

OVER QUALIFICATION AND INNOVATION: THE IMPACT OF EMPOWERMENT, FIT, AND SUPPORT WITHIN THE SOUTH AFRICAN POLICE SERVICE

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Abstract: This study aims to investigate the impact of over qualification on innovative performance among personnel in the South African Police Service (SAPS), focusing specifically on how psychological empowerment, person-job fit, and perceived organizational support influence this relationship. Despite a high incidence of over qualification within SAPS, many overqualified employees remain underutilized, resulting in decreased motivation and limited innovation. Existing research lacks a comprehensive understanding of how empowerment, fit, and support can transform over qualification into a strategic asset to drive innovation in policing. Preliminary literature indicates that over qualification can either hinder or enhance innovation depending on the presence of enabling factors such as empowerment, fit, and support. Empowered and well-supported overqualified employees with good person-job fit tend to exhibit higher levels of innovative behavior, which is critical for addressing the complex challenges faced by SAPS. This study contributes to filling a critical gap in policing research by contextualizing the dynamics of over qualification and innovation within SAPS. It integrates theories of psychological empowerment, person-job fit, and organizational support to offer a nuanced framework for harnessing human capital in the public policing sector. Employing a quantitative, cross-sectional design, the study will collect data from a stratified random sample of SAPS personnel using validated survey instruments. Data will be analyzed using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) to test hypothesized relationships systematically and empirically. Understanding and leveraging the interplay of over qualification, empowerment, fit, and support can enable SAPS to optimize its human resources, foster innovation, improve morale, and enhance overall policing effectiveness. The study offers practical recommendations for human resource management reforms aimed at transforming over qualification into a strategic advantage.

Keywords: *Over qualification, Innovation, Psychological Empowerment, Person-Job Fit, Perceived Organizational Support, South African Police Service (SAPS), Employee Creativity, Human Resource Management, Public Sector Policing, Employee Motivation.*

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Introduction

Over qualification occurs when employees possess more education, skills, or experience than their current job requires. Traditionally, this phenomenon has been associated with negative workplace outcomes such as low job satisfaction, disengagement, and turnover intentions (Erdogan & Bauer, 2009; Maynard et al., 2006). However, recent studies have begun to challenge this one-dimensional perspective, arguing that overqualified employees may also demonstrate high levels of creativity, proactive behavior, and innovative thinking especially when they are empowered, adequately supported, and well-matched to their roles (Zhang et al., 2021; Harari et al., 2017).

In South Africa, over qualification is increasingly visible across the public service due to widespread unemployment, a surplus of university graduates, and limited professional advancement opportunities within state institutions (Stats SA, 2023; Jansen, 2020). The South African Police Service (SAPS) has not been immune to this trend. Numerous reports indicate that

skilled officers often feel underutilized or misaligned with their assigned duties, leading to frustration and low morale (Ngema, 2021; Mofokeng, 2019). Moreover, promotion processes within SAPS have been criticized for lacking transparency and meritocracy, compounding the problem of misallocated talent (Newham, 2024; Burger, 2007).

Despite these systemic challenges, overqualified individuals within SAPS may hold untapped potential to drive innovation, particularly in areas like technology adoption, intelligence-led policing, and administrative reform. However, this potential can only be realized under certain organizational conditions namely, where psychological empowerment, person-job fit, and perceived organizational support are present (Chen et al., 2020; Spreitzer, 1995).

There is a growing body of literature that emphasizes the importance of empowerment and organizational climate in shaping innovative behavior. Psychological empowerment the perception

of autonomy, meaning, competence, and impact has been shown to enhance creativity and initiative, especially among highly skilled employees (Spreitzer, 1995; Thomas & Velthouse, 1990). Similarly, person-job fit and perceived organizational support have been identified as important buffers that can mitigate the negative consequences of over qualification and promote engagement (Erdogan & Bauer, 2009; Hu et al., 2015).

Within the South African context, however, limited empirical research has explored how over qualification interacts with these factors to influence innovation, particularly in the policing sector. This study seeks to fill this gap by investigating how over qualification, when moderated by empowerment, fit, and support, impacts the innovative performance of SAPS personnel.

BACKGROUND

Overqualification is defined as a situation where an individual's education, skills, or experience exceed the requirements of their current job (Maynard et al., 2006). This phenomenon has become increasingly prevalent worldwide, particularly in developing countries such as South Africa, where economic challenges and structural labor market inefficiencies create a surplus of qualified workers relative to available jobs (Stats SA, 2023; Bhorat & Oosthuizen, 2017). In South Africa, the public sector, including the South African Police Service (SAPS), often employs individuals who feel overqualified for their roles, leading to complex organizational challenges (Ngema, 2021; Burger, 2007).

