

A Review of Research on the Influence of Employees' Perceived Overqualification on Their Innovative Behavior

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Abstract. In today's highly competitive workplace environment, a deep understanding of employee psychology and behavior is critical to improving an organization's ability to innovate and compete. This study focuses on the relationship between employees' perceived overqualification and their innovative behavior. It systematically collects and summarizes some domestic and foreign literature published between 2018 and 2025. It explores the positive, negative, and U-shaped relationships between the two indicators from three distinct dimensions: theoretical basis, mediating mechanisms, and moderating mechanisms, constructing a systematic framework for existing studies. On this basis, this study suggests that future research in this field can concentrate on the moderating roles played by employees's own factors in the relationship between the two, the influence of different working environments and job positions, and the application of attribution theory, providing creative views for future researches. This study not only holds theoretical exploration value, but also has significant guiding significance for the management practice of enterprises.

Keywords: Perceived overqualification, innovative behavior, intervening mechanism, regulatory mechanism.

1. Introduction

These years, with the growth in the number of graduates and the saturation of the labor market, more and more people are unable to find jobs that match their qualifications. Many employees feel that they are "overqualified for the job" or "unrecognized for their talents", believing that they are "big fish in a small pond". This feeling of having more knowledge, skills, abilities, and work experience than the requirements of their jobs is defined by scholars as the sense of overqualification. Roughly 84% of Chinese employees perceive themselves as having skills and qualifications exceeding job demands. Globally, around 47% of employees consider their capabilities surpass the requirements of their current positions.

Although the situation where employees feel overqualified is becoming more and more common and managers are paying more attention to the impact of employees' overqualification on the organization, there are still relatively few studies in this area. Most of these studies concentrate on the negative behaviors of employees caused by their overqualification, such as work withdrawal behaviors and knowledge concealment behaviors while few scholars have studied how employees' overqualification influences their creative behaviors. The existing related research indicates that the relationship between overqualification and innovative behavior may have three types relationships: negative, positive, and U-shaped. These contradictory conclusions suggest that the research in this field still needs to be further explored.

Therefore, the objective of this study is to investigate how employees' overqualification impacts their innovative behaviors, clarify the research limitations of scholars in this field, provide a clearer research direction and theoretical framework for further studies, and offer more targeted management suggestions for managers.

2. Research Status

2.1. The Relationship between Employees' Perceived Overqualification and Innovative Behavior

2.1.1. Theoretical Basis

In the exploration of the connection between employees' perception of being overqualified and their innovative, most scholars tended to use classic theories such as the Social Exchange Theory, the Person-Environment or Person-Job Fit Theory, the Relative Deprivation Theory, and the Conservation of Resources Theory.

The Social Exchange Theory posited that there was an exchange bond between an organization and its staff. When the organization failed to meet the employees' needs, employees were less likely to take behaviors that were beneficial to the organization. When employees felt overqualified, however, if they were positively influenced by mediating or moderating variables and developed positive emotions, they would take positive work performance, like innovative behaviors as a way to reward the organization[1].

Studies relying on the Person-Environment Fit Theory have failed to reach a consistent conclusion. Some scholars believed that the sense of overqualification implied an unsatisfactory person-job fit, and employees would feel that they were not treated fairly and not received the respect they deserve, thus generating feelings of dissatisfaction[2]. On the other hand, some other scholars held the view that when there was a situation of mismatch between personnel and positions, employees would adopt other work behaviors to improve the situation where their abilities could not be fully used. In this process, innovative behaviors might emerge[3].

The Relative Deprivation Theory was generally used to explore the adverse influence of overqualification on the innovative activities of employees. Employees with extremely high qualifications would experience a sense of social and economic deprivation due to the feeling that the types of jobs they deserved and their social status were deprived. As a result, they would give negative evaluations of their current jobs, which was bad to the emergence of innovative behaviors[4].

