Why Do Overqualified Incumbents Deviate? Examining Multiple Mediators

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In the modern marketplace, especially when unemployment is high, more and more Americans find themselves overqualified (i.e., possessing more competencies than the job requires). Using and extending person-environment fit theory and the stressor-emotion model of counterproductive work behaviors (CWBs), we examine whether overqualified employees are more likely to display CWBs than employees who feel their positions match their qualification levels. Further, we examine why overqualified employees may behave in counterproductive ways and compare the empirical viability of several theoretically derived competing mediators. Based on data from a sample of full-time employees (n = 215), we found that consistent with the theoretical frameworks, overqualified incumbents display undesirable counterproductive work behaviors because they become cynical about the meaningfulness of their activities. We further show that although poor person-job fit or inadequate psychological contracts can motivate such misbehavior, cynicism dominates as a reason for why overqualified employees engage in counterproductive work behaviors.

Keywords: overqualification, counterproductive work behaviors, burnout, person-job fit, stressor-emotion model

When the labor market is weak, many people find themselves overqualified for the jobs they hold. For example, because of the rapidly rising unemployment rate in the economic recession of 2009, eight million Americans were reemployed in jobs for which they were overqualified (Reingold, 2009) or ended up working far below their education, skills, and expertise. These numbers are comparable across the globe with high overqualification rates in Canada (Li, Gervais, & Duval, 2006), Europe (Brynin & Longhi, 2009; Green & McIntosh, 2007), and some developing countries, such as Pakistan (Farooq, Javid, Ahmed, & Khan, 2009). Given its prevalence, surprisingly little is known about the job performance of overqualified employees. For example, researchers have theorized that overqualified people likely engage in counterproductive work behaviors (CWB; employees’ volitional actions harming or intending to harm organizational stakeholders such as coworkers, supervisors, clients, etc.; Spector et al., 2006) because they are bored and their skills are underutilized (Feldman, 1996; Fisher, 1993), but empirical evidence is lacking. Although there are reasons to expect that overqualification might relate to employees’ CWBs, it remains unclear why overqualified incumbents may engage in behaviors that are outside the boundaries of what is considered acceptable. There are many reasons why people decide to behave in counterproductive ways. Thus, in the current research we will propose and test multiple, potentially competing mediators as possible explanatory mechanisms of the overqualification–CWB relationship.

This dearth of research on CWB among overqualified employees is problematic because CWB is a pervasive organizational problem. For example, 25% of companies have fired at least one employee for Internet misuse, and 95% of organizations report being the targets of employee theft and fraud (Mount, Ilies, & Johnson, 2006). Although we know a lot about why people misbehave (e.g., unfair treatment, inconsiderate leadership, or interpersonal conflict; Bennett & Robinson, 2000; Spector et al., 2006), research is lacking about CWB of overqualified incumbents. Given the influx of overqualification in today’s sluggish job market and high prevalence of CWB in the workplace (Stewart, Bing, Davison, Woehr, & McIntyre, 2009), understanding whether overqualification is related to CWB as well as the
mechanism behind this linkage is important and worthy of increased attention.

Researchers studying overqualification have predominately examined its relation with job attitudes, but there continues to be paucity of research on the performance of overqualified employees. It is well-established that overqualified people are dissatisfied with their jobs (Johnson & Johnson, 2000; Khan & Morrow, 1991), lack affective commitment (Bolino & Feldman, 2000; Maynard & Joseph, 2008; Maynard, Joseph, & Maynard, 2006), and are physically and psychologically distressed (Johnson & Johnson, 1996, 1997, 1999). Performing tasks that are incongruent with their skills and abilities, overqualified incumbents also have higher intentions to quit and actually voluntarily terminate their employment (Maynard, Joseph, & Maynard, 2006; Luksyte, Sady, & Spitzmüller, 2009; Maynard & Simon, 2007). Although both attitudes and turnover intentions of overqualified employees have been studied extensively, the relationship between overqualification and performance still remains unclear with the majority of studies examining task (Bolino & Feldman, 2000) and overall job performance (Erdogan & Bauer, 2009; Fine & Nevo, 2008) and largely ignoring other types of performance (e.g., organizational citizenship behavior, CWB). To our knowledge, no evidence exists about CWB of overqualified incumbents. In addition to the lack of research in the overqualification-performance domain, a coherent theory underlying these phenomena is lacking (Feldman, 1996). Accordingly, it is important to understand whether overqualified individuals likely transgress, and if so, why. This knowledge will help organizations to prevent and minimize CWBs of their overqualified employees.

In the present study we address these gaps. First, we empirically examine a theorized link between perceived overqualification and CWB. Second, we examine possible mediators in this linkage. Finally, we investigate which of the proposed mechanisms best explains the CWB of overqualified incumbents. We begin by briefly describing overqualification and CWB, followed by introduction of person-environment (P-E) fit as the theoretical framework to study the relationship between perceived overqualification and CWB. We then use this and other frameworks [i.e., stressor-emotion model of CWB (Spector & Fox, 2005); conservation of resources (Hobfoll, 1989); and psychological contract (Rousseau, 1995)] to examine potential mediators (i.e., person-job fit, burnout, and psychological contract) in the perceived overqualification-CWB relationship.

Perceived Overqualification, Person-Job Fit, and CWB
Perceived Overqualification

An initial challenge for researchers in this area is that many operationalizations of overqualification exist. Overqualification (i.e., more education, skill, and work experience than a job requires; Maynard et al., 2006) is one of the dimensions of underemployment (a broad term referring to inadequate employment relative to some standard; Feldman, 1996). It can be measured either objectively by comparing employees’ attained qualifications with job requirements (e.g., Brynin & Longhi, 2009; Burris, 1983; Khan & Morrow, 1991; Farooq et al., 2009) or subjectively as people’s perceptions of their qualifications for a job (e.g., Erdogan & Bauer, 2009; Maynard et al., 2006). Objectively measured overqualification may be less susceptible to common method variance than perceived overqualification. However, the former fails to capture the situations in which people with similar backgrounds employed in comparable positions experience different levels of overqualification presumably because of discrepancies in the standard referents they use to assess the person-job match (Edwards, Cabe, Williamson, Lambert, & Shipp, 2006). Further, given the intentional nature of CWB (Spector & Fox, 2005), employee perceptions of their overqualification will trigger these undesired behaviors more so than their actual (or objective) overqualification. Not surprisingly then, the majority of researchers have examined perceived overqualification (e.g., Bolino & Feldman, 2000; Fine, 2007; Johnson, Morrow, & Johnson, 2002) and its relationships with job attitudes (Johnson et al., 2002), job performance (Erdogan & Bauer, 2009; Fine & Nevo, 2008), and voluntary turnover (Maynard & Simon, 2007). Consistent with prior research, which has emphasized the significance of perceptions, we will use perceived overqualification to examine its impact on CWB.

