



Study on the Mechanism of the Effect of Perceived Overqualification on Employee Territorial Behavior

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Abstract. Based on the conservation of resources theory, this study conducted an empirical analysis using SPSS 26.0 on a sample of 203 participants. The results indicate that perceived overqualification has a positive impact on territorial behavior. Furthermore, interpersonal trust partially mediates the relationship between perceived overqualification and territorial behavior. This study not only enriches our understanding of the impact mechanism of perceived overqualification on employee territorial behavior but also expands the application scope of the conservation of resources theory. It provides valuable suggestions and insights for effectively reducing the negative consequences of person-job unfit and promoting full employment opportunities for employees.

Keywords: Perceived overqualification · Interpersonal trust · Employee territorial behavior · Hierarchical regression

1 Introduction

In recent years, with the expansion of higher education and the slowdown of global economic growth, there has been a shrinking demand for human resources in society. This has led to intensified competition in the job market and increased difficulty in finding employment. As a result, some job seekers have had to lower their expectations and accept jobs and positions that are below their level of knowledge, skills, and experience. For example, university graduates may end up working in the real estate industry, while individuals with doctoral degrees may be forced to take on delivery jobs. This is known as “overqualification” where individuals have more knowledge, skills, and experience than the job itself requires [5]. According to surveys, over half of the global population is currently experiencing overqualification, with China facing a particularly severe overqualification issue at 84% [21]. Since the emergence of the overqualification phenomenon, researchers have typically categorized it into objective and subjective types. However, due to the fact that employees’ subjective perceptions are more predictive of their work attitudes and behaviors than objective conditions, management studies have focused more on subjective overqualification, which refers to individuals’ perception of their own overqualification level [17].

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Extensive research has been conducted by scholars to explore the effects of perceived overqualification. On one hand, perceived overqualification may have positive effects on employees, such as promoting their innovative behavior and organizational citizenship behavior [4, 14]. On the other hand, it can also have negative effects, such as reducing job satisfaction, leading to negative behaviors, and even thoughts of leaving the job [15]. As a form of underemployment, perceived overqualification reflects a discrepancy between the actual job and the desired job [5]. When employees experience a significant psychological gap, they may feel that their current job restricts their abilities and potential, leading to a sense of being deprived of opportunities and resources [13] and a sense of unfairness [8]. Territorial behavior refers to the behavior that individuals exhibit when they perceive a psychological sense of ownership over a particular object [2]. It involves the control of organizational resources, and since resources are limited within an organization, establishing territorial ownership can bring benefits to individuals and affirm their importance and value in the organization. Therefore, in order to compensate for the relative deprivation and perceived unfairness caused by perceived overqualification [8, 13], employees are likely to engage in territorial behavior to control and protect their existing resources, ensuring that these resources are not damaged upon by others and safeguarding their own interests [3].

Interpersonal trust refers to the extent to which individuals have confidence in others' language, actions, and decisions and are willing to take action [18]. In general, employees with a strong sense of perceived overqualification tend to have high levels of confidence in their abilities [21]. This excessive self-assurance may lead them to be skeptical of others' abilities and contributions, resulting in distrust. Additionally, when individuals with high levels of perceived overqualification perceive significant gaps compared to others in certain aspects, it can lead to feelings of distance and jealousy [10]. This can cause them to keep their distance from those who have advantages and hold skeptical attitudes toward their abilities and motivations, thereby reducing trust in others. Conservation of resources theory emphasizes that individuals may adopt strategies such as resource assessment, acquisition, conservation, and transfer when faced with resource scarcity [7]. Therefore, in order to ensure the protection of their existing resources, employees with high levels of perceived overqualification may adopt territorial behavior to establish resource boundaries and protective mechanisms, thereby safeguarding their own interests.

In conclusion, this study explores the mechanism of the effect of employees' perceived overqualification on territorial behavior through interpersonal trust based on resource conservation theory. It helps us to understand the effect of perceived overqualification more comprehensively, and provides theoretical and practical insights for reducing perceived overqualification, minimizing territorial behavior, and enhancing employees' interpersonal trust.

