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Employee Reactions to Talent Management

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Acknowledgements

Roses are red
This dissertation is blue
With thanks to those around me
I somehow managed to push through

The completion of a dissertation is, according to many, the single most greatest achievement in one's career. Years upon years of devotion to a singular research topic, meticulously recorded in the book you are currently holding. In accomplishing this objective I am beholden to a number of individuals. While words may fail to express the full extent of my gratitude, I nevertheless hope these sincere, albeit brief, parting words convey my heartfelt gratefulness towards these specific individuals.

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When everything, everyone, and especially reviewer two gets me down
I will remember your words "fake it till you make it" and go to town
Rework that paper, address that comment with a frown
Thank you, for not letting me drown

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Each of you provided me with sound advice, which was always much appreciated
Except when I was told my analyses were plain wrong, I was left devastated
Then, far from home in a foreign institution, your judgement I awaited
Thank you for letting me pass, otherwise I would not have graduated

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Mijn sollicitatie was allerminst bescheiden
Die goede insteek had je vast uit één of andere planeet zitten afleiden
Door Vlaamse invloeden ben ik onderhand wel wat meer modest
Gelukkig blijf ik voor jou nog altijd 'the best'

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Waar we zijn is niet belangrijk
Met jou, Bas, en Poes in mijn leven
Heb ik dit doctoraat echt alles kunnen geven
Wij blijven aan elkaars zijde, op weg naar het volgende avontuur
Recht door het hellevuur… of toch gewoon naar de Griekse frituur?

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Prologue

The dilemma of being a 'non-talent'

Dear reader, before I delve into the fascinating yet complex organizational practice of talent management, I would ask you to engage in a short mental exercise. Please imagine the following scenario as if it actually happened to you: You and a close colleague—let us call him Ben—share an office, and you both apply for a chance to join a prestigious program which will boost your career. You have been warned by many that only very few individuals are eligible to enter—say about 10 percent of all who apply succeed—and is thus only reserved for those with exceptional skills and a clear potential to perform excellently in the future. Your organization's policy is to publicly release an online list with all lucky winners, so when the day comes you frantically rush to find your name—but despite your best scrolling efforts you only happen to stumble upon Ben.

Now, take a brief moment to think about how you would feel. Envious? Disheartened? Or are you genuinely happy for Ben? Will that perhaps heavily depend on how Ben himself responds to the news? Do you expect him to be empathetic towards you, or will you allow him to be proud as he was judged to be the better one? How do you imagine that this would subsequently impact the (working) relationship between you and Ben? And finally, how would you perceive your own ability? I imagine these questions are difficult to answer right off the bat, and it probably goes without saying that your responses will depend on the context, on Ben, and ultimately you yourself. Or perhaps I may have already lost you if this scenario seemed completely foreign to you. Nonetheless, most employees face this situation at some point during their career. In fact, I can attest to the realism of this scenario as I, at the onset of my PhD, have personally lived it. Since you presently are at liberty to read this dissertation,

it does mean that everything turned out alright. That said, this experience did enhance my personal connection to the research topic at hand, which I will reflect back upon briefly in the epilogue. For now, I will illustrate how the presented scenario, and the questions asked thereafter, are relevant to current debates in talent management, and thereby elaborate on how employees experience the in- and exclusion from talent programs.

Current state of talent management research

Talent management is defined as the activities and processes that involve the identification of key positions which contribute to the organization's sustainable competitive advantage, with the aim of filling these key positions with its most high-performing, high-potential employees, thus ensuring their continued organizational commitment (Collings & Mellahi, 2009, p. 305). Studies estimate that around 65 percent of organizations worldwide have a talent program in place (Church, Rotolo, Ginther, & Levine, 2015), with CEOs indicating that talent management is one of their top strategic priorities (PwC, 2014; 2017). They operate on the notion that 'talents' in the labor market are scare—based on the 'war for talent' narrative popularized by McKinsey in the 1990s (Michaels, Handfield-Jones, & Axelrod, 2001)—leading managers to typically include only 1 to 10 percent of their employees in the organization's 'talent pool' (Collings & Mellahi, 2009). Talent management can thus be said to create status differences between co-workers (i.e., talents versus non-talents), where managers allocate a disproportionate amount of resources to the employees identified as 'talents', as they expect a higher return on investment for this group (Collings & Mellahi, 2009).

The question of whether an exclusive talent management practice is beneficial for the organization and its employees is fiercely debated by a growing number of proponents for less exclusive and more transparent talent programs who, amongst others, suggest including a

higher percentage of employees into the talent pool (Sparrow, Scullion, & Tarique, 2014). Their main argument is that traditional, exclusive talent management practices might undermine employee morale (Swailes, 2013)—the assumption being that the negative reactions of employees not identified as a talent, who by definition are in the majority, are likely to cancel out the positive reactions from those identified as a talent. In other words, the opponents of exclusive talent management assume that the net employee reactions—i.e., the positive reactions of talents averaged out by the negative reactions by non-talents—will ultimately be negative (Marescaux, De Winne, & Sels, 2013). For this reason, many organizations are calling into question the legitimacy of their existing talent programs and are starting to experiment with various levels of 'exclusiveness'—i.e., the percentage of employees included in, versus excluded from, the talent pool—of their talent programs (Festing, Schäfer, & Scullion, 2013). For instance, one organization drastically increased the size of its talent pool from 1% to 30% of all employees, motivated out of a fear that too exclusive talent programs result in negative employee reactions (Hjordrup, Jensen, & Minbaeva, 2015).

Remarkably, however, the foundation of such decisions rests on nothing but mere conjecture and anecdotal observations. In fact, a recent systematic review and meta-analysis of all existing academic research on employee reactions to talent management concluded that the basic assumption that talents will react positively, and those not selected will react negatively to talent management, at best lacks nuance and at worst is simply inaccurate (De Boeck, Meyers, & Dries, 2018). Moreover, as De Boeck and her colleagues' (2018) review demonstrates, there is no empirical evidence to support the claim that less exclusive talent management strategies will lead to more positive net employee reactions—even though numerous organizations are currently intent on making this shift. Another trend we can

observe in practice and in the literature is the shift towards more transparency in talent management communication (Swailes, 2013). Most organizations, nevertheless, still keep their talent management practices a secret from employees so that decisions to identify specific employees as 'talents' do not have to be justified to excluded co-workers (Church et al., 2015; Dries & De Gieter, 2014). Similarly, organizations frequently opt for 'strategic ambiguity', such that specific elements are obscured that may harm employee morale (Sumelius, Smale, & Yamao, 2020). While these approaches allow inequalities created by management to remain hidden (Huang & Tansley, 2012), the effectiveness of these strategies have not been empirically investigated either (De Boeck et al., 2018).

Furthermore, practitioners as well as researchers to date have failed to acknowledge that talent management is an inherently relational phenomenon (Al Ariss, Cascio, & Paauwe, 2014; Nijs, Dries, Van Vlasselaer, & Sels, 2022), such that they strictly speak about talent management through a HR lens where talents are equated to 'resources' and 'human capital' (Huselid & Becker, 2011; Collings & Mellahi, 2009). A relational perspective would hold that perceptions and thoughts about talent management practices 'spill over' through interactions between employees, thus creating group-level reactions (Fowler & Christakis, 2008). In other words, one employee having a negative opinion of talent management may influence his or her colleagues' opinions, most likely causing them to converge over time.

Summarily, in this dissertation we challenge prevalent, and quite likely incorrect, assumptions about talent management and investigate these from a social-psychological perspective—i.e., focusing on the rarely studied affective, behavioral, and cognitive employee reactions (De Boeck et al., 2018)—so that we may, broadly speaking, acquire a more thorough understanding of how employees truly experience the in- and exclusion from talent programs within organizations. Particularly, since talent management is a highly phenomenon-driven

research field that has struggled with theory development (De Boeck et al., 2018; Gallardo-Gallardo, Nijs, Dries, & Gallo, 2015), we address various theoretical challenges present in the literature in addition to typical methodological challenges that talent management researchers frequently face.

Theoretical challenges in talent management research

In order to understand social dynamics at play when managers divide their employees into talents and non-talents, we position social comparison theory as the foundation to explain why employees identified as talents generally experience positive outcomes, whereas those excluded tend to endure detrimental effects on their affective and behavioral state (Smith, 2000). The premise of social comparison theory is that individuals frequently—as a natural human tendency—compare themselves with others who outperform them, as well as with others who perform worse than them, in order to validate the views they have of themselves (Festinger, 1954). Whether organizations like it or not, exclusive talent programs are inextricably tied to processes and principles of social comparison, as differentiating between employees enables a forced ranking system to establish who should be included in a talent pool (Heslin, 2003; Nijs, Gallardo-Gallardo, Dries, & Sels, 2014). However, despite some previous studies also linking talent status to negative outcomes (e.g., Stress; Dries & Pepermans, 2008; Tansley & Tietze, 2013), potentially positive outcomes for non-talents—which are theoretically plausible (Smith, 2000)—have been entirely overlooked (De Boeck et al., 2018). Throughout the three chapters we therefore attempt to nuance the debates around talent management by investigating which talent program design features have the best—or perhaps least worst—impact on employee reactions such that the typical negative outcomes of upward comparisons can be buffered, and the positive outcomes of downward

comparisons can be enhanced (Alicke, LoSchiavo, Zerbst, & Zhang, 1997; Smith, 2000). Simply put, in which situations are non-talents motivated to maintain their productivity at work?

Another theory that has been commonly overlooked—albeit less frequently (e.g., Kamoche & Leigh, 2022)—in the talent management literature is that of social identity theory, which explains how individuals base their sense of 'who they are' on their group memberships (Tajfel, 1979). The theory dictates that employees will self-evaluate their own relative value to the organization—similarly to how this would happen through social comparisons (Smith, 2000)—based on the intergroup differences they perceive between their group and other groups, causing them to adjust their behavior and feelings accordingly (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Korte, 2007; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Essentially, it can be argued that talent management is not only about the effects of (tangible) resources unequally distributed amongst employees, but also the (symbolic) identity-relevant information that is communicated when (not) identifying employees as talents (Kamoche & Leigh, 2022; Tansley & Tietze, 2013). Since many talent programs in practice do not come with immediate benefits (Dries & Pepermans, 2008), it is thus also important to consider talent management as a more symbolic practice, where the act of merely labeling an employee as 'talent' is sufficient to induce a reaction (Al Ariss et al., 2014; Nijs et al., 2022). Throughout the studies we therefore ensure that the additional benefits that may come with talent status are separate from the mere act of differentiation, such that the social-psychological mechanisms underpinning how employees react to the in- and exclusion from talent programs can be empirically investigated.

Methodological challenges in talent management research

Apart from the lack of empirical evidence and theory to support the prevalent assumptions about employee reactions to talent management that are advocated in the academic

literature, talent management research is also plagued by methodological shortcomings. First of all it is profoundly difficult to conduct surveys on this topic within organizations as talent programs—due to their sensitive nature—are frequently kept secret from employees (Church et al., 2015), and thus it is often not communicated openly who has and has not been attributed talent status (Sumelius et al., 2020). Research has shown that 25 to 40 percent of employees incorrectly assume their status (as awarded by management and typically documented in a 'secret list' kept by the HR department), and that this applies both to talents and non-talents (Smale et al., 2015; Sonnenberg, van Zijderveld, & Brinks, 2014). Consequently, it is evident that self-report survey data—although almost always used in field studies on talent management (De Boeck et al., 2018)—is unsuitable for research involving talent status as it will likely to lead to invalid conclusions.

Secondly, the most crucial shortcoming is the lack of causal inference that can be made based on the current body of talent management research (De Boeck, et al., 2018). If researchers truly wish to investigate employee reactions to talent management, it is paramount that reverse causality hypotheses can be refuted. Seopa and his colleagues (2015), for instance, found in their cross-sectional survey study that employees identified as talents reported higher levels of organizational commitment than non-talents and concluded from this finding—rather extremely—that not being identified as a talent lowers commitment. It is at least equally feasible, however, that being more committed increases a person's odds of being identified as a talent. In reality, no research to date has actually managed to demonstrate causal effects of talent management choices on employee reactions in a valid way (De Boeck et al., 2018).

Utilizing experimental methods to establish causal relationships

Considering these shortcomings—and emphasizing the causality issue—it follows that the only way forward for talent management research is through experimental designs. This is the logical next step for talent management research considering the typical progression of methods in a phenomenon-driven field such as talent management (i.e., following exploratory field studies and the identification of suitable theories; see Chatman & Flynn, 2005). First, experiments allow for the deliberate creation of control groups of non-talents (another shortcoming currently, as much research has only studied talents; De Boeck et al., 2018). Second, experimental designs allow researchers to systematically vary talent program design features—such as the percentage of employee included in the talent pool—which would be near-impossible to achieve in a field study as this would demand a multilevel study of over 50 organizations, each with subsamples of talents versus non-talents (De Boeck et al., 2018).

In every chapter of this dissertation studies are presented in which employees are presented fictional scenarios—better known as experimental vignette methodologies—of talent management practices within organizations. Vignettes are "short, carefully constructed descriptions of a person, object, or situation, representing a systematic combination of characteristics (presented to participants) to assess dependent variables including intentions, attitudes, and behaviors allowing researchers to manipulate and control independent variables" (Aguinis & Bradly, 2014, pp. 352-353). Following the guidelines (e.g., sufficient identification of participants with the persons/situations described in the experimental vignettes) allows us to enhance the studies' external validity such that participants respond in a similar manner as they would in 'real-life' (Auspurg & Hinz, 2015). Specifically, to achieve high levels of realism, we exclusively make use of employee samples (i.e., no students) despite this being a conventional approach for psychology research. Across three chapters we make use of text-based vignettes, a factorial survey, and a 360°-video vignette to examine employee

reactions to talent management practices. The effectiveness of these various experimental vignette methodologies, and potential alternatives (e.g., Virtual Reality vignettes), will be collectively evaluated in the epilogue.

Structure of the dissertation

A total of six studies have been conducted in an effort to address the aforementioned research gaps and acquire a more thorough understanding of how employees react to talent management practices. The first chapter's primary narrative is to debunk the prevalent assumption that less exclusive and more transparent talent programs lead to more favorable employee reactions. Three studies are presented in which, first of all, these assumptions about talent management are quantified by measuring the talent philosophies of talent managers (i.e., how would they design their talent programs and how do they expect employees to react?), after which the actual employee reactions to these different talent programs are measured for talents and non-talents individually. For the second chapter a more holistic approach is taken to talent management, where the affective thoughts and feelings of non-talents—stemming from a broad array of talent program design features—are paired with pro- and contra-organizational employee reactions. Moreover, through a field study amongst non-talents the 'experience of being a non-talent' has been depicted—something that few researchers have attempted to study (De Boeck et al., 2018)—providing academics and practitioners with relevant benchmarking data. Finally, in the third chapter and last study, talent management is studied from a social-relational perspective where the emotional interactions between talents and non-talents are experimentally manipulated through the use of an innovative research design (i.e., 360°-videos), shedding light on how the affective state of one group can potentially facilitate intergroup conflicts on the work floor between talents and non-talents.

The empirical part of the dissertation is followed by an epilogue which highlights the main theoretical contributions, as well as practical implications, based on the findings discussed in the three individual chapters. In addition, suggestions for future research are specified, and a detailed reflection is given on the hot debate whether talent programs should be inclusive or exclusive, the use of experimental vignette methodologies for organizational research, and finally on my personal connection to the topic at hand.

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Chapter 1

Harnessing the Genius Effect in Elite Organizational Talent Programs: Can Exclusive, Secret Talent Pools Lead to Better Employee Reactions?

Anand van Zelderen, Nicky Dries, & Elise Marescaux

Abstract

We critically examine the assumption that less exclusive, more transparent talent programs will lead to better employee reactions. Based on social comparison theory and the phenomenon of the 'genius effect', we propose that the opposite is likely true—that both talents and non-talents react better to *more* exclusive programs. Using experimental vignette studies we examine managerial assumptions about talent versus non-talent reactions to talent programs at various levels of inclusivity (Study 1; *N* = 179); the reactions of 'non-talents' (Study 2; *N* = 576); and the reactions of 'talents' (Study 3; *N* = 306). Managers' preferences for less exclusive programs were found to relate to their assumptions about non-talents' reactions to them. Non-talents, however, in fact reacted more negatively to less exclusive programs in terms of envy, organization-based self-esteem, and turnover intentions—as they were now excluded from a larger group. Respondents with a stronger real-life desire to be identified as a talent reacted more strongly both to being excluded from or included in a fictitious talent program. Keeping talent status a secret from employees was found to buffer their reactions. These findings have important theoretical and practical implications for the fields of talent management, organizational secrecy, and social comparison.

Keywords: Talent management, high-potential employees, star performers, social comparison, transparency

Introduction

Annual surveys of CEOs have found that the majority among them indicate that talent management is their top people priority, and this consistently for the past 20 years (PwC, 2017). It is estimated that at least 60 to 70 percent of organizations worldwide have talent management programs in place (Collings, 2014; Church, Rotolo, Ginther, & Levine, 2015), defined as "the management and development of high-performing and high-potential incumbents in critical organizational roles" (Collings, 2014, p. 301). While different talent management philosophies exist both in theory and in practice (Meyers & van Woerkom, 2014; Meyers & van Woerkom, Paauwe, & Dries, 2020), the 'exclusive' philosophy—in which having talent is assumed to be rare rather than prevalent—has historically been most dominant (O'Boyle & Aguinis, 2012).

Talent management, as a phenomenon, is grounded in the notion of labor market scarcity—originating from the 'war for talent' discourse popularized by McKinsey in the 1990s—and the desire to attract and retain the best people (Gallardo-Gallardo, Nijs, Dries, & Gallo, 2015). Determining who those 'best' people are almost always involves a form of forced ranking, meaning that employees' performance and potential are directly compared to each other to identify who is in the top tier (O' Boyle & Aguinis, 2012). Typically, between 1 and 10 percent of an organization's population are subsequently selected as 'talents', meaning that their names are placed on a list of employees who will gain access to special career development programs (Meyers & van Woerkom, 2014). Their special status is then solidified by investing more of the organization's resources—opportunities for training, mentoring, networking, and upward mobility—into this so-called 'talent pool', as investments in this group are expected to create higher returns (Huselid & Becker, 2011).

Talent management can thus be said to create status differences between coworkers, differentiating between those considered 'talents' and 'non-talents'—the latter comprising the absolute majority of the workforce (Nijs, Gallardo-Gallardo, Dries, & Sels, 2014). Critics of this type of exclusive approach to talent management have labeled it elite and exclusionary, in that it creates and reproduces unequal treatment of employees within organizations (Bonneton, Festing, & Muratbekova-Touron, 2020; Swailes, 2013). As a result, less exclusive forms of talent management—focusing on the strengths and capabilities of all employees—are gaining traction both in the academic literature and in organizational practice (Swailes, Downs, & Orr, 2014). A common suggestion is to include higher percentages of employees into talent pools (Sparrow, Scullion, & Tarique, 2014). In addition, critical observers take issue with the ambiguous or downright secretive nature of many organizational talent programs (Huang & Tansley, 2012). Especially 'non-talents' are almost always unaware of the talent program in their organization, as organizations fear that being transparent would trigger a constant stream of unfairness complaints and a competitive climate (Dries & De Gieter, 2014; Sumelius, Smale, & Yamao, 2020). It has been argued that the secretive nature of many organizations' talent programs covers up the inequalities created by them (Huang & Tansley, 2012). Therefore, critics of the exclusive approach not only call for less exclusive practices, but also for more transparency towards employees (Swailes, 2013).

The major argument that is used to advocate for less exclusive and transparent talent management practices is that exclusion from talent programs may harm employee morale (Swailes & Blackburn, 2016). On a more pragmatic note, it has been argued that negative reactions to exclusive practices from 'non-talents' may end up outweighing positive reactions from 'talents' (De Boeck, Meyers, & Dries, 2018). As a result, several companies have reported making quite drastic changes to their talent management programs, such as increasing the

percentage of employees included in the talent pool from 1 to 30 percent (cf. Hjordrup, Jensen, & Minbaeva, 2015). The problem is, however, that no empirical evidence has been published to date to support the claim that less exclusive and transparent talent management practices lead to better employee reactions (De Boeck et al., 2018).

In fact—and this is the point we seek to make in the present paper—there are theoretical arguments to be made in favor of the *opposite* being true: that both 'talents' and 'non-talents' are likely to react *worse* to less exclusive, more transparent practices. Research within the area of social comparison theory has shown that people react less strongly to being visibly outperformed when those who are 'better' than them form a small, elite minority (Tesser, Millar, & Moore, 1988). When the person one is outperformed by is seen as a 'genius', for instance, the typical negative effects of upward social comparison on self-esteem do not manifest (cf. the genius effect; Alicke, LoSchiavo, Zerbst, & Zhang, 1997). On the flip side, research on downward social comparison—where the focal person is the one who is 'better' than others—has shown that relative ranking has a strong impact on satisfaction (i.e., it is not just being better than others that matters, but also *how much* better; Boyce, Brown, & Moore, 2010). We propose that similar social comparison mechanisms might be triggered by talent management practices at varying levels of inclusivity (Bélanger & Gagné, 2006).

In the present paper, we examine the effects of talent program inclusivity and transparency on the reactions of employees considered 'talents' versus those considered 'non-talents', across three studies. A first study (N = 179) looks at the assumptions of real-life managers who are responsible for talent management in their organizations. Talent managers are asked to rate how they believe employees will react to being included in versus excluded from talent pools with varying levels of inclusivity, explicitly contrasting the expected reactions of talents and non-talents. We then directly test these assumptions against

employee-level data collected in a second and third study. In the second study (N = 576), a sample of employees is told either that they are not selected for the talent program in their (fictitious) organization, or that the organization has a policy of not disclosing talent status to employees (meaning that they have a theoretically equal chance of being a talent or a non-talent). Respondents are randomly allocated to conditions—at varying levels of talent program inclusivity—and asked how they would react if the situation described actually happened to them. The third and final study (*N* = 306) replicates the second study, but tells respondents they *are*, in fact, selected for a talent program (at a given level of inclusivity). The same set of dependent variables—i.e., envy/being envied, organization-based self-esteem, and turnover intentions—is used to measure employee reactions to a given talent program across the three studies.

All three studies adopt an experimental contrastive vignette design (Aguinis & Bradley, 2014; Auspurg & Hinz, 2014), for two reasons. First of all, this method allows for systematic, controlled variation in independent variables—i.e., the percentage of employees included in an organization's talent pool (1, 10, 30, or 50 percent), and whether or not (non-)talent status is transparently communicated towards employees—which is an important gap in research on employee reactions to talent management. Due to the lack of multilevel and experimental studies, no empirical study to date has been able to systematically compare the effects of talent programs with different design characteristics (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2015). Almost all existing knowledge about talent management is case-based, and thus difficult to generalize into common patterns. Causality issues make up another important gap—for instance, does being selected into a talent pool decrease turnover intentions, or are those with lower turnover intentions more likely to be selected (De Boeck et al., 2018)? Second, the topics of talent management inclusivity and secrecy are notoriously sensitive—especially when

coupled to employee reactions such as envy—creating both data access and research ethics concerns when collecting field data. Working with realistic, hypothetical scenarios is recommended when dealing with sensitive research topics, as this method balances internal and external validity concerns (Aguinis & Bradley, 2014).

We make three important contributions. First, we contribute to the literature on employee reactions to talent management by explicating and operationalizing its implicit claims and assumptions about social comparison (De Boeck et al., 2018). Specifically, we make the point that that social comparison is (somewhat paradoxically) both a design feature and a source of worry in talent programs (Malik & Singh, 2014; Swailes & Blackburn, 2016). We propose that any theoretical and practical understanding of employee reactions to talent programs—both the reactions of 'talents' and 'non-talents'—should refer, directly or indirectly, to social comparison theory. Moreover, in the present study we compare and contrast the reactions of the different stakeholders in talent management (Collings, 2014)—i.e., management, talents, and non-talents—to the same set of manipulations. Especially the experience of so-called 'non-talents' has to date been critically underrepresented in empirical talent management research; hardly any studies have examined how non-talents react to talent programs. Those that have, used this group mostly as a control group for their sample of interest—employees formally identified as talents (Gallardo-Gallardo & Thunnissen, 2016). This is all the more surprising seeing as the expected negative reactions of non-talents are commonly (and increasingly) used to advocate for the abolition of so-called 'exclusive' talent management practices (Malik & Singh, 2014; Swailes & Blackburn, 2016).

Second, we contribute to the literature on organizational secrecy (Costas & Grey, 2014), most notably to the stream of research around the link between secrecy and inequalities within organizations. Organizational secrecy has to date mainly been

conceptualized from a macro perspective, based on case studies looking at the institutional factors that drive secrecy, and studying the phenomenon from a sociological perspective. The present study adds to this literature by looking at the employee-level effects of degree of awareness about organizational inequality practices—of which talent programs are a specific case—on employee reactions to such practices (Sumelius et al., 2020).

Third, we add to the literature on social comparison theory by examining if and when certain defensive attributional strategies cited in the literature—that describe how people protect their self-esteem from upward social comparisons (Mussweiler, Gabriel, & Bodenhausen, 2000)—can be harnessed to shield employees from the potentially harmful effects of exclusive organizational practices. We are specifically interested in the 'genius effect' described by Alicke et al. (1997): the tendency of people to exaggerate the ability of their outperformers to make unfavorable social comparisons appear less relevant and thus less threatening. If this effect can be harnessed, this means that the typically negative reactions to unfavorable, upward social comparisons by employees (such as not being identified as a talent when colleagues are) can be manipulated—both experimentally in research and through organizational management interventions in practice (De Boeck et al., 2018; Tesser et al., 1988).

Theoretical Background

Talent Status and Social Comparison

The basic premise of social comparison theory is that individuals evaluate their self-worth through an ongoing and spontaneous process of observing others and comparing whether they fare better or worse (Festinger, 1954). To this end, individuals actively seek out information about the abilities, opinions, and traits of peers with whom they are cooperating or competing to make sense of their own relative standing or status (Boyce et al., 2010). It

follows that social comparison could reveal either that a given employee is superior to coworkers (triggering downward comparison) or inferior (triggering upward comparison) (Buunk & Gibbons, 2007). Especially work situations characterized by so-called reinforcement contingencies—such as promotions and pay raises—have been found to trigger social comparison between peers (Heslin, 2003).

An employee comparing him- or herself to a coworker with a superior performance, who has access to more of the organization's resources—such as a 'non-talent' comparing him- or herself to a 'talent', in the specific case of talent programs (Nijs et al., 2014)—can thus be understood to make an upward social comparison. Upward comparisons are typically accompanied by negative reactions like envy, a reduction in self-esteem, and hostility toward the comparison target (Fiske, 2010; Taylor & Lobel, 1989; Sterling, van de Ven, & Smith, 2016). 'Talents' who compare themselves to 'non-talents', in contrast, are likely to experience the typical reactions associated with downward social comparison, such as a boost in self-esteem and feelings of pride (Suls & Wheeler, 2013; Wills, 1981).

Individuals do not, however, compare themselves to just anyone; they seek out comparison targets that are similar to them, within a performance domain that is considered personally relevant (Garcia & Tor, 2007). Specifically, individuals tend to compare themselves to comparison targets who perform at a similar level, or slightly better, than themselves (Suls & Wheeler, 2013). For example, doctoral students are much more likely to compare their output to that of other doctoral students in their department than to that of a Nobel Prize winner from another field who is decades their senior. Comparisons to such 'distant' targets are generally much less threatening (Tesser et al., 1988). When comparison targets *are* similar and relevant, (subconscious) self-defense mechanisms tend to be triggered to protect the focal person's self-esteem (Mussweiler et al., 2000). For instance, others' superior

achievements can be ascribed to luck (or other external factors such as nepotism and office politics) rather than ability (Exline & Lobel, 1999); can lead to denigrating, or distancing oneself from the outperformer (i.e., by deemphasizing closeness to, or avoiding him or her; Wills, 1981); or to misrepresenting one's own performance level to outside parties who lack objective data (Exline & Lobel, 1999). The underlying mechanism is that people use this type of defensive attributional strategies to salvage a threatened identity image, by altering perceptions about the outperformer (Alicke et al., 1997).

Interestingly, across four experiments Alicke and colleagues (1997) uncovered a diametrically opposite self-esteem saving mechanism, as well—which they dubbed the 'genius effect'. Specifically, they found that individuals can also protect themselves by *exaggerating* an outperformer's intelligence, thereby increasing the 'distance' between themselves and the superior other. That is, comparing unfavorably to a person of exceptional ability is less threatening to perceived competence than comparing unfavorably to a 'lesser' target. The elevation of the comparison target's ability thus allows people to "maintain their sense of competence while magnanimously acknowledging the superior attributes of the outperformer" (Alicke et al., 1997, p. 781). In the actual experiments themselves, subjects were asked to complete a test of perceptual intelligence at the same time as a confederate, with another subject acting as an observer behind a one-way mirror (unbeknownst to the subject). The confederate was given the answers to the test beforehand so that he or she would clearly outperform the subject; subjects and confederates were then asked to grade each other's tests and rate each other's perceptual intelligence on a single item. Subjects consistently rated the intelligence of their confederates higher than the independent observers did, which Alicke and colleagues (1997) interpreted as a construal mechanism that

"negates the potentially negative implications of unfavorable social comparisons, by allowing inferior performers to discount the relevance of the comparison" (p. 782).

Can the Genius Effect be Harnessed?

The question, then, is whether the genius effect can be harnessed—whether being excluded from highly elite groups could lead to less negative reactions than being excluded from less exclusive groups. We develop hypotheses for predicting employee reactions to talent programs at varying levels of inclusivity and transparency from the point of view of three stakeholder groups—i.e., management (Study 1), non-talents (Study 2), and talents (Study 3).

'Non-talent' reactions to talent programs. Let us start with the reactions that can be expected from so-called 'non-talents', as these seem to form the major concern of scholars critical of the exclusive talent management approach (Malik & Singh, 2014; Swailes & Blackburn, 2016). Considering the evidence for the genius effect (Alicke et al., 1997; Lassiter & Munhall, 2001), it is conceivable that less exclusive and transparent talent programs will lead to more negative reactions from 'non-talents'—whom are now excluded from a relatively larger group. As stated earlier, comparisons to distant targets (such as 'geniuses') are generally experienced as less threatening than comparisons to closer targets (Alicke et al., 1997; Tesser et al., 1988). One question raised by the research on the genius effect is, then, whether making talent pools less exclusive—by raising the percentage of selected employees (Hjordrup et al., 2015; Swailes et al., 2014)—might create undesirable (and unexpected) side-effects. That is, as the inclusivity of a talent pool increases, the status of 'talent' comes progressively more within reach (Garcia & Tor, 2007), decreasing the comparison distance between talents and non-talents, thus making the upward comparison more personal and threatening (Tesser et al., 1988). Constraining the status of 'talent' to an elite minority may

therefore, counterintuitively, trigger less negative reactions from non-talents (Bonneton et al., 2020).

'Talent' reactions to talent programs. We can also expect 'talents' to react more positively to more exclusive practices. In fact, the study by Alicke et al. (1997) found that the genius effect also held when making downward social comparisons—i.e., when the subjects themselves were the outperformers. In this particular sub-experiment, the test was made easier and confederates were instructed to give mostly wrong answers. Again, subjects rated their confederates higher in intelligence than independent observers did. This means that the genius effect leads to exaggeration of the ability of *both* superior and inferior performers (Lassiter & Munhall, 2001). The mechanism underlying the effect remains the same: perceived competence of the comparer is most enhanced if he or she believes to be more intelligent than targets who are also highly intelligent (Alicke et al., 1997). In other words, people feel better when they outperform others who are also good, than when they outperform people who are mediocre or bad performers. In the specific case of talent programs, being selected into a talent pool of 1 percent implies that one outperforms 99 percent of coworkers; a talent pool of 10 percent implies that one outperforms 90 percent of coworkers, and so on (Bélanger & Gagné, 2006). Research on the so-called 'rank hypothesis' has shown that income rank compared to referent others is more predictive of life satisfaction than both absolute income and reference income (i.e., income as compared to a socially constructed norm such as the average income of a relevant comparison group). In fact, the desire for status is believed to be a fundamental human motive (Anderson, Hildreth, & Howland, 2015). Observational and experimental data have shown that being ranked highly among peers has rewarding and motivating effects, even when decoupled from tangible benefits (Van Prooijen, Van den Bos, & Wilke, 2002).