The dimensionality of overqualification has also been scrutinized (Johnson & Johnson, 1996, 1997, 2000; Khan & Morrow, 1991; Maynard et al., 2006). Some researchers suggest that it comprises two dimensions: perceived mismatch (i.e., the extent to which employee qualifications are discrepant from their current job requirements) and perceived no-growth (i.e., whether incumbents have professional development opportunities; Johnson et al., 2002; Johnson & Johnson, 2000; Khan & Morrow, 1991). Others have asserted that it is fully represented by
one dimension (i.e., mismatch; Erdogan & Bauer, 2009; Maynard et al., 2006). For the purpose of this paper, we conceptualize perceived overqualification as a unidimensional construct which may influence employees’ CWB.

Why do people feel overqualified? Research has examined both personal and situational precursors of overqualification. For example, women and minorities are more susceptible to overqualification than White males (Buchel & Battu, 2003; Feldman, 1996). Highly intelligent and open to new experience (i.e., curious, adventurous) people may also feel they are overqualified (Fine, 2007). In addition to individual antecedents, job-level factors such as rank (e.g., Bolino & Feldman, 2000) and organization-level factors such as downsizing (e.g., Feldman, Leana, & Bolino, 2001) likely contribute to overqualification. This research further demonstrates the importance of examining overqualification and its impact on organizationally relevant outcomes such as CWB.

**Counterproductive Work Behavior**

Counterproductive work behavior (CWB) is conceptualized as “acts that harm organizations or people in organizations . . . or run counter to the interests of an organization” (Spector & Fox, 2010, p. 23). Like other conceptually similar constructs (i.e., antisocial behavior, incivility, and retaliation), CWB violates social norms and either harms or intends to harm targets (e.g., employees or organizations; Spector, Bauer, & Fox, 2010). However, CWB differs from other constructs in several important ways. First, CWB is mainly concerned with deviance at work, whereas antisocial behavior is a broader term, encompassing psychiatric diagnoses, violation of legal or social norms (e.g., delinquency), and aggressive behavior (Rhee & Waldman, 2002). Second, CWB consists of “active and volitional acts engaged in by individuals, as opposed to accidental or unintentional actions” (Spector & Fox, 2010, p. 23), whereas the intent of incivility is ambiguous and not necessarily malicious (Cortina, 2008; Milam, Spitzmueller, & Penney, 2009). Finally, CWB is not socially accepted or desired behavior, whereas revenge is normative and potentially justified as a response to perceived mistreatment (Bies & Tripp, 2005).

CWB can also be seen as a behavioral response to work experience (Penney & Spector, 2005). As such, its manifestation can vary depending on the target—whether the behaviors target an organization (CWB-O) or other individuals at the workplace (CWB-I; Bennett & Robinson, 2000; Berry, Ones, & Sackett, 2007; Spector & Fox, 2010). In the former case, people choose to harm an organization by, for example, putting forth little effort, intentionally working slowly, or taking longer breaks. In the latter, CWB-I take the form of making offensive jokes or publicly embarrassing others (Bennett & Robinson, 2000). A recent meta-analysis suggests that these target-specific dimensions (i.e., interpersonal or organizational) are indistinguishable, and researchers should “focus not on the target of the behaviors (the organization or other employees in the organization) but on their source (the individual employee exhibiting the behaviors)” (Dalal, 2005, p. 1251). Thus, in the present study we focus on overqualified employees and their propensity to engage in CWB (Dalal, 2005).

What factors trigger CWBs? Recent meta-analytic evidence has demonstrated that agreeableness (i.e., cooperation, friendliness), conscientiousness (i.e., detail-orientation, responsibility), and emotional stability (i.e., confidence, steadiness) are negatively associated with CWB (Berry et al., 2007). Likewise, situational factors such as interpersonal conflict and inconsiderate leadership likely instigate CWB (Hirschovis et al., 2007). Demographics may also explain some variance in CWB, with younger, less educated men being more prone to misbehave at the workplace than their older and more educated coworkers (Hirschovis et al., 2007; Ng & Feldman, 2008, 2009). Although we know a lot about what types of incumbents likely transgress at work, the relationship between overqualification and CWB remains largely understudied. We attempt to fill this void by applying person-environment fit theory to empirically examine this linkage.

**Person-Environment Fit**

We contribute to the extant research by integrating P-E fit as the conceptual framework to better understand the impact of perceived overqualification on CWB and by providing insight into the processes underpinning these links. Person-environment (P-E) fit refers to the compatibility between characteristics of people and their work environment (Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, & Johnson, 2005). One dimension of person-environment fit is person-job (P-J) fit, which comprises two types: (a) needs-supplies fit, which captures how well the environment fulfills individuals’ goals and values, and (b) demands-abilities fit, characterized by the compatibility between employees’ knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) and formal job requirements (Cable &
Perceived Overqualification and CWB

Working in a job that is largely incongruent with one’s qualifications may be a frustrating experience (Burris, 1983). Overqualified employees may be inclined to engage in CWB in an attempt to assuage a sense of wasted valuable resources (e.g., time, energy, and knowledge). Consistent with the work frustration-aggression model (Fox & Spector, 1999), individuals respond to frustrating events (i.e., specific job situations preventing people from achieving work-related or personally valued goals) by engaging in CWB, which is interpreted as a specific form of aggression. Building on this model, Spector and Fox (2005) proposed the stressor-emotion model of CWB, which incorporates aggression and occupational stress. Spector and Fox explicate the development of CWB, linking cognitive appraisals of one’s environment to emotional responses and subsequent behavior. Specifically, based on the stressor-emotion model of CWB, people’s responses to the unfavorable appraisals of their work environment (e.g., work overload) result in not just frustration but a wider range of negative emotions such as anger, disappointment, resentment, and boredom (Fox & Spector, 2006; Penney & Spector, 2008). Consequently, such emotional reactions stimulate CWBs (Spector, Fox, & Domagalski, 2006).

Further, based on the P-E fit model, which links poor fit with negative work experiences (e.g., Edwards & Shipp, 2007), and based on the research supporting that this mismatch is a stressor leading to strain (Burke & Deszca, 1988; Piasentin & Chapman, 2007), we argue that performing tasks for which one is overqualified is a stressful experience, resulting in a host of negative emotions. Overqualified people may be angry with their organization that it did not offer them a challenging job (representing poor needs-supplies fit). In addition to experiencing discrete emotions, overqualified incumbents may feel negative affective reactions toward their work situation, resulting in CWB:

Hypothesis 1: Perceived overqualification will be positively related to CWB.

The Mediating Role of P-J Fit

We integrated P-E fit theory and stressor-emotion model of CWB to directly test P-J fit, which has only been utilized conceptually to explain the consequences of overqualification on work outcomes (e.g., Bolino & Feldman, 2000; Maynard, Joseph, & Maynard, 2006). According to the stressor-emotion model of CWB, perceptions of a stressful and poorly organized work environment instigate negative emotions that produce CWBs (Fox, Spector, & Miles, 2001; Spector & Fox, 2010; Spector et al., 2006). Further, incongruence between job and various individual characteristics (e.g., people’s career goals) instigates workplace misconduct (Huiras, Uggen, & McMorris, 2000). Poor P-J fit (Edwards, 1996; Edwards & Harrison, 1993) may also aggravate overqualified employees and provoke them to transgress. They may view poorly matching jobs as unvalued and thus may jeopardize them by engaging in deviant work behaviors.