Scholars such as Li Y and Guo, T.F conducted their research based on the Conservation of Resources Theory. This theory posited that persons had the tendency to conserve and take use of valuable personal resources to adapt to various situations. In the context of overqualification, employees possessed resources like skills and experience surpassing job-related needs which prompted them to actively assess their own capabilities and develop core resources. The theory also pointed out that the more resources an individual had, the more beneficial it was to acquiring additional resources. During this process, employees were more likely to take innovative behaviors[5,6].

2.1.2. Research Results

Scholars have adopted varying research emphases, leading to divergent conclusions about how theoretical studies explore the connection of overqualification perception and innovative behaviors.

Some studies confirmed that a negative relationship existed between employees feeling overqualified and their innovative activities. Highly overqualified employees often perceive underutilization of their capabilities, experiencing unmet developmental needs and frustrated career aspirations. They were prone to having a sense of unfairness, which led to a negative work attitude and was not good to creative cognition. Even if they possessed a high level of innovative ability, in a negative work state, they lacked the internal motivation for innovation and found it difficult to carry out their innovative ideas[7]. He, G.M found that the perception of overqualification made employees feel that their abilities were not fully realized, resulting in a psychological gap, reducing their work enthusiasm and engagement, and suppressing innovative behaviors[8].

Some studies in recent years have focused on the significant positive correlation between overqualification and innovative behavior. Research by scholars such as Dar N and Guo, T.F has confirmed that overqualified employees could complete routine tasks more easily, allowing them to

allocate their remaining resources to innovative behavior. Moreover, they possessed more extensive professional knowledge and experience, so they could better adapt to changing environments, had more time and were more likely to generate creative and useful ideas and solutions. In addition, overqualified employees, driven by a strong appetite for intellectual engagement and career progression, actively pursue innovative prospects at work[6,9,10].

A small number of scholars have also believed that the relationship between the two followed a U-shaped pattern. The main argument was that when employees had a low sense of overqualification, as the sense of overqualification increased, employees regarded their excess qualifications as an advantage, leading to an increase in innovative behavior. At this stage, the sense of overqualification played a promoting role in innovative behaviors. When the sense of overqualification became excessively high, employees felt that their current jobs could not fully utilize their talents, which, in turn, reduced their enthusiasm for innovation and suppressed their innovative behavior. At this stage, the sense of overqualification played a suppressing role in innovative behavior[11].

2.2. The Mediating Mechanism between Employees' Perceived Overqualification and Innovative Behavior

In the research of this field, mediating variables are diverse, and different scholars conduct their studies based on the mediating variables they have selected. This study classifies and organizes some crucial mediating variables that have received more attention from scholars according to psychological factors and behavioral factors.

2.2.1. Psychological Factors

a) Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy represents a person's faith in their capacity to carry out actions essential for attaining specific results.[12]. When faced with a challenging work task, if an individual believes one possesses the necessary skills and capabilities to complete it, he has high self-efficacy. Otherwise, his self-efficacy is low. In this study, self-efficacy mentioned in existing research within this field is classified into role-breadth self-efficacy and creative self-efficacy. Role-breadth self-efficacy describes employees' perception of their own capabilities. They feel competent to execute proactive work activities that transcend the narrowly defined technical job requirements[13]. Creative self-efficacy refers to an individual's belief in their capacity to successfully generate or implement the desired changes and achieve expected results[14].

Wang Zhaohui used path analysis experiments to demonstrate that employees'sense of overqualification enhanced their role-breadth self-efficacy. Moreover, role-breadth self-efficacy served as the motivational and cognitive mechanisms underlying employees'innovative behaviors. Those employees with a strong sense of role-breadth self-efficacy were confident in their ability to succeed during difficult situations. This confidence made them more likely to develop original concepts[15]. Guo T.F. also made use of role-breadth self-efficacy as an intervening variable in his research[6].

Creative self-efficacy has also been identified as an important mediating variable. Research by Dar N and Ma X.J. found that when employees regarded themselves as overqualified for their jobs, they were more confident in demonstrating creativity at work. This boosted their creative self-efficacy and motivated them to engage more actively in innovative behaviors[14,10].

b) Organizational Identification

Organizational identification refers to employees' psychological perception and emotional attachment to their organization. It is manifested in employees regarding the organization as a part of themselves and making cognitive, emotional, and behavioral investments in it.