It is important to note that, both for talents and non-talents, reactions to a given talent program will not only depend on their organization's evaluations of them, but also on their self-evaluations. That is, employees with a stronger desire to be acknowledged as a talent by their organization will likely react more strongly both when they are excluded from or included in a talent program (Swailes et al., 2014). Indeed, according to the self-evaluation maintenance model (SEM)—situated within the broader framework of social comparison theory— any individual will try to maintain, or increase, their own self-evaluation, and does so based on the relevance of the comparison domain (Tesser, 1988). SEM describes social comparisons as a process that enables individuals to determine their own personal growth and progress, where individuals actively seek out peers to compare with on relevant domains of comparison. The accomplishments (or conversely, the lack thereof) of the comparison target thus serve to aid the comparer in reflecting upon his or her own relative standing. In the event that an upward social comparison causes one to question one's own abilities deemed important to the self, the comparison negatively affects the self-evaluation (Tesser et al., 1998). The exclusive approach to talent management is particularly likely to trigger self-evaluations, as it assumes that talent is rare and dispositional, with a focus on a small subset of gifted employees 'being a talent' (as opposed to all employees being able to 'become talents', which is the focus of the inclusive talent philosophy; Meyers et al., 2020). In light of this, the exclusive approach advocates that the non-tangible perks associated with talent status—e.g., talent status as a symbolic privilege (Nijs et al., 2014)—are sufficient to trigger employee reactions even in the absence of any immediate tangible benefits (Van Prooijen et al., 2002). In order to test this assumption we will include a study variable capturing 'real-life desire to be a talent' in addition to manipulating talent status experimentally.

Managerial assumptions about talent programs. As for the assumptions of managers about employee reactions to talent programs, we can be brief. Based on the existing literature, we hypothesize that managers will generally adopt a simple heuristic—i.e., that exclusive talent management is 'good' for talents but 'bad' for (and hated by) everyone else (Malik & Singh, 2014). In other words, non-talents are expected to react negatively to more exclusive practices while talents are expected to react positively (Swailes & Blackburn, 2016). In addition, there is a taken for granted assumption that exclusive talent management is worse for overall employee morale (Sparrow et al., 2014; Swailes, 2013). These assumption are more like 'credos' repeated throughout the literature than that they are grounded in a theory-driven rationale or in empirical evidence (De Boeck et al., 2018). Clearly, there is an ethical undercurrent to this debate, as well, as exclusive talent management disrupts the socially desirable norm of equality (Swailes, 2013).

Employee Reactions to Talent Programs at Varying Levels of Inclusivity

Three outcome variables were selected to reflect employee reactions that are in line both with the talent management literature (De Boeck et al., 2018), and the basic assumptions of social comparison theory (Suls & Wheeler, 2013): envy/being envied, organization-based self-esteem, and turnover intentions. In what follows, we go into more detail about the expected effects of talent programs on each separate outcome variable. We propose, however, that the underlying mechanisms will be largely the same for each type of employee reaction—depending on the specific talent management stakeholder (Collings, 2014). As explained above, as a general pattern we expect that managers will assume that 'talents' will react better to more exclusive talent programs while 'non-talents' will react better to less exclusive talent programs. We propose, however, that data from employees will reveal a different pattern—i.e., that both 'talents' and 'non-talents' will in fact react better to more exclusive

talent programs (see Table 1 for the full overview of our hypotheses across the three studies and stakeholder groups).

Envy and being envied. It is generally assumed that being excluded from a talent program will lead to feelings of envy (Reh, Tröster, & Van Quaquebeke, 2018). Envy is defined as a pattern of thoughts, emotions, and behaviors that results from the (threat of) loss of social standing, in response to another person obtaining outcomes that are personally desired (Vecchio, 2005). The selection of a small subgroup of employees into a talent pool signals to employees that this group has a higher standing than others (Swailes & Blackburn, 2016), which is likely to trigger unfavorable social comparisons and thus envious reactions among non-talents (Fiske, 2010). One might say that talent status is a zero-sum construct: being a 'talent' is only special when that status is not granted to everyone (Sirola & Pitesa, 2017). Recent research has shown that so-called 'rising stars', especially, trigger envy as employees do not only monitor the extent to which others form a threat to their current status, but also to their future status (Reh et al., 2018). On the flip side, employees identified as 'talents' are likely to feel that their coworkers envy them, which is also an unpleasant emotion (Sterling et al., 2016). Being envied can "provide an unusual source of personal satisfaction" (Veccio, 2005, p. 70), but has also been found to be experienced as distracting and debilitating (Exline & Lobel, 1999). Although it is generally considered better to be envied than to envy, being the target of coworker envy can lead to social undermining by colleagues, and to decreased productivity in the long term (Reh et al., 2018). While we believe that non-talents will actually be *less* envious of talents in more exclusive talent programs—due to the genius effect (Alicke et al., 1997)—we also believe that talents are likely to anticipate *more* envious reactions when their status is more exclusive. Research on rivalry has found that the highest-ranked individuals behave most competitively towards lower-ranked coworkers, to make sure they

do not lose ground to them (Garcia & Tor, 2007). These competitive feelings are then likely projected onto others, causing an effect where the more highly ranked an employee is, the more he or she will perceive envy from others, whether it actually is there or not (Vecchio, 2005).

Organization-based self-esteem. Self-esteem is a central construct within social comparison theory, as it is assumed that downward social comparisons enhance self-esteem, while upward comparisons threaten it (Fiske, 2010; Suls & Wheeler, 2013). In addition, as discussed before, numerous defensive attributional strategies—including the genius effect—have been described in the literature demonstrating that unfavorable social comparisons trigger self-esteem saving mechanisms (Alicke et al., 1997). Organization-based self-esteem (OBSE) is defined as the value individuals perceive to have in their role as organizational members. Employees with high OBSE perceive themselves as important, meaningful, capable, and worthwhile within the specific context of their employing organization. OBSE is thus a role-specific form of self-esteem, which is more broadly defined as the extent to which a person perceives him- or herself as a competent individual, or a 'person of worth' (Pierce, Gardner, & Cummings, 1989). Organization-based self-esteem has been shown to be more malleable than global self-esteem, in that it is more situational and less trait-like. Three typical sources of OBSE are distinguished in the literature: implicit signals sent by the organization (e.g., through its practices); messages from significant others (e.g., supervisors) that are received and internalized; and feelings of efficacy and competence derived from work and organizational experiences (e.g., experiences of success) (Pierce & Gardner, 2004). It is clear that all three factors are at play in talent programs by design, as they send both direct and indirect messages about the relative value of employees (Malik & Singh, 2014).

Table 1

Overview of Hypotheses Across the Three Studies: Expected Relationships Between Degree of Inclusivity, Real-Life Desire to Be a Talent, and Employee Reactions to Talent Programs

	Hypothesized employee reactions			
Study 1: Managerial assumptions	Managers will expect 'non-talents' to react more favorably to a talent program, the more inclusive it is (H1), while they will expect 'talents' to react less favorably to more inclusive talent programs (H2).			
	Envy	**Being envied**	**OBSE**	**Turnover intentions**
Degree of inclusivity → Non-talent reactions	-	/	+	-
Degree of inclusivity → Talent reactions	/	-	-	+
Study 2: 'Non-talent' (and 'Unaware') reactions	'Non-talents' will react less favorably to a talent program, the more inclusive it is (H3). This effect will be even stronger for employees with a stronger desire to be identified as a talent (H4). When employees are unaware of their own (non-)talent status, the effects of talent program inclusivity on their reactions to such programs—in terms of (a) envy, (b) organization-based self-esteem, and (c) turnover intentions—will be buffered, such that the differences in reactions to talent programs at different levels of inclusivity will be smaller (H5).			
	Envy	**Being envied**	**OBSE**	**Turnover intentions**
Degree of inclusivity → Non-talent reactions	+	/	-	+
× Real-life desire to be identified as a talent → Non-talent reactions	++	/	- -	++
Degree of inclusivity → Unaware reactions	0	/	0	0
Study 3: 'Talent' reactions	'Talents' will react less favorably to a talent program, the more inclusive it is (H6). This effect will be even stronger for employees with a stronger desire to be identified as a talent (H7).			
	Envy	**Being envied**	**OBSE**	**Turnover intentions**
Degree of inclusivity → Talent reactions	/	-	-	+
× Real-life desire to be identified as a talent → Talent reactions	/	- -	- -	++

Notes. OBSE = organization-based self-esteem

Turnover intentions. One of the primary goals of most talent programs is enhancing the loyalty and commitment of employees considered talents (Festing & Schäfer, 2014). Retaining one's top employees—especially in light of the stronger pull of the market for this group—has been described as a cornerstone of successful talent management ever since McKinsey's 'War for talent' book first came out (Michaels et al., 2001). That said, in recent years critics of the exclusive talent management approach have argued that if talent programs lead to alienation and dissatisfaction among the 80 to 90 percent of employees *not* considered talents, overall retention effects of such programs may be negative (Malik & Singh, 2014; Swailes & Blackburn, 2016). We know from research that employees who feel underappreciated are more inclined to leave their organizations (Verbruggen & van Emmerik, 2020). The process through which turnover intentions are formed typically includes an evaluation of the current employment situation, thoughts of leaving, and the search for alternatives (Hom, Griffeth, & Sellaro, 1984). Although they are often used as a proxy measure for actual turnover, it should be noted that turnover intentions only explain only about 10 to 20 percent of variance in actual turnover (Dalton, Johnson, & Daily, 1999). That said, turnover intentions are considered a detrimental work attitude even when employees do decide to stay with their employer. Research on employees who reported high turnover intentions but did not act on them found that their levels of regret increased over time, while their levels of career satisfaction decreased drastically (Verbruggen & van Emmerik, 2020). The question is, then, whether talent programs are conceivable that simultaneously boost retention of talents while not drastically increasing the turnover intentions of non-talents (De Boeck et al., 2018). Research has found that unfavorable upward social comparisons generally increase employees' turnover intentions, while favorable downward social comparisons are linked with employee retention (Williams, McDaniel, & Nguyen, 2006). In general, people are

motivated to seek out and stay in situations that enhance a favorable self-evaluation, and to avoid or leave situations that threaten it (Taylor & Lobel, 1989).

Talent Program Secrecy and Talent Status Awareness

As mentioned earlier, critics of the exclusive talent management approach do not only take issue with the exclusivity itself, but also with the secrecy that tends to go hand in hand with it (Huang & Tansley, 2012). Organizational secrecy is defined as the intentional concealment of information from actors by actors in organizations (Costas & Grey, 2014), and is considered an inherent feature of the exclusive talent management phenomenon (Khoreva, Vaiman, & Kostanek, 2019). Indeed, in a bid to avoid negative reactions of 'non-talents' (Sumelius et al., 2020)—but also to avoid perceptions of career guarantees among 'talents' (Dries & de Gieter, 2014)—only around one in three organizations inform the employees in their talent pool of their own special status (Church et al., 2015). An even larger proportion of organizations—estimates range from 75 to 90 percent—keep their talent management practices entirely hidden from those outside of the talent pool (Dries & De Gieter, 2014).

At the employee level, the degree of secrecy or transparency of a talent program translates into the variable of 'talent status awareness'—i.e., the extent to which an employee is aware of his or her status as a 'talent' or 'non-talent' (Sumelius et al., 2020). A study by Sonnenberg, van Zijderveld, and Brinks (2014) compared archival data on talent status with employee self-reports, and found that 50 percent of employees misclassified themselves—of which 6 percent were 'talents' who thought they were 'non-talents', and 84 percent were 'non-talents' who thought they were talents. It is clear that ambiguity about talent programs is strategically targeted towards non-talents in particular (Sumelius et al., 2020).

Although one can certainly question the use of secrecy (Khoreva et al., 2019), ambiguity (Dries & De Gieter, 2014), and obfuscation (Huang & Tansley, 2012) in talent programs from an ethical point of view (Anand & Rosen, 2008; Swailes, 2013), another question is whether secrecy 'works'—i.e., whether keeping (non-)talent status a secret indeed buffers potentially negative reactions from employees (Sharot & Sunstein, 2020). This assumption is taken for granted in the literature, but has in fact never been tested empirically, mostly due to the ethical and practical challenges of collecting field data from employees who are unaware of their own talent status (De Boeck et al., 2018). The study by Sonnenberg et al. (2014) is an exception—these authors did in fact test the effects of what they called 'talent perception incongruence' (and found it had negative effects on psychological contract fulfillment). They assumed, however—in contrast to the present study—that the incongruence between perceived and actual talent status reflected a flaw in organizations' communication around their talent programs (and proposed more transparency as a solution), rather than a deliberate strategy of secrecy (Costas & Grey, 2014).

We thus propose that presenting respondents with fictitious scenarios about talent programs introduced by their employer while withholding information about their own talent status reflects the current-day realities of talent management secrecy and talent status unawareness (Dries & De Gieter, 2014; Sumelius et al., 2020). We hypothesize that when employees are unaware of their own (non-)talent status, defensive attributional strategies such as the genius effect will not be triggered, as there is no clear faultline between lesser and better performers—the odds of being a 'talent' or a 'non-talent' are theoretically equal in this condition (Alicke et al., 1997).

Methods

Procedure and Sample

We carried out three vignette studies: a first study, in which a sample of managers were asked to rate the assumed reactions of talents versus non-talents to a fictitious talent program; a second study, in which a sample of employees were told they were not selected for a fictitious talent program, or that they were unaware of their status; and a third study, in which respondents were told they *were* selected as 'talents'. In each study, we applied an experimental logic—most notably, systematically controlled variation in independent variables (in our case, talent program inclusivity)—to a more classical survey administration format (Auspurg & Hinz, 2014). This method is particularly well suited to create hypothetical scenarios that address sensitive topics, while balancing internal and external validity concerns (Aguinis & Bradley, 2014).

The survey for each separate study consisted of four sections, each on a separate page (screen) of the survey. The first screen explained the goals of the research, and contained the study's working definition of talent management. Instructions to respondents read as follows: "In this study, we look into [the expectations of supervisors as to] how employees will react to talent management programs with different features. Our focus is specifically on the type of talent management programs in which only a limited percentage of employees is identified as being a 'talent', who are subsequently granted more opportunities for internal career advancement than employees not identified as such". The second screen contained a series of socio-demographic background questions (see sample descriptives and control variables further down). The third screen described a fictional organization and its newly introduced talent program, with respondents randomly routed to one of four conditions. The survey concluded with a separate screen for each dependent variable, followed by a treatment check.

The survey was placed on the Qualtrics platform. For all three studies, we included several eligibility checks, such that only respondents who were employed full-time (i.e., no students, retirees, temporary workers, and independent contractors or business owners) could participate. For the managers in Study 1 we additionally demanded that they managed at least three employees directly, and had a certain level of experience and expertise with talent management (see sample descriptives; Table 2). The initial sampling strategy involved contacting managers from our personal and professional networks in the Benelux—i.e., CEOs, HR managers, consultants, and alumni—directly using personalized e-mails, LinkedIn, and Facebook. Additionally, a trade press magazine in the area of HR agreed to publish a call for participation in their weekly newsletter in return for first access to our research findings. In the end, a total of 179 managers completed the survey and passed the treatment checks. One respondent (out of 180) was excluded from our analyses due to having no experience or expertise with talent management. For Study 2, we had student research assistants recruit respondents (through similar channels as in Study 1). 576 respondents, all employed full-time, participated in the study. Finally, for Study 3 we worked with a panel data provider (i.e., Qualtrics Panels), which allowed us to have more control over the sample's sociodemographic characteristics—as we wanted to collect a sample as similar as possible to that of Study 2. Specifically, we set age, gender, and education level quotas as sampling criteria. A total of 306 employees were sampled for Study 3. Table 2 summarizes the sample descriptives for all three studies.

Manipulations

Talent program inclusivity. Prior to seeing the vignette about talent program inclusivity, respondents in all three studies were given a background story about a large fictitious organization (employing thousands of employees), and asked to imagine that they

actually worked there. They were then told the organization had recently introduced a new talent program. On the following screen, respondents were randomly assigned to one of four between-subjects conditions (i.e., 1, 10, 30, or 50 percent—based on percentages of talent program inclusivity commonly found in the field; see the benchmark study by Church et al., 2015).

Table 2

Sample Descriptives for the Three Studies

	Study 1 Managers (*N* = 179)	**Study 2** Non-talents / Unaware (*N* = 576)	**Study 3** Talents (*N* = 306)
Gender	58% women	50% women	51% women
	42% men	50% men	49% men
Mean age	45.04 (*SD* = 9.12)	40.91 (*SD* = 11.09)	41.43 (*SD* = 11.36)
Mean work experience	21.65 (*SD* = 9.16)	16.76 (*SD* = 12.25)	18.88 (*SD* = 11.46)
Educational level	26% Bachelor	39% Bachelor	57% Bachelor
	62% Master	34% Master	18% Master
	10% PhD/MBA	4% PhD/MBA	3% PhD/MBA
	2% No higher education	23% No higher education	22% No higher education
Industry	21% HR	21% Government	13% Healthcare
(top 3 in sample)	13% Construction	7% Logistics	10% Education
	9% Government	7% Construction	9% Government
Job position	31% HR manager	28% Management	16% Management
	25% Project leader		
	15% Board member		
Mean TM experience[1]	3.61 (*SD* = 0.91)		
Mean TM expertise[1]	3.45 (*SD* = 0.98)		

Notes. TM = talent management; [1] managers (Study 1) were asked to indicate their experience and expertise with talent management on a 5-point Likert scale (from *1. Very limited experience/expertise* to *5. Ample experience/strong expertise*)

Talent status awareness. In Study 2, respondents were randomly rerouted to either a 'non-talent' condition or an 'unaware' condition. In the non-talent condition, the vignette stated that they were informed of their non-talent status; in the unaware condition, the vignette stated that the organization had chosen not to communicate about talent status to individual employees and that they thus had had no idea whether or not they were selected for the talent program.

Treatment and attention checks. A treatment check was included at the end of the survey to help eliminate inattentive participants. Specifically, we wanted to check whether respondents had responded with the intended talent program inclusivity manipulation in mind. We asked them to pick the correct percentage from a multiple-choice list (i.e., 1, 10, 30, or 50 percent). In addition, respondents in Study 2 and 3 were asked to indicate whether they were identified as a talent or not. Extra attention checks were included in the Study 3 survey, which is recommended when collecting panel data (e.g., to weed out 'speedrunners'). These items, added to several of our scales, instructed participants to respond with a specific value (e.g., "My answer to this item has to be three, such that the researchers know that I read each individual item carefully"). In Study 1, 7 (4%) out of 187 respondents indicated the wrong talent inclusivity percentage in their treatment check, and were thus excluded from the analyses. In Study 2, 63 out of 639 participants (10%) were excluded as they failed one or both treatment checks. In Study 3, all participants who failed any of the treatment or attention checks were excluded from the dataset and final sample supplied to us by Qualtrics Panels.

Measures

The vignette was repeated at the top of each screen, with each dependent variable being rated on a separate screen of the survey. Managers in Study 1 were asked to rate the assumed reactions of talents and non-talents separately, with response scales for both groups presented alongside one another, next to each item (i.e., two columns, each consisting of a five- or seven-point response scale, the first labelled 'talents' and the second 'non-talents'). For both Study 2 and 3 the scales were identical, except that the items were phrased in the first-person form. Cronbach's alphas for each of the scales listed below are reported on the diagonal of Table 3, 5 and 6.

Envy/Being envied. We asked respondents in Study 1 to indicate to what extent they believed the talent program would lead to envy among non-talents (five items) versus the feeling of being envied among talents (three items) (Vecchio, 2005). An example of an envy item was "The non-talents would find it somewhat annoying to see the talents having all the luck in getting the best assignments". An example of a being envied item was "Because of their success at work, the talents may feel resented by their coworkers". For Study 2 and 3 these items were worded into the first-person perspective, with participants responding to the items as if they themselves were in that situation. All items were rated on a five-point scale from *1. very unlikely* to *5. very likely*.

Organization-based self-esteem. To measure OBSE we used the ten-item scale developed by Pierce et al. (1989). A sample item was "They (I) would feel that they (I) count around here". Items were rated on a seven-point scale from *-3. much less than before* to *+3. much more than before* to reflect changes in OBSE as reactions to the introduction of the talent program.

Turnover intentions. Turnover intentions were measured using the five-item job search behavior index (Kopelman, Rovenpor, & Millsap, 1992), combined with the three-item turnover intention scale (Hom et al., 1984), as recommended by turnover researchers (Mitchell, Holtom, Lee, Sablynski, & Erez, 2001). A sample item of the former is "How likely is it that, within 12 months after the announcement of the talent program, they (*I*) would… revise their (*my*) resume", and of the latter "… talk to friends or relatives about getting a new job". Items were rated on a seven-point scale from *-3. much less than before* to *+3. much more than before* to reflect changes in turnover intentions as reactions to the introduction of the talent program.

Real-life desire to be identified as a talent. To account for employees' self-evaluations (cf. self-evaluation maintenance model; Tesser, 1988), in Study 2 and 3 we asked respondents whether or not they would want to be identified as a talent by their current employer, provided that this was possible within their organization, and regardless of their real-life talent status. Respondents were asked to choose between the response options 'yes', 'no', or 'indifferent' (the latter two response options were both equated to 0 in the resulting dummy variable). 77 percent of our Study 2 respondents (*N* = 446), and 62 percent (*N* = 190) of our Study 3 respondents, indicated they would want to be identified as a talent in real life.

Control variables. We identified gender and age as potential control variables. Studies have found that women have a higher tendency to engage in social comparisons than men (Guimond & Chatard, 2014), while younger employees tend to value talent management more (Festing & Schäfer, 2014)—qualities that may feed into respondents' assumptions about employee reactions to talent programs. ANCOVA analyses showed that these control variables did not significantly affect our findings for any of the three studies. In line with the guidelines for control variables proposed by Becker (2005), we thus report our results without these control variables. Additionally, in Study 1, we asked managers to indicate their real-life preference for talent program inclusivity on a slider from 0 to 100%. This control variable was in fact found to be a significant predictor of managerial assumptions, and is therefore reported in our results (see Table 4).

Analyses. One-way ANOVAs were run to assess mean differences in employee reactions for the different conditions of talent program inclusivity (see Table 7). In addition, we ran two-way ANOVAs to test our hypotheses about the interactive effect of employees' real-life desire to be identified as a talent in Study 2 and 3.

Table 3

Study 1 (Managerial Assumptions): Descriptives and Correlations (N = 179)

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1. Gender[1]	0.58	0.49												
2. Age	45.04	9.12	-.20**											
3. Work experience (years)	21.65	9.16	-.17*	.97***										
4. TM experience[2]	3.61	0.91	.05	.23**	.20**									
5. TM expertise[3]	3.45	0.98	-.02	.27***	.25**	.72***								
6. Being envied – Talents[4]	3.56	0.75	.05	-.04	-.04	.01	.04	(.85)						
7. Envy – Non-talents[5]	3.97	0.62	.06	.06	.07	.13	.07	.60***	(.71)					
8. OBSE – Talents[4]	5.83	0.66	-.05	-.03	-.03	-.11	-.12	.17*	.14	(.93)				
9. OBSE – Non-talents[5]	2.96	0.86	-.10	-.10	-.12	-.02	-.06	-.48***	-.54***	-.34***	(.93)			
10. Turnover intentions – Talents[4]	3.15	1.07	.08	.07	.08	.07	.09	.09	-.01	-.13	.03	(.85)		
11. Turnover intentions – Non-talents[5]	4.98	0.85	.17*	.03	.04	.15	.12	.38***	.46***	.12	-.50***	-.21**	(.85)	
12. Talent program inclusivity – Manipulated (%)	23.03	18.64	.02	.04	.01	-.03	-.04	-.08	.01	-.14	-.01	.21**	-.04	
13. Talent program inclusivity – Real-life preference (%)	52.84	32.85	.17*	-.02	.02	.09	.12	.25**	.34***	.13	-.48***	-.05	.27***	-.23**

Notes. TM = talent management; OBSE = organization-based self-esteem; [1] 0 = male, 1 = female; [2] Five-point Likert scale: 1= No experience with TM at all, 5 = Extensive experience with TM; [3] Five-point Likert scale:1= Very limited expertise in TM, 5 = Strong expertise in TM; [4] Reactions by 'talents' to talent programs *as assumed by* managers; [5] Reactions by 'non-talents' to talent programs *as assumed by* managers; *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$; Cronbach's alphas on the diagonal between parentheses

Results

Study 1: Managerial Assumptions

The means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations for all Study 1 variables can be found in Table 3. Table 7 (top and bottom left column) reports the means and standard deviations for our managerial sample's assumptions about talent versus non-talent reactions for each dependent variable, for each of the talent program inclusivity conditions. Paired-samples *t*-tests showed significant differences between talent and non-talent reactions overall—that is, across all conditions and for each dependent variable, talents were assumed to react more positively to talent programs than non-talents ($p < .001$). We did not find support for Hypothesis 1, however. That is, one-way ANOVAs did not uncover any significant differences between the four conditions of talent program inclusivity for managerial assumptions about 'non-talent' reactions (envy: $F(3, 175) = 1.66$, $p = .177$; OBSE: $F(3, 175) = 0.96$, $p = .411$; turnover intentions: $F(3, 175) = 1.63$, $p = .185$). As for 'talent' reactions (being envied: $F(3, 175) = 0.93$, $p = .430$; OBSE: $F(3, 175) = 1.52$, $p = .212$), only turnover intentions ($F(3, 175) = 3.08$, $p = .029$) was significant. Overall, managers thus assumed that non-talents would react negatively—and talents positively— to talent programs, regardless of the level of talent program inclusivity. In partial support of Hypothesis 2, managers did assume that talents would be more likely to leave organizations with more inclusive talent programs.

Looking at the descriptives for our control question around real-life preference for talent program inclusivity, however, we observed that over half of our respondents ($N = 94$; 52%) actually preferred talent programs that included at least 50 percent of employees. Specifically, 6% ($N = 11$) of respondents preferred talent programs that include between 1 and 9% of employees, 25% ($N = 44$) between 10 and 29%, and 17% ($N = 30$) preferred talent programs between 30 and 49%. Of those who preferred talent programs including 50% or

more of employees, the largest group (*N* = 24; 13%) actually preferred programs selecting 100% of employees as 'talents'. This meant that it was conceivable that many of our respondents considered *all* conditions in the survey (i.e., 1, 10, 30, and 50 percent) more exclusive than they would like, which offered a potential explanation for our lack of significant findings for Hypotheses 1 and 2. Furthermore, we found significant correlations between most of the assumed talent and non-talent reactions to talent programs, and managers' real-life talent program inclusivity preferences (see Table 3). We thus ran a supplementary analysis to test whether real-life preferences around talent program inclusivity were indeed related to managerial assumptions about talent versus non-talent reactions to talent management. Specifically, we wondered if the extent to which managers believed that non-talents (talents) would react negatively (positively) to exclusive talent programs in general (i.e., across all four of our conditions) was predictive of their preference for less exclusive programs. Table 4 reports the findings of a linear regression analysis to this end.

Table 4

Study 1 (Managerial Assumptions): Multiple Linear Regressions Predicting Managers' Real-Life Talent Program Inclusivity Preferences Based on Assumed Reactions of Non-Talents and Talents

	Talent program inclusivity – Real-life preference (%)	
	Non-talents	Talents
Envy/Being envied	6.13 (4.27)	10.44 (3.33)**
OBSE	-17.44 (3.33)***	3.77 (3.87)
Turnover intentions	-0.43 (3.09)	-2.08 (2.30)
F	12.78	2.92
R^2	.27	.08
Adjusted R^2	.25	.05

Notes. N = 179; table reports unstandardized coefficients (with standard errors); *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

We found that especially the assumed negative impact of talent programs on non-talents' organization-based self-esteem was significantly related to managers' preferences for

less exclusive programs (β = -17.44, t(177) = -5.24, p < .001). As for the assumed negative reactions of talents to talent programs, only the assumption that talents would feel highly envied was significantly related to managers' preferences for less exclusive programs (β = 10.44, t(177) = 3.13, p = .002). These analyses imply support for Hypothesis 1, and partial support for Hypothesis 2. That is, we conclude that managers indeed assume that non-talents will react negatively to exclusive talent programs, and that these assumptions are significantly related to their preferences for less exclusive programs. It is thus conceivable that managers' real-life preferences around talent program inclusivity 'overruled' our experimental conditions in Study 1.

Study 2: 'Non-Talent' Reactions

The means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations for all Study 2 variables can be found in Table 5. Table 7 (top right columns) reports the means and standard deviations of respondents' reactions for each dependent variable, for each of the talent program inclusivity conditions. We found support for Hypothesis 3. That is, employees who were told they were not selected as talents reported more envy when a talent program was more inclusive (F(3, 298) = 7.21, p < .001). They also reported lower OBSE (F(3, 298) = 6.18, p < .001) and higher turnover intentions (F(3, 298) = 4.79, p = .003) in the conditions where a higher percentage of employees was selected as 'talents'.

No interaction effects were found for employees' real-life desire to be identified as a talent. Talent program inclusivity influenced the reactions of both groups of 'non-talent' respondents similarly—those who did, versus did not, desire to be identified as a talent in real life. However, we did find significant main effects of real-life desire to be identified as a talent on the different employee reactions. 'Non-talents' who desired to be a talent in real life reported more envy (F(1, 298) = 12.07, p = .001), lower OBSE (F(1, 298) = 17.87, p < .001), and

increased turnover intentions (F(1, 298) = 7.56, p = .006) across all four conditions than 'non-talents' who did not desire to be a talent, thereby supporting Hypothesis 4.

In support of Hypothesis 5, talent program secrecy was indeed found to buffer the effects of talent program inclusivity on employee reactions (see Figure 1, which also includes the 'talent' reactions data from Study 3). That is, in the condition where participants were unaware of their own (non-)talent status, there were no significant differences between the different levels of talent program inclusivity (envy: F(3, 265) = 3.24, p = .023; OBSE: F(3, 263) = 1.45, p = .230; turnover intentions: F(3, 264) = 1.07, p = .363). We should note that although the coefficient for envy was in fact significant, a post-hoc test found no significant differences between the talent program inclusivity conditions.

Study 3: 'Talent' Reactions

The means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations for all Study 3 variables can be found in Table 6. Table 7 (bottom right column) reports the means and standard deviations of respondents' reactions for each dependent variable, for each of the talent program inclusivity conditions. Hypothesis 6 was not supported by our Study 3 data. That is, there were no differences in reactions to being included in a talent program based on its level of inclusivity—reactions by 'talents' were similar across the different conditions (being envied: F(3, 298) = 0.96, p = .414; OBSE: F(3, 298) = 2.29, p = .079; turnover intentions: (F(3, 298) = 0.97, p = .408).

Again, no interaction effects were found for employees' real-life desire to be identified as a talent. We did find significant main effects: 'talents' who desired to be a talent in real life reported stronger feelings of being envied (F(1, 298) = 6.24, p = .013) and higher OBSE (F(1, 298) = 40.04, p < .001) across all four conditions than 'talents' who did not desire to be a talent, providing partial support for Hypothesis 7. No significant main effect was found for turnover intentions (F(1, 298) = 1.99, p = .160).