Further, based on the P-E fit theory, the demands-abilities and needs-supplies fit differentially relate to various dimensions of job performance (Edwards & Shipp, 2007). Although Edwards and Shipp (2007) suggest that the demands-abilities fit best predicts task performance (i.e., performance of core job duties; Sackett & Lievens, 2008), we argue that demands-abilities misfit may also result in CWBs. When abilities exceed job demands, they become underused and atrophy (Edwards & Shipp, 2007).
Such a waste of valuable resources is likely associated with negative emotions, which, in accordance with the stressor-emotion model of CWB, triggers CWB (Penney & Spector, 2008; Spector et al., 2006). The needs-supplies fit is associated with organizational citizenship behavior (OCB; behaviors contributing to organization’s social and psychological environment; Sackett & Lievens, 2008). Although OCB and CWB are considered two distinct constructs (Berry, Ones, & Sackett, 2007), under certain circumstances (e.g., when people are bored or understimulated) they can represent general active behaviors, ranging from helpful to harming actions (Spector & Fox, 2010). Accordingly, needs-supplies misfit likely results in CWB. Integrating these two theoretical perspectives, we suggest that overqualified employees will perceive that their needs have been poorly satisfied, which may activate CWBs.

Alternatively stated, when people are deprived of full use of their skills, they may misbehave in attempt to alleviate feelings of boredom and underuse. Being unable to satisfy their needs and use their qualifications on the job, they may feel angry, frustrated, bored, and distressed. Keeping up with the stressor-emotion model of CWB (Fox & Spector, 2006; Spector & Fox, 2005), positioning CWBs as a response to negative emotions that stem from perceived stressors, overqualified incumbents appraise P-J misfit (both demands-abilities and needs-supplies) as a stresor that theoretically invoke negative feelings culminating in CWBs:

Hypothesis 2: Two types of person-job fit: (a) demands-abilities and (b) needs-supplies will mediate the perceived overqualification-CWB relationship.

The Mediating Role of Burnout

Burnout may be another reason why overqualified people engage in CWB. A prolonged emotional response to job stressors, burnout consists of three dimensions: emotional exhaustion (i.e., feelings of being overworked), cynicism (i.e., disengagement from one’s job), and low personal accomplishment (i.e., perceptions of self-infficacy; Maslach, 2003; Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001). Burnout, one of “the U.S.’s fastest-growing disability categories” (Gorman, 2007), is widespread across different cultures, and it permeates a variety of occupations, including police officers (Burke & Mikkelsen, 2006), call center agents (Wegge, Van Dick, & Fisher, 2006), engineers (Riolli & Savicki, 2006), and even religious workers (Beebe, 2007).

The conservation of resources model (COR; Hobfoll, 1989, 2001; Hobfoll & Schumm, 2009) has been one of the predominant conceptual frameworks to study burnout (e.g., Bakker, Demerouti, & Verbeke, 2004; Halbesleben, 2006, 2010). The COR model uses a resource perspective in explaining why people experience strain (or burnout). Based on this model, resources have been defined as “those objects, personal characteristics, conditions, or energies that are valued in their own right, or that are valued because they act as conduits to the achievement or protection of valued resources” (Hobfoll, 2001, p. 339). Hobfoll (1989, 2001) has defined resources broadly to encompass both physical (e.g., office space) and abstract (e.g., personality, qualifications, time, etc.) entities.

As such, people become burned-out if their resources are lost or threatened (Halbesleben, 2006; Hobfoll, 2001). The model rests on two major principles: (1) resource loss contributes more to strain than does resource gain, and (2) people need to invest their resources to accumulate other resources or prevent their loss (Hobfoll & Schumm, 2009). Accordingly, when people are faced with resource loss or threat, they are motivated to minimize the resultant strain by either protecting or enriching their resources (Hobfoll, 1989). Failure to do so results in burnout (Halbesleben, 2006), which is detrimental not only for people’s well-being but adversely influences organizationally valued outcomes such as retention and performance (Bakker, Demerouti, de Boer, & Schaufeli, 2003; Taris, 2006). It is well-established that burned-out employees are not productive (Bakker, Demerouti, & Verbeke, 2004; Cropanzano, Rupp, & Byrne, 2003; Halbesleben & Bawler, 2007) and even counterproductive (Liang & Hsieh, 2007).

Although workaholics or those who are overwhelmed by job demands (i.e., work overload) are most susceptible to experience burnout (Bakker, Demerouti, & Euwema, 2005; Bakker, Hakonen, Demerouti, & Xanthopoulou, 2007; Maslach & Leiter, 2008), burnout may also result from insufficient workload or underload (i.e., tedium and monotony; Maslach et al., 2001). Having an insufficient load, people will have limited opportunities to use existing and accumulate future resources, which, according to the COR (Hobfoll & Schumm, 2009), causes burnout. Work underload may be qualitative (e.g., lack of challenge, boredom) or quantitative (e.g., too little activity). Both types are stressful and can lead to burnout (Maslach, 1998) or boredom strain (Fisher,
Further, burnout may be caused by poor person-job fit. In other words, “the greater the gap, or mismatch, between the person and the job, the greater the likelihood of burnout” (Maslach et al., 2001, p. 413). Defined, overqualification represents a situation “when individuals perceive that they possess education, experience, or skills that exceed normal job requirements” (Johnson et al., 2002, p. 425). In this light, overqualified employees may be susceptible to the three dimensions of burnout because their workload may be inappropriate. Specifically, overqualified employees perform tasks for which they have surplus credentials (qualitative underload) and/or complete work assignments quickly, resulting in limited activities for them (quantitative underload). Although no research has examined the overqualification-burnout link, we build on the P-E fit (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005), COR (Halbesleben, 2006; Hobfoll, 1989), and stressor-emotion model of CWB (Spector & Fox, 2005) theories to justify this relationship.

**Emotional exhaustion.** The COR model posits that people strive to retain, protect, and build resources; both actual and perceived loss of resources are threatening (Hobfoll, 1989, 2001). Guided by the COR and P-E fit theories, we anticipate that overqualified employees may perceive that they waste their valuable resources such as time, skills, and knowledge staying on the jobs that are incompatible with their credentials. As a result, overqualified people may grow frustrated (Burriss, 1983) and emotionally drained by their perceived impotence to adequately apply their skills and potentially develop new expertise. Indeed, work underload (i.e., repetitive and tedious tasks) has been linked to emotional exhaustion (Leung, Skitmore, & Yee Shan, 2007). From the standpoint of the stressor-emotion model of CWB, such an affective reaction to adverse work conditions corresponds with increased CWBs (Fox et al., 2001; Spector & Fox, 2005).