2 Theory and Hypotheses

2.1 Perceived Overqualification and Employee Territorial Behavior

The concept of overqualification originates from underemployment and represents a form of underemployment. Current research on overqualification can be classified into two categories: objective overqualification and subjective overqualification. Objective overqualification refers to the excess of experience, skills, etc. that an individual possesses compared to what is required for the job [5], and it is an objective manifestation of facts. And subjective overqualification is defined as individuals' perception of being overqualified for their jobs, where they possess qualifications that exceed the job requirements, and it is a subjective perception of job fit [17]. Since employees' subjective perceptions better predict work attitudes and behaviors, management studies have placed greater emphasis on subjective overqualification. Some progress has been made in studying the effects of perceived overqualification. For instance, it has been found that perceived overqualification positively influences employees innovative behavior [14], but at the same time, it may have negative effects on their job satisfaction [15]. However, most of these studies have been conducted in Western cultural contexts, and further exploration is needed to examine the consequences of perceived overqualification in the Chinese cultural context.

Territorial behavior is a behavioral expression that individuals exhibit when they feel a sense of psychological possession of an object [2]. Previous studies have found that individuals with high levels of psychological ownership tend to exhibit more territorial behavior [1]. However, in addition to individual factors, whether employees engage in territorial behavior is also influenced by factors such as the material rewards and emotional support provided by the organization. Conservation of resources theory suggests that individuals adopt strategies such as resource assessment, acquisition, conservation, and transfer to construct, protect, and retain resources that have actual or potential value to them [7]. First, from a cognitive perspective, perceived overqualification reflects a negative mindset in individuals [12]. Employees may feel that their own resources are being wasted and that the benefits derived from their resources are being deprived by others, such as colleagues [6]. This perception may trigger employees' resistance towards others and motivate them to engage in territorial behavior. Second, from an emotional perspective, perceived overqualification can trigger negative emotions such as envy and feelings of unfairness in employees [8, 10]. These negative emotions can lead employees to activate self-defense mechanisms to protect their resources and status by denying access to others or limiting resource sharing, in order to avoid harm from other colleagues. In summary, employees who have high levels of their own qualifications are prone to engage in territorial behavior as a defensive strategy to protect their cognitive and emotional resources. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

Hypothesis 1: Perceived overqualification has a positive impact on employee territorial behavior.

2.2 The Mediating Role of Interpersonal Trust

Interpersonal trust refers to the degree to which an individual has confidence in another person's language, actions, and decisions and is willing to take action based on that confidence [18]. Previous research has shown that interpersonal trust not only promotes knowledge sharing among employees [9] but also enhances employees innovative behavior [11]. The influence of interpersonal trust on individuals is based on both cognitive and affective aspects [18], therefore, the impact of perceived overqualification on interpersonal trust can be explained from both cognitive and affective perspectives. From a cognitive perspective, individuals with a strong sense of perceived overqualification often believe that they have higher abilities [21]. This excessive self-confidence can lead them to be skeptical of others' abilities and contributions, thereby creating distrust towards others. Additionally, employees with a sense of perceived overqualification may experience exclusion when collaborating with other colleagues [22], which also reduces their interpersonal trust in others. From an affective perspective, employees with a sense of perceived overqualification may feel envy towards others [10], believing that they should receive more privileges and advantages compared to their colleagues. In this psychological state, employees with perceived overqualification may perceive unfair resource allocation within the organization and suspect that their colleagues attained their positions through illegitimate means, further diminishing their interpersonal trust in others.

In organizations, interpersonal trust can facilitate communication and coordination among members, reducing the likelihood of conflict [19] and competition. When members of an organization have established reciprocal and exchange relationships, they are less likely to focus excessively on territorial relationships with their colleagues. Furthermore, interpersonal trust helps establish common goals and values, enhancing team cohesion and a sense of belonging [16]. In this context, employees prioritize the interests of the team and are less inclined to engage in territorial behavior for personal gain. Conversely, when interpersonal trust is low, employees may protect their resources through knowledge hiding behaviors [20] or even establish territorial boundaries with their colleagues. Therefore, when employees have a higher level of perceived overqualification, it is likely to reduce their level of interpersonal trust, resulting in an increased occurrence of territorial behavior. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

Hypothesis 2: Perceived overqualification has a negative impact on interpersonal trust.

Hypothesis 3: Interpersonal trust mediates the relationship between perceived overqualification and employee territorial behavior.

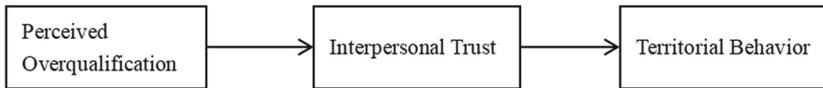


Fig. 1. Theoretical model

By integrating the above hypotheses on perceived overqualification, interpersonal trust, and employee territorial behavior, we propose a hypothetical model (see Fig. 1).