Table 5

Study 2 ('Non-Talent' Reactions): Descriptives and Correlations (N = 576)

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Gender[1]	0.50	0.50								
2. Age	40.91	11.09	-.09*							
3. Work experience (years)	16.76	12.25	-.07	.88***						
4. Envy	2.95	1.03	.13**	-.08*	-.01	(.71)				
5. OBSE	3.37	1.13	-.11*	.02	-.08*	-.62***	(.93)			
6. Turnover intentions	4.03	1.50	.05	-.06	-.03	.50***	-.50***	(.85)		
7. Talent program inclusivity (%)	22.70	18.83	-.07	-.07	-.11**	.10**	-.07	.13**		
8. Talent status awareness[2]	0.47	0.50	.08*	.12**	.29***	.43***	-.56***	.29***	.01	
9. Real-life desire to be identified as a talent[3]	0.77	0.42	.00	-.19***	-.24***	.14**	-.10*	.08*	.04	.03

Notes. OBSE = organization-based self-esteem; [1] 0 = male, 1 = female; [2] 0 = unaware of (non-)talent status, 1 = non-talent; [3] 0 = no desire to be a talent, 1 = desire to be a talent; *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$; Cronbach's alphas on the diagonal between parentheses

Table 6

Study 3 ('Talent' Reactions): Descriptives and Correlations (N = 306)

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Gender[1]	0.51	0.50							
2. Age	41.43	11.36	-.05						
3. Work experience (years)	18.88	11.46	-.05	.93***					
4. Being envied	2.99	0.90	.02	.01	.03	(.85)			
5. OBSE	5.31	0.70	.01	-.08	-.07	.08	(.93)		
6. Turnover intentions	2.58	1.28	.08	-.09	-.10	.01	.03	(.85)	
7. Talent program inclusivity (%)	22.80	18.96	-.13*	.00	.01	-.07	-.02	-.03	
8. Real-life desire to be identified as a talent[2]	0.62	0.49	-.02	-.09	-.08	.14*	.35***	.09	.05

Notes. OBSE = organization-based self-esteem; [1] 0 = male, 1 = female; [2] 0 = no desire to be a talent, 1 = desire to be a talent; *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$; Cronbach's alphas on the diagonal between parentheses

Table 7

One-Way ANOVA Means Comparisons of the Reactions of Talents and Non-Talents to Talent Programs at Various Levels of Inclusivity, as Assumed by Managers (Study 1), Employees Not Selected as Talents and Employees Unaware of their Own (Non-)Talent Status (Study 2), and Employees Selected as Talents (Study 3)

	Study 1 (Managerial assumptions) Non-talents				**Study 2 (Employee reactions)** Non-talents				Unaware of (Non-)Talent Status			
	Envy	OBSE	Turnover	*N*	Envy	OBSE	Turnover	*N*	Envy	OBSE	Turnover	*N*
1%	4.08_{a}^{d}	2.91_{a}^{d}	5.17_{a}^{d}	43	2.99_{a}^{f}	2.98_{a}^{d}	4.06_{a}^{f}	74	2.40_{a}^{g}	4.16_{a}^{h}	3.31_{a}^{h}	64
	(0.64)	(0.96)	(0.85)		(1.00)	(0.87)	(1.47)		(0.85)	(1.00)	(1.44)	
10%	3.80_{a}^{d}	3.11_{a}^{d}	4.79_{a}^{d}	43	3.26_{ab}^{ef}	2.86_{a}^{d}	4.37_{a}^{f}	77	2.76_{a}^{g}	3.84_{a}^{h}	3.75_{a}^{h}	74
	(0.66)	(0.77)	(0.84)		(0.86)	(0.99)	(1.57)		(1.12)	(0.99)	(1.54)	
30%	4.02_{a}^{d}	2.82_{a}^{d}	5.05_{a}^{d}	50	3.47_{bc}^{e}	2.81_{ab}^{d}	4.36_{a}^{f}	79	2.37_{a}^{g}	4.11_{a}^{h}	3.51_{a}^{e}	63
	(0.65)	(0.91)	(1.03)		(0.89)	(0.78)	(1.35)		(0.72)	(1.17)	(1.29)	
50%	3.98_{a}^{d}	3.00_{a}^{d}	4.92_{a}^{d}	43	3.71_{c}^{de}	2.50_{b}^{f}	4.96_{b}^{d}	76	2.35_{a}^{g}	4.09_{a}^{h}	3.62_{a}^{e}	66
	(0.51)	(0.78)	(0.53)		(0.83)	(0.74)	(0.94)		(0.88)	(0.86)	(1.61)	
F	1.66	0.96	1.63		8.71^{***}	4.39^{**}	5.95^{**}		3.24^{*}	1.45	1.07	

	Study 1 (Managerial assumptions) Talents				**Study 3 (Employee reactions)** Talents			
	Being envied	OBSE	Turnover	*N*	Being envied	OBSE	Turnover	*N*
1%	3.69_{a}^{e}	5.87_{a}^{e}	2.79_{a}^{e}	43	3.09_{a}^{f}	5.46_{a}^{g}	2.52_{a}^{e}	76
	(0.81)	(0.80)	(1.11)		(0.87)	(0.69)	(1.33)	
10%	3.49_{a}^{e}	5.95_{a}^{e}	3.06_{ab}^{e}	43	3.03_{a}^{fg}	5.21_{a}^{g}	2.80_{a}^{e}	77
	(0.77)	(0.67)	(1.14)		(0.88)	(0.62)	(1.21)	
30%	3.61_{a}^{e}	5.84_{a}^{e}	3.33_{ab}^{e}	50	2.88_{a}^{f}	5.21_{a}^{g}	2.42_{a}^{g}	76
	(0.74)	(0.61)	(0.99)		(0.88)	(0.77)	(1.19)	
50%	3.45_{a}^{e}	5.65_{a}^{e}	3.40_{b}^{e}	43	2.94_{a}^{f}	5.37_{a}^{e}	2.57_{a}^{g}	77
	(0.68)	(0.54)	(0.96)		(0.96)	(0.68)	(1.37)	
F	0.93	1.52	3.08^{*}		0.79	2.42	1.22	

Notes. Table reports means (with standard deviations); means within studies that do *not* share a common subscript (for the same variable, across the different conditions of talent program inclusivity within that study) differ at the $p < .05$ level or lower as per Tukey's honestly significant difference test; means between studies that do *not* share a common superscript (for the same variable, for the same talent program inclusivity condition across studies) differ at the $p < .05$ level or lower as per Tukey's honestly significant difference test; OBSE = organization-based self-esteem; *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

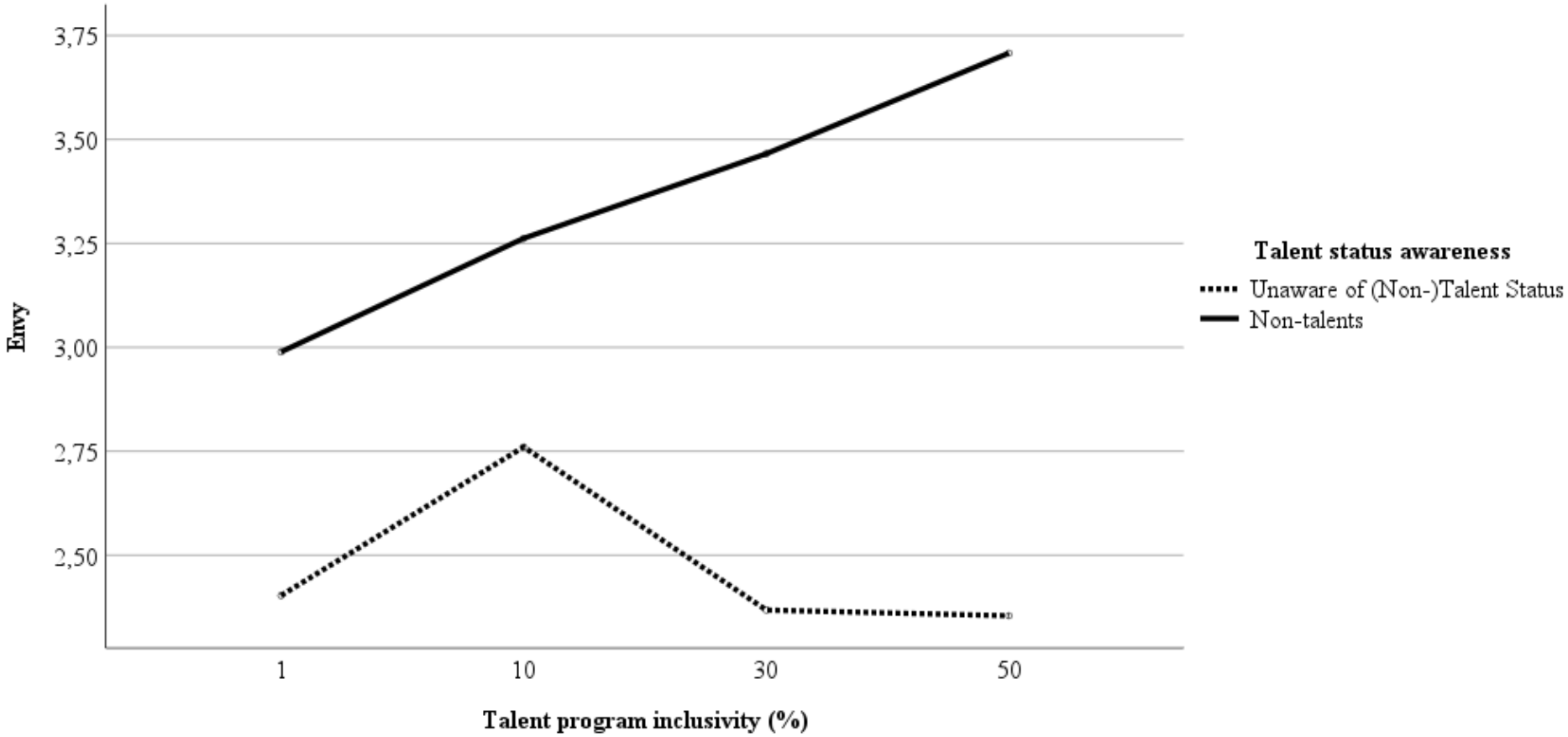

Figure 1

Employee Reactions as a Function of Talent Program Inclusivity and Talent Status (Awareness)

Discussion

Across three experimental vignette studies, we hypothesized a general pattern where managers would assume—based largely on the simple heuristic that "exclusive is worse" (Malik & Singh, 2014)—that everyone except 'talents' themselves will prefer less exclusive talent programs. We expected, however, that our employee data would reveal that both 'talents' and 'non-talents' would in fact react better to more exclusive talent programs. Our first assumption was derived from experimental research on the genius effect, positioned within the framework of social comparison theory (Alicke et al., 1997). Put simply, this research showed that being outperformed by a small elite group is less threatening than comparing oneself to 'closer' targets, as the former allows inferior performers to discount the relevance of the comparison to their self-perceived competence. We thus proposed that less exclusive talent programs imply that the status of talent is more within reach, which makes being excluded a more negative experience than it would be with a highly exclusive talent program (Garcia & Tor, 2007). Our second assumption was that talents would also react better to exclusive talent programs, as proposed by the rank hypothesis (Boyce et al., 2010), which holds that downward comparison is an even more positive experience when one outperforms more (and better) people, than when one outperforms mediocre or poor coworkers (Alicke et al., 1997).

We found empirical support for the former assumption, but not the latter. That is, so-called 'non-talents' (as manipulated in Study 2) indeed reacted worse—in terms of envy, organization-based self-esteem, and turnover intentions, specifically—to talent programs including relatively more employees. For 'talents', however, talent program inclusivity mattered less (Study 3). It would appear from our findings that this group reacted positively

to being selected overall, regardless of how many other employees were included in the talent program.

Additionally, for both non-talents and talents, our analyses showed that their reactions to (fictitious) talent programs were even stronger when they indicated they would want to be identified as a talent in real life—across all conditions of talent program inclusivity. It has been argued that as not all employees actually want to be identified as 'talents', reactions to being excluded from a talent program may vary depending on employees' self-evaluations (Tesser, 1988). An interesting finding was that roughly three out of four employees in our data expressed a real-life desire to be identified as a talent, which implies that talent status is indeed likely a salient source of social comparison in organizations (Swailes et al., 2014). However, while the 'genius effect' study suggested that the tendency to exaggerate the abilities of superior performers is likely stronger for aspects that are more central to the comparer's self-concept (Alicke et al., 1997), we found that even when respondents had no real-life desire to be identified as a talent (or were indifferent about it), they showed significant reactions to the talent programs presented to them, both when they were told they were talents or non-talents. We can therefore conclude that, regardless of employees' self-evaluations, social comparisons will be central to understanding employee reactions to talent management.

Employees who were unaware of their own (non-)talent status—and were explicitly told their organization chose not to communicate about this to employees—were somewhere in the middle in terms of their reactions to the talent programs (Study 2). As the means reported in Table 7 illustrate, they reacted less negatively than non-talents, but less positively than talents overall. It would thus appear that 'secrecy works' in buffering negative reactions from employees to talent programs, even when the secrecy is openly admitted to (as in our

Study 2 vignette)—which is often not the case in the field (Church et al., 2015; Dries & De Gieter, 2014; Huang & Tansley, 2012; Sumelius et al., 2020).

Finally, when contrasting our data at the employee level with the assumptions of managers, our findings were somewhat inconclusive. In Study 1, we only found that managers expected talents to react significantly better to talent programs than non-talents—we did not find any effect of talent program inclusivity. Our analyses also suggested, however, that manager's real-life preferences around talent program inclusivity—over half of our sample preferred talent programs with an inclusivity of over 50 percent—may have overruled our experimental conditions (i.e., 1, 10, 30 and 50 percent). Regression and correlational analysis showed that the more negatively managers expected non-talents to react to talent programs, the less they preferred exclusive programs. We believe this finding gives an indication of managers assuming that less exclusive talent programs will create better reactions among non-talents—while our Study 2 findings imply otherwise.

Taken together, the present research has theoretical implications for the literature on talent management (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2015) and social comparison theory (Mussweiler et al., 2000). First of all, although no published studies on talent management to date have used social comparison theory as their theoretical framework, in the present paper we argue that many of the decisions made about talent management in the field—as well as the growing critique of its practices both among scholars and practitioners—can be understood and explained only through the lens of social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954). Specifically, we propose that some of the design characteristics inherent to exclusive talent programs are intrinsically linked to processes and principles of social comparison. Any talent program that does not include 100 percent of an organization's population—which most do not (Church et al., 2015)—can be assumed to apply a form of forced ranking in

establishing which employees should be included (Nijs et al., 2014). Whether organizations want it or not, such practices are likely to trigger social comparison between employees as they create status differences between coworkers (Heslin, 2003). Those identified as 'talents' can be assumed to engage in downward comparison to their 'non-talent' coworkers—typically associated with positive feelings and reactions—while the latter are forced into making upward comparisons, typically associated with negative reactions (Fiske, 2010; Taylor & Lobel, 1989; Sterling et al., 2016). We believe that although these dynamics have been acknowledged and described in earlier research on talent management, they have to date not been properly labeled under the header of social comparison theory (or any theory, for that matter; De Boeck et al., 2018). As talent management research is a highly phenomenon-driven field that has generally struggled with theory development (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2015), we believe that this is an important step forward. Moreover, although the assumed negative reactions of non-talents are widely called upon to advocate for less exclusive and transparent practices (Swailes & Blackburn, 2016), they have hardly ever been empirically studied (Malik & Singh, 2014), certainly not in systematic comparison to other stakeholders (such as talents and managers) as in the set of studies reported here. Overall, we caution talent management researchers against making bold claims in favor of less exclusive and transparent practices, when both theoretical arguments and empirical evidence are severely lacking, and undesirable side-effects may emerge when these claims are taken up by organizational practice (De Boeck et al., 2018).

Second, as stated earlier, the phenomenon of talent management secrecy is hotly debated currently, both in theory and practice (Huang & Tansley, 2012), but rarely studied due to data access and research ethics concerns (De Boeck et al., 2018). Interestingly, the literature on organizational secrecy more generally offers arguments and evidence both for

the position that transparency is better for employees (from a normative ethics point of view; e.g., Anand & Rosen, 2008), and the opposite position—that secrecy is better (from an ego-enhancement/self-preservation, 'ignorance is bliss' point of view; e.g., Sharot & Sunstein, 2020). We believe that our findings illustrate exactly why secrecy works, and why managers often choose to keep talent programs a secret—secrecy obfuscates the faultlines between talents and non-talents, thus creating less negative reactions to talent programs compared to those who know for a fact that they are not seen as talents.

Third, in the present paper we set out to examine whether the genius effect could be intentionally harnessed. The genius effect dictates that when a person is unambiguously outperformed, he or she is more likely to construe the outperformer as an exceptional case—so is it also true that it is less threatening to be excluded from a smaller group of outperformers? Our results suggest that this is indeed the case, as respondents placed in the 'non-talent' condition reacted less negatively when they were excluded from a relatively smaller (and thus more exclusive) talent pool. This finding implies that the typically negative reactions to unfavorable, upward social comparisons by employees (such as not being selected for a talent program) can be manipulated—both experimentally and in organizational practice (De Boeck et al., 2018; Tesser et al., 1988)—which is an important, but potentially controversial finding.

Practical Implications

Our findings suggest that making talent programs less exclusive and transparent will not unequivocally lead to better employee reactions to such programs, and may even create unexpected side effects. Anecdotally, we have heard of cases where (large, well-known) organizations changed their talent program from 1 to 30 percent inclusivity and back to 1 percent in the space of a few years, all based on the assumed reactions of employees. As our

data show, however, making talent pools less exclusive may ironically make excluded people feel more severely excluded, while keeping (non-)talent status a secret may soften the blow for non-selected employees. That said, we must also acknowledge that when talent programs include over 50 percent of employees—and 1 in 8 of our Study 1 respondents actually preferred 100 percent—the proportion of non-talents decreases, which reduces the impact of this group's negative reactions on the overall net effect of such programs (De Boeck et al., 2018). In other words, our findings suggest that reactions to being excluded from a talent program will become more and more negative the less exclusive the program is—while simultaneously the proportion of employees reacting negatively *also* decreases. It is exactly this type of trade-off that organizations are struggling with in designing their talent programs (Swailes et al., 2014). It is unclear at this point, however, whether programs including 100 percent of employees—not differentiating in terms of performance and potential at all—still qualify as 'talent management', or what such programs would even look like (for a deeper discussion, see Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2015; Nijs et al., 2014; Swailes et al., 2014).

As for the phenomenon of talent management secrecy, based on our findings the most optimal strategy would be to inform talents of their status, but not tell the 'non-talents'—which is exactly what most organizations do (Church et al., 2015). In fact, it is remarkable that in our Study 2 we found positive effects of secrecy (in the sense that employees unaware of their own talent status showed less negative reactions to a fictitious talent program than employees who were informed they were non-talents) as in our design we were *transparent about the secrecy* in the fictional talent program, which in reality is most often not the case. That is, in Study 2 respondents in the 'unaware' condition were explicitly told that the organization had chosen not to communicate about talent status to individual employees, whereas in most organization the existence of exclusive talent programs is hidden from non-

talents entirely (Dries & De Gieter, 2014). The literature has so far generally assumed that employees will react negatively when made aware of secrecy within their organization—as it causes trust issues (Belogolovsky & Bamberger, 2014)—while our findings imply that the effects of transparency versus secrecy may not be so clear cut. In fact, when done right, communicating about the existence of a talent program without 'naming names'—especially to non-talents—may buffer the negative effects of unfavorable social comparisons, while motivating employees to increase their work effort in the hopes of being selected for the program in the future (Sterling et al., 2016). Based on our data, however, we cannot predict what the likely outcomes would be of fully secretive talent programs, especially not how employees would react if information leaks and gossip starts to spread (Anand & Rosen, 2008). That said, the choice between secrecy versus transparency is to be seen on a continuum with both sides facing potential challenges. For instance, ambiguity has been found to lead to increased levels of gossip and lower trust in management (Belogolovsky & Bamberger, 2014). It is also important to understand that nor transparency, nor secrecy, are ethical or unethical in and of themselves (Costas & Grey, 2014). Anand and Rosen (2008) offer some guidelines to evaluate whether secrecy motives are unethical or not. First of all, secrets sanctioned solely by organizational insiders (rather than by legal, industry, or societal norms) are more likely to be unethical. And second, secrets that are kept primarily to protect the interests of in-groups (as opposed to preventing harm to out-groups) are more likely to be unethical. The latter implies that secrecy can in fact be ethical on the condition that it is specifically decided upon to protect the self-esteem of non-talents (Mussweiler et al., 2000). In a similar vein, organizations seeking to implement talent programs can reflect on ways in which they can have exclusive programs, while still showing respect towards non-talents and protecting their self-esteem. Research has shown that the use of terminology (for instance,

creating mirror labels for non-talents such as ‘key performers’ or ‘trusted collaborators’) and message framing (“it is not because you were not selected this year that you will not be selected next year”) can have large effects on the emotions experienced by excluded groups (Taylor & Lobel, 1989).

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Several of the limitations of our studies warrant further research. First, further research needs to examine whether our finding that talent program inclusivity matters less for talents than non-talents holds across contexts. In general, there has been very little research on relative group size as a determinant of both upward and downward social comparison outcomes (Suls & Wheeler, 2013), with no study to date having considered the firm size in talent management research as a relevant context variable (cf. review article by Gallardo-Gallardo & Thunnissen, 2016). Employees may interpret the top 10% differently when considering a small firm (with 10 employees), as opposed to a large organization (with 10,000 employees), as the absolute number of individuals outperforming them varies (Boyce et al., 2010). Although research on the rank hypothesis (applied to pay) found that people not only care about making more than others, but also about whether they were “the second most highly paid person, or the eight most highly paid person, in their comparison set” (Boyce et al., 2010, p. 472), we could not replicate such an effect in our Study 3. In fact, our findings seem to imply that people mostly care about not being excluded from a talent program, rather than how many other employees were selected. It is unclear whether this is partly due to the fictional (experimental) setting of the talent programs (Auspurg & Hinz, 2014), or the talent philosophies held by participants (Meyers & van Woerkom, 2014). Future research could examine the role of talent philosophies more explicitly, either by manipulating it in vignettes describing fictitious talent programs—which in our studies were all of the ‘exclusive’ type—

or by measuring the talent philosophies held by respondents and using these as control or moderating variables. Furthermore, two findings from research on competition within the social comparison literature offer interesting avenues for further research (and may explain our findings for the 'talents'): first, the finding that the number of individuals who earn more matters twice as much to satisfaction than the number of individuals who earn less—reflecting stronger reactions to upward than to downward comparisons (Boyce et al., 2010); and second, the finding that it is not only rank that matters, but also thresholds—for instance, ranking 499th in the Fortune 500 means you are 'in', even though being 499th is not necessarily a top ranking in absolute terms. An interesting question that arises—which the data reported here cannot answer—is at what specific cut-off value or threshold the genius effect is triggered exactly. For both OBSE and turnover intentions, for instance, a significant difference in means was found only between 1 and 50% inclusivity (see Table 7). Thus, while our results support the idea that the genius effect will only be triggered in self-defense at percentages of high exclusivity, the exact cut-off point at which individuals 'begin' to experience the genius effect, or other psychological effects, is yet unknown. Based on our findings, we can draw conclusions about trends in the data (i.e., more exclusive talent programs lead to better employee reactions overall), yet the specific psychological effects of talent programs at specific percentage points constitutes a research question beyond the scope of this paper.

Second, although the present research can be criticized for its use of experimental methods—of which HRM researchers typically question the external validity towards 'real' employee behavior in 'real' companies' (De Boeck et al., 2018)—we believe that more experimental research is urgently needed in the talent management topic area, considering the causality issues plaguing the field, and the difficulty of getting access to field data due to the sensitivity of the topic (De Boeck et al., 2018; Gallardo-Gallardo & Thunnissen, 2016). We

would also argue that vignette studies are the most feasible method to study employee reactions to talent management, as the alternative—multilevel field studies—would require hundreds of employees in a few dozen organizations that systematically vary in their talent management designs. On top of that, researchers would have to account for confounds (i.e., irrelevant differences between organizations that influence employee reactions), deal with talent management secrecy and research ethics, and avoid self-report measurements of talent status—which conflates actual talent status (typically between 1 and 10 percent of employees) with desire to be a talent (according to our data, typically between 60 and 80 percent of employees). For these reasons we opted for experimental vignettes, while also including 'real-world' variables (e.g., employees' desire to be a talent; supervisors' preferences as concerns the degree of inclusivity) where possible. If we want to come to a better theoretical and empirical understanding of employee reactions to different types of talent management practices, we need more studies that capture the effects of systematic variations in such practices (De Boeck et al., 2018). Further experimental research could study the effects of different configurations of talent management philosophies and practices in more details using within-subjects designs, such as implicit policy capturing and conjoint analysis (Aguinis & Bradley, 2014). Such designs typically study the effects of a large number (and/or complex configurations) of independent variables on a simple dependent variable (typically choice preference or approval rating), allowing researchers to disentangle the relative outcomes of different talent program design features in more detail (Auspurg & Hinz, 2015).

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Chapter 2

Antecedents to Co-Worker Envy in Talent Management

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Abstract

The exclusionary nature of talent programs is causing concern among scholars and practitioners around negative effects on 'non-talents'—i.e., the co-workers of employees identified as 'talents'. A specific concern is co-worker envy, which can potentially undermine the goals of talent management. We propose that while specific characteristics of talent programs will indeed elicit malicious envy—leading to undermining behaviors—other characteristics are likely to elicit benign envy—leading to self-improvement behaviors among non-talents. Across two studies, we ask non-talent co-workers to report on how envious they felt (field study; *N* = 601) or would feel (factorial survey; *N* = 472) in response to talent programs with different characteristics (i.e., inclusivity, zero-sum framing, overreward inequity, and secrecy). We test several mediating mechanisms building on social comparison and organizational justice theory—i.e., pain of inferiority, outcome interdependence, distributive justice, and communicative justice. We find that more exclusive talent programs that do not divert resources away from non-talents are associated with less malicious envy, while a balanced input/output ratio for talents and transparent communication are associated with more benign envy. The study thus adds much-needed nuance to a hot topic within the literature—what features of talent management trigger positive versus negative employee reactions?

Keywords: Talent management, workforce differentiation, employee reactions, envy, social comparison, perceived organizational justice, secrecy

Introduction

In the last two decades, we have seen a growing interest amongst practitioners and academics in the implementation and outcomes of talent management practices, with CEOs indicating that talent management is their top people priority (PwC, 2017). Talent management is defined here as "the activities and processes that involve the identification of key positions which contribute to the organization's sustainable competitive advantage, with the aim of filling these key positions with its most high-performing, high-potential employees, thus ensuring their continued organizational commitment" (Collings & Mellahi, 2009, p. 305). It is estimated that at least 60 to 70 percent of organizations worldwide have a talent program in place (Silzer & Church, 2009). A common critique of talent management is that it creates status differences between co-workers, effectively differentiating between those considered 'talents' and 'non-talents'—the latter comprising the absolute majority of the workforce, as organizations typically identify only between 1 and 10 percent of employees as 'talents' (Meyers & van Woerkom, 2014; Nijs, Gallardo-Gallardo, Dries, & Sels, 2014). Another concern is the lack of transparency, as only around one in three organizations openly communicate about talent status to their employees (Church, Rotolo, Ginther, & Levine, 2015).

Critics of so-called 'exclusive' talent management (Swailes, 2013) have stated that co-worker envy is a likely and natural outcome of talent programs (e.g., De Boeck et al., 2018; Kim & Glomb, 2014), that can trigger a number of behaviors that undermine the productivity and well-being of co-workers (Reh, Tröster, & van Quaquebeke, 2018). Envy is most typically understood as what authors call *malicious envy*; a negative experience leading to a desire to undermine superior co-workers. However, there is also another form of envy—*benign envy*—that triggers a desire to self-improve in order to match the performance level of superior others (Van de Ven, 2016). Envy—in the broad sense of the word—is inextricably tied to social

comparison theory, which explains why comparing yourself to 'better' co-workers (in the case of the present study, non-talents comparing themselves to talents) typically leads to negative employee reactions (Festinger, 1954; Heslin, 2003; Smith, 2000; Vecchio, 2005).

Such concerns have led organizations to experiment with their talent programs, such as increasing talent program inclusivity—the percentage of employees included in their talent pool—from 1 to 30 percent (Hjordrup, Jensen, & Minbaeva, 2015). However, such changes to talent programs are made on the basis of speculative outcomes, as relatively little is known about the actual causal effects of talent management on both talents and non-talents (De Boeck, Meyers, & Dries, 2018). On top of that, no empirical evidence has been published to date to support the claim that more inclusive talent pools—or any other talent management design modification—lead to better co-worker reactions (De Boeck et al., 2018). In this paper, we focus on four specific talent program characteristics, based on review articles and case studies (Church et al., 2015; De Boeck et al., 2018; Hjordrup et al., 2015; Nijs et al., 2014; Pfeffer, 2001): first, the degree of inclusivity (vs. exclusivity) of the talent program; second; the organization's degree of transparency (vs. secrecy) around talent management; third, the ratio of rewards given to, and workload demanded of, employees identified as talents (vs. non-talents); and fourth, the zero-sum framing of the talent program, in terms of the extent to which it diverts resources away from non-talents.

The recent literature on employee reactions to talent management has approached the topic mostly through the theoretical lens of perceived organizational justice (Gelens, Dries, Hofmans, & Pepermans, 2013), with studies concluding that perceived equity leads to more favorable employee reactions (e.g., employee engagement, organizational citizenship behavior; Malik & Singh, 2020; O'Connor & Crowley-Henry, 2019). We propose, however, that mechanisms related to equity or fairness offer only a partial understanding of how non-talents

react to talent programs. That is, equity is typically operationalized as pertaining to tangible outcomes received to a greater extent by some employees but not others (e.g., pay, promotions), while it is much less suited to understand the potential symbolic effects of talent programs, such as being identified as a 'talent' representing a special organizational status indicating membership of a privileged group (Nijs et al., 2014). Being a non-talent, in turn, creates a marginalized organizational status, and exclusion from desirable groups (Tyler & Lind, 1992). Importantly, fairness research has found that symbolic benefits can trigger fairness evaluations even in the absence of any immediate tangible benefits (Van Prooijen, Van den Bos, & Wilke, 2002). Review papers on talent management have pointed out that research on the tangible versus symbolic effects of talent (non-)identification is needed to unravel the underlying psychological mechanisms leading to positive versus negative talent and non-talent reactions (De Boeck et al., 2018). In the present study, we thus aim to separate the symbolic value of talent status and the tangible benefits associated with it, explaining their effects on malicious versus benign envy through the parallel mechanisms of perceived organizational justice and social comparison.

With this research we respond to several gaps in the literature and aim to make two important contributions. First, the experience of non-talents has been critically underrepresented in empirical talent management research, despite ample assumptions being made in the literature about how they react to talent management (Malik & Singh, 2014; Swailes, 2013; Sparrow, Scullion, & Tarique, 2014). At best, researchers use this group mostly as a control group for the sample they are really interested in—employees formally identified as talents (Gallardo-Gallardo & Thunnissen, 2016). This is all the more surprising seeing as the expected negative reactions of non-talents are commonly (and increasingly) used to advocate for more inclusive talent management practices (Malik & Singh, 2014; Swailes & Blackburn,

2016). Our first study thus collects field data from 'non-talents' (using case sampling), aiming to provide benchmark data on their experiences of being excluded from their organizations' talent programs.

Second, we offer an empirical test of the assumption that malicious envy should be a universal concern in talent programs (Malik & Singh, 2014; Swailes & Blackburn, 2016), or whether talent programs can be designed in such a way that non-talent co-workers perceive them as fair and focused on improving themselves rather than undermining the talents (Gelens et al., 2013; Van de Ven, 2016). The goal, then, is to determine the exact talent program features that result in the most optimal outcomes for both employees and organizations, effectively enabling managers to optimize their talent management practices further (Collings & Mellahi, 2009; Sapegina & Weibel, 2017).

In the current paper we report on two studies, which complement each other in terms of external and internal validity. In Study 1, we examine the phenomenon of being seen as a non-talent by one's organization by having employees excluded from real-life talent programs detail the program's characteristics and their reactions to being excluded from it, using a survey. In Study 2, we use factorial surveys (also called vignette experiments) to assess the causal relationships between specific talent program design features and their effects on malicious versus benign envy, through different mediators (i.e., mechanisms) based on the justice and social comparison literature. This method allows for systematic, controlled variation in independent variables (Auspurg & Hinz, 2015), allowing researchers to uncover the causal effects of talent management features on employee reactions, which is another important gap in research on employee reactions to talent management (De Boeck et al., 2018). Effectively, we make a methodological contribution to the talent management

literature by cross-validating our findings using two research designs with complementary strengths and limitations.

Theoretical Background

The basic premise of social comparison theory is that individuals evaluate their self-worth through an ongoing and spontaneous process of observing others and comparing whether they fare better or worse (Festinger, 1954). To this end, individuals actively seek out information about the abilities, opinions, and traits of peers with whom they are cooperating or competing to make sense of their own relative standing or status (Boyce, Brown & Moore, 2010). Through social comparisons then, employees may learn that some co-workers are perceivably superior (triggering downward comparison) or inferior (triggering upward comparison). Especially work situations characterized by so-called reinforcement contingencies—such as promotions and pay raises—have been found to trigger social comparisons between peers (Heslin, 2003). Employees comparing themselves to co-workers with superior performance, who have access to more of the organization's resources—such as employees identified as 'talents', in the specific case of talent programs (Nijs et al., 2014)—can thus be understood to make an upward social comparison. Upward comparisons are most typically accompanied by a reaction of envy (Vecchio, 2005).

Social comparison theory and organizational justice theory go hand in hand as individuals instinctively evaluate the deservingness of others, who acquired or achieved something that is personally desired, in order to judge whether the advantage is fair or unfair (Pepper, Gosling, & Gore, 2015). Sprung by an upward social comparison, employees will look towards their co-workers and evaluate whether their newly acquired talent status—and all the perks that come with it—are deserved (Gelens et al., 2013). In these evaluations, equity theory dictates that employees are not concerned with the absolute level of outcomes talents

receive (Adams, 1963), but rather if these outcomes are fair and can be justified by various external conditions (e.g., are the talents fairly paid for their efforts; Clay-Warner, Robinson, Smith-Lovin, Rogers, & James, 2016). Moreover, these evaluations—while typically driven by objective measures—are inherently subjective (Hofmans, 2012), such that the non-talents may feel that the talents do not work hard enough, despite potentially working twice as hard, to justify their status. If non-talents feel management has unfairly identified certain co-workers as a talent, we can expect them to exhibit behaviors that undermine the talents (Cohen-Charash & Mueller, 2007), as the non-talents infer that they are not a valued member of the organization (Tyler & Lind, 1992). Nevertheless, the experience of envy is not contingent on perceptions of (un)fairness—instead it determines the way employees feel about the superior co-worker (i.e., admiration or contempt; Smith, 2000) after making the upward social comparison (Sapegina & Weibel, 2017). It is therefore important to distinguish between two forms of envy when investigating the relationship between envy and perceived organizational justice (Cohen-Charash & Mueller, 2007; Van de Ven, 2016): malicious versus benign envy.