**Cynicism.** We argue that overqualified individuals may try to protect their depleted resources (i.e., excess qualifications) by distancing themselves from the organization; this distancing may manifest as heightened cynicism. In other words, being overqualified represents a threatening situation for one’s resources: They are not fully used, maximized, enriched, or protected. Skill use is an important resource that explains employees’ task enjoyment and well-being (Bakker, van Veldhoven, & Xanthopoulou, 2010; Griffin, Greiner, Stansfeld, & Marmot, 2007). Not surprisingly then, lack of skill use is considered to be a form of depleted resources, which, in turn, leads to emotional exhaustion and cynicism (Neveu, 2007). Thus, we anticipate that overqualified people likely grow cynical when being unable to adequately utilize their resources.

**Professional inefficacy.** Further, being deprived of opportunities to apply their skills, overqualified employees may feel they stagnate professionally, which corresponds with perceived inefficacy. It is difficult to gain sense of accomplishment, productivity, and achievement (i.e., inefficacy; Maslach & Leiter, 2008) when one does not use all of one’s skills. Alternatively, efficacy boosts with the increased opportunities to practice a variety of qualifications. For example, research on job characteristics demonstrated that high-tech employees experience increased professional efficacy with the larger job scope, in which they exercise more autonomy and task variety (Hsieh & Chao, 2004). Accordingly, we argue that being overqualified is a stressful experience, resulting in behavioral strain (i.e., CWB) as the consequence of the three dimensions of burnout.

Although there is no research examining the links between overqualification, burnout, and CWB, studies investigating similar topics are consistent with our theoretical propositions. For example, work underload (as opposed to overload) predicted strain among cost engineers (Leung et al., 2008). We also expect that incongruence between an individual’s characteristics and those of their environment will be positively related to all three dimensions of burnout. For example, value incongruence has been linked to cynical attitudes (Abraham, 2000; Naus, van Iterson, & Roe, 2007; Pugh, Skarlicki, & Passell, 2003) and overqualification has been positively related to cynical attitudes toward one’s careers (Bolino & Feldman, 2000). Further, people perceiving poor fit between their vocational interests and current job experienced high levels of inefficacy (Rubino, Luksyte, Perry, & Volpone, 2009). Based on the COR, P-E fit theories, and stressor-emotion model of CWB as well as relevant research, we anticipate that overqualified employees tend to engage in CWB as the result of the multidimensional burnout:

**Hypothesis 3:** The three dimensions of burnout: (a) emotional exhaustion, (b) cynicism, and (c) inefficacy will mediate the perceived overqualification-CWB relationship.

**The Mediating Role of the Psychological Contract**

Research on the psychological contract may also shed light into processes behind the overqualification-CWB relationship (Rousseau, 2001; Wade-
Benzoni & Rousseau, 2006; Zhao, Wayne, Glb-kowski, & Bravo, 2007). Psychological contract theory suggests that employee-employer relationships are based on implicit and subjectively defined mutual obligations and commitments (Rousseau, 1995; Rousseau & Tijoriwala, 1998). Employees expect their organizations to deliver explicitly and implicitly promised inducements, and, in turn, they reciprocate by engaging in organizationally valued behaviors (Shore, Tetrick, Lynch, & Barksdale, 2006). Given the subjective nature of such expectations and promises, the psychological contract is susceptible to violation, where one of the parties fails to fulfill obligations and commitments they agreed to exchange with the other (Robinson & Morrison, 1995; Robinson & Rousseau, 1994; Turnley & Feldman, 2000; Zhao et al., 2007). A recent meta-analysis demonstrated that an organization’s violation of a psychological contract has a deleterious impact on job performance and work-related attitudes (Zhao et al., 2007) and prompts workplace deviance (Bordia, Restubog, & Tang, 2008; Chiu & Peng, 2008).

Additionally, the type of the psychological contract is important in understanding the overqualification-CWB link as it influences employees’ attitudes and their performance (Dabos & Rousseau, 2004). Based on the employment duration and performance-rewards contingency, an employment arrangement can be categorized as one of three types of psychological contract: transactional (i.e., short-term with well-defined terms of the employee-employer relationship), relational (i.e., long-term trusting relationship without any specific performance-rewards expectations), and balanced (i.e., long-term employment with well-articulated performance requirements; Rousseau, 2001; Wade-Benzoni & Rousseau, 2006). Conceptually, the relational psychological contract is similar to social exchange that focuses on feelings of trust, mutual commitment, and investment in harmonious relationship building (Lester, Kickul, & Bergmann, 2007). Alternatively, a transactional psychological contract overlaps with economic exchange that underscores materialistic aspects of the employee-employer relationships (Montes & Irving, 2008).

Guided by these theoretical assertions, we argue that overqualified employees may perceive a job that is misaligned with their qualifications as a stepping-stone to employment elsewhere and thus may view their exchanges with organizations in a narrow, transactional way, rather than in long-term psychological terms (Feldman, 1996). Alternatively stated, overqualified employees likely interpret employment arrangements in transactional terms and therefore carry out their duties for pay or other tangible rewards that are associated with economic exchange (Shore et al., 2006). Conversely, overqualified incumbents are unlikely to view relationship with their organizations through long-term lens (i.e., relational or balanced) because of poor P-J fit. Research shows that a relational psychological contract promotes such organizationally valued behaviors as task and contextual performance (Shore et al., 2006; Uen, Chien, & Yen, 2009). Alternatively, transactional or economic exchanges emphasizing the tangible aspects of the interaction (e.g., work for pay) are negatively associated with organizational practices aimed to build highly committed workforce (Uen et al., 2009). Accordingly, we hypothesize:

**Hypothesis 4:** Overqualification will be positively related to (a) a transactional psychological contract and negatively to (b) relational and (c) balanced psychological contracts.

Further, building on the theoretical premises of psychological contract theory, we argue that overqualified employees likely feel that they are unfairly deprived of challenging and motivating jobs, and this frustration may engender a host of negative emotions such as aggression, anger, and disappointment (Fox & Spector, 1999; Spector & Fox, 2005). Specifically, overqualified incumbents may view routine and mismatching tasks as an indicator of low social investment, in which organizations do not appreciate and accommodate their talents and needs (Halbesleben & Bowler, 2007). Alternatively stated, overqualified employees will view their employment in short and transactional terms, which likely heightened CWBs. Similar to this logic, overqualified incumbents will not perceive their relationships with the organization from a long-term, trusting, and reciprocal perspective. Lack of relational (or balanced) psychological contract may legitimize CWBs for overqualified employees, who can cognitively justify these behaviors (“Since I won’t be here for long, I don’t need to work too hard”).