3 Research Design

3.1 Participants and Procedure

The data of enterprise employees from Guizhou, Henan and Jiangsu were collected by anonymous method, 230 questionnaires were distributed and 203 valid questionnaires were collected. Among them, 57.14% were male and 42.86% were female; 85.22% of the research subjects had a bachelor's degree or above; 37.93% had worked for 7 years or more.

3.2 Measures

The scales used in this study are all mature scales, and except for demographic variables, all scales in this study are scored using a 5-point Likert scale.

Perceived overqualification: The scale developed by Maynard et al. (2015) [17] was used, which consists of nine items, such as “My education level is above the education level required by my job”. The Cronbach's α of the scale was 0.892.

Interpersonal trust: The scale developed by McAllister (1995) [18] was used, with a total of eleven items such as “This person approaches his/her job with professionalism and dedication” The Cronbach's α of the scale was 0.935.

Employee territorial behavior: A scale developed by Brown et al. (2014) [1] consisting of six items, such as “I tell others that the workspaces or resources belong to me” The scale's Cronbach's α was 0.814.

Control variables: Employee gender, age, job tenure, education level, and job position level were included as control variables in the analysis.

4 Data Analysis and Results

4.1 Confirmatory Factor Analysis

In this study, the software Amos 23.0 was used to conduct confirmatory factor analysis for the three variables: perceived overqualification, interpersonal trust, and employee territorial behavior. As shown in Table 1, the three-factor model had the best fit compared to other models ($\chi^2/df = 1.61$, CFI = 0.93, TLI = 0.93, RMSEA = 0.06), and the variables had good discriminant validity, indicating that the next step of testing could be conducted.

Table 1. Confirmatory Factor Analysis

Model	χ^2	<i>df</i>	χ^2/df	<i>IFI</i>	<i>TLI</i>	<i>CFI</i>	<i>RMSEA</i>
Three-factor model (A, B, C)	477.82	296	1.61	0.93	0.93	0.932	0.06
Two-factor model (A + B, C)	920.89	298	3.09	0.77	0.75	0.768	0.10
Single-factor model (A + B + C)	1130.847	299	3.78	0.69	0.66	0.690	0.12

Note A represents perceived overqualification, B represents interpersonal trust, C represents territorial behavior

4.2 Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

The means, standard deviations, and correlation coefficients of each variable in this study are shown in Table 2. According to Table 2, perceived overqualification was significantly positively related to territorial behavior ($r = 0.482, p < 0.01$); perceived overqualification was significantly negatively related to interpersonal trust ($r = -0.518, p < 0.01$); and interpersonal trust was significantly negatively related to territorial behavior ($r = -0.411, p < 0.01$). Thus, the hypotheses receive preliminary support.

4.3 Hypothesis Testing

Multilevel regression analysis was conducted in this study using SPSS 26.0 to test the hypotheses, and the results are presented in Table 3. According to Model 4, after controlling for relevant variables, perceived overqualification was significantly positively related to territorial behavior ($\beta = 0.471, p < 0.001$). Model 2 reveals a significant negative relationship between perceived overqualification and interpersonal trust ($\beta = -0.571, p < 0.001$). Model 5 indicates a significant negative relationship between interpersonal trust and territorial behavior ($\beta = -0.355, p < 0.001$). Additionally, Model 6 demonstrates that both perceived overqualification and interpersonal trust have significant effects on territorial behavior when included in the same model ($\beta = 0.367, p < 0.001$; $\beta = -0.183, p < 0.01$), suggesting that interpersonal trust partially mediates the relationship between perceived overqualification and territorial behavior. Therefore, Hypotheses 1, 2, and 3 were supported.

To further validate the mediating role of interpersonal trust, the mediation effect was tested using the Process method. The results based on 5000 bootstrap samples, after controlling for relevant variables, indicate that the indirect effect of perceived overqualification on territorial behavior through interpersonal trust is 0.1043, with a 95% confidence interval of [0.0124, 0.1936], which does not include zero. Therefore, Hypothesis 3 was supported again.