Malicious vs. benign envy

Envy typically triggers specific behaviors set on restoring the individual's self-view, that was initially threatened by one or more superior peers (Van de Ven, 2016), as envy "reflects an employee's feeling that s/he lacks another's superior quality, achievement, or possession and either desires it or wishes that the other one lacked it" (Parrott & Smith, 1993, p.906). Accordingly, scholars agree that envy can be split into two separate constructs: malicious and benign envy (Van de Ven et al., 2009), as employees are effectively left with two possible responses such as to restore their status relative to their outperformer. Malicious envy is characterized by hostile tendencies that undermine the privileges and/or status of the superior individuals, with the ultimate aim to take away their benefits such as to restore

equality (Van de Ven et al., 2009). Benign envy, on the other hand, characterizes the opposite reaction, where an individual desires to become a part of the superior group in the future, thus leading to behaviors that focus on improving one's own situation to match that of their outperformers (Van de Ven et al., 2009). While benign and malicious envy are theoretically polar opposites, they are not mutually exclusive. Social comparison theory dictates that individuals whose self-view is under threat from outperformers are keen to close the gap between them as quickly as possible, potentially through both self-improvement tendencies as well as actions undermining others (Smith, 2000).

While there is no consensus in the literature on when a malicious versus a benign response occurs precisely, it is argued that the answer lies with the way employees perceive and experience competitive outcomes in their organization (Gelens et al., 2013; O'Connor & Crowley-Henry, 2019; Sapegina & Weibel, 2017). When organizations implement talent programs, for instance—making status differences salient amongst employees—we can expect employees excluded from the talent pool to inevitably make upward social comparisons with their superior 'talented' co-workers (Festinger, 1954), and proceed to evaluate the fairness of the newly acquired status (Pepper et al., 2015). The way in which talent management is approached and implemented by managers, however, varies greatly and will undoubtedly have different effects on employees excluded from a talent pool (e.g., Hjordrup et al., 2015), either triggering more benign or malicious responses. Below, we address four distinct talent program characteristics that we propose may influence the envy experienced by non-talent co-workers.

Antecedents of co-worker envy in talent programs

Talent program inclusivity**. S**ocial comparisons serve to help individuals determine their own performance level relative to others in their social environment (Boyce et al., 2010).

While upward social comparisons always indicate room for improvement, the context of the comparison determines the type of envious response (Smith, 2000). For instance, if talent identification is perceived as an extraordinary achievement—by keeping it reserved for only the top few employees—non-talents can more readily justify it for themselves as talents must have had to be exceptionally competent in order to earn their status (Garcia & Tor, 2007). A highly inclusive talent program—where perhaps half of the workforce is identified as a talent (a common trend in practice; Swailes & Blackburn, 2016)—conversely signals that the non-talents are (below-)average performers. With most employees convinced they are above-average performers (Kruger & Dunning, 1999), being excluded from a more inclusive talent pool thus challenges their self-evaluations, threatening non-talents' confidence (Garcia & Tor, 2007).

In practice, the percentage of employees included in a talent pool varies greatly between organizations, with case studies reporting inclusivity levels between 1 and 50 percent (Church et al., 2015; Hjordrup et al., 2015). While the percentage in and of itself may be arbitrary in nature, it usually is the outcome of management's philosophical (e.g., we believe talent management should be exclusive/inclusive) and/or practical (e.g., we only have sufficient funds to allocate to a select few employees) choices (Swailes, 2013). While higher percentages of talent program inclusivity indicate a more readily accessible talent pool, they also unintentionally place increased emphasis on the inferiority of those not identified (Garcia & Tor, 2007), giving rise to malicious feelings as their belief that things may change for the better in the future is weakened (Sapegina & Weibel, 2017). Specifically, it is this belief—motivated by feelings of inferiority—that self-improvement efforts would be in vain, that makes employees undermine their superior co-workers (Collins, 1996), as it is the only option left to balance the performance level again (Smith, 2000; Van de Ven, 2016).

Research on the pain of inferiority has also shown that individuals outperformed by large groups are prone to derogate and devalue the superior performers (Leach & Spears, 2008)—in an attempt to undo their fortune (Smith, 2000)—and experience pleasure when the superior group fails (Feather, Wenzel, & McKee, 2013). Moreover, one of the primary goals of malicious behaviors on the work floor is to relieve the envious person's frustration with feeling inferior (Cohen-Charash & Mueller, 2007). In these inferiority studies, such as the one from Leach and Spears (2008), inferiority is often induced by having individuals outperformed by a superior majority (i.e., it instills a self-perception of 'below average'). With the talent program inclusivity varying greatly between organizations, we expect it to inevitably affect employees' pain of inferiority as higher percentages increasingly put non-talents' confidence at stake (Garcia & Tor, 2007).

Taken together, we hypothesize a positive relationship between talent program inclusivity and malicious envy, mediated by the pain of inferiority. In other words:

> **Hypothesis 1.** The larger the talent pool from which they are excluded, the more inferior non-talents will feel; and the more they will hope that the talent program fails and gets cancelled.

***Zero-sum framing*.** In practice, organizations have limited working funds and frequently have to deal with a 'zero-sum distribution' on their human resources budget. A zero-sum distribution entails that resources allocated to one group (e.g., the talents) within the organization necessitate a decrease in resources allocated to another group (e.g., the non-talents). The benefits one group of employees receives are therefore contingent on the benefits others receive and, in the case of talent management, more is disproportionally invested in the high potentials than in the non-talents (Collings & Mellahi, 2009). This zero-sum distribution facilitates internal competition among employees (Deutsch, 1949), such that non-talents may feel that whatever the talents gain from the organization, is something they

lose out on. Talent programs do not necessarily have to make use of a zero-sum distribution per se, with separate budgets existing for organizations. For instance, regional or national government initiatives (e.g., Chambers of Commerce) might be available that donate funds to organizations to provide for their talent programs, most commonly with the intent to attract more talent to a particular region (e.g., Digitalswitzerland, 2018). Alternatively, organizations may free up resources from other areas to invest into their talent program, rather than reallocating resources from general HR practices aimed at all employees towards practices for talents only (Pfeffer, 2001).

It thus seems crucial to consider non-talents' perceptions of (negative) outcome interdependence of the talent program they are excluded from, as this can be linked to malicious envy (Ng, 2017; Samnani & Singh, 2014; Smith, 2000; Van Der Vegt, Emans, & Van De Vliert, 1998). Outcome interdependence, defined here as "the extent to which non-talents feel that their success at work is determined by the talents' achievements", is negative when talents' inclusion in the talent program hinders non-talents to achieve their own goals (Deutsch, 1949; Van der Vegt et al., 1998, p. 130).

We argue that the way in which managers fund their talent programs will be instrumental in shaping non-talent reactions. First, competitive HR practices—such as talent programs—that disproportionally reward employees are said to create a "breeding ground for various feelings of ill-will" (Smith, 2000). This is corroborated by research on I-deals—idiosyncratic employment arrangements brokered between the individual employee and management—where Ng (2017) conducted a longitudinal study on the impact preferential treatment had on the left-out employees' feelings of malicious envy. Their findings suggest that a zero-sum distribution of resources given to specific employees encourages a more competitive climate—as originally proposed by Deutsch (1949)—which ultimately leads to

malicious envy if an employee does not receive benefits from management him/herself (Ng, 2017). Second, zero-sum distributions on the work floor encourage the undermining of co-workers, and facilitate workplace bullying (Samnani & Singh, 2014), as a means to increase outcomes for the self (Pfeffer, 2001). In other words, a zero-sum talent program establishes a toxic culture of envy, where employees believe that inter-group conflicts enable them to acquire benefits for the self (Samnani & Singh, 2014). As long as employees feel that they need to compete with co-workers for limited resources they will actively pursue actions that diminish the success chance of their competitors (Deutsch, 1949; Pfeffer, 2001). Avoiding a zero-sum distribution should therefore prevent these feelings of negative outcome interdependence to arise among non-talents, inhibiting malicious tendencies towards the employees included in the talent pool.

We thus hypothesize a positive relationship between zero-sum framing and malicious envy, mediated by a negative outcome interdependence. In other words:

> **Hypothesis 2.** The more a talent program diverts resources away from non-talents, the more they will feel it undermines the odds of achieving their own goals; and the more they will hope that the talent program fails and gets cancelled.

***Overreward inequity*.** The purpose of talent programs is to typically to ensure the retention of the highest-performing employees—i.e., talents—in key positions in the organization (Collings & Mellahi, 2009), which is typically associated with a number of tangible benefits such as higher pay for talents. The issue here is that differential pay adds yet another dimension on which non-talents will evaluate the fairness of a talent program (Heslin, 2003). The rank-income hypothesis shows that individuals do not so much evaluate their own income based on its absolute value, but rather compare it to that of their peers to determine whether they find it fair (Boyce et al., 2010). In other words, non-talents will not judge talents for how much they earn in absolute terms, but relatively—i.e., how much more they earn in

comparison to their own income. In addition, the literature on fairness ratios has found that co-workers receiving a higher relative salary can be perceived as fair, on the condition that they have a clearly higher workload, such as training and overtime outside of regular working hours (Gelens et al., 2013; Hofmans, 2012).

In organizations, employees continuously evaluate the output (e.g., benefits, pay) co-workers receive in comparison to their input (e.g., time, energy)—such social comparisons are triggered especially in the event of promotions or raises (Mumford, 1983). The resultant input/output ratio then determines perceived distributive justice (Brashear, Brooks, & Boles, 2004). Specifically, we speak of equity when input and output are balanced; overreward inequity when output exceeds input; and underreward inequity when input exceeds output. In the event of 'overrewarded' talents—who earn more but are not perceived to work more than non-talents—we can thus expect that pay differences between talents and non-talents triggers perceptions of unfairness (Brashear et al., 2004; Gelens et al., 2014; Pepper et al., 2015). This is corroborated by research from Clay-Warner and colleagues (2016) who found that overreward was only rated as unfair when outcomes were unbalanced in favor of others, not when individuals themselves benefitted from overreward. In addition, a study by Heikkinen and her colleagues (1998) found that differential pay, specifically, was the largest determinant of co-worker envy (as compared to differences in professional reputation or relationship quality with management). A potential explanation is that salary is commonly seen as the most prominent indicator of ('other-referent' or comparative) career success (Heslin, 2003). 'Underrewarded' talents—who work more than non-talents, but do not earn more—are typically *also* not perceived as being treated fairly, however, although their hard work in this case may be perceived as more admirable by non-talents (Lockwood & Kunda, 1997). In this case, talents may even be seen as role models—particularly since the merit

associated with their special status is not tarnished by money (Kuvaas, Buch, Weibel, Dysvik, & Nerstad, 2017)—encouraging behaviors that focus on improving the self (i.e., benign envy), rather than taking away the talents' benefits (i.e., malicious envy) (Smith, 2000).

We thus hypothesize a negative relationship between overreward inequity and benign envy, mediated by distributive justice. In other words:

> **Hypothesis 3.** The less talents are perceived as being overrewarded as compared to their relative workload, the more non-talents will perceive the distribution of resources within the talent program as fair; and the more they will strive to become part of the talent group themselves.

Talent program secrecy. Despite widespread calls for more transparent talent programs (Swailes, 2013), many managers show concern about the prospect of letting employees know that they are excluded from a talent program (Sparrow et al., 2014). Implicitly, these managers seem aware of the potentially detrimental outcomes of upward social comparisons, which they would rather circumvent by keeping status differences secret from employees. Managers most commonly choose to keep (lack of) talent status secret from employees, with reports showing that roughly only one in ten organizations communicate openly about their talent program, whether through a public announcement or a private—manager to subordinate—sharing policy (Church et al., 2015). By keeping talent programs a secret from non-talents, managers can avoid having to justify each individual decision, such as why person X received preferential treatment and person Y did not (Swailes, 2013). For organizations keeping talent status a secret however, Huang and Tansley (2012) argue that employees will usually find out about their (lack of) talent status one way or another regardless, possibly through gossip (Dries & De Gieter, 2014).

Perceived organizational justice is strongly determined by employee perceptions of transparency (Gelens et al., 2013). Employees particularly want to be aware of possible HR

practices that affect their professional development (Huang & Tansley, 2012), and have the opportunity to have a voice so their views can be considered by management (Bauer et al., 2001). For employees to experience benign envy, it is necessary for them to feel that self-improvement is possible (Smith, 2000; Van de Ven, 2016). By communicating openly towards employees, managers allow non-talents an opportunity to request feedback as to why they have not been identified as a talent (Bauer et al., 2001). Through such feedback, employees can learn on which facets they need to improve in order to potentially acquire talent status in the future (O'Connor & Crowley-Henry, 2019). In addition, benign feelings towards the talents can be encouraged when talent management decisions are justified by a manager in person (Wert & Salovey, 2004), as opposed to employees discovering their exclusion from the talent group through gossip, for instance. Research has also shown that managers investing individual time into employees—building a better leader-member relationship—is positively related with more benign responses on the work floor (Wang, Law, Hackett, Wang, & Chen, 2005). Conversely, when talent program decisions are made behind closed doors, employees excluded from the talent program may suspect nepotism (Gelens, Dries, Hofmans, & Pepermans, 2014), hindering their belief that self-improvement behavior will have a positive outcome in future rounds of the talent program (Lockwood & Kunda, 1997; Smith, 2000).

We thus hypothesize a positive relationship between talent program transparency and benign envy, mediated by communicative justice. In other words:

> **Hypothesis 4.** The more transparent an organization is about its talent program, the more non-talents will perceive the organization's communication is fair; and the more they will strive to become part of the talent group themselves.

Methods

We conducted two studies to test our hypotheses. Study 1 was a field survey administered to employees who had previously been excluded from a talent program in their organization. Study 2 was a factorial survey in which talent program characteristics were manipulated, allowing us to measure causal effects between these characteristics and employee reactions. Both studies included the exact same independent, mediating, and dependent variables, with the difference that we used full scales in the field study and single items in the factorial survey study. The single items were validated in Study 1, as reported further down. Single items were used in Study 2 since respondents had to contrast and compare multiple talent programs simultaneously, in which case this is the recommended approach in light of cognitive load (Auspurg & Hinz, 2015).

Sampling strategy

Participants for both studies were recruited through Prolific, a reliable panel provider that caters specifically to academic research (Palan & Schitter, 2018). Panel data respondents have been found to be both extrinsically as well as intrinsically motivated to complete their tasks well, and their data typically does not deviate from data acquired from other respondent pools (Berinsky, Huber, & Lenz, 2012). Nevertheless, it is common practice to include attention checks with panel data to ensure respondents were actively reading the questions, and not clicking random responses to expedite their monetary reward (see further down). To be eligible for our studies, participants had to be white-collar workers full- or part-time employed at an organization in the UK for a minimum period of one year, as well as being fully proficient in English. These criteria ensured that we could find enough employees who had potentially been exposed to a talent program at work (e.g., such programs are uncommon among blue-collar workers). The use of purposive sampling criteria is typically most effective when using Prolific samples, as respondents' sociodemographic profiles are fixed to their ID and cannot

be readily adjusted to cater to a specific survey's criteria. Respondents who did not meet our predefined sampling criteria were thus not able to see the study in their dashboard (Palan & Schitter, 2018).

Method Study 1

Screener

As a first step, in Study 1 we set out to case-sample employees who had actually experienced being excluded from a talent program in their organization. Respondents were thus first presented with a screening question: "Have you ever been in a situation where a manager considered one or more colleagues of yours as 'talented', which meant that they were given access to a special 'talent program' that you were not a part of?". Only participants who responded 'yes' were subsequently invited to participate in Study 1 (respondents received a survey completion fee regardless of whether they answered yes or no, to encourage honesty). In total, 2299 white-collar workers on Prolific completed the screener, of which 719 (31%) responded that they had experienced this. We should note that this percentage should not be interpreted as representative of the working population, since we specifically attracted respondents who were willing and able to complete a survey on talent management. As a check of both their experience as non-talents and their language proficiency, we asked respondents to write a short description of what happened in a text box. Respondents who were unable to do so dropped out of the study. All remaining respondents provided adequate responses as to their experiences of being excluded from a talent program, for instance:

> "There was a talent programme with excellent training and experience that would have benefitted me career wise however I was overlooked by my supervisor and another colleague was chosen." (Woman, 42, healthcare sector).
>
> "At work we have a 'tap into talent' program where line managers put forward employees to be added to this. The program gives access to training and opportunities

not otherwise easily available for others. My manager put forward 2 others of the team, but not myself." (Man, 41, insurance sector).

"There was a selection process for a talent programme. I was up against 30 other employees and there were 25 positions. I scored highly on all tasks other than the written task and was discounted from the programme." (Man, 29, environmental sector).

Procedure and sample

After the screener, the 719 respondents were rerouted to participate in Study 1 (of which 677 actually did), where we asked them to rate the talent program they were excluded from on specific features (see independent variables below). The event of exclusion transpired, on average, 4.54 years ago (SD = 5.31). The number of years since the exclusion from the talent program did not influence our results. Following the description of the talent program, participants were prompted to respond to six scales with corresponding single items (see dependent variables below) to capture their experience of being excluded. In total, 601 British employees completed the field study and passed the attention checks—which required participants to respond to various items with a specific numeric value. A total of 76 (11%) inattentive participants—who failed one or more attention checks—were excluded from our sample and analyses and received no monetary compensation. Gender was nearly equally divided (i.e., 49% women), with participants having a mean age of 38.82 years (SD = 10.30), and an average work experience of 19.21 years (SD = 10.60). 64% of participants had a master's degree or above and 24% had a bachelor's degree. Participants were employed in a wide array of sectors, most commonly education (17%), healthcare (13%), and the government (12%). 51% of our sample had leadership responsibilities.

Independent variables

Participants detailed the talent program they were excluded from on a number of specific features. For each feature, participants indicated the confidence they had in their response

(on a scale from *1. very uncertain* to *7. very certain*), allowing us to exclude responses which were largely speculation, if this proved to be an issue for our sample and influenced our analyses.

Talent program inclusivity. Participants indicated the percentage (between 0 and 100%) of employees included in the talent program from which they were excluded.

Zero-sum framing. Participants indicated whether the talent program was "a new program that was additional to the existing training and development programs" or whether it was "realised by completely redesigning existing training and development programs to divert more resources to the talent program".

Overreward inequity. Participants indicated the pay raise given to talents (from 0 to 100%) as well as the additional working hours imposed upon talents (from 0 to 100%). Overreward inequity was calculated by dividing the pay raise by the additional working hours.

Talent program secrecy. Participants indicated whether their managers "kept the talent program a secret from those excluded, thereby learning about it through gossip from their co-workers", "communicated publicly about the talent program to all employees, thereby learning about it through a company-wide announcement" or "communicated privately about the talent program to all employees, thereby learning about it during a personal meeting with their supervisor".

Mediators and dependent variables

Each dependent variable was rated on a separate screen of the survey, with the single items (needed for Study 2) presented on a separate screen preceding their full-scale counterparts (see Appendix). Items were slightly adjusted to suit our design, such that they included mention of the talent program and were worded in the past tense (i.e., how *did* you feel; in Study 1) and the conditional tense (i.e., how *would* you feel; in Study 2)—instead of in the

present tense like in the original scales. Participants responded on a Likert scale from *1. strongly disagree* to *7. strongly agree*. Cronbach's alphas for each of the scales listed below are reported on the diagonal of Table 2.

Benign and malicious envy. We asked respondents to indicate, using the Benign and Malicious Envy Scale (Lange & Crusius, 2015), to what extent they thought the talent program led them to experience benign envy (five items) and malicious envy (five items). An example item of benign envy was '*I tried to improve myself*', and for malicious envy '*I wished that the talents would lose their advantage*'.

Pain of inferiority. Six items were used to evaluate how inferior non-talents felt to the talents, using the pain of inferiority scale (Feather et al., 2013). An example item was '*I felt second-rate*'.

Outcome interdependence. We used the outcome interdependence scale (Van Der Vegt et al., 1998), with six items that measured whether non-talents felt that the talent program harmed their successes and outcomes at work. An example item was '*When the talents succeeded in their jobs, I felt it was at my expense*'.

Distributive justice. Eight items measured non-talents' perception of fairness regarding the outcome talents acquired relative to their input, using the distributive justice scale (Brashear et al., 2004). An example item was '*I felt that the status given to talents was fair considering the amount of effort they had put forth*'.

Communicative justice. Five items, belonging to the communication sub-scale of the procedural justice scale (Bauer et al., 2001), were used to measure communicative justice. An example item was '*I felt able to ask questions in this situation*'.

Control variables

Finally, as a control variable we asked respondents in both studies whether they had wanted to be identified as a talent on a scale from *-5. I very firmly did **not** want to be identified as a 'talent'* to *+5. I very firmly wanted to be identified as a 'talent'*, and whether they felt they deserved to be, on a scale from *1. very undeserving* to *7. very deserving*. In addition, we identified gender and work experience as potential control variables. Women are more prone to experience negative outcomes from upward social comparisons (Guimond & Chatard, 2014), whereas senior employees tend to value talent management less (Festing & Schäfer, 2014). These variables may thus influence employees' responses to being excluded from a talent program.

Conducting our analyses while accounting for the control variables yielded no significantly different results. In line with the above, however, we can conclude from both studies that women excluded from a talent program are more likely to feel inferior (Study 1: $r = .22$, $p < .001$; Study 2: $r = .14$, $p < .001$), and that more senior employees are slightly less likely to experience benign envy (Study 1: $r = -.15$ $p < .001$; Study 2: $r = -.11$, $p < .001$).

Analysis

Analyses were performed using IBM SPSS (28) software. The mediation models (Model 4) were tested using the PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2017). Bias-corrected bootstrapping ($n = 5{,}000$) and 95% confidence intervals (CI) for the indices were used to test the indirect mediation effects. Whenever the CI did not include zero, it indicated that the parameter was statistically significant.

Method Study 2

Design and procedure

For this second study, conducted immediately after Study 1 was analyzed, we developed vignettes that described the introduction of a talent program in a set of fictional organizations.

Using factorial surveys allowed us to experimentally manipulate the design features of talent programs that may trigger specific reactions in non-talents. They are commonly used to study the impact of a large number of factors on the decision-making process of an individual in true-to-life scenarios (Auspurg & Hinz, 2015). Respondents have been found to adequately immerse themselves in such scenarios, on the condition that they are a feasible delineation of reality, and manipulations are not obscured by adding in a large amount of irrelevant information (Aguinis & Bradley, 2014; Auspurg & Hinz, 2015). As our manipulations overlapped with the range of lived experiences reported by real-life 'non-talents' in Study 1 (see Table 1), we believe that our set of vignettes was indeed realistic.

Not all possible vignettes could be presented to participants as the culmination of every unique combination—a Cartesian product—would amount to a few thousand variations. Instead, we followed the instructions from Auspurg & Hinz (2015) and presented each participant with six randomly allocated vignettes. As is also common practice, we verified our data to ensure that all levels of each independent variable were equally included (Dülmer, 2007), and found no unbalanced distributions in factor levels. Participants completed six items below each vignette; a single item for each of our four mediators and two forms of envy.

One of our attention checks took the form of a seventh vignette (randomly mixed with the six 'real' vignettes), which at first glance looked similar to all other vignettes yet described irrelevant information and instructed participants to respond to all items with a specific value. Participants were furthermore clearly informed at the start of the study, as well as in each vignette, that they themselves were not identified as a talent. We therefore also added an attention check at the end of the survey asking if they were or were not identified as a 'talent' in any of the scenarios. A total of 87 (16%) inattentive respondents were removed from our sample and analyses.

Sample

In total, 472 British white-collar workers completed the factorial survey on Prolific and passed the attention checks. Respondents who participated in our screener (regardless of whether they answered yes or no there) were not given the chance to participate in Study 2, ensuring that no one could participate in both studies accidentally. The majority was female (69%), with a mean age of 36.88 years (SD = 10.59), and an average work experience of 17.13 years (SD = 10.56). 64% of participants had a master's degree or above and 23% had a bachelor's degree. Participants were employed in a wide array of sectors, most commonly education (16%), healthcare (12%) and the government (12%). A large part of our sample were employees with leadership responsibilities (36%). Our sample for Study 2 was thus largely similar to that of Study 1.

Manipulations

The manipulations in the Study 2 vignettes corresponded to the talent program characteristics reported by employees excluded from a talent program in Study 1. An example vignette read as follows:

> "Organisation 3 has introduced a talent program in which 10% of your co-workers are selected as 'talents'. As your organisation has decided to keep the talent program a secret from those excluded, you learn through gossip from co-workers about the talent program and who is—and is not—included. You yourself are not considered a 'talent', while several of your co-workers are. Employees identified as 'talents' are going to earn 50% more salary, while management expects them to put in 10% additional hours into their work. The talent program is realised by completely redesigning existing training and development programs to divert more resources to the talent program. How would you react if this scenario happened to you in real life?"

Talent program inclusivity. The percentage of employees included in the talent program was manipulated as "Organisation [1-7] has introduced a talent program in which [1% / 5% / 10% / 15% / … - 95%] of your co-workers are selected as 'talents'.".

Zero-sum framing. The way the talent program is financed was manipulated as "The talent program is [a new program that is additional to the existing training and development programs / realised by completely redesigning existing training and development programs to divert more resources to the talent program].".

Overreward inequity. We operationalized overreward inequity as talent pay raise divided by additional working hours. Pay raise and additional working hours were manipulated as "Employees identified as 'talents' are going to earn [0% / 10% / 20% / … - 100%] more salary, while management expects them to put in [0% / 10% / 20% / … - 100%] additional hours into their work.".

Talent program secrecy. The means through which the employee learns that they are excluded from the talent program was manipulated as "As your organisation has decided to [keep the talent program a secret from those excluded, you learn through gossip from co-workers / communicate publicly about the talent program to all employees, you learn through a company-wide announcement from management / communicate privately about the talent program to all employees, you learn during a personal meeting with your supervisor] about the talent program and who is—and is not—included.".

Mediators and dependent variables

We used the same dependent variables as in Study 1, except this time only using single items. The use of single items is inevitable in factorial surveys as too many items, together with a substantial number of vignettes where these items are repeated each time, would impose far too much cognitive strain on respondents. Furthermore, factorial surveys typically serve to assess the impact of a large number of independent variables on simple dependent variables, not to measure an elaborate set of outcomes (Auspurg & Hinz, 2015). Single items are thus more reliable as the focus is put on the variance in the independent variables (i.e., our

manipulations), without the participants becoming distraught due to answering the same question a dozen times.

We developed six single items for each dependent variable, predominantly inspired by the definition of the construct, and first asked participants to respond to them during Study 1. These single items served no purpose in the analyses of Study 1 and were only used to validate them in comparison with their full-scale measurements, thereby supporting the measurements used in Study 2. Through an exploratory factor analysis using oblique rotation—as recommend by researchers (Martinko, Harvey, & Mackey, 2014)—we found that every single item had a high factor loading with its matching items (i.e., between .66 and .90), and no noteworthy cross-factor loadings were present (i.e., the highest was .28, below the .32 threshold; Costello & Osborne, 2005).

Pain of inferiority was measured using the item '*I would feel that I am inferior to the talents*', outcome interdependence with '*I would feel that the talents' success in attaining their goals would make me less likely to achieve my goals*', distributive justice with '*I would feel that the status given to talents was fair considering the time they will invest into their work*', and communicative justice with '*I would feel comfortable asking management questions about the talent program, if I have any*'

Benign envy was measured with '*I would strive to become part of the talent group myself in future rounds of the program*', and malicious envy with the item '*I would secretly hope the talent program would fail and gets cancelled*'. The entire component matrix can be found in the Appendix.

Analysis

In order to properly analyze our data, accounting for its nested structure, we made use of multilevel modelling. There was a total of 2,832 observations—the sum of individual vignette

responses (*participants × vignettes per person: 472 × 6*)—with these observations being nested within-subjects as well as between-subjects. Thus, to accurately predict scores on our dependent variables, we combined vignette factor-level (i.e., within-subjects) and respondent (i.e., between-subjects) variation in a conventional multilevel model. Multilevel mediation modeling—using the MLmed macro for SPSS (Hayes & Rockwood, 2020)—allowed us to test for mediation effects between the various independent variables (i.e., talent management characteristics) and the dependent variables (i.e., benign and malicious envy), while accounting for its nested structure.

Results

The phenomenon of being a non-talent

The descriptive data in Table 1 shows the means, medians, modes, and confidence intervals of the talent program characteristics within organizations, as perceived by the 601 employees excluded from a talent program in their organization. In addition, the confidence employees had in their responses are reported, which shows that employees overall were moderately confident that they remembered (or knew about) the talent program characteristics within their organization. The fact that employees felt slightly less confident about their estimate of the talent program inclusivity, and talents' salary and workload increase, is most likely because these characteristics were asked using a moveable percentage slider, inherently encouraging responses that are decidedly precise (e.g., exactly 12% of employees were identified as a talent) while employees typically only perceive approximations of these values (e.g., roughly one in ten employees was identified as a talent). Excluding respondents who were uncertain of their responses did not significantly alter the means, nor our analyses further on.

Besides responding to the measurements provided in the survey (i.e., pain of inferiority, communicative/distributive justice, outcome interdependence, and

benign/malicious envy), respondents had the opportunity to provide us with more reactions that featured their experience of being excluded from a talent program. The majority of respondents indicated that our choice of reactions adequately covered their experience (e.g., "The survey covered it all"), or emphasized already measured outcomes (e.g., *malicious envy*; "My secret glee when most of the 'talents' failed", *benign envy*; "I was determined to show everyone that I was the true talent and should have been chosen", *inferiority*; "I accepted that I did not deserve to be selected, but it did not stop me feeling inferior to them"). A handful of respondents provided insightful qualitative responses that, principally, further highlighted the adverse experience of not being a talent, with multiple non-talents emphasizing the deleterious impact it had on their mood (e.g., "I was just livid. It still makes my blood boil years later.", "I felt really angry", "Bitterness").

Mediation analyses

Tables 2 and 3 report the means, standard deviations, and correlations of study 1 and 2 respectively. Benign envy was slightly negatively correlated with malicious envy in our factorial survey (r = -.21, p < .001), and did not correlate in our field study (r = -.08, p = .061), confirming that these two variants of envy are, in fact, different constructs (Van de Ven, 2016; Van de Ven et al., 2009). We also calculated the intraclass correlations (ICC2) for our multilevel models, which depict the magnitude of group effects within a nested structure (Auspurg & Hinz, 2015). We found strong support that ample variation could be attributed to our vignettes for benign envy (ICC2 = 0.65), as well as for malicious envy (ICC2 = 0.85), meaning that 65% and 85% of the total observed variance, respectively, occurs at the group level (i.e., within-subjects effects). Furthermore, our multilevel models are significant in predicting benign envy (R^2 = .550) and malicious envy (R^2 = .511), when using the independent variables as our predictors, explaining 55% and 51% of variance respectively.

Table 1

Characteristics of talent programs as perceived by white-collar workers (N = 601) excluded from the talent program in their organization.