Indeed, scant research supports these propositions. In a qualitative study of perceived overqualification, Burris (1983) concluded that overqualified incumbents’ heightened frustration resulted from perceived lack of organizational support to provide opportunities to use one’s skills and develop new competencies on the job. In addition, research on organizational revenge (Aquino, Tripp, & Bies, 2001; Bies & Tripp, 2005) suggests that perceived injustice (i.e., a vio-
lated psychological contract) triggers employee retribution (i.e., CWB). Overqualified employees may perceive unchallenging work as a specific form of unfair treatment and may strive to restore justice by engaging in CWB. Consistent with this logic, we hypothesize:

**Hypothesis 5:** Three types of psychological contract: (a) transactional, (b) relational, and (c) balanced will mediate the perceived overqualification-CWB relationship.

### Method

#### Sample

We recruited 215 full-time working adults. In recruiting participants, we were particularly interested in collecting information from individuals spanning a wide range of industries and who were likely to experience some level of overqualification. As prior research also demonstrates that perceived overqualification is particularly prevalent among young employees, we hence recruited full-time employees who were pursuing a bachelor’s degree at a large U.S. Southern University. The participants were 160 women (74%) and 55 men (26%) with an average age of 25 years (M = 24.71, SD = 6.75). They varied in ethnicity (33% Whites, 26% Hispanics, 21% Blacks, 15% Asians, and 5% other). The participants worked in a myriad of industries (e.g., health care, food industry, law enforcement, etc.) and occupations (e.g., sales associate, legal assistant, veterinary technician). The mean tenure at the organization in which the participants were employed was three years (M = 2.76, SD = 2.68).

### Measures

All measures, unless indicated otherwise below, used a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

**Perceived overqualification.** We measured perceived overqualification using Maynard and colleagues’ (2006) nine-item Scale of Perceived Overqualification. The scale assessed perceived match between individual qualifications and job requirements (e.g., “I have more abilities than I need in order to do my job”). Higher values indicated higher level of perceived overqualification (α = .88).

**Person-job fit.** We measured person-job fit using Cable and Judge (1996) and Saks and Ashforth’s (1997) Perceived Person-Job Fit scale. The scale consists of two subscales: (1) demands-abilities fit, which has four items (e.g., “My knowledge, skills, and abilities match the requirements of my job”), and (2) needs-supplies fit, consisting of four items (e.g., “I feel that this job enables me to do the kind of work I want to do”). Consistent with prior studies (e.g., Resick, Baltes, & Shantz, 2007) these two types of fit represent conceptually distinct constructs. In the current sample, the Cronbach’s alpha was low for demands-abilities fit (α = .52) and reasonably high for needs-supplies fit (α = .95). Although Cable and Judge (1996) obtained a higher reliability for demands-abilities fit (α = .68), it was still fairly low and somewhat comparable to the one reported in our research.

**Psychological contract.** We used the Psychological Contract Inventory (Rousseau, 2000) to measure various types of employee-employer relationships. Consistent with prior research (e.g., Hui, Lee, & Rousseau, 2004), we measured three types of psychological contract: transactional (e.g., “A job limited to specific well-defined responsibilities”; seven items), relational (e.g., “Steady employment”; eight items), and balanced (e.g., “Skill development that increases my value to the firm”; 14 items). Each subscale assessed the extent to which an employer made certain obligations and/or commitments to an employee. We asked participants to rate each item on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 5 (to a great extent). The three types of psychological contract (i.e., transactional, relational, and balanced) demonstrated acceptable to strong levels of internal consistency (α = .79, α = .88, and α = .95, respectively).

**Burnout.** We used the 16-item General Survey of the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) to measure three dimensions of burnout: exhaustion (e.g., “I feel emotionally drained from my work”), cynicism (“I doubt the significance of my work”), and professional inefficacy (e.g., “In my opinion, I am good at my job,” reverse coded; Maslach, Jackson, & Leiter, 1996). We asked participants to rate each item on a seven-point frequency scale ranging from 1 (never) to 7 (every day). These three dimensions of burnout (i.e., exhaustion, cynicism, and inefficacy) demonstrated acceptable to strong

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1 Research suggests that overqualification is particularly prevalent among recent graduates across the globe (Frenette, 2004; Green & Zhu, 2010). These findings further attest to the applicability of our sample to study overqualification.
levels of internal consistency ($\alpha = .89$, $\alpha = .77$, and $\alpha = .71$, respectively).

**Counterproductive work behavior (CWB).** We used a 19-item scale of CWB that included seven items targeting people (CWB-I) and 12 items targeting the organization (CWB-O; Bennett & Robinson, 2000). The scale assessed the extent to which employees engage in behaviors that are harmful for an organization (e.g., “Put little effort into your work”) and individuals (e.g., “Publicly embarrass someone at work”). Consistent with prior research (e.g., Judge, LePine, & Rich, 2006), CWB-I and CWB-O were highly correlated ($r = .62$, $p < .001$). Accordingly, we collapsed them into one dimension representing CWB and used this construct in the subsequent analyses. The use of the global measure of CWB is consistent with a recent meta-analysis (Dalal, 2005). Further, because of the “socially unacceptable” nature of deviant behaviors (Bennett & Robinson, 2000, p. 357), CWBs are likely to be performed in a covert manner. Supervisors likely have limited information about such behaviors, and their ratings are likely to be severely contaminated by halo error (Dalal, 2005). Thus, we collected self-reports, as opposed to supervisors’ accounts, of CWB ($\alpha = .91$). This approach is consistent with the recent meta-analysis demonstrating reliability of self-reported measures of CWB (Berry et al., 2007).

**Controls.** Previous research has indicated that gender is consistently related to CWB with men being more susceptible to behaving in counterproductive ways (Berry et al., 2007; Hershcovis et al., 2007; Semmer, Tschan, Meier, Facchin, & Jacobshagen, 2010). In addition, education, organizational tenure, employment status (e.g., part-time vs. full-time), and minority status have also been linked to CWB (e.g., Berry et al., 2007). Furthermore, these demographic characteristics have been associated with overqualification (e.g., Büchel & Battu, 2003; Feldman, 1996; Frank, 1978; Maynard & Joseph, 2008). Thus, we controlled for gender, education, organizational tenure, employment, and minority status to test whether overqualification influences CWB above and beyond these demographic variables’ effects.

**Results**

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics and correlations among the variables. We used mediation analyses to test the study hypotheses. According to Baron and Kenny (1986), first, there must be a relationship between an independent (IV) and dependent variables (DV). Second, the predictor (i.e., overqualification) must have a significant association with mediators (i.e., fit, burnout, and psychological contract). Third, the mediators must be significantly related to the outcome (i.e., CWB) after controlling for the predictor. Finally, if the relationship between the IV and DV is no longer significant in the presence of the mediator, the relationship is fully mediated. Consistent with Hypothesis 1, perceived overqualification exhibited a significant positive relationship with CWB after controlling for demographic variables ($B = .12$, $p = .04$; see Table 2).

