller and Van Dyne 2013). Thus, we join a growing conversation that views helping as a critical part of ensuring organizational functioning, and, in our case, as supporting the retention of valuable employees.

4.2 | Practical Implications

Our study yields practical insights for organizations, managers, and reentering mothers. First, organizations can support reentering mothers by ensuring they are socially well-integrated into the workplace. This could be achieved by fostering social interactions among colleagues (e.g., encouraging exchanges during lunchtime), encouraging cooperation, and organizing regular employee gatherings to facilitate a sense of belonging in reentering mothers. Leaders can also convey the belongingness and value of returning mothers. Research has shown that leader support is strongly associated with employees feeling valued and belonging in the company (Scott and Duffy 2015). Moreover, employees perceived as integral members of the in-group tend to be treated more positively by their coworkers (e.g., Brewer 1979).

Second, our findings suggest that by engaging in proactive helping, reentering mothers who feel overqualified can experience increased work-related self-efficacy and claim agency over their adjustment process. It should be noted that, due to our statistical approach, the indirect effects we observed were relatively small, implying that interventions focused solely on work-related self-efficacy may have limited downstream effects. Nevertheless, these findings underline the importance of affirming reentering mothers in their professional identity and giving them a vote of confidence in their skills and value for the organization (Chawla et al. 2024). That said, not all returning mothers may be equally able to engage in such adaptive behaviors. Those with lower socioeconomic status and lower autonomy roles may lack opportunities to apply their excess skills (Kohn and Schooler 1983; Wrzesniewski and Dutton 2001), underscoring the need for organizations to ensure meaningful role fit across

job levels. Rather than providing the often-well-intended soft landing in the form of fewer and lower level job tasks (Arena et al. 2023; Equality and Human Rights Commission 2016; Hideg et al. 2018; Williams and Bornstein 2006), employers should carefully engage with their returning employee to determine their individual needs and capabilities. This is further underscored by our findings that, alongside adaptive reactions to perceived overqualification, negative consequences for job satisfaction persist and even outweigh the adaptive reactions.

4.3 | Limitations and Directions for Future Research

As is the case with any study, ours is not without limitations. First, the indirect effects reported in our study are of modest size, although they align with expectations for complex models with multiple mediators (Hayes 2013; Preacher and Hayes 2008) and provide critical evidence for understanding intricate processes during the return to work after maternity leave. They are also consistent with similar effect sizes reported in the organizational behavior and psychology literature (e.g., Aubry et al. 2024; George et al. 2022; Wang et al. 2022).

Second, we collected single-source data from an extremely hard-to-reach population: returning mothers who are experiencing potentially the highest point of work and family demands in their careers (Spitzmuller and Matthews 2016). As such, attaining three time points to test our four-step serial-mediation is exciting, and the self-reports allowed us to investigate the highly relevant subjective experiences of returning mothers (Cruz 2022). Still, subsequent research may reduce the risk of common method bias by collecting additional time points and integrating partner- or coworker-ratings (e.g., to investigate social integration). This could be achieved by securing substantial external funding to further incentivize participants (Grandey et al. 2020; Simha 2024).

Third, our study captures data from returning mothers across multiple stages of the reentry process (ranging from 2 weeks to 12 months). This represents a strength, given the inherent challenges of longitudinal research in this population. Still, subsequent investigations can refine our findings by using longitudinal cohort designs to model trajectories. Participants should be captured at the same point of reentry, ideally even before they reenter the organization (e.g., 4 weeks prior, see Wiese and Ritter 2012). For instance, the development of work-related self-efficacy across the adjustment process could be investigated. Immediately upon reentry, there may be a drop (e.g., Jaeckel et al. 2012; Ladge and Greenberg 2015), which may then fade over time as returning mothers engage in proactive behaviors, such as helping behavior.