Variables	Mean/Frequency	Standard Deviation	Median	Mode	Min/max 95% CI	Confidence[1] (SD)
Inclusivity	26.95%	21.22	20	10	1% – 85%	4.26 (1.41)
Talent program secrecy	Public 214 (36%)					
	Secret 198 (33%)	/	/	/	/	5.33 (1.45)
	Private 189 (31%)					
Talents' salary increase	24.43%	19.77	20	20	0% - 60%	4.28 (1.62)
Talents' workload increase	14.58%	17.28	10	0	0% - 50%	4.73 (1.59)
Overreward inequity[2]	1.10	0.18	1.09	1	0.7 – 1.5	/
Zero-sum framing	Redesign 151 (25%)	/	/	/	/	5.38 (1.40)
	Additional 450 (75%)					

Notes. [1] Respondents' certainty of their response from *1. very uncertain* to *.7 very certain*; [2] Talents' salary increase divided by workload

Table 2

Study 1 (field study) descriptives and correlations (N = 601)

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	
1. Gender[1]	0.49	0.50													
2. Work experience	19.21	10.60	-.07												
3. Inclusivity	26.95	21.22	.06	-.14***											
4. Private communication	0.31	0.46	.02	-.03	.10*										
5. Secret communication	0.33	0.47	.03	.03	-.12**	-.48***									
6. Overreward inequity[2]	1.10	0.18	.03	.01	.02	-.05	.07								
7. Zero-sum framing[3]	0.75	0.43	-.02	-.04	-.03	.03	-.08*	-.05							
8. Benign envy	4.76	1.46	.04	-.15***	.18***	.08*	-.19***	-.04	-.04	(.93)					
9. Malicious envy	3.64	1.74	-.02	-.03	.06	-.07	.14***	.08*	.04	-.08	(.94)				
10. Inferiority	4.26	1.46	.22***	-.07	.08	.04	.04	.08	.00	.02	.48***	(.88)			
11. Outcome interdependence	3.74	1.47	-.03	.02	.09*	-.01	.07	.09*	.06	-.03	.59***	.45***	(.93)		
12. Distributive justice	3.22	1.48	-.08*	-.01	.07	.09*	-.24***	-.16***	-.02	.14***	-.48***	-.27***	-.31***	(.97)	
13. Communicative justice	3.29	1.54	-.13**	.00	.06	.11**	-.46***	-.14***	-.05	.28***	-.32***	-.37***	-.25***	.51***	(.93)

Notes. [1] 0 = Male, 1 = Female; [2] Talents' salary increase divided by workload; [3] 0 = Redesign (zero-sum), 1 = Additional; *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$; Cronbach's alphas on the diagonal between parentheses

Table 3

Study 2 (factorial survey) descriptives and correlations (N = 472)[1]

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1. Gender[2]	0.69	0.46												
2. Work experience	17.13	10.56	-.10***											
3. Inclusivity	47.79	28.65	.01	.00										
4. Private communication	0.34	0.47	.03	-.02	.04*									
5. Secret communication	0.33	0.47	-.02	-.01	-.01	-.50***								
6. Overreward inequity[3]	1.05	0.33	.02	.02	.00	.00	.02							
7. Zero-sum framing[4]	0.50	0.50	.00	.06**	.00	.02	-.02	.02						
8. Benign envy	4.04	2.19	.03	-.11***	.00	.01	-.02	.54***	-.04*					
9. Malicious envy	4.18	2.02	.01	.02	.11***	-.02	.02	-.07***	.00	-.21***				
10. Inferiority	4.10	1.95	.14***	-.14***	.13***	-.03	.04*	.18***	.01	.25***	.22***			
11. Outcome interdependence	3.70	1.68	.07***	.00	.09***	-.01	.03	.15***	-.04*	.16***	.32***	.46***		
12. Distributive justice	3.63	1.80	.05**	-.06**	-.11***	.01	-.02	-.05**	-.02	.17***	-.29***	.07***	-.02	
13. Communicative justice	4.72	1.82	-.06**	.08***	-.03	.08***	-.16***	.07***	-.02	.13***	-.22***	-.19***	-.19***	.12***

Notes. [1] *n*(observations) = 2832; [2] 0 = Male, 1 = Female; [3] Talents' salary increase divided by workload; [4] 0 = Redesign (zero-sum), 1 = Additional; *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

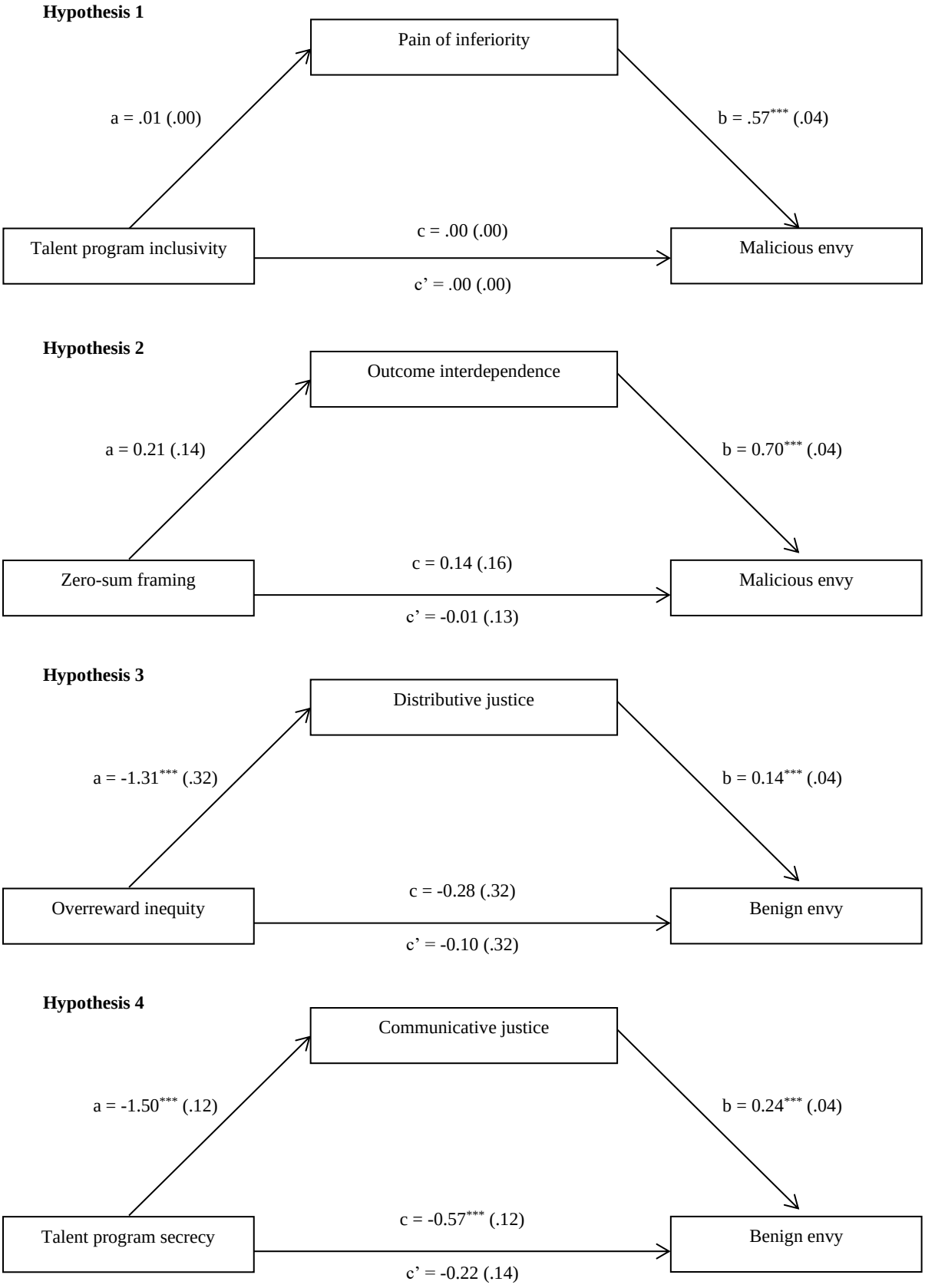

Figure 1. *Mediation models (field data Study 1).*

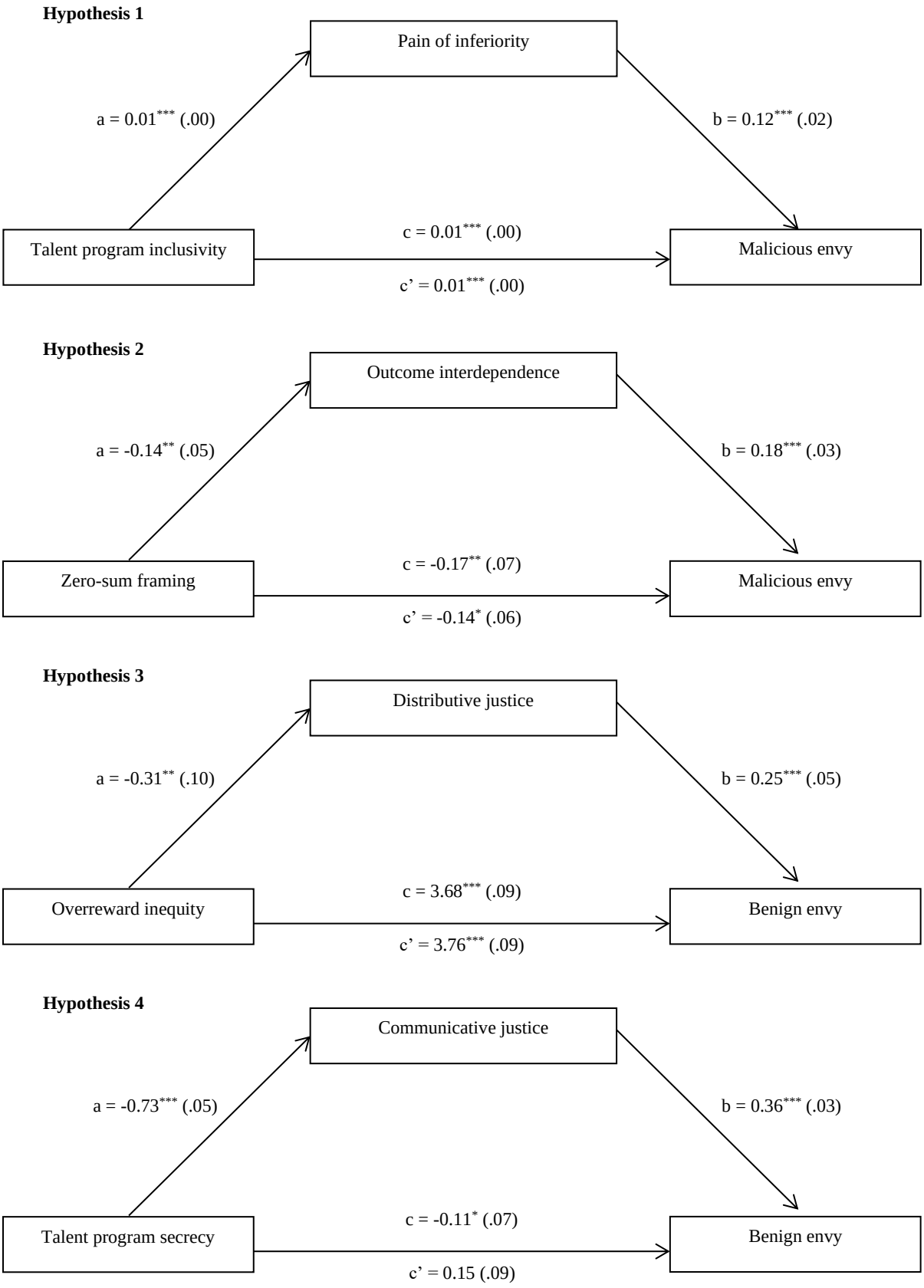

Figure 2. *Mediation models (experimental data Study 2).*

Malicious envy. The outcomes of our mediation analyses are summarized in Figures 1 and 2, for the field study and factorial survey respectively. Hypotheses 1 and 2 are partially supported by Study 1 and fully supported by Study 2. From both studies we can conclude that feelings of inferiority can be associated with more malicious envy among non-talents, and in Study 2 we found that inferiority mediates the relationship between malicious envy and talent program inclusivity (Study 1 indirect effect = 0.00, boot SE = 0.00, boot 95% CI = [0.00, 0.01]; Study 2 within-subjects indirect effect = 0.00, SE = 0.00, $p < .001$). Similarly, both studies show that stronger perceptions of outcome interdependence can be associated with more malicious envy, yet its mediating effect between zero-sum framing and malicious envy was only found in Study 2 (Study 1 indirect effect = 0.15, boot SE = 0.09, boot 95% CI = [-0.03, 0.33]; Study 2 within-subjects indirect effect = -0.03, SE = 0.01, $p = .006$). We address these discrepancies in the discussion.

Benign envy. Hypotheses 3 and 4 are fully supported by our models in both studies. First, distributive justice mediated the relationship between the overreward inequity and benign envy in both studies (Study 1 indirect effect = -0.18, boot SE = 0.08, boot 95% CI = [-0.35, -0.06]; Study 2 within-subjects indirect effect = -0.07, SE = 0.02, $p = .002$). Second, the more secretive an organization is in regard to its talent program, the less non-talents will perceive the organization's communication is fair, and the less they will strive to become part of the talent group themselves in the future (Study 1 indirect effect = -0.36, boot SE = 0.07, boot 95% CI = [-0.51, -0.22]; Study 2 within-subjects indirect effect = -0.26, SE = 0.03, $p < .001$).

Robustness check. To ensure that the findings could be attributed to our manipulated variables we examined all between-subjects (indirect) effects while testing our multilevel models. We found no significant between-subjects coefficients, indicating that respondents answered in a largely similar fashion to the various scenarios presented to them. In addition,

we explored potential interaction effects between various talent program characteristics—through moderated mediation analyses using the data from Study 1 and 2—and found no significant outcomes. Thus, despite respondents thinking about being excluded from talent program(s) differing on a multitude of characteristics, the influence specific characteristics have on their reactions may be evaluated individually.

Discussion

In two studies—one field study and one factorial survey—we set out to discover which talent management characteristics significantly predict feelings of envy—split up in its two sub-forms: benign and malicious envy (Van de Ven, 2016)—in response to the introduction of a talent program. The general hypothesis was, based on the existing theory on social comparisons, perceived organizational justice, and envy, that benign envy would be elicited through perceptions of fairness (Gelens et al., 2013), whereas malicious envy would be elicited when non-talents feel inferior or negatively interdependent (Sapegina & Weibel, 2017). Overall, we found strong support for our models on benign envy in both studies—and partial support for malicious envy—showing a mediating relationship between specific talent program design features and malicious or benign envy. Moreover, since benign and malicious envy were not triggered in unison in our studies (i.e., they did not occur at the same time and to the same extent—which is not always evident in practice; Van de Ven et al., 2009), we can broadly conclude that talent programs are theoretically able to elicit either pro-organizational or contra-organizational feelings and intentions—motivated through upward social comparisons—depending on how these programs are designed and introduced by management.

Looking at the talent program characteristics individually, we established that talent program inclusivity was a significant predictor, with higher percentages of talent pool sizes

related to higher levels of malicious envy, mediated through feelings of inferiority. Malicious envy was also significantly predicted by the zero-sum framing of talent programs, with zero-sum talent programs—where benefits for the talents are taken from existing programs provided to all employees—elicit negative interdependence and subsequent malicious envy. The mediating relationships, however, were only found in our factorial survey. First, feelings of inferiority may have been triggered because participants were forced to evaluate six random percentage of inclusivity during the factorial survey, triggering psychological evaluation mechanisms more explicitly (Auspurg & Hinz, 2015), causing them to consciously debate the relative influence of talent program inclusivity (i.e., what does talent program inclusivity mean in isolation, without comparing it to programs with other percentages?). In support of this, research on social comparisons has also found that relative outcomes are more important than absolute outcomes (Boyce et al., 2010). Differences in pain of inferiority may ultimately be more likely to be measured in within-subject than in between-subject designs. Second, there are more contextual effects at play in the field study (i.e., respondents all worked for different organizations), that can potentially confound these causal relationships. The lack of control over potential confounds is precisely what hinders the internal validity of field studies, in comparison to experimental research designs (Aguinis & Bradley, 2014), which if accounted for may explain some of the variance in our tested models and lead to significant test results instead. Based on these findings, we argue again that both research designs complement each other and serve to fill in potential gaps in outcomes.

As for benign envy, we found that overreward inequity and talent program secrecy were significant predictors. Specifically, when employees are confronted with a talent program in which the talents are overrewarded (i.e., earn relatively more than they work, in comparison to the non-talents) and when management keeps non-talents in the dark about

their (lack of) talent status, non-talents will perceive organizational injustice. Both distributive and communicative justice, then, are positively related to benign envy. Thus, by keeping the input/output ratio balanced—or at least not in the talents' favor—non-talents will feel that resources are distributed fairly and subsequently focus more on attaining these benefits for themselves. While there are concerns that benign envy is heavily influenced by egotistical motives (i.e., individuals may want to match their superiors' level solely to acquire those benefits for themselves; Van de Ven et al., 2009), our findings reveal that a relatively higher pay raise does not automatically motivate employees to acquire those same benefits (i.e., they will also consider if these benefits are distributed fairly), despite it being the largest predictor of general feelings of envy (Heikkinen et al., 1998). An effective talent program would adjust these features consistently to maintain balance and avoid perceptions of organizational injustice. Similarly, as the communication strategy secrecy is crucial in determining employee reactions (Huang & Tansley, 2012), transparent communication towards employees ensures communicative justice and promotes benign envy among non-talents. Since we found no significant difference between public and private—both transparent—communication strategies, we expect private communication only to lead to more benign envy in the event ample time has passed to develop a more intimate working relationship between managers and their subordinates (Wert & Salovey, 2004), which was beyond the scope of the current studies.

Finally, while one may be inclined to assume that benign and malicious envy are orthogonal (i.e., when benign envy is high malicious envy must be low, or vice versa), the literature on envy is clear that this does not necessarily have to be the case and, in fact, both can be equally present to enable individuals to level with their comparison target as fast as possible (Van de Ven et al., 2009). Theoretically, as we have illustrated in our rationale, the

antecedents of malicious versus benign envy differ (Smith, 2000; Van de Ven, 2016), which is corroborated by the non-significant and small correlation—for Study 1 and 2 respectively—between benign and malicious envy. Nevertheless, researchers may want to investigate the interacting mechanism of malicious envy and perceived organizational justice in the future as well. This would allow them to untangle whether malicious behaviors are more specifically directed towards the organizational body (unfairly) granting superior performers their status (i.e., those responsible for distributing something desirable), or at the individuals receiving their status (i.e., those who benefit but technically speaking cannot be blamed).

Theoretical contributions

This study contributes to the existing literature on the causal relationships between talent programs and employee outcomes. As we focused specifically on the reactions of employees not identified as talents, we target a topic area (and research population) that remains largely unexplored to this day (De Boeck et al., 2018). Even though our used research method (i.e., the factorial survey) only allows for a limited number of dependent variables to be measured, the two variants of envy do enable us to infer conclusions about potential positive organizational outcomes, as well as negative outcomes (Van de Ven et al., 2009).

In contrast to previous research, this study's focus was not to examine a range of different employee reactions to talent programs, but rather to understand the underlying mechanism of how such reactions come to be (cf. through the various talent program design features gauged in the field study and manipulated in the factorial survey—and the mediating role of perceived organizational justice, inferiority, and outcome interdependence). With that logic we contribute to the existing literature on envy and social comparison theory, by explicating how benign envy can be elicited individually while suppressing feelings of malicious envy. Our research makes it particularly clear that benign and malicious envy are best

examined separately. Smith's (2000) framework for social comparisons details the general boundary conditions that lead to benign versus malicious responses to upward comparisons, yet these conditions are rarely clearly delineated in practice. Envy on the work floor is highly complex, especially in the case of talent management, as a number of (mediating) mechanisms are at play. First of all, non-talents will typically also aspire to acquire talent status as they believe it will give them access to professional development resources or other perks (Swailes, 2013). Second, being excluded from the talent program calls their competence into question (i.e., they feel inferior; Leach & Spears, 2008), even more so given the fact that individuals usually overestimate themselves (Kruger & Dunning, 1999). Third, what talents gain is frequently something non-talents lose out on (cf. talent management as a zero-sum game; Collings & Mellahi, 2009), making them feel negatively interdependent on the talents (Pfeffer, 2001). Fourth, perceptions of organizational justice play a critical role in determining whether envy will prompt non-talents to improve their own position within their organization or not (Cohen-Charash & Mueller, 2007; Gelens et al., 2013; Khan, Quratulain, & Bell, 2014).

Furthermore, the approach taken in the present paper integrates the instrumental approach to justice (i.e., employees judging whether the distribution of resources is fair based on individual input; Adams, 1963), with more recent relational models taking into account the effects of direct social comparisons between employees and their co-workers (Bartol, Durham, & Poon, 2001). Although social comparison was a key feature of justice theory at its conception (Greenberg, Ashton-James, & Ashkanasy, 2007), surprisingly little empirical research has actually explicitly studied perceived fairness as a direct function of comparisons between co-workers. Such social comparisons are particularly salient in the context of talent management, as differentiation between 'talents' and 'non-talents'—typically determined using forced-ranking formats where employees are directly compared to each other in order

to identify the top 1-20 per cent of employees—is one of its defining features (Meyers & van Woerkom, 2014; Nijs et al., 2014). Moreover, most research on distributive justice to date has modeled it as a predictor—i.e., as a subjective evaluation of (in many cases unknown and unmeasured) organizational allocation procedures, leading to between-subjects differences in job attitudes—much more so than as a consequence of specific organizational differentiation practices (Colquitt, 2012). Our studies thus aid researchers in coming to a better theoretical and empirical understanding of employee reactions to different types of talent management practices, by systematically varying a number of relevant talent program characteristics in an experimental setting (Gelens et al., 2013).

Finally, the present studies contribute to the justice literature by offering insights into the mediating influence of fairness perceptions—brought forth by the tangible rewards given to talents (i.e., overreward inequity)—compared to the perceived value-laden non-tangible status communicated to employees (e.g., 1%: 'extraordinary elite' vs. 50%: 'above-average'), mediated by the pain of inferiority and outcome interdependence. As our models illustrate, both mechanisms have unique and distinctive effects on the experience of envy in a work setting. We can therefore establish that it is possible to separate the symbolic and tangible effects at play—which previous studies have been unable to demonstrate (Nijs et al., 2014)– that determine the kind of envious reaction (i.e., benign vs. malicious) employees excluded from a talent pool will exhibit. Thus, while it is commonly assumed that the unequal treatment of employees will invariably lead to feelings of injustice (Gelens et al., 2013), and negative employee reactions (Swailes, 2013), the manner in which talent programs are designed and implemented greatly determines how employees actually respond when exposed to unequal work settings.

Limitations

Factorial surveys, despite allowing causal inferences to be made—which is currently critically lacking in talent management research (De Boeck et al., 2018)—represent fictitious scenarios that cannot accurately encompass every single factor an individual might potentially consider in a decision-making process in a real setting (Auspurg & Hinz, 2015). Critics therefore argue that the conclusions drawn from these studies are not highly generalizable, and do not accurately depict how employees would respond if they were in that situation in real-life. To proactively address this limitation, we first conducted a field study to support our hypothesized models and to ultimately confirm that our measured causal relationships can also be observed in practice. To date, however, almost all existing field studies about talent management have been case-based—i.e., done within a single organization, or comprising of a sample of employees from different companies that cannot be systematically grouped into meaningful clusters based on their talent management characteristics—and thus difficult to generalize into common patterns. Therefore, due to the lack of multilevel and experimental studies, no empirical study to date has been able to systematically compare the effects of talent programs with different design characteristics (De Boeck et al., 2018). We thus believe that factorial surveys in particular are a promising avenue forward for talent management research, combined with more traditional field studies to enhance the validity of the conclusions drawn. We do want to forewarn researchers that the topic of talent management is notoriously sensitive—especially when coupled with negative employee outcomes such as envy—creating both data access and research ethics concerns if one would attempt to study them using field data (Garcia-Retamero & López-Zafra, 2006). Using panel data, as we did with Prolific, is a highly accessible method to overcome this barrier (Palan & Schitter, 2018). Ultimately, we believe that working with realistic hypothetical scenarios, replicated in field studies, is the best—and likely the only feasible—way forward for this type of research. While

the external validity of factorial surveys is arguably lower than that of field studies, participants have been found to respond to fictional scenarios as if they were really in the depicted situation (Aguinis & Bradley, 2014; Auspurg & Hinz, 2015), which we can corroborate with the current studies.

Building on the above, we hope this paper guides organizational behavior and management researchers when designing their own studies. The question that is often asked in organizational research is whether field studies—suffering from a plethora of confounds, unable to refute the reverse causality hypothesis (i.e., does X cause Y, or vice versa?), and plagued by data access issues; see the review from De Boeck and her colleagues (2018)—truly lead to (more) reliable and usable employee data (Aguinis & Bradley, 2014)? On the other hand, to what extent are experimental studies—generating 'clean' causal effects through controlled variation of independent variables (Auspurg & Hinz, 2015)—generalizable and externally valid to organizational practice? While we can write an entire paper on this topic—which others already have (e.g., Aguinis & Bradley, 2014)—we hope the two studies presented here may act as a precedent, illustrating how both methodologies can effectively complement each other. Specifically, we demonstrate that a lack of external validity can be enhanced through a replication of the same study—using the same scales and converting manipulations into measured predictors—in the field. Conversely, a lack of internal validity can be enhanced by replicating the study in an experiment, by using factorial surveys for instance (Aguinis & Bradley, 2014; Auspurg & Hinz, 2015).

Practical implications

With the findings presented in this paper we hope to make managers aware of how talent programs can impact their workforce. As talent management research typically revolves around talents (De Boeck et al., 2018)—not surprising considering its purpose—it is still

imperative to understand the effects talent management has on the entire organization, as negative reactions from non-talents may outweigh the positive outcomes for the select few talents (Swailes, 2013). Considering that benign and malicious envy were found to be mutually exclusive constructs in the given context (which is not always the case; Van de Ven et al., 2009), our findings can help managers develop an effective talent program where feelings of benign envy among non-talents—which encourages these employees to exhibit pro-organizational behaviors (e.g., organizational citizenship behavior, enhanced work effort; Van de Ven et al., 2009)—are maximized and malicious envy—which encourages these employees to exhibit counterproductive work behaviors (e.g., intergroup conflict; Samnani & Singh, 2014)—are minimized. While our findings cannot realistically offer one concise solution that provides managers with the right tools to develop a talent program that solely stimulates employees' self-improvement tendencies, while at the same time inhibits their destructive behavior towards their superior co-workers, we can discuss numerous design features that are successful in eliciting predominantly benign envy and curtailing malicious envy on the work floor.

First of all, small incremental changes to a talent program's inclusivity pose no serious threat to employees' feelings of malicious envy (considering the relatively small beta-coefficient), while radical adjustments—as we have seen in practice where the inclusivity was upped from 1% to 30% (Hjordrup et al., 2015)—are best avoided. More importantly, the non-significant difference between public (i.e., company-wide announcement) and private (i.e., informal chat with a supervisor) communication on communicative justice informs us that talent programs are more readily observed as fair as long as decisions about who did, and did not, acquire talent status are not made behind closed door—which critics of exclusive talent management practices have long been arguing for (Swailes, 2013). We therefore want to urge

managers to be transparent in their talent program communication towards employees. While secrecy could theoretically lead to better organizational outcomes (as non-talents are not confronted with their unfavorable position within their organization; Heslin, 2003; Vecchio, 2005), keeping talent status a secret from employees is generally perceived as controversial, unethical, and ultimately risky as employees will typically find out anyway (Swailes, 2013; Huang & Tansley, 2012). With inferiority predicting malicious envy, we would also recommend that managers foster an engaging and collaborative atmosphere between talents and non-talents such that the situation becomes less threatening for non-talents (Reh et al., 2018)—reducing feelings of inferiority among non-talents (Garcia & Tor, 2007)—allowing for decreased malicious behaviors towards talents.

Second, and most importantly, we recommend that managers avoid an unbalanced input/output ratio in favor of talents. It seems that in many organizations, talents working extra hours (for instance through their participation in after-hours personal development programs) without additional pay is commonplace already, prompting some authors to conclude that talent status is mainly symbolic up until the point that the person is actually promoted to a higher position (Nijs et al., 2014). It is imperative that managers communicate to all employees about the expectations and benefits associated with talent status, and thereby uphold a realistic preview of what it means to be a talent (i.e., work harder for the same money while keeping a long-term perspective). This adds some much-needed nuance to the commonly held belief that exclusive talent management practices will almost always result in feelings of unfairness, leading to malicious behaviors, amongst non-talents (De Boeck et al., 2018).

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Appendix

Exploratory factor analysis showing factor loadings of the six single items and their full-scale measurements after oblique rotation.

	Factors					
Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6
Benign envy						
Single item: I strove to become part of the talent group myself in future rounds of the program	.003	**.711**	.023	-.087	.068	-.017
Full scale:						
1. I focused on how I could become equally successful in the future	-.051	**.880**	-.040	.026	.046	.007
2. I tried to improve myself	.008	**.888**	-.041	.015	-.023	-.028
3. I was motivated to accomplish my goals	.023	**.833**	-.012	.100	.032	-.030
4. I strove to reach the talents' superior achievements	.074	**.894**	.017	-.011	-.021	-.011
5. I tried to attain these superior qualities, achievements, and possessions for myself	.058	**.900**	.030	.005	-.042	.036
Malicious envy						
Single item: I secretly hoped the talent program would fail and get cancelled	-.018	-.043	.061	.019	-.042	**.671**
Full scale:						
1. I wished that the talents would lose their advantage	-.071	.002	.006	.019	.021	**.851**
2. I wished I could take their 'talent' status away from them, because I wanted it for myself	.004	.117	.088	.004	.026	**.799**
3. I felt ill will towards the talents	.007	-.037	-.044	-.006	-.008	**.936**
4. It caused me to dislike the talents	-.024	-.041	-.016	.017	.005	**.921**
5. The talents' achievements made me resent them	.011	-.038	-.035	-.058	-.023	**.894**
Pain of inferiority						
Single item: I felt that I was inferior to the talents	.053	-.023	.012	**-.897**	.019	-.110
Full scale:						
1. I felt inferior	-.020	-.036	.016	**-.924**	.049	-.060
2. I felt threatened	.014	.051	.277	**-.402**	-.035	.246
3. I felt frustrated	-.280	.175	.087	**-.323**	-.076	.260
4. I felt ashamed	.077	.020	.003	**-.680**	-.054	.107
5. I felt inadequate	-.012	.004	-.029	**-.880**	-.050	.020
6. I felt second-rate	-.106	-.016	.005	**-.821**	-.034	.075
Communicative justice						
Single item: I felt comfortable asking management questions about the talent program, if I had any	-.184	.073	.003	.092	**.806**	-.021
Full scale:						
1. I felt there was enough communication in this situation	.196	-.057	-.014	-.075	**.717**	-.058
2. I felt able to ask questions in this situation	.038	.004	-.040	-.042	**.900**	-.003
3. I felt satisfied with the communication that occurred during this situation	.239	-.036	-.015	-.016	**.743**	-.004
4. I felt comfortable asking questions about the situation, if I had any	-.036	.022	.003	.000	**.943**	.017
5. I felt comfortable with the idea of expressing my concerns in regards to this situation	-.015	.040	.010	.048	**.849**	.026

Variables	Factors					
	1	2	3	4	5	6
Single item: I felt that the status given to the talents was fair considering the time they invested into their work	**.822**	.020	-.058	-.027	.040	-.042
Full scale:						
1. I felt that the status given to the talents was fair considering the investments in time and energy that they had made to support the company	**.882**	.036	-.017	-.035	.042	-.005
2. I felt that the status given to the talents was fair considering the roles assigned to them	**.875**	.039	-.021	-.017	.012	-.010
3. I felt that the status given to the talents was fair compared to what the company earned from my labour	**.869**	.018	-.008	-.003	.027	.014
4. I felt that the status given to the talents was fair compared to the contributions I made to my company	**.864**	-.007	.034	.037	.053	.022
5. I felt that the status given to the talents was fair considering the responsibilities they had	**.895**	.009	.006	.032	-.024	-.003
6. I felt that the status given to the talents was fair considering the amount of effort they had put forth	**.893**	.014	-.014	.002	-.032	-.079
7. I felt that the status given to the talents was fair considering the risks and exposure due to working for the company	**.858**	.005	.013	.022	.038	-.009
8. I felt that the status given to the talents was fair considering the work they had done well	**.858**	.029	-.059	-.027	-.025	-.069
Outcome interdependence						
Single item: I felt that the talents' success in attaining their goals made me less likely to achieve my goals	-.122	-.014	**.660**	.026	-.045	-.010
Full scale:						
1. I felt that it hindered me when the talents attained their goals	-.048	.080	**.829**	-.023	-.047	-.030
2. I felt that the things the talents wanted to accomplish and the things I wanted to accomplish were incompatible	.182	-.084	**.687**	.101	.026	.074
3. I felt that it was disadvantageous for me when the talents succeeded in their jobs	-.099	.006	**.850**	-.102	.038	-.060
4. When the talents succeeded in their jobs, I felt it was at my expense	-.014	.060	**.853**	-.020	-.033	.024
5. I felt that my concerns and those of the talents were clashing	.006	-.018	**.805**	.006	.008	.050
6. When the talents succeeded in their jobs, I felt it worked out negatively for me	-.058	-.019	**.791**	-.095	-.010	.013

Notes. Factor loadings greater than |.32| are shown in bold. Phrasing in Study 2 (conditional tense): I would strive to become part of the talent group…, I would feel that I was inferior… etc.