Zhang M found that in organizations with a strong employee-development-oriented culture, even when employees perceived themselves as overqualified, their organizational identification was enhanced because the development opportunities provided by the organization met their personal needs. As a result, they internalized organizational goals as their own and actively engaged in

innovative behaviors. However, when employees' organizational identification decreased, their innovative behaviors also declined[16].

Perceived insider status, which is associated with organizational identification, can also function as a mediating variable. It reflects employees' subjective feelings about their status within the organization, their level of connectedness to the organization, and their acceptance by the organization. It serves as an internal driving force for employees' innovative behaviors. He G.M. believed that perceived overqualification, as a subjective judgment, affected individuals' self-concept. Perceived overqualification made employees experience negative feelings such as being unimportant and worthless to the organization. This reduced their sense of belonging to the organization, weakened their perceived insider status, and suppressed their innovative behavior[8].

2.2.2. Behavioral Factors

a) Job Crafting

Job crafting can be defined as the physical changes in task structure and cognitive changes in job perception made by employees within the boundaries of their work tasks or relationships[17].

Li Hui found that when employees felt overqualified, they had an internal motivation to change the situation and would engage in job-crafting behaviors to improve job satisfaction. Such job-crafting behaviors created opportunities for employees to innovate[3]. The research data of Guo YP also showed that overqualified employees actively adjust their work through expansionary job crafting, sought additional work resources, and take on more challenging tasks. In this process, employees encountered new problems and were more likely to engage in innovative behavior[18].

b) Work Engagement

Work engagement refers to an individual's cognitive and emotional state regarding the work they are engaged in, reflecting the degree to which employees are committed to their current work[2].

Some scholars discovered through empirical research that when employees perceived themselves as being overqualified, they had difficulty in obtaining a sense of achievement and satisfaction in their work, resulting in a decrease in work engagement and a gradual decline in their willingness to engage in innovative behavior[19]. On this basis, the research conducted by Li Guangping explored that when employees with a tendency to quit their jobs faced work pressure, they would regard it as a hindrance stressor, generating negative emotions. This further weakened their enthusiasm for work, reduced their work engagement, and led to a decrease in the occurrence of innovative behavior[2].

2.3. The Moderating Mechanism between Employees' Perceived Overqualification and Innovative Behavior

In existing research, when exploring the moderating variables the interconnection between employees' overqualification perception and innovative behavior, the influence of organizational factors is mostly taken into account, while the moderating role of personal factors has not received much attention. Therefore, this study sorts out some crucial organizational factors that have attracted more attention from scholars.

2.3.1. Organizational Support

Eisenberger proposed that organizational support refers to the organization's care and emphasis on employees, including prioritizing their well-being, encouraging their participation in various organizational activities, and attaching importance to employees' personal interests[20].

Luksyte, A and Caliskan found that when employees perceived a high level of support from the organization, they would form a cognitive perception of a positive exchange relationship between themselves and the organization. This perception would prompt employees to have a stronger sense of belonging and responsibility. They would be more willing to make contributions to the development of the organization. Even if employees had a perceived overqualification, due to their profound sense of organizational identity and an inclination to return the organization's support, they would also participate more actively in innovative behaviors[19,21].

Wang Zhaohui proposed that in addition to the support from supervisors at the individual level also provided powerful environmental support for employees to remain actively innovative under the perception of overqualification. As the direct leaders of employees at work, the support and encouragement given by supervisors helped enhance employees' self-confidence and work motivation. When employees perceived the recognition and support from their supervisors, they would be more willing to try new ideas and methods[15].

2.3.2. Organizational Culture

Organizational culture represents a cultural construct forged through an organization's long-term operational journey. It encompasses the shared values, thought patterns, psychological anticipations, behavioral norms, sense of affiliation, and work ethos. These elements are widely embraced and adhered to by every member within the organization.