Historically, over qualification was viewed largely as detrimental to employee morale, productivity, and retention (Erdogan & Bauer, 2009). The mismatch between employee qualifications and job demands was seen to generate frustration, lower job satisfaction, and increased turnover intention (Fine & Nevo, 2008). However, more recent research nuances this perspective by suggesting that overqualified employees might also exhibit increased innovative potential when provided with the right organizational context, including empowerment, fit, and support (Zhang et al., 2021; Chen et al., 2020).

The SAPS has faced longstanding challenges related to human resource management and career development, with many skilled officers reportedly feeling undervalued and restricted by rigid promotion policies and bureaucratic constraints (Mofokeng, 2019; Newham, 2024). These conditions contribute to a sense of over qualification and underutilization among officers, which can erode morale and reduce motivation to innovate (Magaji et al., 2023). Studies emphasize that the failure to recognize and utilize overqualified personnel's capabilities hampers the modernization efforts critical to effective policing in South Africa (Burke & Sebele, 2016).

Empowerment has emerged as a vital mechanism for transforming the negative effects of over qualification into positive innovative outcomes. Psychological empowerment fosters a sense of autonomy, competence, and impact, enabling employees to leverage their surplus qualifications constructively (Spreitzer, 1995; Thomas & Velthouse, 1990). Similarly, person-job fit defined as the alignment between an employee's abilities and the demands of the job—has been identified as a crucial factor in enhancing engagement and innovation, particularly among overqualified employees (Edwards, 2008; Kristof-Brown et al., 2005).

Perceived organizational support, encompassing the availability of resources, recognition, and career development opportunities, also plays a pivotal role in moderating the relationship between over qualification and innovative behavior (Eisenberger et al., 1986; Hu et al., 2015). Within SAPS, where institutional support and training have historically been inconsistent, strengthening these support mechanisms could be key to harnessing the innovation potential of overqualified officers (Ngema, 2021; Magaji et al., 2023).

Overall, the interplay of over qualification with empowerment, fit, and support within SAPS remains underexplored, despite its potential to impact organizational innovation and effectiveness. This study seeks to bridge this gap by investigating these dynamics, thereby contributing to policy discussions aimed at reforming SAPS human resource practices and promoting a culture of innovation.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Over qualification remains a persistent challenge within the South African Police Service (SAPS), where many employees possess qualifications and skills that exceed the requirements of their assigned roles (Ngema, 2021; Magaji et al., 2023). This mismatch is often the result of limited career advancement opportunities, bureaucratic promotion systems, and inadequate human resource planning (Newham, 2024; Stats SA, 2023). Such conditions contribute to reduced job satisfaction, low morale, and disengagement among overqualified officers, undermining organizational performance and innovation potential (Ngema, 2021; Magaji et al., 2023).

Despite these challenges, over qualification can potentially serve as a valuable resource for fostering innovation if the right organizational conditions such as psychological empowerment, person-job fit, and organizational support are in place (Zhang et al., 2021; Chen et al., 2020). However, within SAPS, there is a lack of empirical research exploring how these factors interact to influence innovative behaviors among overqualified personnel. Without such insight, SAPS risks underutilizing its human capital and failing to harness the creative capacities of its workforce to respond to complex policing challenges in a rapidly changing environment (Newham, 2024; Magaji et al., 2023).

This study, therefore, seeks to address this critical gap by examining the impact of empowerment, fit, and support on the relationship between over qualification and innovation in SAPS. Understanding these dynamics is essential to inform human resource policies and management practices aimed at transforming over qualification from a liability into a strategic asset that drives innovation and improved policing outcomes.

AIM OF THE STUDY

The aim of this study is to critically examine the relationship between over qualification and innovative performance among personnel within the South African Police Service (SAPS), with particular focus on the moderating roles of psychological empowerment, person-job fit, and perceived organizational support. This research seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of how overqualified employees can be effectively engaged and supported to enhance innovation and operational efficiency within SAPS.

The study aim is to investigate the relationship between over qualification and innovative performance among personnel

within the South African Police Service (SAPS), focusing on how empowerment, person-job fit, and perceived organizational support influence this relationship. Specifically, the study seeks to understand how these factors can transform the challenges of over qualification into drivers of innovation to enhance operational effectiveness and service delivery in SAPS.