Chapter 3

Ostracism in Talent Management:

Out-Group Emotional Response as a Key Determinant of Talent Retention

Anand van Zelderen, Nicky Dries, & Elise Marescaux

Abstract

Based on social identity theory, exclusive talent programs divide employees into two groups—'talents' vs. 'non-talents'—creating a setting where mutual ostracism may occur. Using 360°-video vignettes we recreate a fictional board meeting in which a talent program is announced. Using a moderated mediation model, we test the moderating impact of out-group emotional response on the relationship between talent identification and anticipated ostracism, and the mediating effect of ostracism on turnover intentions (*N* = 184). Employees identified as talents, overall, exhibit lower turnover intentions than non-talents, yet this retention effect is suppressed by talents' anticipation of being ostracized by non-talents. Specifically, when non-talents display contrastive emotional responses to talent programs (e.g., resentment) talents anticipate more ostracism, increasing their turnover intentions. The present study addresses researchers' and practitioners' concerns about talent retention and provides theoretical and practical implications for the field of talent management, social identity theory, and organizational intergroup conflicts.

Keywords: Talent management, social identity, ostracism, competition, envy, jealousy, social undermining, turnover, talent retention

Introduction

CEO surveys indicate that talent management—defined as "the management and development of high-performing and high-potential incumbents in critical organizational roles" (Collings, 2014, p. 301)—is among their top strategic priorities (PwC, 2017). It is estimated that two-thirds of organizations worldwide have a talent management program in place (Collings, 2014). They tend to operate on the assumption that true talent is scarce—an idea that stems from the 'war for talent' narrative popularized by McKinsey in the 1990s (Michaels, Handfield-Jones, & Axelrod, 2001)—and that they should thus focus on attracting and retaining the 'best' people in the labor market (Gallardo-Gallardo, Nijs, Dries, & Gallo, 2015).

Typically, organizations that engage in so-called 'exclusive' talent management (Swailes, 2013) allocate a disproportionate amount of resources to the employees identified as 'talents', as they expect a higher return on investment for this group (Collings & Mellahi, 2009). This means that losing talents is also disproportionally costly (Glebbeek & Bax, 2004). Notwithstanding the hot-button nature of talent retention, empirical evidence on the specific drivers of turnover among talents is still critically lacking (Bethke-Langenegger, Mahler, & Staffelbach, 2011; Festing & Schäfer, 2014). Even less research exists on how employees *not* identified as talents (i.e., 'non-talents') perceive and react to talent management programs, due to the sensitivity of the topic, which creates data access issues (De Boeck, Meyers, & Dries, 2018).

The key assumption of the present study is that exclusive talent management creates status differences between employees—the talents versus the non-talents, the 'haves' versus the 'have-nots'—and thus two opposing groups within the organization (Nijs, Dries, Van

Vlasselaer, & Sels, 2022). Research in social identity theory has shown that opposing groups are prone to socially exclude (i.e., ostracize) each other (Williams, 2007). In this study, building on social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), we examine under which conditions employees—both non-talents and talents—feel socially excluded within their organization as a direct result of its talent program. Furthermore, as evidence suggests that ostracism is a key determinant of voluntary turnover (Rubenstein, Eberly, Lee, & Mitchell, 2015), we set out to investigate the turnover intentions of both groups of employees as a result of their anticipated ostracism by out-group co-workers.

One major limitation of existing research is that talent management is rarely considered from a social-psychological perspective—i.e., focusing on the interactions, behaviors, and feelings of employees—and thus not acknowledged as a relational phenomenon (Al Ariss, Cascio, & Paauwe, 2014; Nijs et al., 2022). Instead, talent management is mostly studied as a strategic HR topic, equating talented employees to 'resources' and 'human capital' (e.g., Collings & Mellahi, 2009), despite increasing concerns about employee responses to exclusive talent management practices—especially those of non-talents (Swailes, 2013). In addition, it is taken as a given that talent management will create positive effects on talents (De Boeck et al., 2018). A relational perspective, in contrast, would account for 'spillover' effects, where the thoughts and feelings of one group of employees influence the thoughts and feelings another group has about talent management—i.e., the non-talents' responses influencing the talents' responses and vice versa (Fowler & Christakis, 2008).

In the present paper, we hypothesize that the nature of the emotional response non-talents (talents) exhibit to the introduction of a talent program within their organization—i.e., an

assimilative (e.g., inspiration displayed by non-talents; sympathy displayed by talents) or contrastive emotional response (e.g., envy displayed by non-talents; pride displayed by talents)—will affect the degree of anticipated ostracism among talents (non-talents), which in turn will influence their turnover intentions (see Figure 1). In line with social identity theory, we propose that the mere act of identifying a subset of employees as 'talents' will establish in-groups and out-groups—the talents representing the 'out-group' to the non-talents and vice versa (cf. minimal group paradigm; Tajfel, 1970).

To test our model we adopt an experimental vignette design (Auspurg & Hinz, 2015) as this approach allows for systematically controlled variation in independent variables—fostering high levels of internal validity—which is a crucial gap in research on employee reactions to talent management (De Boeck et al., 2018). To date, most of the research done on talent management has been case-based, which means that very little research has been able to establish generalizable, causal patterns between talent program characteristics and employee responses (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2015). To address a potential critique on external validity, however, we specifically used 360°-video vignettes which serve to enhance participants' experience through immersion and realism, fostering high levels of ecological validity (i.e., the findings can be extrapolated to the 'real world'). Aguinis and Bradley (2014) have argued that these immersive experimental vignette methodologies thus lead to optimal levels of both internal and external validity in organizational research, whereas field studies frequently fall short on both (De Boeck et al., 2018).

Figure 1
Hypothesized theoretical model

Theoretical background

Talent Identification as a Source of Social Identity

Recent developments in the talent management literature have shown an increase in interest in employee reactions—particularly those of employees not identified as talents—as these are assumed to greatly influence the success of talent programs (De Boeck et al., 2018). To date the dominant theory used to understand employee reactions to talent management has been social exchange theory (Wikhamn, Asplund, & Dries, 2021). The basic assumption is that when employees are identified as talents by their organization, they receive additional resources such as opportunities for training and promotions, which they reciprocate through increased work effort and organizational loyalty. In their review of the literature, De Boeck and colleagues (2018) conclude, however, that social exchange theory alone is insufficient to provide a complete understanding of the social-psychological processes underpinning employee reactions to talent management. They propose that the introduction of a talent program will not only lead to (tangible) unequal resource allocation among employees, but also conveys (symbolic) identity-relevant information such as the extent to which one is valued and appreciated by the organization (Kamoche & Leigh, 2022; Tansley & Tietze, 2013). Several authors have since suggested that symbolic effects of talent management—i.e., the mere act of being labeled as 'talent'—may persist even in the absence of tangible differences created between talents and non-talents (as it has been found that not all organizations couple talent identification to immediate benefits but rather take a 'wait and see' approach; Dries & Pepermans, 2008). Such symbolic effects cannot be explained by social exchange theory, while social identity theory offers important insights in this regard (De Boeck et al., 2018). These ideas were then taken up

and empirically tested by Wikhamn et al. (2021), who confirmed in a field study that being identified as a talent leads to shifts in social identity, such as an increased identification with management and the organization (as compared to non-talents). While that study looked at the relationships of talents and non-talents to their organizations, there have not yet been any studies on how talent identification alters identity-based relationships *between* both groups of employees.

In the present paper, we respond to this call for further research on the symbolic and relational dynamics that are triggered when employees are (not) identified as talents by their organizations (Al Ariss et al., 2014; Nijs et al., 2022). As a starting point, we adopt the basic premise of social identity—i.e., that individuals base their sense of who they are (and their social status) on their group memberships (Tajfel, 1979). Identity-relevant information provided by organizations prompts employees to self-evaluate their own relative value to the organization and adjust their behavior accordingly (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Korte, 2007). In addition, perceived intergroup differences are assumed to predict group members' behaviors and feelings, as they adjust to the norms of their in-group (Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

To get at the idea that talent identification has symbolic identitary value to employees, in the present study we adopt a minimal group paradigm, meaning that respondents are randomly allocated to groups without any real-life consequences. Prior to Tajfel's (1970) seminal work it was believed that in-group/out-group effects would only manifest in groups that were deliberately formed based on shared goals. Tajfel showed, however, that experimental allocation to arbitrary groups—e.g., based on the outcome of a coin toss—is sufficient to induce a sense of belongingness to a specific group, and to foster a sense of 'us' (i.e., the in-group) versus 'them'

(i.e., the out-group). Further research showed similar effects in the field, where individuals are found to continuously divide themselves and others into (imaginary) groups based on similar abstract socio-environmental elements—such as the clothes people wear—in order to make sense of the world (Krueger & DiDonato, 2008). Applied to organizational settings, this means that it is not necessarily required for employees to interact personally in order to form a group. Instead, employees' sense of belonging to a specific social group (such as the 'talents' of the organization) can perfectly well be internalized based on abstract notions of that group as compared to other groups in the organization (Ashforth & Mael, 1989).

Overall, we expect talent identification to have positive effects on employees' attitudes toward their organization. Korte (2007), for instance, found that belonging to an organizational in-group motivated employees to engage in behaviors beneficial to the organization as a whole. In a talent management study, Björkman, Ehrnrooth, Mäkelä, Smale, and Sumelius (2013) found that turnover intentions are lower among employees who believe they are identified as a talent, which they explained using social exchange theory. We discuss this and other studies on talent identification and retention in more detail below.

Talent Identification and Turnover Intentions

One of the primary goals of talent programs is to enhance the loyalty and commitment of talented employees (Festing & Schäfer, 2014), with talent retention being one of the biggest challenges reported by organizations (Bethke-Langenegger et al., 2011; Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2015). It is typically assumed that talent identification should lead to lower turnover intentions among talents, through the mediating effect of perceived organizational support—explained by the rule of reciprocity in social exchange theory (Björkman et al., 2013; Dries, Van Acker, &

Verbruggen, 2012; Rubenstein et al., 2015). Empirical evidence on the retention effects of talent programs, however, is scarce and somewhat inconsistent. Only a handful of empirical studies exist that have directly measured the turnover intentions of talents, of which some concluded that talent management had positive effects (i.e., lower turnover intentions of talents; Björkman et al., 2013), while others found it had negative (i.e., higher perceived ease of movement among top performers; Trevor, Gerhart, & Boudreau, 1997) or null effects (i.e., no significant effects on talents' organizational loyalty; Dries et al., 2014). De Boeck et al., (2018), in their review of all empirical studies on employee reactions to talent management, concluded that negative effects of talent programs on talents are likely underreported in general, since effects on talents are assumed to be positive (and negative variables are thus not included in survey studies). They found, however, that several qualitative interview studies had uncovered unexpected negative side-effects of being identified as a talent, such as increased pressure to live up to expectations (Dries & Pepermans, 2008), identity struggles (Tansley & Tietze, 2013), and the burden of being forced to assume an elite identity (Kamoche & Leigh, 2022). These types of negative effects could, in the long term, trigger turnover intentions among talents (Rubenstein et al., 2015).

In addition to the lack of clarity around the retention effects on talents, non-talents—who typically comprise 90-99% of the workforce in a given organization (Church et al., 2015)—are assumed to react very negatively to talent programs (Swailes 2013), raising concerns of disengagement and quitting in this group (Malik & Singh, 2014). The exclusive nature of talent programs has been said to create the risk of alienating the employees who are excluded from them, eventually causing them to seek employment elsewhere, and potentially making the overall retention effects of these programs negative (Swailes, Downs, & Orr, 2014). It has even

been argued that the benefits of attracting and retaining talented employees may not outweigh the costs associated with the subsequent voluntary turnover of non-talents (Malik & Singh, 2014). To date, however, there have been hardly any empirical studies on the turnover intentions of non-talents, since organizations typically will not allow researchers to survey this group on how they feel about talent management—fearing that this would trigger (further) dissatisfaction among them (De Boeck et al., 2018). The few quantitative studies that have in fact been able to compare workplace attitudinal data from employees formally identified as talents versus non-talents (Boonbumroongsuk & Rungruang, 2021; Dries et al., 2012) were fully blind, meaning that respondents were not informed nor debriefed that the study was about talent management (and contained archival talent identification data provided by their organizations) due to the sensitivity of the subject matter (De Boeck et al., 2018).

In summary, identity struggles (Tansley & Tietze, 2013), performance pressures and stress (Dries & Pepermans, 2008), and the pull of the market (Trevor et al., 1997) are potential drivers of turnover intentions among talents, while the demotivational effects of talent programs on non-talents (Malik & Singh, 2014; Swailes et al., 2014) and lower perceived organizational support (Dries et al., 2012) have been identified as potential drivers of turnover intentions among non-talents. In the present study, we nuance these assumptions—while performing a much-needed causal test among both talents and non-talents—by adding in the mediating role of ostracism and the moderating role of the nature of each out-group's emotional response. That is, for talents, we expect that the potential drivers of turnover intentions will (at least partially) be offset by the psychological effects of their special status, and the symbolic value attached to talent identification (Korte, 2007; Nijs, Gallardo-Gallardo, Dries, & Sels, 2014). Whether or not

non-talents react positively or negatively to their identification is modeled as a boundary condition to this retention effect (see Figure 1). For non-talents, as well, we expected a moderated mediation effect of out-group emotional response (in their case that of the talents) and ostracism on turnover intentions, as explained below.

Ostracism Between Talents and Non-Talents

As stated earlier, differentiating between employees—in this case talents versus non-talents—inevitably creates two opposing groups (i.e., 'us' vs. 'them'; Nijs et al., 2022). In line with social identity theory, we can expect employees to exhibit in-group favoritism—preferring collaborations and interactions with other co-workers belonging to the same group— causing out-group individuals to feel socially excluded (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Tajfel, 1979; Williams, 2007). In-group favoritism has been demonstrated using the minimal group paradigm, demonstrating that even arbitrary conditions separating two groups of individuals (e.g., shirt color) are sufficient to create biases in favor of an in-group, and against an out-group (Tajfel, 1970). The root cause for this phenomenon is humans' strong innate desire to belong to social groups—for various reasons such as reproduction and security (Baumeister & Leary, 1995)—subconsciously pushing individuals to foster a sense of 'us' versus 'them'. Within the organizational setting, as well, employees are prone to create groups using the information available to them (Ashforth & Mael, 1989).

The phenomenon of a group of individuals feeling ignored or excluded by individuals belonging to another group is called ostracism (Robinson, O'Reilly, & Wang, 2013; Williams, 2007). The past few decades have seen ample research on what happens when individuals feel excluded in various social settings, including the workplace (Buss, 1990; Robinson et al., 2013).

Studies have found that people will most likely exhibit a flight response when they feel they are being ostracized. A fight response—more common to other types of inter-group conflicts—would require individuals to confront perpetrators with their aggravating actions, which is difficult to do as acts of social exclusion are easily denied (Williams, 2007). This sets ostracism apart from other inter-group conflicts such as bullying (Ferris, Brown, Berry, & Lian, 2008), as it is characterized by an *absence* of intergroup interactions (Robinson et al., 2013; Williams, 2007).

Feeling ostracized is considered aversive and painful, to the extent that the feeling of ostracism has been shown to elicit physical pain (i.e., the same neurons in the brain are activated when people are ostracized and when physically hurt; Eisenberger, Lieberman, & Williams, 2003), and can be elicited both when people feel excluded by familiar others or by strangers (Williams, 2007). As physical pain sensations normally signal to the brain that something is wrong, it acts as a prompt that action needs to be taken to remedy the situation (Ferris et al., 2008). Within an organizational context, the most readily available response for employees—in a bid to avoid further unfavorable situations on the work floor—is to leave the organization entirely (Mitchell, Holtom, Lee, Sablynski, & Erez, 2001). Research from O'Reilly, Robinson, Berdahl, and Banki (2015) showed that workplace ostracism, compared to other intergroup conflicts such as harassment, was the best predictor of employee turnover. While organizations can take steps to combat ostracism in the workplace, such as improving communication channels and introducing more cooperative tasks (Wu, Liu, Kwan, & Lee, 2016), employees themselves rarely feel powerful enough to change, or adapt to, their isolation from the group (Williams, 2007). Furthermore, an innately natural response to ostracism is to attempt to seek new social connections, making

employees more prone to explore other employment opportunities—and with that new co-workers—elsewhere (Mitchell et al., 2001; O'Reilly et al., 2015).

Members of (typically already disadvantaged) minority groups (e.g., ethnic minorities, transgender people) tend to suffer ostracism the most (Eck, Schoel, & Greifeneder, 2017; Williams & Carter-Sowell, 2009). In the case of talent management, however, there are reasons to assume that both talents and non-talents will end up being ostracized by the other group—the non-talents forming a disadvantaged majority group (typically 1-10%), and the talents an elite minority group (see benchmarking study by Church, Rotolo, Ginther, & Levine, 2015). As there is evidence for negative outcomes for both disadvantaged and minority groups (Eck et al., 2017; Williams & Carter-Sowell, 2009), ostracism on the work floor may thus trigger a flight response in both talents and non-talents (Robinson et al., 2013; Williams, 2007).

Viewed from the specific perspective of social identity theory, talent programs send an implicit message about some employees being seen as 'better' or more 'valuable' to the organization than others (Wikhamn et al., 2021), which is typically highly sensitive to employees (Wu et al., 2016). These types of perceived slights typically trigger defensive coping mechanisms among disadvantaged employees such as non-talents (Williams, 2007), driving them even further away from the privileged group, which can create a downward spiral perpetuating events of mutual social exclusion (Williams, 2007). On the side of the talents, studies have found that employees who are perceived to have received preferential treatment by their superiors are more likely to be acutely aware of the social risks that accompany their special status (Vecchio, 2005), leading them to avoid interacting with out-group co-workers in order to hide their success

(Roberts, Levine, & Sezer, 2021). On top of that, members of an elite group may also ostracize inferior co-workers as a means to protect their privileges and benefits (Ashley & Empson, 2012).

Taken together, we argue that ostracism is a relevant effect of talent (non-)identification, that will mediate its relationship to turnover intentions. Although we expect both talents and non-talents to feel ostracized by each other, for different reasons (i.e., belonging to an elite minority versus to a disadvantaged majority), we expect that the outcome of this mediation effect will be contingent on the moderating role of out-group emotional response, as explained below.

The Moderating Role of Out-Group Emotional Response

A natural occurrence is for in-groups of individuals to evaluate their position as equal, better, or worse compared to out-groups (Tajfel, 1979). Using all the information available to them from the social environment (Krueger & DiDonato, 2008), such evaluations will ultimately determine their feelings and behaviors (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). They are driven at least in part by intergroup dynamics, such as the emotions expressed by out-group members (Spoor & Williams, 2007), which can either be classified as contrastive (i.e., emotional cues that highlight the differences between the groups) or assimilative (i.e., emotional cues that decrease the distance between the groups) (Smith, 2000). Both talents and non-talents may exhibit contrastive or assimilative emotional responses to the introduction of a talent program in their organization that can either exacerbate or buffer the anticipation of being ostracized by the other group respectively (Korte, 2007), effectively creating a spillover effect where the thoughts and attitudes of one group of employees influences the other (Fowler & Christakis, 2008). Especially when employees feel that there is a lack of potential positive interaction with members from another

group, out-group members' emotions—signaled by verbal remarks and facial expressions (Van Kleef, De Dreu, & Manstead, 2010)—have been shown to be crucial drivers of felt ostracism (Spoor & Williams, 2007). In addition, with a sense of belonging being a fundamental human need (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), it is guaranteed that employees will actively—yet subconsciously—pick up on the social cues signifying social exclusion as they are predisposed to detect these specific signs (Spoor & Williams, 2007).

On the side of the non-talents, an example of a contrastive emotional response would be envy—i.e., feelings of discontent and ill will towards the talents as a result of their superior position—and an example of an assimilative response would be inspiration—i.e., enhanced expectations for one's own future created by another person's superior example. As for the talents, a typical contrastive emotional response would be pride—i.e., celebrating one's own success of being identified as a talent—whereas a typical assimilative emotional response would be sympathy—i.e., worry about the misfortune of employees excluded from the talent program (Smith, 2000). In line with social identity theory, intergroup conflicts—such as ostracism—may be buffered entirely when employees perceive that the differentiation between employees does not threaten their and others' social identity, and instead benefits the organization as a whole (Korte, 2007).

Thus, a more assimilative response from employees—e.g., sympathy from talents towards non-talents and inspiration from non-talents towards talents (Smith, 2000)—may diminish the interpersonal distance between the 'superior' individuals and others. For instance, talents making it clear that they do not feel superior to non-talents could counter the original message of inferiority that talent programs can convey to non-talents (Wikhamn et al., 2021).

Similarly, non-talents' expressions of inspiration and admiration signal support for talents' social identities and indicates a desire to learn from them to potentially acquire the same status in the future (Lockwood & Kunda, 1997). Most importantly, they signal to talents that their advantage is well-deserved, ensuring that the social identity of talents is endorsed rather than brought into question (Smith, 2000), as is most commonly the case with ostracized minority groups (Eck et al., 2017). Conversely, pride—a contrastive emotional response displayed by talents—places the focus on the self, enforcing one's own social identity at the cost of the out-group's social identity. Finally, envy and resentment—as contrastive emotional responses displayed by non-talents—reveal discontent with the talents' advantage, in that the relatively superiority of their position induces feelings of inferiority in the social identities of talents (Smith, 2000).

In conclusion, we hypothesize that whether talents and non-talents will anticipate feeling ostracized, and subsequently be of a mind to leave the organization, will depend largely on the emotional response displayed by out-group co-workers (i.e., talents observing the responses of non-talents and vice versa). We expect contrastive emotional responses by out-group employees to increase the risk of ostracism, while assimilative responses will decrease this risk. We test this hypothesis using moderated mediation (see Figure 1).

Methods

Procedure

Respondents were randomly assigned to one of 24 conditions (i.e., 2x2x3x2 design: talent management program inclusivity[1], talent identification, talents' emotional response, and non-

[1] **Data transparency note.** In the study we originally also manipulated the percentage of employees identified as a talent (i.e., 1% versus 30%) in the fictitious talent management program. We excluded this condition from our methods and analyses as

talents' emotional response; see manipulations further down), and after giving their informed consent, prompted to watch an eight-minute 360°-video of a board meeting in which a talent program was introduced at a fictional organization (visuals and methodological details can be consulted in the Appendix). Respondents witnessed events unfold during the meeting from the first-person perspective of an employee named 'Robin' (a gender-neutral name). All other employees in the video (i.e., Robin's co-workers and HR director) were actors acting out a script written by the researchers. Respondents were instructed to imagine being in the shoes of Robin for the entirety of the study. Once respondents finished watching the video, they were taken to a survey containing the measures detailed below. They also completed an attention check (detailed further down).

Sample

Potential respondents were recruited by reaching out to various organizations in Belgium. Respondents had to be employed full- or part-time (i.e., no students, retirees, and temporary workers) in order to be eligible to participate. Of our preliminary sample of 229 employees, 184 completed the survey and were included in our analyses. 16 respondents had to prematurely exit the survey due to technical issues with the video (e.g., unsynchronized sound, trouble loading), 28 were removed for failing attention checks (see further down), and one additional respondent was removed for completing the survey faster than the total duration of the video. Of these 184 employees, 44% were male and 56% female. Respondents were on average 37.32 (*SD* = 12.43)

manipulation checks showed that instead of picking up on this manipulation, participants tended to count the number of talents versus non-talents in the video (2 and 6, respectively). Therefore, part of our sample (N = 27) did not correctly observe the experimentally manipulated percentage presented in the video. As a robustness check, we ran analyses using these two conditions (1 versus 30%) and found no significant outcomes (see Appendix).

years old and had 14.88 (*SD* = 12.37) years of work experience. Respondents worked in many different industries, the most common being human resources (9%), healthcare (9%), and finance (8%). The majority of our sample had obtained a higher education degree (48% held a Master's degree; 37% a Bachelor's degree; 3% a PhD or MBA; and 12% did not complete any higher education), and 28% of respondents held a position in management.

Manipulations

Talent identification. 2 employees present in the fictional meeting were identified as talents (announced by the actor playing the HR director), and 6 employees were not. Half of the respondents were assigned to the condition in which 'Robin' was one of the 2 employees identified as a talent, and the other half to the condition in which 'Robin' was a non-talent. Across all conditions, non-talents represented a clear majority to ensure that the talent status was perceived as special.

Talents' emotional response to their talent identification. The employee(s) identified as a talent in the vignette responded to their talent identification either with visible pride (a downward contrastive emotion), sympathy (a downward assimilative emotion; Smith, 2000), or remained neutral and exhibited no observable emotional reaction[2]. In the former condition, they raised their arms in victory, yelling out "woo!". They then said: "I am so proud, I will do everything to show I am the right person". In the latter condition, they briefly placed their hand over their

[2] **Data transparency note.** The neutral condition was excluded from our analyses as our manipulation checks showed that participants still believed they could discern emotions from them, even though all emotional terminology and responses were removed from the script in that condition. For instance, they often indicated that the talents showed a proud or sympathetic response when they in fact showed no response at all (which was clear when comparing the video vignettes to each other, but perhaps less so when one watches only one vignette in isolation). We thus decided to omit all data (N = 103) from participants assigned to the neutral condition from the analyses entirely (the reported sample size of N = 184 already excludes this subsample). As the conditions were between-subjects, and respondents were randomly assigned to them, this does not affect the rest of our analyses.

mouth and then said, with a concerned and earnest expression on their face: “I feel so bad for all the others who were not selected to join”.

Non-talents’ emotional response to the talent program. Each of the non-talents in the vignette was instructed to act out a different emotion, based on Smith’s (2000) work on upward contrastive (i.e., envious, depressed, stressed, irritated, hostile, resentful) and upward assimilative emotions (i.e., interested, enthusiastic, inspired, admiring, hopeful, optimistic). They acted out the emotions both verbally and non-verbally. For instance, envy was acted out as huffing, looking around angrily, and saying in the direction of the talents: “Sorry, but this whole program seems to have been concocted just to make us envious of you. I’m going to observe you more closely from now on, see if you really do a better job than the rest of us!”. Admiration, in contrast, was acted out by heavy nodding, smiling, and saying to the talents: “I really admire you guys for being chosen as talents! I’m going to observe you more closely from now on, see if I can learn from you”. Each condition contained either only contrastive, or only assimilative emotional responses by non-talents.

Attention checks. Several attention checks were included at the end of the survey to help eliminate respondents who did not pick up on one or more of our manipulations (for instance through distractions around them while watching the video; Abbey & Meloy, 2017). Specifically, we asked respondents if they were (i.e., if Robin was) identified as a talent or not, and to check off all the emotions they observed in the video as expressed by the actors (from a fixed list containing all assimilative and contrastive emotions included in the script verbatim). 28 participants (13%) were removed for failing one or both of the attention checks.

Measures

The study was conducted in the form of an online survey, published on the Qualtrics platform. The survey consisted of four sections: first, a socio-demographic background section; second, the video vignette section (containing an embedded YouTube video), third, a section containing the scales for our dependent and mediator variable (see further down), and fourth, a set of attention checks.

Anticipated ostracism. We asked respondents to indicate to what extent they believed they would feel ostracized by co-workers of the out-group (i.e., by non-talents if the respondent was identified as a talent and vice versa) in the scenario allocated to them, using the *Workplace Ostracism Scale* from Ferris and colleagues (2008), adapted minimally to fit our study topic. An example item was "The (non-)talents would start ignoring me at work". Items were rated on a seven-point scale from *1. never* to *7. always.*

Turnover intentions. To measure turnover intentions we used the five-item *job search behavior index* (Kopelman et al., 1992), combined with the three-item *turnover intention scale* **(**Hom, Griffeth, & Salaro, 1984), as recommended by turnover researchers (Mitchell et al., 2001). An example item was "To what extent would you, within 12 months after the announcement of the talent program, revise your resume?". Items were rated on a seven-point scale from *1. to a very small extent* to *7. To a very large extent*.

Control variables. Gender and work experience were identified as potential control variables for this study. Studies have found that women are more affected by differentiation

practices at work (Guimond & Chatard, 2014), and that employees at the start of their career tend to value talent management more than more senior employees (Festing & Schäfer, 2014).

Statistical Analyses

Analyses were performed using IBM SPSS 27. The moderated mediation model was tested using the PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2017). We used effect coding to recode our dummy variables (i.e., talent identification and out-group emotional response) to -0.5 and 0.5. Bias-corrected bootstrapping (n = 5,000) and 95% confidence intervals (CI) were used to test the indirect effects.

Results

Means, standard deviations, and correlations for all variables can be found in Table 1.

The total effect of our moderated mediation model (Table 2) showed a negative relationship between talent identification and turnover intentions (β = -1.17, SE = 0.21, p < .001). Overall, employees identified as talents were less likely to want to leave the organization (M = 2.67, SD = 1.33) than those not identified as talents (M = 3.83, SD = 1.48). Talent identification directly influenced anticipated ostracism in our model (β = 0.77, SE = 0.16, p = < .001), and ostracism directly influenced turnover intentions (β = 0.33, SE = 0.09, p < .001). Overall, talents (M = 2.61, SD = 1.12) were more likely to anticipate feeling ostracized than non-talents (M = 1.84, SD = 1.07), increasing the likelihood that they would leave the organization. Supporting our hypothesized theoretical model (Figure 1), we found a partial mediation effect of ostracism on the relationship between talent identification and turnover intentions (indirect effect = 0.25, Boot SE = 0.14, Boot 95% CI = [0.06, 0.59]). As the direct effect of talent identification on turnover intentions was negative (β = -1.42, SE = 0.21, p < .001), whereas the indirect effect through

ostracism was positive, the mediator in our model acted as a suppressor variable (MacKinnon, Krull, & Lockwood, 2000). We address this phenomenon in our Discussion.

In line with our expectations, we found that out-group emotional response moderated the relationship between talent identification and anticipated ostracism (β = -0.81, SE = 0.32, *p* = .011). Furthermore, we found that the indirect effect of talent identification on turnover intentions through anticipated ostracism was moderated by out-group emotional response (indirect effect = -0.26, Boot SE = 0.13, Boot 95% CI = [-0.56, -0.05]). More specifically, there was no effect of talent identification on anticipated ostracism when the out-group response was assimilative (indirect effect = 0.12, Boot SE = 0.11, Boot 95% CI = [-0.01, 0.39]), while there was an effect when the out-group response was contrastive (indirect effect = 0.38, Boot SE = 0.18, Boot 95% CI = [0.10, 0.80]). This effect was only found for talents, however; for non-talents, it made no difference whether talents exhibited an assimilative or contrastive emotional response (see Figure 2).

In addition to the above analyses, we performed robustness checks and a test of ecological validity, which are reported in the Appendix to this article.