Fourth, we want to note that we infer—rather than directly test—the relevance of perceived overqualification among returning mothers from theory and empirical evidence (Büchel and van Ham 2003; The Economist 2025). Future studies could compare levels of perceived overqualification among returning mothers with employees reentering work after other types of career interruption (e.g., sabbaticals, extended sick leave). Such a comparison would demonstrate whether perceived overqualification

is mainly relevant for returning mothers or even more broadly relevant for employees returning after career interruptions.

Moreover, we call on future research to explore the generalizability of our findings to more diverse parental populations. First, we suggest investigating the experiences of returning mothers joining a new organization, where social integration is initially low. In such situations, mothers may benefit from alternative forms of proactive behavior, such as individual job crafting that do not rely on preexisting social capital (Wrzesniewski and Dutton 2001). Second, future research should examine the applicability of our findings to mothers with lower levels of educational attainment. Similar to much of the work–family literature (e.g., Ladge and Greenberg 2015), our sample consisted mainly of highly educated workers. Mothers with lower educational attainments may face distinct structural challenges, such as financial constraints, limited childcare access, and inflexible or unstable employment conditions (Jacobs and Padavic 2014), which then impact their reentry in distinct ways. Researchers need to secure the funding necessary to include hard-to-reach populations through outreach and community-engaged partnerships. Third, future investigations could examine returning fathers, an increasingly relevant group (OECD Family Database 2022). They may also face unique reentry barriers, such as backlash for taking parental leave in organizations with traditional gender role attitudes (e.g., Duvander 2014; Eagly 1987). We encourage future research to investigate how family-supportive organizational policies (Moran and Koslowski 2019) influence the reentry experiences of these parental populations.

Fourth, our framework of the carryover mechanism and socialization processes has significant potential to extend to other return-to-work contexts, such as employees returning after prolonged illness (e.g., Etuknwa et al. 2019). We would expect that carrying over excess abilities in the form of proactive behaviors will relate to self-efficacy and longer term work adjustment in both employees returning from prolonged sick leave and maternity leave. In fact, the broader return-to-work literature found self-efficacy and personal and social relations to be key factors in successful work adjustment (Cancelliere et al. 2016; Etuknwa et al. 2019), which is similar to our present findings. However, there are likely unique challenges and adaptive strategies for each return-to-work context. For example, an employee returning from sick leave may face delayed recovery, relapse risk, and potentially reduced work functioning (Nielsen and Yarker 2023). Consequently, low-effort proactive behaviors such as feedback seeking may be more relevant in this context. Such an investigation would demonstrate the generalizability of our findings to broader contexts beyond the return from maternity leave.

5 | Conclusion

We investigated the joint adaptive role of perceived overqualification—a relevant yet neglected phenomenon among returning mothers—and social integration in work adjustment after maternity leave by applying P-E fit theory’s carryover mechanism (Edwards et al. 1998). In doing so, we contribute to the perceived overqualification literature by adding a novel perspective on the construct and respond to calls for more research on the adaptive side of perceived overqualification, alongside the strain-related

reactions (e.g., Erdogan and Bauer 2021). Furthermore, our work extends the application of classic socialization frameworks (e.g., Kammeyer-Mueller and Wanberg 2003) to the work-adjustment process after maternity leave, offering practical recommendations to facilitate adjustment success. Additionally, we demonstrate the relevance of integrating the underexplored role of perceived overqualification into the work-adjustment process after maternity leave, revealing its adaptive side, alongside its maladaptive one, and thereby demonstrate perceived overqualification’s influence on the entire return-to-work after maternity leave process.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

All data and materials have been made publicly available at the Open Science Framework and can be accessed at https://osf.io/w8tds/?view_only=742b1ca4a6e54c279dfc150dd84bc029.

Endnotes

¹ We used both positively and negatively valenced items to measure our constructs.

² We also collected data on perceived productivity and reentry regret as additional adjustment outcomes, alongside job satisfaction. The results showed generalizability of our model to other outcomes. Full tables are available on OSF (tab. S3 and S4; https://osf.io/w8tds/overview?view_only=742b1ca4a6e54c279dfc150dd84bc029).

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