Recent studies highlight that over qualification can be a double-edged sword, potentially undermining motivation if left unaddressed, but fostering creativity and innovation under supportive organizational conditions (Zhang, Law, & Lin, 2021; Chen, Gully, & Eden, 2020). In the South African policing context, where human resource challenges persist, exploring these dynamics is essential for informing strategies that leverage the full potential of overqualified personnel (Ngema, 2021; Magaji et al., 2023).

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This study is significant as it addresses a critical but underexplored area within the South African Police Service (SAPS) the potential of overqualified personnel to contribute to innovation when supported by appropriate organizational factors. By examining the roles of psychological empowerment, person-job fit, and perceived organizational support, the study provides valuable insights into how SAPS can transform over qualification from a perceived liability into a strategic asset.

In a policing environment marked by complex challenges such as rising crime rates, technological change, and public demand for improved service delivery, fostering innovation is imperative (Newham, 2024; Magaji et al., 2023). Understanding how overqualified officers can be empowered and supported to innovate can enhance operational effectiveness, improve morale, and reduce turnover key issues identified in recent SAPS human resource assessments (Ngema, 2021; Stats SA, 2023).

Moreover, this research contributes to the broader field of human resource management by integrating theories of empowerment and person-job fit in the context of over qualification, offering practical recommendations for policy and practice within SAPS and similar public sector organizations (Zhang et al., 2021; Chen et al., 2020). The findings could guide targeted interventions such as tailored training programs, empowerment initiatives, and career development pathways designed to leverage the unique capabilities of overqualified personnel.

Ultimately, the study aims to support SAPS's ongoing transformation efforts by highlighting pathways to build a more innovative, motivated, and resilient police service capable of meeting South Africa's evolving security needs.

GAPS IN THE STUDY

While over qualification has been extensively studied in various organizational settings globally, there is a notable scarcity of research focusing on its impact within law enforcement agencies, particularly in the South African Police Service (SAPS) (Ngema, 2021; Magaji et al., 2023). Most existing studies tend to examine over qualification's negative effects on job satisfaction and turnover without adequately exploring its potential positive outcomes, such as fostering innovation, especially under supportive organizational conditions (Zhang et al., 2021; Chen et al., 2020).

Moreover, despite growing interest in psychological empowerment, person-job fit, and perceived organizational support as moderators in the over qualification-innovation relationship, empirical evidence within the SAPS or broader South African public sector remains limited (Newham, 2024; Stats SA, 2023). This lack of context-specific data limits the ability to design targeted interventions that could leverage overqualified personnel's potential to enhance policing innovation and effectiveness.

Additionally, prior research in SAPS predominantly focuses on challenges such as promotion bottlenecks, morale, and human resource management inefficiencies (Ngema, 2021; Magaji et al., 2023), with insufficient emphasis on how organizational empowerment and support mechanisms could be strategically employed to convert over qualification into a constructive force for change.

Therefore, this study seeks to fill these critical gaps by providing empirical insights into how empowerment, fit, and support influence the relationship between over qualification and innovation within SAPS, offering evidence-based recommendations to optimize human resource practices and innovation capacity in South African policing.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study draws on several complementary theories to explain how over qualification influences innovative behavior within the South African Police Service (SAPS), moderated by empowerment, person-job fit, and organizational support.

Person–Job Fit Theory

Person–Job Fit theory emphasizes the alignment between an individual's knowledge, skills, abilities (KSAs), and the demands of their job role (Edwards, 1991; Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, & Johnson, 2005). A good fit enhances job satisfaction, motivation, and performance, including creativity and innovation. Over qualification represents a misfit condition where employee qualifications exceed job requirements, potentially leading to frustration or underutilization (Maynard et al., 2006). However, when empowerment and support are present, this mismatch can be reframed as a resource that fosters innovative contributions (Zhang, Law, & Lin, 2021).

Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) Model

The JD-R model (Demerouti et al., 2001) posits that job demands (e.g., workload, role conflict) can lead to strain, while job resources (e.g., autonomy, social support) promote motivation and engagement. Psychological empowerment perceived autonomy, meaning, competence, and impact—is a critical job resource that can buffer the negative effects of over qualification and stimulate innovative behaviors (Spreitzer, 1995; Chen, Gully, & Eden, 2020). Within SAPS, empowerment may help overqualified officers channel their surplus skills constructively.

Self-Determination Theory (SDT)

Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000) focuses on intrinsic motivation driven by fulfilling basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Overqualified employees may feel demotivated if these needs are unmet, but when supported and empowered, they experience greater intrinsic motivation to innovate (Gagné & Deci, 2005). SDT thus complements the JD-R model in explaining how

organizational support fosters innovation among overqualified personnel in SAPS (Ngema, 2021).