**Mediation Analyses**

In the remaining hypotheses we posited that the relationship between perceived overqualification and CWB would be mediated by multiple variables [i.e., person-job fit (H2), each of the three dimensions of burnout (H3), and psychological contract (H5)]. To test these hypotheses we ran a mediation model with multiple mediators, using Preacher and Hayes’ (2008) SPSS macro, which allowed to test both direct and indirect effects using a normal theory approach (i.e., Sobel test) and bootstrapping procedure to obtain confidence intervals (CIs) estimates. In addition to testing a simple mediation model, this updated SPSS macro allows for multiple mediators and covariates and is thus more powerful than the earlier version of the macro (Preacher & Hayes, 2004). This SPSS macro also integrates a stepwise procedure described by Baron and Kenny (1986). Preacher and Hayes (2008) posit that using multiple mediators in one model allows researchers to test the extent to which a specific mediator influences the X $\rightarrow$ Y relationship in the presence of other mediators. In addition, they also argue that this approach reduces the likelihood of parameter bias attributable to the omitted third variable.

As several bivariate correlations between perceived overqualification and the proposed mediators (i.e., demands-abilities fit, exhaustion, and inefficacy dimensions of burnout) were not significant ($r = -.02$, $ns$, $r = .12$, $ns$, $r = .02$, $ns$, respectively), they were not eligible as mediators in the proposed mediation model. Likewise, neither transactional nor balanced psychological contracts were significantly related to CWB ($r = .11$, $ns$, $r = -.13$, $ns$, respectively), and thus they were excluded from the proposed mediation model. Accordingly, Hypotheses 2a, 3a, 3c, 5a, and 5c did not receive support. As a result, we used only needs-supplies fit (H2b), cyni-
Table 1
Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations Among All Variables

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<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>1</th>
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<tr>
<td>3) Tenure</td>
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<td>-.01</td>
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<td>6) Overqualification</td>
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<td>7) Demands-abilities fit</td>
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<td>8) Needs-supplies fit</td>
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<td>-.04</td>
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<td>-.48**</td>
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<td>9) Emotional exhaustion</td>
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<td>-.04</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.01</td>
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<td>10) Cynicism</td>
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<td>-.05</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.38**</td>
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<td>-.57**</td>
<td>.47**</td>
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<td>11) Inefficacy</td>
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<td>-.01</td>
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<td>-.06</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.02</td>
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<td>-.32**</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.40**</td>
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<td>12) Transactional contract</td>
<td>-.18**</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>-.15*</td>
<td>.15*</td>
<td>.17*</td>
<td>.14*</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>-.09</td>
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<td>.23**</td>
<td>.25**</td>
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<td>13) Relational contract</td>
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<td>.05</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>-.05</td>
<td>-.15*</td>
<td>-.26**</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.46**</td>
<td>-.27**</td>
<td>-.40**</td>
<td>-.32**</td>
<td>-.12</td>
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<td>14) Balanced contract</td>
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<td>.07</td>
<td>-.03</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>-.08</td>
<td>-.31**</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>.40**</td>
<td>-.15*</td>
<td>-.42**</td>
<td>-.36**</td>
<td>-.08</td>
<td>.69**</td>
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<td>15) CWBc</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>-.09</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>-.03</td>
<td>-.03</td>
<td>.14*</td>
<td>-.14*</td>
<td>-.18**</td>
<td>.17*</td>
<td>.33**</td>
<td>.25**</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>-.21*</td>
<td>-.13</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
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<td>2.76</td>
<td>2.03</td>
<td>.65</td>
<td>3.50</td>
<td>3.96</td>
<td>2.93</td>
<td>2.85</td>
<td>2.71</td>
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<td>SD</td>
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<td>.85</td>
<td>.63</td>
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<td>1.01</td>
<td>.86</td>
<td>.55</td>
<td>.83</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>1.01</td>
<td>.72</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. n = 215.

*a 0 = Male; 1 = Female.  
b 0 = Non-Minority; 1 = Minority.  
c CWB = Counterproductive work behavior.  
*p < .05.  **p < .01.
Table 2
The Effect of Overqualification (X) on CWB (Y) Through Multiple Mediators∗ Controlling for Gender, Education, Tenure, Employment, and Minority Status

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>B</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>t</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>b (gender)</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>-0.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b (education)</td>
<td>-0.06</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>-0.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b (employment)</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>-0.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b (minority)</td>
<td>-0.10</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>-1.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b (YX)</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>2.03*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b (M,X)</td>
<td>-0.60</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>-7.86**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b (M,Y)</td>
<td>0.40</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>5.97**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b (M,N)</td>
<td>-0.33</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>-4.11**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b (YM1,X)</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b (YM2,X)</td>
<td>0.24</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>3.36**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b (YM3,X)</td>
<td>-0.09</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>-1.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b (YX,M)</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. n = 215.
∗ Needs-Supplies Fit (M1), Cynicism (M2), and Relational Psychological Contract (M3).
* p < .05. ** p < .01; 5000 bootstrap samples.

cism (H3b), and relational psychological contract (H5b) to test the proposed mediation model (i.e., overqualification → mediators → CWB). Using the SPSS macro, we entered the control variables (i.e., gender, education, tenure, employment, and minority status) as covariates, the perceived overqualification as IV, and cynicism, needs-supplies fit, and relational psychological contract as the mediators. Overall, our model accounted for 13% of the variance in CWB.

Using the SPSS macro, as a first step, we regressed CWB on perceived overqualification, which, as expected, was significant (B = 0.12, SE = 0.06, t = 2.03, p = 0.04, see Table 2). In the second step, we tested the relationship between perceived overqualification and the proposed multiple mediators. All relationships [except for transactional psychological contract (H4a)] were significant and in the expected direction. Specifically, perceived overqualification was negatively associated with needs-supplies fit (B = -0.60, SE = 0.08, t = -7.86, p < .001), and it was positively related to cynicism (B = 0.40, SE = 0.07, t = 5.97, p < .001). These results indicate that individuals who perceived that they were overqualified reported lower levels of needs-supplies fit and become cynical about the meaningfulness of their work. Further, contrary to Hypothesis 4a, overqualification was not associated with transactional psychological contract (B = 0.11, SE = 0.07, t = 1.64, p = .10). However, overqualification was significantly and negatively related to both relational (B = -0.33, SE = 0.08, t = -4.11, p < .001) and balanced (B = -0.38, SE = 0.08, t = -4.83, p < .001) psychological contracts, thereby supporting Hypotheses 4b and 4c, respectively. These findings demonstrated that overqualified incumbents viewed the relationship with their employers as lacking long-term, reciprocal, and trusting orientation. In the third step, we tested the links between the mediators and CWB. Only cynicism was significantly related to CWB (B = 0.24, SE = 0.07, t = 3.36, p < .001), whereas neither needs-supplies fit (B = 0.02, SE = 0.07, t = 0.33, p = .74) nor relational psychological contract (B = -0.09, SE = 0.06, t = -1.57, p = .12) were associated with CWB in the presence of other mediators.