Table 2. Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations (N = 203)

Model	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Gender	1.43	0.50							
2. Age	32.77	5.26	-0.078						
3. Education	3.01	0.74	-0.125	-0.101					
4. Job level	1.92	0.86	-0.002	0.308**	0.319**				
5. Tenure	2.19	0.93	-0.136	0.698**	0.096	0.437**			
6. Perceived overqualification	2.62	0.85	0.109	-0.076	-0.065	-0.037	-0.176*		
7. Interpersonal trust	3.08	0.95	-0.013	0.055	0.156*	0.212**	0.149*	-0.518**	
8. Territorial behavior	2.76	0.85	0.088	-0.065	-0.159*	-0.105	-0.114	0.482**	-0.411**

Note *, **, and *** indicate $p < 0.05$, $p < 0.01$, and $p < 0.001$, respectively, and so on

Table 3. Mediation effect test of Interpersonal Trust (N = 203)

Model	Interpersonal trust		Territorial behavior		Territorial behavior	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
Gender	0.020	0.095	0.102	0.040	0.109	0.057
Age	-0.012	-0.005	-0.003	-0.009	-0.007	-0.010
Education	0.116	0.088	-0.158	-0.134	-0.116	-0.118
Job level	0.164	0.197*	-0.025	-0.052	0.033	-0.016
Tenure	0.124	0.000	-0.062	0.041	-0.018	0.041
Perceived overqualification		-0.571***		0.471***		0.367***
Interpersonal trust					-0.355***	-0.183**
R ²	0.060*	0.313***	0.039	0.253***	0.186***	0.281***
ΔR ²	0.037*	0.292***	0.014	0.230***	0.162***	0.255***
F	2.532*	14.858***	1.591	11.046***	7.487***	10.903***

5 Discussion

5.1 Theoretical Implications

First, this study reveals the mechanism of the influence of perceived overqualification on territorial behavior through the conservation of resources theory, which enriches the study of the influence results of perceived overqualification. As a relatively new concept, territorial behavior has attracted the attention of management scholars in recent years. The findings of this study confirm the view that perceived overqualification has a positive effect on territorial behavior, providing an important theoretical basis for effective utilization of perceived overqualification in organizational management practices and mitigating the negative effects of territorial behavior among employees.

Second, this study selects interpersonal trust as a mediating variable to expand the mechanism of mediating the sense of perceived overqualification on territorial behavior. On the one hand, perceived overqualification significantly reduces the level of interpersonal trust, which is very important in organizations. On the other hand, interpersonal trust has been found to significantly decrease the likelihood of territorial behavior. By introducing interpersonal trust as a key mediating variable, this study provides a new theoretical perspective that helps unravel the relationship between perceived overqualification and territorial behavior, contributing to the research in this field.

5.2 Practical Implications

First, organizations should establish fair and scientifically sound personnel selection and promotion mechanisms. A rational selection and appointment process not only contributes to creating a positive and fair work environment, increasing employee job

satisfaction and sense of belonging, but also helps reduce the occurrence of person-job unfit within the organization. By accurately assessing each employee's experience and capabilities, and fully leveraging their knowledge and skills, organizations can enhance work quality and efficiency, thereby improving their competitiveness.

Second, creating a conducive environment of trust is crucial. Organizations and managers need to be fully aware of the negative impact of perceived overqualification can have on employees and strive to establish a positive and healthy trust environment. By regularly organizing departmental team-building activities and other initiatives, territorial behavior can be fundamentally reduced, promoting communication and interaction among organizational members, and increasing employees' sense of identification and belonging. Such a trust environment will help foster a positive work atmosphere, enhance teamwork and coordination, and strengthen the cohesion and overall performance of the organization.

5.3 Limitations and Future Directions

There are still some limitations to consider. Firstly, the data used in this study were self-assessed by employees, which may lead to common method bias. Future research could address this issue by employing multiple time points and multiple data sources. Secondly, this study only discussed the mediating role of interpersonal trust, and future research could explore other mediating mechanisms of perceived overqualification on territorial behavior using alternative theoretical frameworks. Lastly, it would be beneficial to identify different boundary conditions to clarify the scope of perceived overqualification's impact on territorial behavior, such as organizational climate.

6 Conclusions

Based on the analysis of data from 203 employees, this study concludes that perceived overqualification significantly influences territorial behavior through interpersonal trust. These findings not only contribute to the theoretical understanding of perceived overqualification and territorial behavior in the local context but also provide practical implications for organizations dealing with underemployment issues.

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