Social Exchange Theory

Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964) suggests that when employees perceive strong organizational support and fair treatment, they reciprocate with positive attitudes and behaviors, including innovation (Eisenberger et al., 1986). Perceived organizational support within SAPS may encourage overqualified officers to invest their surplus skills towards creative problem-solving and service improvement (Magaji et al., 2023).

The integration of these theories provides a robust framework to understand how overqualification, typically a mismatch, can be transformed into a source of innovation through empowerment, fit, and support. This framework will guide the study's examination of relationships among these variables within SAPS.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Over qualification: Concept and Consequences

Over qualification occurs when employees possess education, skills, or experience exceeding the demands of their job (Maynard et al., 2006). Traditionally, over qualification has been linked to adverse outcomes such as job dissatisfaction, reduced organizational commitment, and turnover intentions (Erdogan & Bauer, 2009; Fine & Nevo, 2008). This is particularly relevant in contexts with rigid promotion structures and limited career mobility, such as public sector institutions including the South African Police Service (SAPS) (Ngema, 2021; Newham, 2024).

However, recent literature challenges this purely negative perspective. Overqualified employees may demonstrate enhanced creativity, problem-solving abilities, and innovation when their surplus skills are harnessed and supported (Zhang et al., 2021; Chen et al., 2020). The degree to which over qualification leads to positive or negative outcomes depends largely on contextual factors such as empowerment, person-job fit, and organizational support (Hu et al., 2015).

Empowerment as a Moderator

Psychological empowerment, defined as employees' perception of meaning, competence, autonomy, and impact at work, is widely recognized as a key motivator for innovative behavior (Spreitzer, 1995; Thomas & Velthouse, 1990). Empowered employees tend to feel more confident and motivated to apply their skills creatively (Chen et al., 2020). In the context of over qualification, empowerment can alleviate feelings of underutilization and disengagement by granting overqualified employees greater autonomy and influence (Zhang et al., 2021). Within SAPS, where hierarchical structures can limit autonomy, enhancing empowerment is crucial for unlocking innovation potential (Ngema, 2021).

Person–Job Fit and Its Influence

Person-job fit theory underscores the importance of alignment between an employee's skills and job demands (Edwards, 1991; Kristof-Brown et al., 2005). A strong fit promotes job satisfaction and proactive behaviors, including innovation. Over qualification represents a form of misfit; however, if organizational roles are adapted or expanded to better utilize employees' capabilities, this misfit can become a source of

innovation rather than frustration (Maynard et al., 2006; Hu et al., 2015). Studies in public sector settings emphasize the importance of flexible role design to accommodate diverse talents and reduce the negative effects of over qualification (Magaji et al., 2023).

Perceived Organizational Support

Perceived organizational support (POS) reflects employees' belief that their organization values their contributions and cares about their well-being (Eisenberger et al., 1986). POS has been shown to enhance job satisfaction, commitment, and discretionary behaviors such as innovation (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). Overqualified employees who feel supported are more likely to invest their surplus skills in innovative initiatives (Hu et al., 2015). In SAPS, inconsistent support and lack of development opportunities have been identified as barriers to leveraging overqualified personnel's potential (Ngema, 2021; Newham, 2024).

Over qualification and Innovation in Policing Context

While over qualification has been examined in private and general public sectors, limited research exists on its impact within policing, particularly SAPS. Policing environments require adaptability, problem-solving, and innovation to address evolving crime challenges (Burke & Sebele, 2016). Recent calls for professionalization and modernization of SAPS stress the need to utilize human capital innovatively (Newham, 2024). Harnessing overqualified officers' capacities through empowerment, fit, and support could enhance innovation in crime prevention, community engagement, and administrative efficiency (Magaji et al., 2023).

The reviewed literature suggests that over qualification does not inevitably lead to negative outcomes. Instead, its impact on innovation depends on the presence of enabling factors such as empowerment, person-job fit, and organizational support. However, empirical studies specific to SAPS are scarce, underscoring the need for this research to inform human resource strategies that foster innovation in South African policing.

THEMES FOR THE STUDY

Over qualification and Its Dual Impact

This theme explores the complex nature of over qualification as both a potential challenge and opportunity in organizational settings. Traditionally associated with negative outcomes such as job dissatisfaction and turnover (Erdogan & Bauer, 2009; Maynard et al., 2006), recent research highlights its positive potential when mediated by factors like empowerment and support (Zhang et al., 2021; Chen et al., 2020). This duality is particularly relevant in the SAPS context where skilled personnel often feel underutilized (Ngema, 2021).