Finally, we tested the full mediation model with the multiple mediators. The total indirect effect including all the mediators in the same model was significant (point estimate for indirect effect = .11; 95% CI = .03, .20) and the relationship between overqualification and CWB became nonsignificant (B = .01, SE = .07, t = .13, p = .90), suggesting full mediation. However, of all mediators included in the model only cynicism fully mediated the effects of perceived overqualification on CWB (indirect effect = .10, 95% CI = .03, .18). Because the confidence interval does not include zero, the indirect effect is significant at α = .05, thereby supporting a fully mediated model for the cynicism dimension of burnout. Thus, Hypothesis 3b received support. There was no evidence of statistically significant mediation by either needs-supplies fit (indirect effect = -.01, 95% CI = -.11, .07) or relational psychological contract (indirect effect = .03, 95% CI = -0.02, .08) because confidence interval for these mediators included zero. Thus, Hypotheses 2b and 5b did not receive support.

Supplemental Analyses

Given conceptual overlap among the proposed mediators, they need not be viewed merely as competing factors. To examine this possibility, we conducted separate mediation analyses with needs-supplies fit (H2b), cynicism (H3b), and relational psychological contract (H5b) to test the proposed mediation model (i.e., overqualification → mediators → CWB). In general, the results indicated that, in the absence of other competing mediators, needs-supplies fit, cynicism, and relational psychological contract fully me-
mediated the overqualification-CWB relationship. These findings underscored the salience of each intervening mechanism in this linkage. They also illuminated the importance of examining these mediators simultaneously in one model; failure to do so likely results in the biased estimates and an incomplete picture of the processes underlying the overqualification-CWB linkage.

Discussion

Overqualification is a widespread organizational problem, particularly during times of economic downturn (Brynin & Longhi, 2009; Farooq et al., 2009; Reingold, 2009). Despite the increase in the prevalence of overqualification, surprisingly little is currently known about whether and why overqualified incumbents engage in counterproductive work behavior. We attempted to fill this gap by examining the CWB of overqualified employees and processes underlying this relationship. In particular, building on the P-E fit theory, the stressor-emotion model of CWB, and conservation of resources theory, we proposed P-J fit, burnout, and psychological contract as possible mechanisms underpinning the overqualification-CWB relationship. The results provided mixed support for the hypothesized models.

As expected, we found that overqualified incumbents do engage in organizationally undesired counterproductive work behaviors. Although this relationship has been theorized (Feldman, 1996), to our knowledge, this is the first study to provide any empirical evidence. We also extend prior research on overqualification by demonstrating that the cynicism dimension of burnout fully mediated the perceived overqualification-CWB relationship. Notably, we explored other potentially competing mechanisms and demonstrated that, in comparison with other mediators tested in this study, cynicism fully explains the proposed relationships. Below, we present theoretical and practical implications of our research results.

Theoretical Implications

From a theoretical perspective, the P-E fit framework may prove useful in explaining why overqualified individuals tend to engage in CWB. According to this paradigm, P-E mismatch is a stressful experience resulting in poor psychological and behavioral outcomes. Indeed, we demonstrated that perceived overqualification is positively related to CWB because of needs-supplies misfit. In particular, as the results indicate, overqualified employees likely view jobs that are incongruent with their competencies as a waste of valuable resources (e.g., time, effort). This inability to adequately use one’s skills likely instigates a host of negative emotions such anger, frustration, disappointment. Consistent with the stressor-emotion model of CWB (Spector & Fox, 2005), perceived overqualification represents a stressor and is positively related to CWB because presumably people are deprived of opportunities to achieve work-related goals. A recent meta-analysis illuminated the impact of demographic variables on CWB (Berry et al., 2007). In addition, the theory of differential overqualification (Frank, 1978) posits that women are more likely than men to feel they are overqualified for their jobs. Further, it was also suggested that overqualification is prevalent among minorities (Feldman, 1996) and workers with nontraditional employment arrangements (e.g., part-time, contingent; Maynard & Joseph, 2008). We accounted for the influence of these demographic characteristics on counterproductive work behaviors of overqualified individuals. Notably, the negative impact of perceived overqualification on CWB held true after controlling for the effects of these demographics.

In addition to receiving empirical support for the main effects, we also attempted to test the theory-grounded mechanisms behind the overqualification-

\[ \text{CWB} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \times \text{overqualification} + \beta_2 \times \text{needs-supplies fit} + \beta_3 \times \text{P-J fit} + \beta_4 \times \text{burnout} + \beta_5 \times \text{psychological contract} + \epsilon \]

2 For needs-supplies fit, overqualification was positively related to CWB \((B = .12, SE = .06, t = 2.06, p = .04)\). Further, needs-supplies fit was associated with both overqualification \((B = -.60, SE = .08, t = -7.89, p < .001)\) and CWB \((B = -.13, SE = .06, t = -2.22, p = .03)\). Finally, in the presence of needs-supplies fit, the overqualification was not significantly associated with CWB \((B = .05, SE = .07, t = .72, p = .47)\). The model accounted for 6% variance in CWB.

We obtained similar results for cynicism, wherein overqualification was associated with CWB \((B = .12, SE = .06, t = 2.06, p = .04)\). As expected, cynicism was related to both overqualification \((B = .40, SE = .07, t = 5.98, p < .001)\) and CWB \((B = .28, SE = .06, t = 4.55, p < .001)\). Finally, the relationship between overqualification and CWB became non-significant in the presence of cynicism \((B = .01, SE = .06, t = 2.0, p = .04)\). The model accounted for 13% in CWB.

Likewise, for the relational psychological contract, overqualification was significantly linked to CWB \((B = .12, SE = .06, t = 2.03, p = .04)\). As hypothesized, relational psychological contract was negatively related to overqualification \((B = -.33, SE = .08, t = -4.11, p < .001)\) and CWB \((B = -.15, SE = .05, t = -2.86, p = .00)\). Finally, the non-significant relationship between overqualification and CWB \((B = .07, SE = .06, t = 1.18, p = .24)\) in the presence of the relational psychological contract indicates that it fully mediated this linkage. The model explained 7% variance in CWB.
CWB relationship. Specifically, the results of a simple mediation model suggested that overqualified employees engage in CWB as a result of poor needs-supplies fit. Interestingly, the demands-abilities fit did not play a significant role in this linkage. These findings are consistent with prior research that failed to detect significant relationships between demands-abilities fit and job performance (e.g., Cable & DeRue, 2002; Greguras & Diefendorf, 2009). Further, the importance of needs-supplies fit and nonsignificance of demands-abilities fit for overqualified employees in predicting CWB has important implications for P-E fit theory. Specifically, both types of fit represent complementary fit because people and their jobs harmonize each other by providing lacking characteristics. Despite this conceptual similarity, it appears that overqualified incumbents form their P-E fit perceptions based on how well the organization fulfills their needs, not on the match between their abilities and job demands. Edwards and colleagues (2006) concluded that how people develop perceptions of P-E fit remains a “theoretical black box largely neglected, perhaps because the comparison is considered simple and straightforward” (p. 822). We demonstrated that for overqualified people this process is indeed subtle and complex as unfulfilled needs (not excess abilities to perform jobs) contributed to P-J misfit, resulting in CWB.