Table 1
Descriptives and correlations (N = 184)

	M	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Gender[1]	0.56	0.50							
2. Work experience	14.88	12.37	.15*						
3. Talent identification[2]	0.50	0.50	.01	-.01					
4. Out-group emotional response[3]	0.51	0.50	-.01	.03	-.04				
5. In-group emotional response[3]	0.52	0.50	-.10	-.08	-.04	-.07			
6. Anticipated ostracism	2.23	1.16	-.05	.03	.34***	-.17*	-.07	(.94)	
7. Turnover intentions	3.25	1.52	-.06	-.04	-.38***	-.04	-.05	.09	(.84)

Notes. [1] 0 = Male, 1 = Female; [2] 0 = Non-talent, 1 = Talent; [3] 0 = Contrastive, 1 = Assimilative; *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

Table 2

Testing the moderated mediation effect of talent identification on turnover intentions through anticipated ostracism, moderated by out-group emotional response

Predictor variables	β	SE	*p*	95% CI
DV: Anticipated ostracism (mediator variable), R^2 = .17				
Gender	-0.11	0.16	.479	[-0.43, 0.20]
Work experience	0.00	0.01	.602	[-0.01, 0.02]
Talent identification (TI)[1]	0.77	0.16	<.001	[0.46, 1.08]
Out-group emotional response[2]	-0.35	0.16	.026	[-0.67, -0.04]
TI × Out-group emotional response	-0.81	0.32	.011	[-1.43, -0.19]
DV: Turnover intentions (dependent variable), R^2 = .21				
Gender	-0.11	0.21	.574	[-0.52, 0.30]
Work experience	-0.01	0.01	.484	[-0.02, 0.01]
Talent identification	-1.42	0.21	<.001	[-1.84, -0.99]
Anticipated ostracism	0.33	0.09	<.001	[0.14, 0.51]
Conditional indirect effects	Bootstrapped indirect effect		Boot SE	Boot 95% CI
Contrastive	0.38		0.18	[0.10, 0.80]
Assimilative	0.12		0.11	[-0.01, 0.39]

Notes. Analyses conducted using PROCESS macro model 9; Gender, 0 = male, 1 = female; [1] -0.5 = Non-talent, 0.5 = Talent; [2] -0.5 = Contrastive, 0.5 = Assimilative

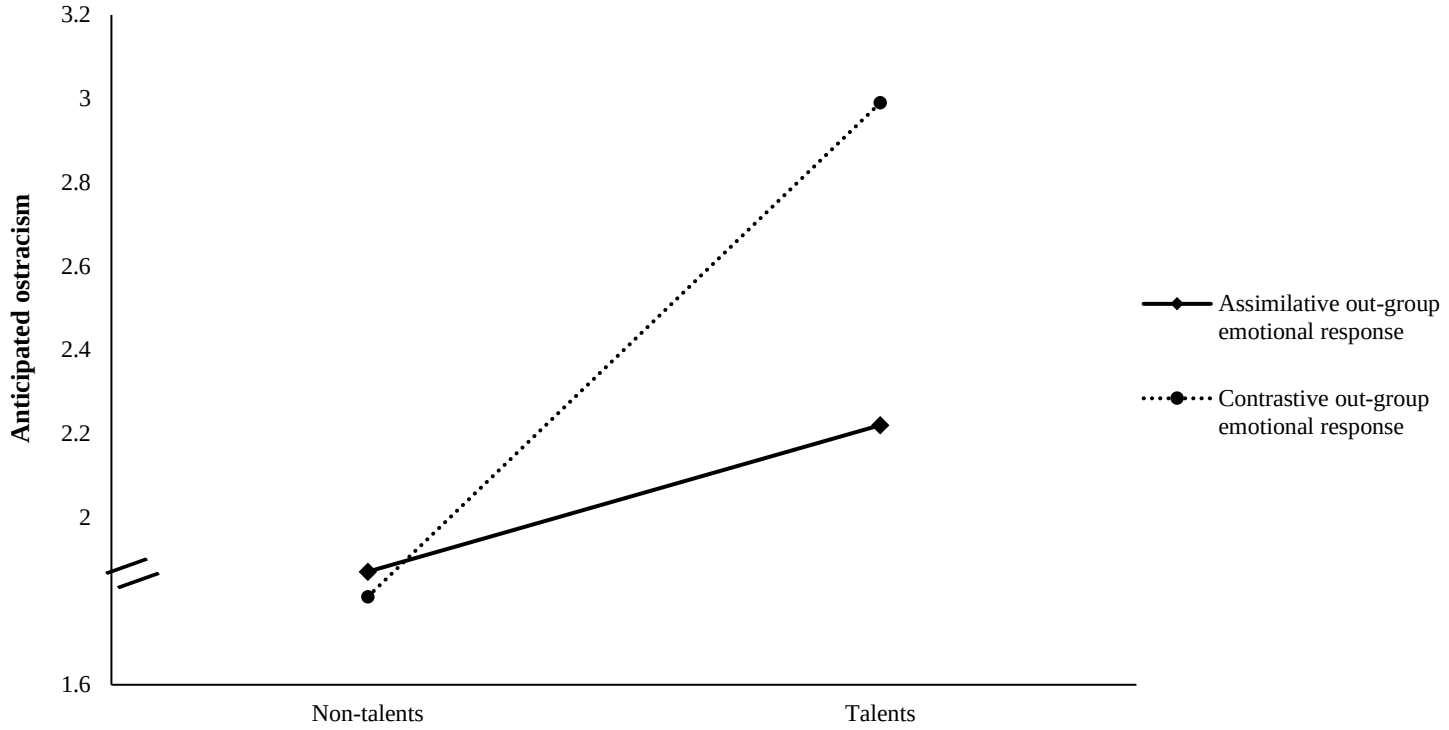

Figure 2

Anticipated ostracism as a function of talent identification and out-group emotional response (means plot)

Discussion

In this paper we set out to examine the causal relationship between talent identification and turnover intentions, the mediating influence of anticipated ostracism, and the moderating role of out-group emotional response to a talent program (Figure 1). Surprisingly little research has looked at the factors affecting the turnover intentions of talents versus non-talents, despite the clear importance of talent retention to organizations (Festing & Schäfer, 2014; Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2015; Michaels et al., 2001), and heated debates in the literature especially about the assumed effects of talent programs on non-talents (De Boeck et al., 2018).

A first finding was that talent identification directly affects the turnover intentions of employees. However, talent retention through talent identification alone is not a given. We found that the relationship between talent identification and turnover intentions was partially mediated by ostracism, with stronger expectations of being ostracized by out-group members (i.e., talents being excluded and ignored by non-talents and vice-versa) eliciting stronger intentions to leave the organization. While quitting is a natural response to avoid undesirable social situations at work (Mitchell et al., 2001; O'Reilly et al., 2015), what was rather surprising in our study was that the average talent anticipated more ostracism than the average non-talent.

We found a negative direct effect of talent identification on turnover intentions but a positive indirect effect through anticipated ostracism. These opposite directions indicate that ostracism acts as a suppressor variable in our model, partialling out extraneous variation, and strengthening the relationship between talent identification and turnover (MacKinnon et al., 2000). Where most mediators explain the process through which an outcome comes to be, a

suppressor variable provides support why it may not. It is thus very well possible that previous talent management studies did not find consistent effects of talent identification on turnover intention (as described earlier in this paper) as a result of unidentified suppressor variables, of which ostracism appears to be one.

We also found a conditional indirect effect of out-group emotional response on in-group anticipated ostracism. Specifically, assimilative emotional responses shown by non-talents—where they embrace the talent program and support the talents' new social identity—reduce talents' anticipation of being ostracized by non-talents. As Figure 2 shows, the level of ostracism talents anticipate under that boundary condition is similar to that of non-talents. In other words, employees identified as talents expect to be ostracized on the work floor more, unless the talent program is perceived by the employees excluded from it as a positive practice, such that the program is considered praiseworthy and a source of inspiration to all employees.

Theoretical Contributions

The present study adds to the literature on talent management (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2015), social identity theory (Ashforth & Mael, 1989), and ostracism in the workplace (Williams, 2007). First, to date only a handful of studies on talent management—most of which qualitative interview studies—have used social identity theory as their theoretical framework (e.g., Dubouloy, 2014; Kamoche & Leigh, 2022; Tansley & Tietze, 2013; Wikhamn et al., 2020). As it stands currently, the literature benefits from a deeper understanding of the effects of talent identification on social identity (De Boeck et al., 2018). Our findings provide the necessary evidence that exclusive talent management programs, in which only a small subset of employees are identified as talents (Swailes et al., 2014), may be subjected to intergroup conflicts within the

organization. Whether organizations like it or not, the label 'talent' given to a select few shapes employees' social identities and subsequent behavior (Tajfel, 1979), leading to in-group favoritism and out-group hostilities (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) such as ostracism (Ferris et al., 2008). Moreover, our study demonstrates that employees will react to (not) being identified as a talent in this way even when a minimal group paradigm is adopted, mirroring talent identification practices that are mostly symbolic in nature and decoupled from tangible rewards (Nijs et al., 2014). Field studies, to date, have been unable to separate the symbolic effects of talent status from the effects of the tangible additional resources employees (e.g., promotions, pay raises) may receive as a result (De Boeck et al., 2018). In addition, our study is the first to study the potential effects of talent programs on intergroup dynamics between talents and non-talents, which is also a significant gap in the literature (Al Ariss et al., 2014; Nijs et al., 2022). In general, there has been very little acknowledgment of the potential negative effects of talent management on talents (De Boeck et al., 2018), with the exception of a few studies that looked at stress and alienation (Dries & Pepermans, 2008; Kamoche & Leigh, 2022; Tansley & Tietze, 2013). While it is much more common to assume negative effects on non-talents (Malik & Singh, 2014; Sapegina & Weibel, 2017), empirical studies on this have also been exceedingly rare as organizations are typically unwilling to allow data collection on such a sensitive topic (De Boeck et al., 2018). Therefore, another contribution of our study is to demonstrate an alternative method for doing research on employee reactions to talent management, using realistic and immersive vignettes that allow for a systematic manipulation of independent variables and thus causal inferences (Aguinis & Bradley, 2014; Auspurg & Hinz, 2015).

Second, within the literature on ostracism, researchers are still actively exploring which variables may influence individuals' experience of ostracism both within, and outside of the workplace (e.g., O'Reilly et al., 2015; Robinson et al., 2013; Wu et al., 2016). To the best of our knowledge, while recent studies have looked at dispositional variables such as personality to predict whether people will feel ostracized in specific situations (Yaakobi, 2021), to date there have not been any studies experimentally manipulating workplace factors to gauge their impact on ostracism. At best, through survey studies, researchers have identified factors in the organizational context that correlate with ostracism (e.g., job mobility, collectivism, power distance, and future orientation; Wu et al., 2016), yet these do not offer causal evidence. In the current paper we find that there is, in fact, a causal relationship between talent identification and turnover intentions, partially mediated by anticipated ostracism and moderated by out-group emotional response. Our findings not only demonstrate that ostracism is directly linked to employees' intention to leave the organization, but that these feelings can be actively assuaged by managers if they succeed in achieving a pleasant, cooperative work environment characterized by assimilative emotions (Smith, 2000).

Finally, building on the above, our findings contribute to social identity theory by showing that minority- and majority-group outcomes can be reversed in certain situations. In our study, we found that talents anticipated more ostracism than non-talents, especially when non-talents displayed contrastive emotional responses to the talent program (that are assumed to be much more prevalent in real-life settings than assimilative responses; Gelens, Dries, Hofmans, & Pepermans, 2013; Malik & Singh, 2014). A possible explanation is offered by Eck and colleagues (2017), who found that belonging to a majority group—such as the non-talents in our study—

tends to buffer the feeling of ostracism as there is less threat to the need to belong when one belongs to a relatively larger in-group. Thus, where employees would normally be expected to benefit from their inclusion in a privileged group, such effects may be reversed in a talent management setting as talents run the risk of being excluded from a very large majority group (the non-talents, often comprising 90-99% of the workforce; Church et al., 2015). A theoretical question that arises, then, is whether our findings would still hold if the talents were to form the majority group, despite the fact that this is hardly ever the case in real-life organizations (Swailes et al., 2014). This essentially means that singling out an elite, high-status minority group in an organizational setting can create undesired and unexpected side effects, such as the group being ostracized by out-group members belonging to the majority—which studies have indicated is more typically the case for lower-status minority groups (Williams & Carter-Sowell, 2009). The literatures on envy (e.g., Roberts et al., 2021; Vecchio, 2005), competitive human resource practices (Sapegina & Weibel, 2017), coworker social undermining (Reh, Tröster, & Van Quaquebeke, 2018), and knowledge hiding (e.g., Connelly, Černe, Dysvik, & Škerlavaj, 2019) may be relevant to look at for future studies examining these effects in more depth.

Practical Implications

Our findings lend support to the notion that talent identification, as an organizational practice, can indeed positively affect talent retention—a key objective of talent management since its conception in the 1990s (Collings, 2014; Michaels et al., 2001)—such that the mere identification of employees as 'talent' makes them less likely to want to leave the organization. That said, critics have warned that enhanced talent retention may come at a cost of disengagement amongst those excluded from the talent pool (Björkman et al., 2013; Swailes, 2013)—an assumption that

is *also* corroborated by our research. Managers should not underestimate these effects on turnover intentions as they are likely to translate into actual turnover in the future (Rubenstein et al., 2015), or alternatively into disgruntled employees who end up staying, but are resentful and demotivated (Verbruggen & Van Emmerik, 2018).

One of the more surprising findings of our study that is likely of interest to both researchers and practitioners is that employees identified as 'talents' in our sample anticipated more ostracism by non-talents than the other way around. It is possible that this reflects a natural effect where social order is restored by undermining coworkers who are higher in status (Reh et al., 2018). This finding certainly warrants reflection, as some authors have gone so far as to say that ostracism can have more harmful effects on organizations than bullying (Ferris et al., 2008; Williams, 2007) or harassment (O'Reilly et al., 2015), even though employees themselves tend to rate these latter types of interpersonal conflict as subjectively worse than being excluded. Reported effects of ostracism on employees include anxiety (Buss, 1990), risky and unhealthy behaviors (Twenge, Catanese, & Baumeister, 2002), aggression (Twenge, Baumeister, Tice, & Stucke, 2001), physical pain (Eisenberger et al., 2003), and ultimately greatly reduced organizational performance (Kerr, Seok, Poulsen, Harris, & Messé, 2008). The root of the issue lies in the ambiguity surrounding ostracism, leading individuals to ruminate over whether it even occurred to begin with (Robinson et al., 2013). This ambiguity also makes it nearly impossible for managers to identify and address workplace ostracism, exacerbating the issue further, as they cannot confront group members about what they have *not* done (Robinson et al., 2013), and any act of ostracism can be infallibly denied by the perpetrators (Williams, 2007).

So what can managers do? Our results indicate that an assimilative emotional response from non-talents to a talent program—i.e., interest, enthusiasm, inspiration, admiration, hope, optimism (Smith, 2000)—buffers the anticipated feelings of ostracism held by talents. Consequently, it may help to set up more cooperative tasks and improved communication lines (e.g., weekly employee meetings, networking events) between both groups (Wu et al., 2016). It is likely also important to communicate that not being identified as a talent this year does not mean one will not have the opportunity to be identified in the future, and check for selection biases annually (Gelens et al., 2013). Other strategies are positioning the talents as role models (Lockwood & Kunda, 1997) and emphasizing the similarities and shared goals among non-talents and talents within one's team or business unit, thereby altering the 'us versus them' dynamic (Krueger & DiDonato, 2008).

The opposite strategy may also work, which is keeping the talent program a secret from excluded employees (Church et al., 2015). There have been several studies that have found that, indeed, talent management secrecy or at least 'strategic ambiguity' seems to be the norm in the field (Dries & De Gieter, 2014; Sumelius, Smale, & Yamao, 2020). While this prevents the overt creation of two opposing groups, Huang and Tansley (2012) argue that employees will often find out about their talent identification regardless, for instance when one employee gets to do a company-sponsored MBA while others do not, leading to gossip and detective-work (Dries & De Gieter, 2014). The risk is, then, that the secrecy will exacerbate the already negative responses to the talent program (Swailes, 2013), unwittingly intensifying ostracism between talents and non-talents even more.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Experimental vignette studies are sometimes criticized for their perceived lack of ecological validity, as they capture participant responses to fictitious scenarios and are not based on field data. It is argued, therefore, that their findings cannot be readily extrapolated to 'real' employees in 'real' organizations (De Boeck et al., 2018). This critique is also in part based on the observation that many experimental studies draw from student or MBA samples, which was not the case in the present study (see sample descriptives). When done properly vignettes allow researchers to capture intricate and complex real-life situations and mechanisms into scenarios designed to test for causal effects of systematically varied independent variables, a distinct advantage over field studies (Auspurg & Hinz, 2015). As compared to the more commonly used text-based vignettes, more immersive methods like 360° videos have also been found to be rated by respondents as more realistic and invoking a greater sense of presence (see Appendix, section on ecological validity). Moreover, vignettes allow for the study of sensitive or counterfactual phenomena that are difficult or impossible to study in the field (Aguinis & Bradley, 2014).

In fact, we believe that more experimental research is urgently needed in the talent management topic area, considering the causality issues plaguing the field, and the difficulty of getting access to field data due to the sensitivity of the topic (De Boeck et al., 2018). We would also argue that vignette studies are also the most feasible method to study employee responses to talent programs, as the alternative—multilevel field studies—require samples of hundreds of talents and non-talents in a few dozen organizations to account for the impact of organizational context and specific talent program features. Such studies would furthermore have to oversample talents as they typically comprise only 1 to 10% of an organization's population (Church et al., 2015), which means that random sampling would lead to extremely skewed

sample sizes for talents and non-talents respectively. Field studies also typically suffer from causal inference issues, especially when they use cross-sectional surveys, which has been the case for almost all existing quantitative studies on talent management (De Boeck et al., 2018). For instance, are talents less likely to leave the organization because of their talent identification, or were they hand-picked by management because of their visibly higher loyalty to the organization (Wikhamn et al., 2021)?

In addition, researchers would have to account for confounds (i.e., irrelevant differences between organizations that influence employee responses), and avoid relying on self-report data since as a result of the talent management secrecy/ambiguity phenomenon (Huang & Tansley, 2012; Dries & De Gieter, 2014; Sumelius et al., 2020), employees cannot reliably report on their own talent status (Sonnenberg, Van Zijderveld, & Brinks, 2014). As we report in the Appendix (see robustness checks), 121 out of 184 participants in our study (66%) indicated that they self-identified as a talent in real life. It is immediately clear that these numbers stand in stark contrast to benchmarking data as to what proportion of employees are considered talents by organizations (Church et al., 2015). Further research might perform more fine-grained tests of the effects of (incongruences between) formal talent status, self-perceived talent status, and perhaps yet other constructs such as perceived deservingness (Gelens et al., 2014; Sonnenberg et al., 2014).

If we want to come to a better theoretical and empirical understanding of talent versus non-talent responses to different types of talent management practices, we need more studies that capture the effects of systematic variations in such practices (De Boeck et al., 2018). Further experimental research could study the (interactive) effects of different configurations of talent

program characteristics and coworker emotional responses, in more details using within-subjects designs, such as implicit policy capturing and conjoint analysis (Aguinis & Bradley, 2014). Such designs typically study the effects of complex configurations of a larger number of independent variables on a simple dependent variable (typically choice preference or approval rating), allowing researchers to disentangle the relative effects of different talent program variables on interpersonal dynamics such as ostracism in more detail (Auspurg & Hinz, 2015).

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Appendix

Development of 360°-Video Vignettes

The study was conducted using 360°-video vignettes, with both vignettes and videos offering various benefits as a research method. Vignettes allow for systematic and controlled variation in the independent variables, in comparison to more classical survey administration formats (Aguinis & Bradley, 2014; Auspurg & Hinz, 2015). 360°-videos offer a more immersive medium, enhancing the authenticity, credibility, and realism of the scenarios presented (Adão et al., 2018), a lack thereof being a common critique of text-based vignettes (Auspurg & Hinz, 2015). Moreover, videos allow for the observation of bodily and facial gestures, which have found to be crucial to accurately identify and cognitively process emotions (Kret, Stekelenburg, Roelofs, & De Gelder, 2013). As out-group emotional responses were central to our research question, we believed that 360°-video vignettes would be the most appropriate method for this study.

All scenes for the video vignettes were recorded with a special ball-shaped 360°-camera (Garmin VIRB®360), allowing for video and sound capture in a 360°-angle around the camera. While watching the video vignettes (which were embedded in the Qualtric survey as YouTube videos), respondents were able to look around the room from the seated perspective of Robin using their mouse or smartphone, which enhances realism (Aguinis & Bradley, 2014). We rented out a boardroom at our local university campus that had a large circular meeting table, which made it particularly well suited to capture the whole meeting from one video angle. We placed name tags, coffee mugs, snacks, and slide projector screens in the room to further enhance realism, as we knew respondents would be looking around the room during the video. In front of the respondent's (i.e., the camera's) chair, the name tag "Robin" was clearly displayed (see the

still in Figure 3). As respondents were also able to look down during the video, the tripod that carried the 360°-camera was placed onto a chair with the camera at eye-height, and draped with a formal shirt to create a 'body' for Robin (see Figure 4).

All roles in the video were acted out by university staff with proven acting experience (e.g., having performed theater as a hobby). The recordings consisted of separate scenes (i.e., each manipulation was shot independently of the rest), allowing us to combine the various scenes together to create 24 unique video vignettes, corresponding to our experimental conditions. The editing was done using the Garmin VIRB Edit software application included with the 360°-camera. Rehearsal and filming took place over the course of a day, following a script written by the researchers that included verbal and non-verbal directions for each manipulation, based verbatim on the terminology and definitions from the literature. For instance, at crucial points in the vignettes the actors were instructed to look and talk directly at Robin (i.e., the camera). The authors of the paper were present to supervise the shoot and check the footage.

Ecological validity

The primary motivation to use 360°-video vignettes was to heighten the realism of the scenarios presented to employees—to make it appear like they attended a real board room meeting in a real organization—and to foster high levels of immersion. Immersion, often measured as a sense of presence, was assessed at the end of our survey using the Slater-Usoh-Steed questionnaire, consisting of six items (see Table 3) enquiring how 'real' the vignette experience felt in comparison to a real-life experience, and to what extent participants felt like they were in Robin's shoes (Usoh, Catena, Arman, & Slater, 2000). On a scale from 1 to 7, where higher scores indicate a more life-like experience that resembles reality, we found that participants reported a mean

presence level of 4.27 (*SD* = 1.34). This mean presence is similar to those found in other studies using 360°-videos (e.g., Gold & Windscheid, 2020), and is also significantly higher than the neutral (4.00) scale point, $t(183) = 2.70$, $p = .008$. Furthermore, presence did not correlate with anticipated ostracism ($r = .12$, $p = .121$) and turnover intentions ($r = .02$, $p = .826$). We can conclude that our study design was successful in addressing potential concerns about ecological validity (Auspurg & Hinz, 2015).

Supplementary Analyses

Robustness Checks

Talent program inclusivity. As indicated in the manuscript in a data transparency note, in the study we originally also manipulated the percentage of employees identified as a talent (i.e., 1% versus 30%; *N* = 94 and *N* = 90, respectively), but excluded this variable from our analyses as several respondents (15%) failed the corresponding manipulation check. We compared the means of the dependent variables between these two conditions and checked for interaction effects with the other independent variables. Both turnover intentions ($t(182) = -1.30$, $p = .195$), and ostracism ($t(182) = 0.40$, $p = .690$), do not significantly differ between 1 and 30% talent program inclusivity. Through ANOVAs, we found no evidence of interaction effects between talent status and talent program inclusivity on turnover intentions ($F(1, 180) = 1.11$, $p = .293$), and ostracism ($F(1, 180) = 0.11$, $p = .736$). Finally, including talent management program inclusivity as a variable in our theoretical model—using PROCESS macro (Model 11)—revealed no three-way interaction ($\beta = -0.02$, SE = 0.02, $p = .336$) with talent identification and out-group emotional response. In the manuscript, we thus work with data aggregated across these two conditions.

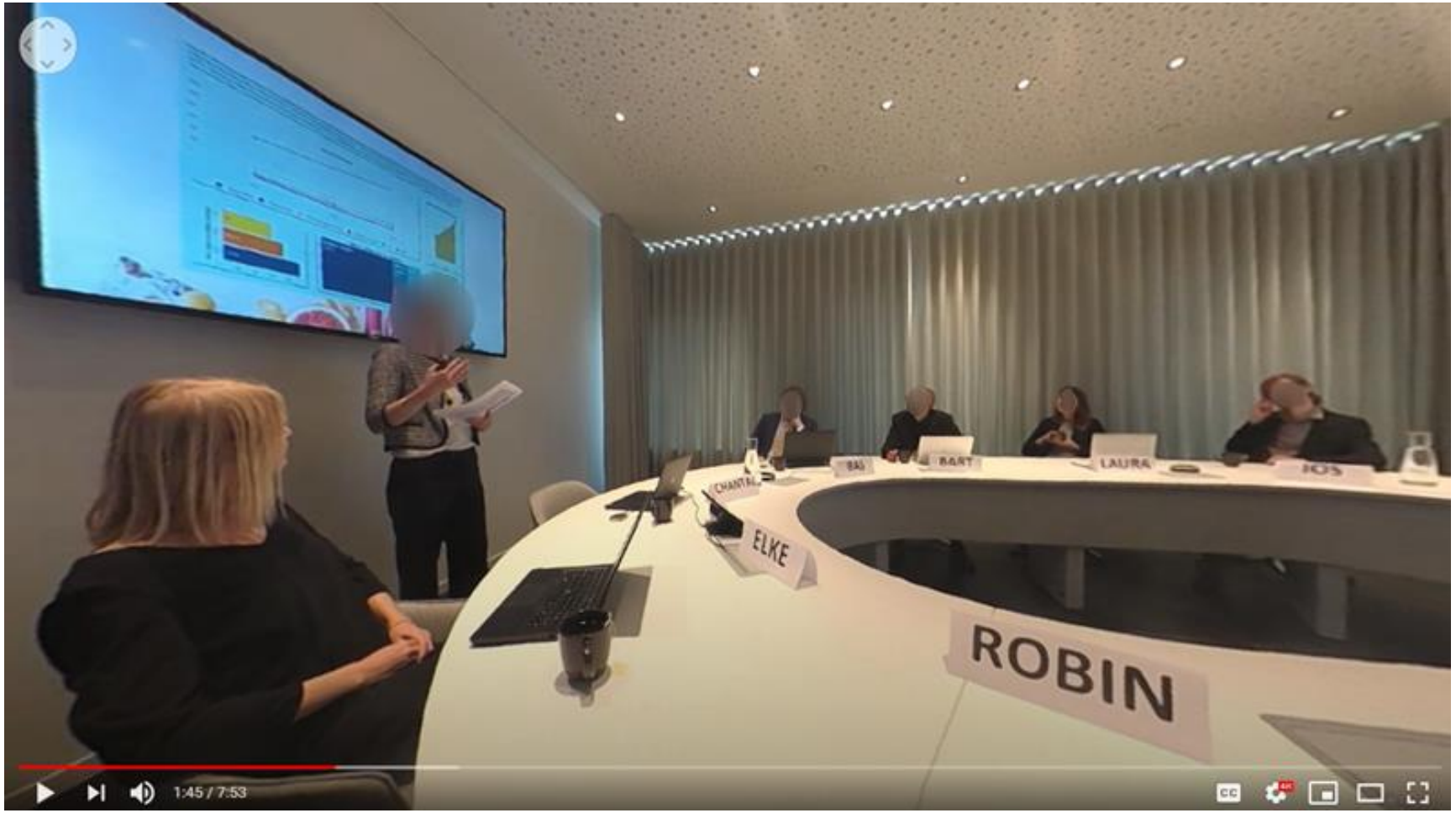

Figure 3

Still from one of the experimental 360°-video vignettes (seen from the respondent's—i.e., Robin's—point of view)

Figure 4

The ball-shaped 360° camera (a Garmin VIRB®360) was mounted on a tripod and dressed with a shirt to enhance realism for the viewer in first-person perspective

Table 3
Exploratory factor analysis showing factor loadings of the six presence items

Presence items	α
1. To which extent did you have the feeling really being 'present' at the meeting at DruCo in which the talent management program was introduced?	.804
2. To which extent did you have times that you felt that the meeting at DruCo was the reality for you?	.844
3. If you think back at your experience as Robin, did you experience the meeting at DruCo as a form of imagination, or rather as a place you have visited?	.765
4. During your experience as Robin during the meeting at DruCo, did you have a stronger feeling of presence at DruCo, or of being in your real environment?	.776
5. If we were to ask you to remember a memory from your time at DruCo as Robin, would your memory be similar to that of a place that you have recently visited?	.704
6. To which extent did you have moments in which you really felt like an employee (i.e., Robin) at DruCo?	.888

In-group emotional response. Since ostracism is typically inferred from the socio-emotional signals portrayed by out-group members (Spoor & Williams, 2007), the emotional response of in-group co-workers (i.e., talents observing the reactions of fellow talents, and non-talents observing the reactions of fellow non-talents) should not directly influence anticipated ostracism by an out-group. Nonetheless, we wanted to check if in-group emotional response influenced the anticipated ostracism of talents and non-talents, and whether it interacted with out-group emotional response. Testing for this three-way interaction was done using the PROCESS macro (Model 9). As expected, in-group emotional response did not influence anticipated ostracism (β = -0.13, SE = 0.16, p = .408), nor did it interact with talent identification (β = -0.19, SE = 0.32, p = .542). A three-way interaction was not found either (β = 1.04, SE = 0.64, p = .106). Talents will thus only expect to be ostracized when faced with a contrastive out-group emotional response, regardless of how the other talents respond to their talent identification.

Self-perceived talent identification. For the sake of establishing causality, which is typically lacking in talent management research (De Boeck, Meyers, & Dries, 2018), in the present study we chose to allocate talent status to respondents randomly. As a robustness check,

however, we wanted to account for the potential confounding influence of self-perceived talent identification. It is conceivable that respondents who see themselves as 'talents' in real life may react more negatively to a fictitious talent program in which they are not identified as talents (Björkman, Ehrnrooth, Mäkelä, Smale, & Sumelius, 2013). According to the social identity literature, employees will behave in accordance with how they view themselves (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Korte, 2007). While minimal group paradigm studies have found that individuals can and do adapt their behavior to the social categorization they are assigned to in an experimental context (Tajfel, 1970), there is still a risk of confound when the group they are placed in does not fit their real-life social identity at all, especially when the group is considered inferior (Abrams & Hogg, 1990).

We thus asked respondents whether or not they perceived themselves as a talent in real life, and examined the two-way interaction effect between talent identification and the match between experimentally manipulated and self-perceived talent identification. The followings subsamples emerged: 'manipulated talents' self-identifying as 'real-life talents' (N = 64); 'manipulated talents' self-identifying as 'real-life non-talents' (N = 28); 'manipulated non-talents' self-identifying as 'real-life non-talents' (N = 35); and 'manipulated non-talents' self-identifying as 'real-life talents' (N = 57). Note that 121 out of 184 respondents total self-identified as talents, which corresponds to 66% of our sample.

Testing another moderated mediation model using the PROCESS macro (Model 7), we found that there was no significant interaction effect between manipulated and self-perceived talent identification on ostracism (β = -0.52, SE = 0.35, p = .138). We conclude that both employees who self-identify as a talent, and those who do not, reacted similarly to the

experimentally induced talent identification in our study. We found that talent identification reduced the turnover intentions of respondents regardless of whether or not they perceived themselves as a talent in real life. As thoroughly examining discrepancies between self- and other-identification as a (non-)talent is beyond the scope of this particular study, we encourage researchers to explore how such discrepancies influence employee retention and their experience of organizational intergroup conflicts (Sonnenberg, van Zijderveld, & Brinks, 2014).

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Epilogue

With managers and academics locked in debate for the past decade on how talent management is best approached to elicit favorable employee outcomes (Sparrow, Scullion, & Tarique, 2014; Swailes, 2013)—and arguments for alterations to existing talent programs to appease employees built upon assumptions and mere conjecture (De Boeck, Meyers, & Dries, 2018)—the primary objective of this dissertation was to empirically investigate how employees actually react to the in- and exclusion from various talent programs. Six studies (i.e., five experimental studies and one field survey) were conducted in an attempt to address this general research question, and subsequently broaden our understanding of the social-psychological mechanisms underpinning talent management practices in order to predict and explain the reactions of these employees. As previously stated, the phenomenon of talent management is highly complex pressing researchers to account for a plethora of boundary conditions in their studies—for instance, do employees respond to their talent status because of the benefits it provides or the symbolic value the label 'talent' carries? (Kamoche & Leigh, 2022; Tansley & Tietze, 2013). When designing our studies we took all these components into consideration and focused on a relatively wide array of contextual factors, design features, dispositional variables, and potential employee outcomes that may—or have previously been shown to (De Boeck et al., 2018)—play a role in talent management practices. It was obviously impossible to focus on all relevant theories (e.g., social exchange theory; Wikhamn, Asplund, & Dries, 2021) and employee reactions (e.g., stress; Dries & Pepermans, 2008; Tansley & Tietze, 2013), so some of these are addressed as potential suggestions for future research further on in the epilogue.

In the first chapter we argued, using social comparison theory, that the commonly held assumption that less exclusive and more transparent talent programs lead to improved employee reactions was incorrect. More specifically, we incorporated the findings from the study from Alicke and his colleagues (1997) in our research design to illustrate that being excluded from a small superior minority (i.e., 1%) creates a so-called 'genius effect' where these exceptional individuals are framed as 'geniuses', protecting the inferior individuals from the typically negative effects of the upward social comparison (Mussweiler, Gabriel, & Bodenhausen, 2000). Simply put, it is better to not belong to the top 1% of a group of individuals, than the top 30%. In the first study the assumptions of managers were quantified, showing that those concerned about negative employee reactions effectively opt for less exclusive talent programs. For study two and three the reactions of non-talents and talents were measured respectively, revealing that less exclusive programs were associated with more envy, turnover intentions, and less organization-based self-esteem for non-talents. While we did not observe any noticeable impact on the reactions of talents, the results do confirm that there is a trade-off to be made when talent managers make their programs less exclusive. Managers can reduce the number of disgruntled employees excluded from the talent pool at the cost of enhancing the intensity of these negative reactions. Finally, for the first chapter we can also conclude that keeping talent status a secret from employees is an effective way to soften the blow for non-talents, at least until they find out—which they most likely will (Huang & Tansley, 2012).

In chapter two we examined whether specific talent program design features, such as the program's inclusivity and management's communication strategy, impacted non-talents' feelings of envy. We specifically decided to split envy into two separate constructs of benign and malicious envy, the former representing employees' motivation to improve themselves

to try and acquire talent status, and the latter representing a desire for the talent program to fail (Van de Ven, 2016). Our data showed that organizational justice perceptions played a significant role here, with non-talents more likely to exhibit benign envy when they thought the implementation of the talent program was fair. In the first study we conducted a field survey amongst employees who had previously been excluded from a talent program at their organization, allowing us to explore and recount their experience of 'being a non-talent'. Replicating that study in an experiment led to similar findings, adding further causal evidence to the table that non-talents generally struggle with not being included into a talent pool that is reserved solely for exceptional co-workers. Based on the findings however, we proposed that talent managers provide a realistic preview of what is required of talents—i.e., more work with no immediate tangible benefits (Nijs, Gallardo-Gallardo, Dries, & Sels, 2014)—to encourage a benign reaction from non-talents. The results also indicated that transparent communication about the talent program promoted self-improvement behaviors—thereby benefitting both the non-talents and the organization at large—which, at a glance, appears to contradict the implications of chapter one. This contradictory inter-study outcome will be discussed in depth later during the implications of this dissertation.