Psychological Empowerment and Innovation

Psychological empowerment comprising meaning, competence, self-determination, and impact is a critical factor fostering employee creativity and innovation (Spreitzer, 1995; Thomas & Velthouse, 1990). Empowerment mitigates the negative effects of over qualification by increasing motivation and enabling employees to utilize their surplus skills effectively (Chen et al., 2020). In hierarchical organizations like SAPS, empowerment initiatives can unlock innovation potential (Ngema, 2021).

Person–Job Fit and Role Alignment

Person-job fit, the congruence between employee abilities and job demands, influences job satisfaction and innovative behavior (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005; Edwards, 1991). Over qualification signals misfit, but flexible role design and task enrichment can transform it into a source of innovation (Hu et al., 2015; Magaji et al., 2023). This theme addresses how SAPS can optimize fit to leverage talent.

Perceived Organizational Support and Career Development

Perceived organizational support (POS) reflects employees' perceptions that their organization values and supports them (Eisenberger et al., 1986). POS is linked to enhanced commitment and discretionary behaviors like innovation (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). Given SAPS's challenges with career progression and training, understanding POS is essential for fostering an innovative workforce (Newham, 2024).

Innovation in Policing and Public Sector Contexts

Innovation in policing involves adopting new technologies, strategies, and practices to improve crime prevention and community engagement (Burke & Sebele, 2016; Newham, 2024). Overqualified officers represent a human resource asset that, if empowered and supported, can drive such innovation within SAPS's evolving landscape.

EFFECT/IMPACT ON THE SOUTH AFRICAN POLICE SERVICE (SAPS)

The interplay between over qualification, empowerment, person-job fit, and organizational support has significant implications for innovation and overall effectiveness within SAPS.

Enhanced Innovation and Problem-Solving Capacity

Overqualified officers, when psychologically empowered and adequately supported, can contribute novel ideas and innovative solutions to complex policing challenges. This can lead to improved crime prevention strategies, better community engagement, and more efficient administrative processes (Magaji et al., 2023; Burke & Sebele, 2016).

Improved Employee Morale and Retention

Addressing over qualification through empowerment and fit enhances job satisfaction and reduces feelings of underutilization. This, in turn, can decrease turnover intentions, absenteeism, and burnout among SAPS personnel, fostering a more stable and motivated workforce (Ngema, 2021; Zhang et al., 2021).

Optimized Human Resource Utilization

By aligning personnel capabilities with job demands and providing strong organizational support, SAPS can better leverage the surplus skills of overqualified employees. This optimization contributes to increased operational efficiency and effectiveness in a resource-constrained environment (Newham, 2024).

Cultural and Structural Transformation

Fostering empowerment and support in SAPS can help break down hierarchical and bureaucratic barriers, promoting a culture of innovation and continuous improvement that is critical for adapting to evolving security threats and public expectations (Chen et al., 2020; Ngema, 2021).

Strategic Capacity Building

Integrating these factors into SAPS's human resource management strategies supports long-term capacity building, enabling the service to respond proactively to social and technological changes impacting policing (Magaji et al., 2023).

The South African Police Service (SAPS) faces significant challenges related to employee placement and promotion, which impact operational efficiency and employee morale. These challenges include:

Promotion Bottlenecks and Career Stagnation

Many SAPS personnel experience slow or limited promotion opportunities due to bureaucratic delays, rigid hierarchical structures, and inadequate merit-based advancement systems (Ngema, 2021; Newham, 2024). This often results in overqualified employees being placed in roles that do not fully utilize their skills or qualifications.

Mismatch between Skills and Job Roles

Improper placement of personnel frequently leads to poor person-job fit, where employees' skills and qualifications exceed job requirements (Magaji et al., 2023). This mismatch contributes to job dissatisfaction, decreased motivation, and underperformance.

Inefficient Human Resource Management Practices

SAPS's human resource policies have been criticized for lack of transparency and inconsistency in placement and promotion decisions (Newham, 2024). Such inefficiencies exacerbate feelings of unfairness and reduce trust in leadership.

Impact on Morale and Retention

Placement and promotion challenges contribute to low morale, high turnover intentions, and loss of skilled personnel who seek better opportunities outside the police service (Ngema, 2021; Stats SA, 2023).