Zhang M conducted an in-depth exploration the impact of perceived overqualification on creative performance from the perspective of person-organization fit. The study found that when the organizational culture focused on employee development, the organization could fully meet employees' needs in terms of career growth and skill improvement. In such a cultural atmosphere, employees could feel the consistency between their own goals and those of the organization, which enhanced their sense of fit within the organization. They were more likely to develop a strong sense of identity with the organization. They tended to actively engage in creative work, fully utilize their creativity, and improve creative performance[16].

In addition, when the overall work atmosphere of the organization was harmonious, employees felt a sense of psychological safety and did not have to worry about being criticized or blamed for putting forward different ideas or innovative thinking. This psychological safety encouraged employees to share their innovative ideas and promoted the generation of innovative behaviors. At the same time, in such a positive atmosphere, employees experienced greater support and cooperation. When employees perceived themselves as overqualified, they would express their opinions more confidently, receive more encouragement and help from organizational members, and engage more actively in innovation [10].

3. Review and Prospect

Although certain achievements have been made in the research on employees' sense of overqualification, the overall number of studies is still relatively small. The scope of existing research has certain limitations, and only a few scholars have paid attention to the connection between employees' sense of overqualification and innovative behavior. In different industries and organizational contexts, the degree of influence and the mechanisms of the sense of overqualification on innovative behavior may vary, but the existing research has not fully covered these possibilities. Currently, there is a lack of in-depth exploration of the mediating and moderating variables at play. Moreover, most of the research in this field explores the relationship model between independent and dependent variables under the influence of classic theories such as the Person-Environment Fit Theory, Relative Deprivation Theory, and Social Exchange Theory, lacking innovation. The Attribution Theory, among others, has been overlooked. In addition, only a few studies have found that when the mediating and moderating mechanisms are different, the same theory exerts different effects. Therefore, there is still no unified conclusion regarding the action mechanism between employees' perceived overqualification and creative behavior. This study believes that the following aspects can be considered in future research in this field.

3.1. Focus on Research into The Moderating Role of Personal Factors

In existing research, when determining moderating variables, the focus is primarily on organizational factors such as culture and support, while the importance of employees' personal factors is often overlooked. In fact, factors such as employees' personal traits, values, and motivations

may all moderate the connection between the sense of overqualification and innovative behavior in a vital way.

For instance, employees with strong achievement motivation may view a sense of overqualification as an opportunity for self-improvement and actively engage in innovation. In contrast, employees with low achievement motivation may develop negative emotions due to a sense of overqualification, which suppresses their innovative behavior. Future research can pay attention to these personal factors to enhance and improve the relevant theories.

3.2. Research in Different Organizational Cultures and Industry Environments

Future research could explore whether the action mechanisms of mediating and moderating variables vary in different organizational cultures or industry environments. For instance, in organizations that champion an innovation-supportive culture, employees are encouraged to break free from traditions and engage in innovative research and development. When employees perceive overqualification, they may combine their capabilities with innovation demands, thereby generating innovative behaviors. In the pursuit of innovation, they gain a sense of accomplishment, which further enhances their self-worth. This positive feedback continuously strengthens their willingness to innovate.

Moreover, it's also worthwhile to explore how the impact of relevant variables on the innovative behaviors of employees with a sense of overqualification differs when employees are in different positions. Different positions, such as those in education, government, or scientific research, have distinct requirements and competitive landscapes. In these diverse contexts, the impact on employees' innovative behaviors may vary significantly.

3.3. The Impact of The Sense of Overqualification on Innovative Behavior Based on The Attribution Theory

The Attribution Theory has not been applied in the existing research in this field. Future research can focus on the relationship between the sense of overqualification and innovative behavior under this theory. When employees attribute their sense of overqualification to the external labor market, they may be more inclined to engage in innovative behaviors. However, when employees attribute their sense of overqualification to internal unfairness, their identification with the organization may decrease, and their willingness to innovate will also decline. These two different attribution directions may have opposing impacts on employees' innovative behaviors. Future research can concentrate on this difference and analyze the distinctions in employees' innovative behaviors under different attribution approaches.

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