In the third and final chapter we conducted one more innovative study to try and show under which conditions talent programs are successful in ensuring talent retention—an important outcome of talent management practices for organizations (Festing & Schäfer, 2014)—considering that previous studies in the field found mixed results on turnover (De Boeck et al., 2018). Using 360°-video vignettes, employees participated in a virtual and fictional boardroom meeting where a new talent program was introduced. This allowed us to manipulate intergroup interactions between talents and non-talents, leading us to conclude that a negative emotional response from non-talents leads talents to expect being ostracized,

and subsequently more likely to leave the organization in response. A poorly implemented talent program could therefore create the opposite effect of what managers actually intended to accomplish.

The chapters and studies presented in this dissertation hopefully shed a light on how employees react to talent management and inform the reader why talent management can only be better understood through a social-psychological lens. The next few parts of the epilogue revolve around the contributions and implications of the dissertation, followed by a number of suggestions for future research. Further, a global evaluation is made on the inclusive versus exclusive debate happening amongst academics and practitioners, as well as an evaluation on the experimental vignette methodology utilized for most studies presented in this dissertation. Finally, a reflection is included, nuancing my personal views on 'elite' talent programs in light of new insights acquired over the past five years.

Theoretical contributions

While various psychological phenomenon and dynamics have been identified by management scholars—such as the observation that differentiating between employees can create interpersonal friction (Swailes & Blackburn, 2016), or cripple employee morale (Swailes, 2013)—they have to date never been properly identified and described using existing psychological theories (De Boeck et al., 2018). This is not surprising given that talent management is a highly phenomenon-driven field that has struggled with theory development (Gallardo-Gallardo, Nijs, Dries, & Gallo, 2015), yet it is no less worrisome as it allowed numerous unsubstantiated assumptions to emerge that have driven academics and practitioners alike to promote ineffective 'solutions' to relevant and ongoing organizational challenges (De Boeck et al., 2018; Festing & Schäfer, 2014). Talent management has been

examined through a social-psychological lens in this dissertation to address that gap, which we believe is an important—and ultimately necessary (Chatman & Flynn, 2005)—step forward for the advancement of talent management research. Nevertheless, the studies presented here contribute not only to the field of management (i.e., talent management literature) but also to the field of organizational psychology (i.e., social comparison theory and social identity theory), thereby addressing research gaps in both fields simultaneously. In that regard we can emphasize three major contributions to the literature.

Social comparison theory

First, all empirical studies highlight the importance of social comparisons between talents and non-talents as a manner through which their reactions to talent management can be explained. Particularly chapter one, where social comparison theory is discussed at length to build a theoretical framework, shows that non-talents making upward social comparisons (i.e., they are comparing their inferior position to that of the superior talents), is associated with typical social comparison outcomes such as envy (Fiske, 2010) and diminished organization-based self-esteem (Taylor & Lobel, 1989). More importantly, the findings show that the genius effect could be harnessed by non-talents—by keeping talent programs highly exclusive—to buffer against these negative reactions (Alicke et al., 1997). In chapter two—despite social comparison theory not being an equally central topic there—it is similarly shown how specific talent programs are more likely to inhibit envious feelings from surfacing amongst non-talents. It can be argued then that these design features (e.g., more transparent communication) are also instrumental in protecting non-talents from upward social comparisons, as research has shown that individuals can protect themselves more adequately when the outperformance is more justified (Clay-Warner, Robinson, Smith-Lovin, Rogers, & James, 2016). These studies therefore prove that the negative reactions to upward social

comparisons can effectively be manipulated—both experimentally and in organizational practice (De Boeck et al., 2018; Tesser, Millar, & Moore, 1988)—through these social comparison defense mechanisms.

Moreover, across all studies the tangible rewards can be decoupled from the benefits associated with talent status. With most social comparison research examining quantifiable differences in terms of tangible rewards (e.g., income; Boyce, Brown, & Moore, 2010), performance outcomes (e.g., test scores; Garcia & Tor, 2007), or personal attributes (e.g., attractiveness; Agthe, Spörrle, Frey, & Maner, 2014), it is interesting and novel to learn that a purely symbolic label of 'talent' is already sufficient to induce a social comparison as well (Nijs et al., 2014). In other words, this dissertation shows that inferior employees may envy others for how observers perceive them rather than—as is most typically assumed for social comparisons (Smith, 2000; Taylor & Lobel, 1989; Tesser et al., 1988)—for what these outperformers *measurably* have (c.f., a label cannot be quantified, unlike standard comparison domains such as performance; Garcia & Tor, 2007). For future studies researchers may thus want to explore to what extent non-talents are upset about not having the same opportunities for professional development as talents, relative to how upset they are for not being seen as equals by their managers.

Social identity theory

Second, this dissertation highlights how differentiating between employees—splitting them up in talents and non-talents—is sufficient to develop an 'us' versus 'them' mentality amongst members of both groups. Particularly chapter three contributes to social identity theory by demonstrating that typical outcomes for majority and minority group members can be reversed, such that talents (i.e., the minority) may suffer from out-group attacks despite being

in a high-status position (Williams & Carter-Sowell, 2009). Simultaneously, majority group members can buffer against potential intergroup conflicts (i.e., ostracism) despite being in a low-status position. In chapter one we can observe that employees also feel and behave in accordance with their social identities (Ashforth & Mael, 1989), with talents experiencing more organization-based self-esteem and more loyalty towards the organization in comparison to the non-talents. Understanding how employees socially identify is thus crucial, with other researchers corroborating that employee reactions are already shaped on basis of whether they *believe* that they have been identified as a talent (Björkman, Ehrnrooth, Mäkelä, Smale, & Sumelius, 2013), despite often incorrectly so (Smale et al., 2015; Sonnenberg, van Zijderveld, & Brinks, 2014). In line with that, chapter one furthermore shows that employees unaware of their talent status also benefit from heightened organization-based self-esteem and lower turnover intentions, which can potentially be explained by the fact that roughly two out of three employees believe they are a talent. With social comparisons made difficult if talent status is unknown amongst workers, one may argue that social identity theory ultimately plays a more profound role when talent management practices are kept secret.

The above example illustrates the difficulty in disentangling the psychological mechanisms at play in talent management practices. Questions employees—particularly non-talents—will most likely (subconsciously) ask themselves in response to the implementation of a new talent program would not only revolve around social comparison theory (i.e., how much better are the talents than me?) and social identity theory (i.e., based on my 'new' identity, how should I behave?), but also social exchange theory (i.e., how much is the organization investing into talents, and how do I reciprocate?), justice (i.e., was the program's implementation fair?), and organizational culture (i.e., are my co-workers going to be competitive about this?). While these mechanisms are kept separate as much as possible

across studies, it is not wholly unthinkable that some employees fill in the dots themselves (e.g., they imagine their relationship with their 'real' colleagues to indicate how they would respond themselves in the fictional scenario, as occasionally seen in their feedback—e.g., "we have a very informal work atmosphere, so with that in mind…"). This challenge is inherent to practically any organizational research, yet it is important to be aware of it. Through qualitative studies researchers can perhaps best attempt to discern which of these questions most occupy (non-)talents' minds.

Talent management literature

Third, this dissertation puts some deleterious and prevalent assumptions about employee reactions to talent management to rest. The case study presented in the paper of Hjordrup and her colleagues (2015) was perhaps the greatest motivator of this dissertation, and the observed phenomenon that set the studies of chapter one into motion. With an organization opting to increase their talent program inclusivity from 1% to 30% of all employees to counter negative employee reactions, it was evident that the causal impact of less exclusive talent pools had to be properly measured. Through the random allocation of talent status to employees in every experimental study the reverse causality issue was addressed (e.g., allocating talent status to an employee directly increases their loyalty to the organization, and not the other way around) as well as the risk of inaccurate self-rapport talent status measures (De Boeck et al., 2018; Smale et al., 2015; Sonnenberg et al., 2014). Furthermore, since the vast majority of talent management research is case based—i.e., conducted in a single organization—this dissertation contributes to the literature by introducing and demonstrating alternative research methods to study this organizational phenomenon.

Hopefully it has also become evident that psychological insights are absolutely necessary when speaking of employee reaction to talent management (De Boeck et al., 2018), and that experimental research is crucial to further advance the literature (Chatman & Flynn, 2005). It should be noted however, that numerous management scholars will nonetheless say that these fictional experiments are too detached from reality, arguing that employees will never respond to vignettes in the same manner as in real-life. While this criticism did solicit a replication study in the field in chapter two (which, if time and funding allows, should always be encouraged), experimental vignette methodologies are regarded as both internally and externally valid by prestigious scholars (Aguinis & Bradley, 2014). Moreover, experiments allow for the systematic variation of variables in a controlled environment, ensuring that confounding variables—of which there are tons in real organizations—are kept to a minimum. Nevertheless, by including 'real-world' variables wherever possible (e.g., chapter 1, managers' talent philosophies; chapter 2, non-talents' experience of being excluded; chapter 3, employees' self-perceived talent status), the studies endeavor to stay as relevant as possible for the field of management, on top of the field of organizational psychology.

Implications for practice

The findings presented in this dissertation provide valuable insights for (talent) managers, particularly in terms of how to design and implement talent programs to elicit favorable reactions from employees. Based on state-of-the-art research and case studies, it is evident that managers are both struggling with their approach towards talent management (De Boeck et al., 2018; Hjordrup et al., 2015) as well as under pressure from academics to reconsider their current talent philosophies (Sparrow et al., 2014; Swailes, 2013). The study among managers in chapter one made it distinctly clear that those managers that are concerned for

the reactions of non-talents generally opt for different—and as we have demonstrated, ineffective—strategies to combat these negative reactions. In addition, chapter two's findings detail steps to limit malicious behaviors from surfacing amongst non-talents and in chapter three some boundary conditions are illustrated that could be linked to intergroup conflicts. At the same time, a lot of these negative outcomes may potentially be circumvented through organizational secrecy. With so many things to consider, what should managers actually do?

Most importantly, contrary to what is commonly advocated in the literature (Sparrow et al., 2014), managers ought to keep their talent programs reserved for only their 'elite' most high-potential employees. This limits levels of (malicious) envy amongst the majority workforce, preserves their levels of organization-based self-esteem, and ensures that they will not readily leave the organization. While envy does not immediately sound worrisome to most managers, it is does significantly hinder the well-being and productivity of employees (Reh, Tröster, van Quaquebeke, 2018). Secondly, managers will want to highlight the increased expectations laid upon talents so that non-talents feel that the talent program is fair, making them less likely to retaliate in response. Thirdly, by assuring employees that the talent program's funding does not originate from old programs available to all employees, managers can also positively influence non-talents' behavior. Last but not least, managers may want to consider setting up cooperative tasks involving both talents and non-talents, to avoid having talents feel excluded from socially interacting with their co-workers (Wu, Liu, Kwan, & Lee, 2016). All in all, these basic steps serve to alter the 'us versus them' dynamic that is typically present in competitive working atmospheres stemming from talent management practices (Krueger & DiDonato, 2008; Sapegina & Weibel, 2017), and foster positive employee reactions.

Alternatively, managers can forego all these steps and simply keep talent status a secret from employees to avoid a competitive climate from surfacing, together with the detrimental effects on the feelings and behaviors of non-talents (Sumelius, Smale, & Yamao, 2020). Based on the results from chapter one, the most optimal strategy would be to only inform talents of their status, while keeping non-talents in the dark—precisely as most organizations presently already do (Church, Rotolo, Ginther, & Levine, 2015). That said, in chapter two it was observed that transparency was perceived as fairer, encouraging non-talents to self-improve their position within their organization rather than retaliate. In the latter study, however, non-talents still learned of their lack of talent status through gossip, whereas the employees in the former study had no idea whether or not they were included in the talent pool. Essentially, one group of employees still had hope to be included—with most probably assuming that they would be (Smale et al., 2015; Sonnenberg et al., 2014), especially since people usually overestimate themselves (Kruger & Dunning, 1999). Despite the secrecy, Huang and Tansley (2012) argue that non-talents will eventually find out that they are excluded through gossip which, according to them, is likely to lead to worse outcomes than when the organization was transparent from the beginning.

Perhaps the best strategy lies in the middle then. A new form of strategic ambiguity, such as was used in chapter one, where employees are transparently informed that they will not learn their talent status (i.e., being transparent about secrecy—something hardly seen in organizations; Costas & Grey, 2014; Dries & De Gieter, 2014). By doing so, organizations never fully secretly operate behind the back of employees (Sumelius et al., 2020), instill hope amongst employees to be selected (Smale et al., 2015; Sterling, Van de Ven, & Smith, 2016), and proactively address concerns regarding communicative justice (Gelens, Dries, Hofmans, & Pepermans, 2013). It may not be as effective as complete secrecy in diminishing

interpersonal competition, but the risks associated with eventual leaks are perhaps not as great. Future studies could look into this in greater detail, and more adequately address the contradictory finding presented in this dissertation.

A final suggestion for managers would be to take a moment and assess what the most optimal employee reactions would be for their talent program to be considered a success. Nothing will probably ever change the fact that talents, generally, exhibit fewer turnover intentions than non-talents. Yet with talent retention being one of the primary goals of talent management (Festing & Schäfer, 2014), the cost of losing some non-talents may outweigh the benefit of retaining a few talents, whom the organization has disproportionally invested into (Collings & Mellahi, 2009; Glebbeek & Bax, 2004). In fact, organizations committed to 'topgrading' consider losing non-talents beneficial, as it frees monetary funds to hire new talents (Smart & Smart, 1997). These organizations, such as Tesla and McKinsey, unsurprisingly claim their entire workforce consists of talents. Obviously, most organizations do not have this luxury, with talented applicants being scarce (Michaels, Handfield-Jones, & Axelrod, 2001). Most talent managers should instead take to heart that raising the size of the talent pool—as well as expanding the benefits granted to talents—should be in tandem with how much they value talents, as the increased emphasis put on talent practices in the organization comes with increasingly disgruntled non-talented employees. If managers were to attach a numeric value to individual employee outcomes for talents and non-talents in a follow up study, then mathematicians could develop an algorithm that would precisely delineate how managers must design their talent program to achieve the desired results.

Suggestions for future research

At this point of the dissertation a number of suggestions for future research have already been made, both in the individual chapters as well as in the above few paragraphs. Particularly the suggestion to examine whether non-talents worry about not being seen as equals rather than the opportunities for professional development they are missing out on, seems like the perfect follow-up study that would contribute greatly to both the talent management literature and social comparison theory. Yet when examining the chapters presented in this dissertation researchers surely do not only identify various research gaps that could be further explored, but also become inspired to adopt novel research methodologies for their own future research endeavors. With both in mind, four suggestions for future research are detailed below.

First, while this dissertation has already led to important theoretical and practical insights into employee reactions to talent management, many more studies can be conducted to further our understanding of this organizational practice and its impact on employees. Particularly, as was also described in chapter one and three, the question remains to what extent these findings can be generalized to 'real-world' organizations (i.e., ecological validity), especially on a global scale and across different contexts (i.e., external validity). For instance, at this point it is not fully evident whether the findings apply across different (organizational) cultures (Kontoghioghes, 2015), sectors (Boselie & Thunnissen, 2017), and firm sizes (i.e., difference for talents in top 10 vs. top 1000; Boyce et al., 2010). More importantly, as explained previously, researchers have expressed concern that the findings may not readily apply to practice. It would be beneficial to replicate these findings in field studies to address these concerns, just as was done in chapter two. Considering that replication studies—both using alternative methods or in different contexts—are not incredibly interesting to most researchers, more novel suggestions for future research are detailed below.

Second, we know from previous studies that labels given to individuals (e.g., foreigner, delinquent, prodigy) can have a tremendous impact, potentially influencing their behavior and self-esteem for better or for worse, sometimes both simultaneously (Taylor, Hume, & Welsh, 2010). As with most labels, each positive label has a negative counterpart, making talent management a double-edged sword. Whenever employees are selected for the talent pool they are typically granted the label 'talent' or 'high-potential employee', which would automatically imply to those not included that they are 'non-talents' or 'low-potential employees' respectively. Even though these negative labels are never used by organizations, at least not openly (Malik & Singh, 2014), employees will likely infer these negative 'mirror labels' automatically. Moreover, not getting a label—when other co-workers do get labelled as 'talent'—is almost always interpreted by employees as negative feedback (Livingston, 2009). According to the literature on self-fulfilling prophecies and labelling theory, behavior is greatly determined by the terms used to describe and classify individuals (e.g., once labelled a criminal, future criminal acts become more likely; Farrington, 1977). We can thus expect non-talents to generally be less motivated to partake in activities to further develop themselves, as a form of self-fulfilling prophecy (Livingston, 2009), which can also be implied from the findings in chapter two.

Fortunately, there is also ample research that shows that positive labels enhance self-esteem (e.g., Meyers, 2016; Taylor et al., 2010; Thomson, 2012). From social comparison theory we can reason that a high self-esteem allows individuals to gain hope, inspiration, and motivation from upward social comparisons, rather than envy, as people with high self-esteem believe they can achieve the same level of performance as the comparison target in the future (Aspinwall & Taylor, 1993). Future studies could thus examine whether allocating positive mirror labels (such as 'rising potentials', 'strivers', or 'raw diamonds') to non-

talents—as opposed to leaving them label-less—can serve to protect their self-esteem, and ultimately improve the reactions these employees have to talent management practices. While the talent management literature does not discuss the labels given to employees extensively—academics do refer differently to 'non-talents', with Malik & Singh (2014) calling them 'B players'—we do know from conversations with talent managers that they already get creative with their talent label to avoid negative mirror-labels. For instance, in the US talents are often referred to as 'stars' (Groysberg, 2010), and a large sport clothing firm calls them 'champions'. Since labeling theory is most commonly applied in the fields of criminal law (e.g., Smith et al., 2022) and mental health (e.g., Meyers, 2016), researchers may want to show its relevance for organizational theory as well in a follow-up study into (non-)talent labels.

Third, researchers may want to apply other relevant theories to explain employee reactions to talent management, while still establishing causal relationships between variables. The most dominant theory to date in the talent management literature has been social exchange theory (De Boeck et al., 2018)—with studies mostly relying on either qualitative data (e.g., Kamoche & Leigh, 2022) or field surveys (e.g., Wikhamn et al., 2021)—which posits that individuals will want to give approximately as much to the organization relative to what they receive from it (Blau, 1964). Similarly to how talent management was approached in this dissertation using social comparison theory, future studies could experimentally manipulate factors inherent to social exchange theory. For instance, the type of benefits granted to talents by management could be manipulated to measure how it directly influences talents' behaviors and intentions to reciprocate back to their organization—relationships that have not been causally substantiated yet (De Boeck et al., 2018; Dries, Forrier, de Vos, & Pepermans, 2014; Michaels et al., 2001). In addition, through the introduction of other (novel) psychological theories, other relevant employee outcomes—

such as stress (Tansley & Tietze, 2013), counterproductive work behavior (Sterling et al., 2016), organizational citizenship behavior (Restubog, Hornsey, Bordia, & Esposo, 2008), and trust (Cheshire, Gerbasi, & Cook, 2010), to name a few—may be examined that do not readily go hand in hand with social comparison or social identity theory. It also opens up an avenue to further explore negative reactions for talents (e.g., stress) as well as positive reactions for non-talents (e.g., trust)—which there is a notable shortage of in the present literature (De Boeck et al., 2018).

Fourth, this dissertation hopefully inspires other organizational researchers to adopt a more experimental approach to address various research questions. Herman Aguinis has been arguing since 1997 for researchers to utilize more experimental and immersive methodologies to study organizational phenomenon (Pierce & Aguinis, 1997), yet even decades later only two to three percent of all published organizational research is conducted using experiments (Aguinis & Bradley, 2014; Eden, 2017). Arguments against experimental research typically revolve around time constraints (Grant & Wall, 2009), and the previously mentioned concerns about external validity (Scandura & Williams, 2000). However, as we have demonstrated in chapter three, through the implementation of immersive video scenarios researchers can create life-like organizational settings which encourages employees to respond in a more natural manner, enhancing the ecological validity of the study (Adão et al., 2018; Finch, 1987; Slater, 2009). Through the development of life-like scenarios, researchers are simultaneously stimulated to consider an appropriate audience for each scenario to ensure a 'natural', familiar, environment is continuously guaranteed (Finch, 1987). Just like we did in chapter one with managers, this type of research may thus also encourage organizational researchers to conduct studies amongst various stakeholder groups, thereby addressing two shortcomings with one solution (De Boeck et al., 2018).

What about fully inclusive talent programs?

One major goal of this dissertation was to address the assumption that less exclusive talent programs lead to improved employee reactions, which we have successfully shown to be incorrect. There is one alternative that up until this point has not been brought up—despite plenty of organizations opting for this strategy (Swailes, Downs, & Orr, 2014)—namely fully inclusive talent programs. This would essentially entail that all employees are considered talents—or are said to have talent—by their organization, with no preferential treatment for those who show above-average potential. This was not examined in the dissertation as it would fundamentally alter the underlying mechanisms that urgently needed to be studied (e.g., there would be no up- or downward social comparisons anymore), and more importantly it would not be in line with the definition of talent management—as a workforce *differentiation* practice—that we adhered to in this dissertation (Collings & Mellahi, 2009). Regardless, it does not take away the question: Would it lead to good, or perhaps even better, employee reactions?

This question cannot realistically be answered here—that is for another dissertation—but we can nuance the entire inclusive versus exclusive talent management debate by more holistically discussing means to enhance the accessibility of talent programs for employees, without merely raising the inclusivity. First, managers could reevaluate their definition of 'talent' and devise more categories to identify their employees with. For instance, groups of employees can be identified who show 'strengths'—rather than the more traditional 'potential'—which manifest in observable pro-organizational behaviors that anyone can further develop given enough training and learning opportunities (Meyers & Van Woerkom, 2014; Briscoe, 2008). Second, similar to the previous point, more employees can be eligible

to join the talent program if managers opt to look at the concept of 'talent' more disjunctively (e.g., talents exhibit either excellent performance, or exceptional leadership skills, or a good organizational fit), rather than have talents score high on a multitude of characteristics or performance measures (Bélanger & Gagné, 2006). This effectively would allow the now larger group of talents to synergize as every member will be above average in one of the many possible talent domains (Taylor, 1973). Third, managers could communicate the specific criteria that employees need to reach in order to be identified as 'talents'—as opposed to simply identifying the top, say, 10% each year—setting an explicit threshold for talent status. By doing so, employees' motivation may be enhanced as they have a clear goal (e.g., 50 successful sales per week), rather then feel like they have to live up to ambiguous demands (e.g., exhibit exceptional potential). Arguably, it encourages employees to take more responsibility for their own performance while simultaneously not disparaging them from working hard just because the talent program's capacity has been reached for this year.

Finally, I would personally argue that just because managers may want to—whether for strategical or moral reasons (Swailes, 2013)—implement professional development programs for all their employees, it does not have to come at the cost of not investing into high-potential employees. Why not do both and forfeit the entire discussion? They are two entirely different HR practices (Swailes et al., 2014)—which is why it would be so hard to empirically study the difference in their effectiveness—that serve their own individual strategic purposes. It can best be described using an allegory:

> *Imagine that many people in Belgium are competing to grow the best fruits and vegetables, with the top competitors receiving various cash prizes. While the vegetation generally gets by fine with some weekly attention, due to an influx of contestants it has become increasingly difficult to make an impression with just regular products. Some individuals have therefore decided to implement a greenhouse on their field to grow more exotic fruits and vegetables and, to the envy of other gardeners,*

grow produce that enables them to win various prices and secure their position for the foreseeable future.

To me this accurately resembles organizations' struggle with the war for talent, illustrating that the talent managers' sole responsibility is 'the greenhouse', ensuring that the best and 'exotic' employees contribute more to the organization in comparison to 'regular' employees, allowing the organization to survive and not succumb to the competition. At the same time, HR practitioners—the regular gardeners—can ensure that all the other plants flourish through various other, less intensive, initiatives. This combined approach is not a groundbreaking new concept by any means, many organizations already do this. It is nevertheless surprising that this is far from the norm, and managers and scholars are still interlocked in a debate on whether exclusive or inclusive talent management is 'better', when perhaps they should start to discuss how these two practices best operate in harmony.

Future of experimental vignette methodologies

While we used experimental vignette methodologies primarily out of necessity—since alternative methods such as field surveys would fall short (De Boeck et al., 2018)—it did not at any point feel like sacrifices had to be made to conduct these types of studies. Looking back at the individual studies, we can conclude from employee feedback that most felt that the scenarios presented to them were accurate depictions of real-life situations. Moreover, chapter three clearly highlights that participants' immersion into the fictitious scenarios was relatively high, heightening the ecological validity of the study (Adão et al., 2018). Yet to truly immerse employees in an organizational setting researchers can go one step further using virtual reality technology. To date and to my knowledge, no organizational researcher has conducted an experimental vignette study in virtual reality, despite initial calls for this kind of research dating back decades (Aguinis & Bradley, 2014; Pierce & Aguinis, 1997).

Virtual reality vignette studies can come into two formats: 360°-videos and fully immersive virtual reality experiences. The former consists of videos recorded with a 360° camera that can be displayed to participants using a virtual reality headset. While it lends the impression to the user that they are physically present in the virtual environment (Slater, 2009), the experience is entirely on rails and does not provide any freedom to the participant whatsoever besides the ability to look at the surrounding area from all possible angles. Originally this was planned for the study in chapter three, but this was adjusted to a 360°-video that could be watched on people's desktop due to the pandemic. Presently, the study has been completed using a virtual reality headset as well, with initial findings showing promising outcomes in terms of heightened immersion, more attention to manipulations, and stronger effect sizes. The second option—fully immersive virtual reality—may perhaps be the most promising avenue for future studies examining organizational behavior, offering the most realistic and immersive experience possible (Aguinis & Bradley, 2014).

A fully immersive virtual reality experience takes place within an entirely simulated reality (i.e., everything is programmed—like a video game), where participants typically embody an avatar and have the freedom to move around and interact with people and objects in the virtual environment that the researchers have meticulously designed (Bowman & McMahan, 2007). Through this method actual behaviors can be measured in real-time, whereas the other types of vignettes used in this dissertation measure intended or expected behaviors in response to the experience. A study has shown that well designed virtual reality experiences are not significantly less 'real'—as a subjective feeling—than similar experiences in real-life, with users paying even more attention to important cues in the environment since they are most likely engrossed by the experience (Villani, Repetto, Cipresso, & Riva, 2012). By fading the lines between what is virtual and what is real—done primarily by ensuring that the

scenario looks realistic, and users can move seamlessly in the world from a first-person perspective (Slater, 2009)—researchers enhance participants' immersion and encourage them to respond in an as natural manner as possible (Adão et al., 2018; Finch, 1987). The typical concerns reviewers in our field have with experiments ought to diminish.

Virtual reality research does not only provide promising opportunities for talent management research, but also for organizational and management research in general. Most importantly, numerous variables that are difficult to manipulate in the real world can be incorporated in these studies (Kozlov & Johansen, 2010). For instance, the study in chapter three could be expanded on by having virtual co-workers—for the experimental condition—ignore the participant in an ordinary work setting. This would allow for the causal relationship between ostracism and turnover to be measured, amongst other behaviors. Obviously, this manipulation would not have as much impact when participants read about it in a written vignette or are not given the freedom to interact with their co-workers (Aguinis & Bradley, 2014).

Despite that this research can be quite costly and time consuming, it is my hope that the research presented in this dissertation sets a precedent—and is testament to the additional value immersive experimental vignette methodologies offer—to more innovational and immersive studies, in an endeavor to more accurately investigate relevant organizational phenomenon in greater detail.

Personal reflection

At the very start of my motivation letter for this PhD, sent to my to-be-promotor back in 2016, I wrote, and I quote: "I know first-hand what it is like to be categorized in the top 1-10%." (referring to a time in my youth when I was formally labelled 'highly gifted'). While frankly it

was meant to depict my personal connection to the project, it was an overly audacious and ludicrous move looking back; accompanied now with a hint of embarrassment by putting it out here for all to read (and it only gets worse as you continue to read on). It kind of goes without saying that we should never speak of ourselves so highly. Certainly the extent to which we can boast is culturally determined, yet in the majority of cases it rapidly leads to perceptions of bragging (Scopelliti, Loewenstein, & Vosgerau, 2015)—which often leads to worse outcomes then if we had just not said anything. Humblebragging is much more socially acceptable (Chen, Liu, & Mattila, 2020), but what I wrote certainly lacked any semblance of humility. Then why is it that we cannot candidly advertise our greatest achievements and skills? Psychologists will argue that bragging is meant to obscure insecurity (Jones, 2008). It would explain why usually less competent people overemphasize their competencies and achievements (i.e., the Dunning-Kruger effect; Kruger & Dunning, 1999), and those on the other end tend to underestimate themselves (i.e., the imposter syndrome; Clance, 1985). I would nevertheless argue that self-defecating behaviors are increasingly unintuitive—younger generations of children are not only brought up to believe they are the best and brightest—it is also a handicap when companies are desperately searching for exceptional applicants (i.e., the top 10% of individuals in the labor market; Michaels et al., 2001). Nevertheless, would I write such a statement again? Unlikely. Let me clarify.

I began this dissertation with a short mental exercise about not getting a research grant—which is akin to being excluded from a talent program as only the top 10% of research proposals receive funding—and promised to reflect on this experience in the epilogue. While being seen as not competent enough is generally not a great experience—chapter one clearly shows it is best not to tell—it is something we all are confronted with at some point in our lifetime (although not everyone will come to terms with it obviously; Kruger & Dunning,

1999). As we progress through our life and our career we go through multiple similar stages—e.g., in secondary school we have to score in the top 20% to go to university, there we have to be in the top 5% to do a PhD, followed by a tiny 1% that will prevail and become a professor—until the point where we eventually average out and become, relative to our peers, mediocre. In other words, being in the top percentiles at one point in life provides very little guarantee for similar successes in higher echelons. Saying you were in the top 10% may thus set unrealistic expectations and ultimately backfire (Scopelliti et al., 2015).

Another reason to not emphasize these percentiles is to avoid unreservedly positioning yourself above others, when it is wiser to let achievements speak for themselves. Nobel prize winners, for instance, will not come forward and proclaim they bested millions of others to earn that prize, and will instead likely adopt a more humble—almost undeserving—attitude (see Obama's speech; Weidman, Cheng, & Tracy, 2018). It is nonetheless interesting to scrutinize why considering yourself superior to others is socially and morally unacceptable. With social comparison theory in mind, a highly controversial suggestion might be that someone 'boasting' about their relative superior performance may actually confront others with their insecurity—as opposed to covering the superior's own insecurity (Jones, 2008)—with other individuals proceeding to protect their own self-esteem through similar social comparison self-defense mechanisms (Alicke et al., 1997). Specifically, inferior individuals may project their own self-depreciating perceptions unto their upward comparison target (i.e., by calling the outperformers *insecure* braggers; Jones, 2008) thereby rendering the social comparison void (Mussweiler et al., 2000).

Returning to the topic of talent management, my personal beliefs on the matter have become rather more nuanced over the years. At the onset of my PhD I would have

vehemently defended ‘elite’ talent programs—undoubtedly vexing academics such as Stephen Swailes (2013)—and considered non-talents frail for not being able to cope with their lack of competency, who essentially needed to be told ‘white lies’ in order to be protected from themselves (see: Van Zelderen, Dries, & Marescaux, 2018). Do not get me wrong, exclusive talent management practices are still without a doubt pivotal in realizing organizational success, yet an incautious implementation of these programs will do much more harm than good. Therefore, I would now argue that we instead need to protect employees from overzealous talent managers who focus too much on specific employees being ‘superior contributors to the organization’ when many employees alternatively could be ‘learning and profiting from role models’ (Alicke et al., 1997; Lockwood & Kunda, 1997; Smith, 2000). Accomplishing that requires talent management practices to be introduced in such a way—substantiated by theory and causal evidence (De Boeck et al., 2018)—that it encourages favorable employee reactions amongst all employees as much as possible. This dissertation hopefully provides some preliminary ingredients to achieve just that, encouraging managers to take into account, amongst others, comparison distances (chapter one), perceptions of equity (chapter two), and cooperative intergroup tasks (chapter three). And with that I presently concur with Stephen Swailes’ (2013) notion that we—academics—should perhaps step away from the typical ‘elitist’ framing of traditional exclusive talent management practices and, to supplement his notion, shift towards fostering synergy through a mutually beneficial co-existence and understanding between talents and non-talents.

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