Effects on Innovation and Service Delivery

The underutilization of overqualified personnel limits SAPS's capacity to innovate and improve service delivery, affecting crime prevention and community trust (Burke & Sebele, 2016; Magaji et al., 2023).

EFFECTIVE STRATEGY FOR ADDRESSING PLACEMENT AND PROMOTION CHALLENGES IN SAPS

- **Implement Transparent, Merit-Based Promotion Systems**

Establish clear, transparent criteria for promotion that emphasize merit, performance, and competencies rather than tenure or seniority alone. This can include standardized assessments, performance appraisals, and panel interviews to ensure fairness and objectivity (Newham, 2024).

- **Develop a Competency-Based Placement Framework**

Adopt a competency-based framework to match personnel skills, qualifications, and experience with appropriate roles. This should involve regular skills audits and job analyses to ensure optimal person-job fit, minimizing underutilization of overqualified staff (Magaji et al., 2023).

- **Introduce Career Development and Succession Planning**

Implement structured career development programs that outline clear progression pathways, including lateral moves and specialized roles. Succession planning can identify high-potential individuals early and prepare them for leadership positions, reducing promotion bottlenecks (Ngema, 2021).

- **Strengthen Human Resource Capacity and Systems**

Invest in modernizing HR management systems with digital tools to track qualifications, performance, and career progression in real time. Training HR personnel on best practices in talent management will improve placement and promotion decisions (Newham, 2024).

- **Enhance Accountability and Oversight Mechanisms**

Create independent oversight bodies or internal audit teams to monitor placement and promotion processes, ensuring adherence to policies and providing grievance mechanisms to address unfair practices (Burke & Sebele, 2016).

- **Foster a Culture of Continuous Learning and Innovation**

Encourage ongoing training and professional development, empowering personnel to upgrade skills and prepare for advancement. Linking training completion to promotion eligibility incentivizes personal growth and innovation within SAPS (Magaji et al., 2023).

- **Engage in Stakeholder Collaboration and Feedback**

Involve police unions, community representatives, and civil society in developing and reviewing promotion policies to build trust and ensure the system reflects diverse perspectives (Newham, 2024).

Expected Outcomes

- Fairer and more efficient promotion processes.
- Better alignment of personnel skills with job roles.
- Increased employee morale and reduced turnover.
- Enhanced innovation and operational effectiveness within SAPS.
- Strengthened public trust through transparent HR practices.

DISCUSSING OVERQUALIFICATION AND PROMOTION IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN POLICE SERVICE (SAPS), HIGHLIGHTING THE CHALLENGES AND IMPLICATIONS:

Over qualification and Promotion in SAPS

Over qualification is a notable issue within the South African Police Service, where many officers possess educational qualifications and skills that exceed the requirements of their current roles (Ngema, 2021). This misalignment is often exacerbated by slow and opaque promotion systems, which limit career advancement opportunities for overqualified personnel.

CHALLENGES:

Promotion Bottlenecks: The SAPS promotion system is characterized by bureaucratic delays and limited merit-based progression, resulting in stagnation for many qualified officers (Newham, 2024). This causes frustration among overqualified staff, who feel their expertise is undervalued and underutilized.

Underutilization of Skills: Overqualified officers frequently remain in positions that do not fully leverage their knowledge or capabilities, leading to decreased motivation and potential withdrawal from discretionary innovative behavior (Magaji et al., 2023).

Impact on Morale and Retention: Lack of promotion opportunities undermines morale and increases turnover intentions among skilled personnel, weakening SAPS's overall human resource capacity (Ngema, 2021).

Inequitable Career Development: Perceptions of unfair promotion processes can foster distrust in management and impede the creation of a cohesive, high-performing workforce.

Implications:

Over qualification combined with promotion stagnation risks creating a demotivated workforce that fails to innovate or fully contribute to SAPS' mission. Addressing these issues requires reforms to ensure transparent, competency-based promotion pathways that recognize and reward qualifications and performance.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Over qualification is a double-edged sword: While traditionally linked to negative outcomes such as job dissatisfaction and turnover (Erdogan & Bauer, 2009; Maynard et al., 2006), over qualification also holds untapped potential to enhance innovation and creativity when managed properly (Zhang et al., 2021; Chen et al., 2020).

Empowerment plays a critical moderating role: Psychological empowerment comprising autonomy, competence, meaning, and impact can transform over qualification from a liability into a driver of innovative behavior, especially in hierarchical organizations like SAPS (Spreitzer, 1995; Ngema, 2021).