In the presence of cynicism, however, the mediating effects of needs-supplies fit in the overqualification-CWB association disappeared. One possible explanation rests on the cognition-emotion distinction, emphasizing the importance of emotions in eliciting CWB (e.g., Liu & Perrewé, 2005). Accordingly, needs-supplies fit likely represents cognitive appraisal of a stressor (i.e., overqualification), whereas cynicism reflects emotional assessment of overqualification. Based on the stressor-emotion model of CWB (Spector & Fox, 2005), cynicism, being a form of affective reaction to a stressor (i.e., overqualification), may weaken cognitive assessments of overqualification, ultimately resulting in CWB. This, in turn, might explain the dissipating effects of needs-supplies fit in the overqualification-CWB link when cynicism is present.

The mediating role of cynicism in the proposed model is also supported by the conceptual tenets of P-E fit. In particular, the P-E fit research links values incongruence with cynical attitudes (Abraham, 2000; Naus et al., 2007). Accordingly, we demonstrated that in performing unchallenging jobs that poorly match their competencies, overqualified individuals likely become cynical about the meaningfulness and purposefulness of their work. This lack of significance may undermine resources (e.g., effort, time, persistence) that overqualified incumbents would otherwise dedicate to accomplish their work-related goals. Further, the conservation of resources model suggests that people experience strain (e.g., burnout) when they are unable to protect and/or build valuable resources. Guided by this framework and P-E fit, we demonstrated that overqualified incumbents experience burnout (i.e., cynicism dimension) stemming from the perceived loss of valuable resources attributable to poor fit and that these processes are detrimental for organizations as they can result in increased CWB.

Social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) asserts that employees are unlikely to reciprocate if their employers fail to fulfill their work-related needs. It further posits that this lack of long-term perspective and trust in employment may be associated with negative outcomes (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). Indeed, the results of a simple mediation model are consistent with this notion, indicating that overqualified incumbents may not perceive the relationship with their organizations as a long-term, reciprocal exchange, which corresponds with heightened CWB. Interestingly, a transactional psychological contract neither mediated this link nor was it significantly related to overqualification. These results might add to the literature on the psychological contract by demonstrating conceptual distinctiveness between the transactional and relational psychological contracts and their differential impact on CWB for overqualified employees. Specifically, our findings emphasized the importance of mutual investments and long-term employment orientation even for such “high-flight risk” employees as overqualified incumbents.

As with the mediating effects of needs-supplies fit, the significance of a relational psychological contract fades away in the presence of cynicism. It is possible that overqualified individuals become cynical because of this deficiency in employee-employer exchange. Consistent with the research on psychological contracts, suggesting that unmet expectations decrease perceptions of a relational contract (Lester et al., 2007), there may be a perceived lack of reciprocity between overqualified employees and their organization. This may signal to employees that the company does not value their qualifications and thus the relationship is a temporary one, resulting in increased cynicism and subsequent CWB. Future research should use structural equation modeling to further explore these interrelations.
Practical Implications

From a practical standpoint, these results offer some important implications for organizations striving to more effectively manage their overqualified incumbents. These results are particularly relevant in the light of the current economic downturn, when many organizations have access to very talented and educated applicants who are potentially overqualified for available positions. Does it mean that managers should not hire these people? Not necessarily. For example, recently, Erdogan and Bauer (2009) showed that overqualified incumbents exhibit high levels of job performance if they receive more empowerment and control over their jobs.

Further, extrapolating from our results, we suggest that managers should be aware of possible perils associated with hiring overqualified people and should take necessary steps to minimize these costs. Specifically, managers could potentially decrease CWBs of overqualified incumbents by emphasizing that they value their subordinates’ contributions. By showing appreciation of their competencies, managers may attempt to diminish cynical attitudes toward their duties, which instigate their overqualified employees to transgress. For example, managers may nominate their overqualified subordinates to serve as mentors for their coworkers or to conduct on-the-job training for newly hired people. Such strategies likely demonstrate to overqualified employees that their employers recognize surplus qualifications their subordinates possess. Such managerial actions may also show overqualified people that their employers try to fulfill their needs. Further, managers likely reap benefits (by decreasing CWBs) if they instill in their overqualified employees a sense of long-term, reciprocal, and trusting employment orientation. This managerial consideration, support, and attention to their needs will likely improve psychological well-being of overqualified employees, resulting in decreased CWBs.

Limitations and Conclusion

The aforementioned contributions notwithstanding, we should note several limitations. First, we used self-reported measures of overqualification, which is consistent with the literature (e.g., Fine, 2007; Maynard et al., 2006). Nevertheless, research on narcissism (i.e., “a grandiose sense of self-importance”; Judge et al., 2006, p. 762) suggests that personality influences self-assessment of talents and abilities, which may differ from actual qualifications, and which may be differentially related to some form of CWB (Moscoso & Salgado, 2004; Penney & Spector, 2002). Drawing from these studies, we argue that self-assessment of overqualification may either underestimate or overestimate its true relationship with CWB. Consequently, integrating objective measures of overqualification in future studies will likely provide incremental evidence to the overqualification-CWB linkage and will be beneficial for advancing knowledge in this domain. Second, the cross-sectional nature of the study prevents us from drawing definite causal inferences. Future research, using a longitudinal design, would improve our understanding of the interrelationships examined in the present study. Third, the low reliability of the demands-abilities fit measure might contribute to non-significant findings between overqualification and this type of fit. After examining the inter-item correlation matrix, it appears that one item (i.e., “My job performance is hurt by a lack of expertise on the job” reverse coded) was not highly related to other items of the scale. This suggests that this item may poorly measure the underlying construct of demands-abilities fit. Although the exclusion of this item improved $\alpha = .62$, it did not change the results of our research.

Finally, the unique characteristics of our sample may raise concerns over its generalizability to other working populations. In particular, we used a sample of relatively young, full-time employees who were pursuing a Bachelor’s (BA) degree at the time of data collection. Most full-time employees are not seeking a BA degree, and it is possible that those who do are particularly sensitive to overqualification. However, we argue that this sample is very relevant to test the study hypotheses because overqualification is especially prevalent among young employees and recent university graduates (Frenette, 2004). Therefore, in the era when baby boomers are retiring (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008), the study findings based on this sample are particularly important because organizations are interested in maximizing job performance of freshly minted professionals (Gloeckler, 2008). Future research may be able to contribute to what we know about overqualification by testing our findings with older employees who are not currently engaged in higher education.

In conclusion, it appears that overqualified incumbents engage in CWB as the result of growing cynical about meaningfulness of their work. This adds further evidence to recommendations derived from the burnout literature emphasizing that burnout cannot only
hurt individuals but can also have negative effects for organizations and society at large.

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