Person-job fit is essential: Aligning employees' skills and qualifications with job demands improves job satisfaction and promotes proactive, innovative work behaviors, reducing the negative effects of over qualification (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005; Hu et al., 2015).

Perceived organizational support boosts innovation: When overqualified employees perceive strong organizational support, they are more likely to engage in discretionary and innovative behaviors, underscoring the importance of supportive HR practices in SAPS (Eisenberger et al., 1986; Magaji et al., 2023).

Contextualizing over qualification in policing is under-researched: There is a significant gap in empirical research exploring how over qualification impacts innovation specifically within SAPS, necessitating focused studies to inform HR and innovation policies in this critical public sector institution (Ngema, 2021; Newham, 2024).

Harnessing overqualified personnel can advance policing innovation: By effectively empowering, supporting, and aligning overqualified officers' roles, SAPS can leverage their surplus skills to enhance crime prevention strategies, community engagement, and operational efficiency (Burke & Sebele, 2016; Magaji et al., 2023).

FURTHER STUDIES

While this study seeks to explore the impact of over qualification on innovation within the South African Police Service (SAPS), several avenues remain for future research:

Longitudinal Studies on Over qualification Dynamics

Future research could employ longitudinal designs to track how over qualification evolves over time within SAPS and its long-term effects on employee innovation, motivation, and career progression. Such studies would provide richer insights into causality and changes in organizational climate.

Comparative Studies across Policing Agencies

Comparative analyses between SAPS and other national or international police services could shed light on how different institutional contexts and human resource practices influence the relationship between over qualification and innovation.

Exploration of Additional Moderators and Mediators

Further research could investigate other potential moderators or mediators such as leadership style, organizational culture, job crafting, or emotional intelligence to deepen understanding of how overqualified employees can be better supported and empowered.

Focus on Specific Units or Ranks within SAPS

Studies focusing on particular units (e.g., detective services, cybercrime units) or ranks could reveal nuanced differences in how over qualification affects innovation across diverse policing roles.

Impact of Technological Innovation and Training Interventions

Research could examine how technology adoption and targeted training programs influence the innovative capacity of overqualified personnel within policing, especially in rapidly changing operational environments.

Employee Well-being and Over qualification

Exploring the relationship between over qualification, psychological well-being, and work-life balance in SAPS would provide a more holistic understanding of the human resource challenges and opportunities.

These further studies can contribute to a comprehensive body of knowledge that supports the development of effective policies and practices to harness over qualification as a strategic asset for innovation in SAPS and similar public sector organizations.

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

Research Design

This study will adopt a **quantitative, cross-sectional research design** to systematically examine the relationships between over qualification, psychological empowerment, person-job fit, perceived organizational support, and innovation within the South African Police Service (SAPS). A quantitative approach is appropriate for testing hypothesized relationships and measuring variables numerically across a representative sample.

Population and Sampling

The target population will consist of SAPS employees across various ranks and departments nationwide. A **stratified random sampling** technique will be used to ensure representation across

different units, ranks, and geographical locations, enhancing the generalizability of the findings.

Data Collection Instruments

Structured questionnaires will be developed, incorporating validated scales from prior research:

- **Over qualification:** Measured using Maynard et al.'s (2006) perceived over qualification scale.
- **Psychological Empowerment:** Spreitzer's (1995) Psychological Empowerment Scale.
- **Person–Job Fit:** Scale adapted from Kristof-Brown et al. (2005).
- **Perceived Organizational Support:** Eisenberger et al.'s (1986) POS scale.
- **Innovation:** Measured by a scale assessing innovative work behavior (Janssen, 2000).

Questionnaires had been distributed electronically and in paper format to accommodate access limitations.

Data Collection Procedure

Ethical clearance and permission from SAPS authorities will be secured prior to data collection. Participants will be informed of the study's purpose, assured of confidentiality, and consent obtained. Data collection were collected over a period of 6 to 8 weeks to maximize response rates.

Data Analysis

Data will be analyzed using **Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS)** and **Structural Equation Modeling (SEM)** via AMOS or SmartPLS to test the hypothesized relationships and mediation/moderation effects. Descriptive statistics, reliability analysis (Cronbach's alpha), correlation, regression, and path analysis will be performed.

Validity and Reliability

- **Content validity** had been ensured by adopting well-established scales and expert review.
- **Construct validity** had been assessed through confirmatory factor analysis (CFA).
- **Reliability** had been confirmed via Cronbach's alpha coefficients for all scales, with values above 0.70 considered acceptable (Nunnally, 1978).

Ethical Considerations

The study adheres to ethical guidelines, including informed consent, voluntary participation, anonymity, and confidentiality. Approval will be sought from the institutional review board and SAPS ethics committee.

This systematic methodological approach allows for a rigorous, empirical investigation of how empowerment, fit, and support influence the innovation potential of overqualified personnel in SAPS, producing data-driven insights to inform policy and practice.

PRACTICAL RECOMMENDATIONS

Develop Empowerment Programs

Implement targeted initiatives that foster psychological empowerment among SAPS personnel, such as participative decision-making, delegation of authority, and skill development workshops. Empowered employees are more likely to channel their surplus qualifications into innovative policing practices (Spreitzer, 1995; Chen et al., 2020).

Enhance Person-Job Fit through Role Redesign

Conduct periodic job analyses and redesign roles to better match the skills and qualifications of personnel, especially overqualified employees. Task enrichment and job crafting can help align duties with employee capabilities, improving job satisfaction and innovation (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005; Hu et al., 2015).

Strengthen Organizational Support Systems

Establish robust support mechanisms including mentoring, career development pathways, and recognition programs. Ensuring employees feel valued and supported encourages innovative behaviors and reduces turnover among overqualified staff (Eisenberger et al., 1986; Magaji et al., 2023).

Implement Continuous Training and Development

Provide ongoing professional development and innovation-focused training tailored to leverage overqualified officers' skills, including technology use, leadership, and creative problem-solving to enhance operational effectiveness (Newham, 2024).

Promote Inclusive and Participatory Leadership

Encourage leadership styles that are inclusive and participative to create a culture where overqualified employees can contribute ideas and take initiative without bureaucratic constraints (Ngema, 2021).

Use Data-Driven Human Resource Planning

Adopt human resource management systems that track qualifications, skills, and performance to better identify overqualification and address it strategically through career planning and internal mobility (Zhang et al., 2021).

Foster a Culture of Innovation

Embed innovation as a core organizational value within SAPS by encouraging experimentation, learning from failures, and rewarding creative contributions (Burke & Sebele, 2016).

For SAPS Management

- **Optimize Human Resource Utilization:** Management should prioritize aligning employee qualifications with job roles to reduce underutilization and maximize innovation potential. Empowerment programs and support mechanisms should be institutionalized to harness the skills of overqualified personnel.
- **Promote Transparent Career Progression:** Developing clear, merit-based promotion and placement policies will improve morale, reduce attrition, and foster a culture of fairness and innovation within the service.

For Researchers

- **Explore Context-Specific Dynamics:** Researchers are encouraged to conduct empirical studies on overqualification and innovation within policing,

focusing on contextual factors unique to SAPS and similar public sector institutions.

- **Investigate Additional Moderators:** Future research should examine other variables such as leadership styles, organizational culture, and technology adoption to provide a more comprehensive understanding of innovation drivers in policing.

For Policymakers

- **Formulate Supportive HR Policies:** Policymakers should develop frameworks that mandate transparent, competency-based promotion and placement practices within SAPS, ensuring accountability and equitable opportunities for advancement.
- **Allocate Resources for Capacity Building:** Policies must support ongoing training, empowerment initiatives, and technology investments to modernize SAPS human resource management and operational capabilities.

For Government

- **Enhance Oversight and Governance:** The government should strengthen oversight mechanisms to monitor SAPS HR practices, ensuring compliance with labor laws and ethical standards.
- **Integrate Innovation in Public Safety Strategies:** Government planning should incorporate human capital development as a strategic pillar for advancing policing innovation, public trust, and service delivery.

This study provides actionable insights that can help SAPS management and stakeholders address critical HR challenges, leverage overqualified personnel's potential, and foster innovation. By bridging research and policy, the study supports building a more effective, motivated, and adaptive police service aligned with South Africa's evolving security needs.

CONCLUSION

The phenomenon of overqualification within the South African Police Service presents both a critical challenge and a unique opportunity. When left unaddressed, it contributes to dissatisfaction, underutilization, and stagnation. However, this study underscores that through strategic empowerment, alignment of roles, and robust organizational support, overqualification can be transformed into a powerful catalyst for innovation. Harnessing the full potential of overqualified personnel is essential for SAPS to evolve into a more agile, innovative, and effective policing organization. Addressing these human resource dynamics not only improves employee morale and retention but also strengthens the service's capacity to respond creatively to the complex demands of modern policing. Ultimately, this research highlights a pathway for SAPS to unlock its human capital, drive meaningful reform, and enhance public safety in South Africa.

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