

ARTICLE

# Perceived Overqualification and Job Attitudes of Public Servants

João Moreira Gonçalves Neto<sup>1</sup>   
Jairo Eduardo Borges-Andrade<sup>2</sup> 

## Abstract

**Purpose** – This study investigated the relationship between perceived overqualification and job attitudes (affective and continuance organizational commitment and turnover intention) in the public sector.

**Theoretical framework** – The theoretical framework was based on theories about perceived overqualification, human capital, equity, relative deprivation, organizational commitment, and turnover intention, as well as Brazilian civil service legislation.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Brazilian public servants ( $n = 243$ ) answered scales of perceived overqualification, affective and continuance commitment, and turnover intention, and these data were analyzed by means of structural equation modeling.

**Findings** – The results showed that affective commitment was negatively related to turnover intention and mediated the relationship between perceived overqualification and turnover intention.

**Practical & social implications of research** – The findings suggest that overqualification is an inevitable phenomenon that needs to be managed, as rejecting overqualified workers (as is done in the private sector) may be a discriminatory practice and crime.

**Originality/value** – Overqualification has been present in the Brazilian civil service for a long time, but it has not been fully investigated. The present study is one of the few empirical studies on the overqualification phenomenon in the Brazilian civil service.

**Keywords:** Resource management, civil service, professional qualification, job attitudes.

1. Instituto de Ensino de Segurança do Pará, Coordenação de Ensino Superior, Belém, PA, Brasil
2. Universidade de Brasília, Departamento de Psicologia Social e do Trabalho, Brasília, DF, Brasil

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## 1 Introduction

Individuals may have more qualifications than their jobs require (or so they may believe), a condition called *overqualification* (Maynard et al., 2006). This condition has been associated with undesirable outcomes in the work context, for both employees and employers (van Dijk et al., 2020). Overqualified individuals may see this condition as a way to increase their social capital (Feldman & Maynard, 2011). Alternatively, they may feel compelled to accept this condition in order to escape unemployment (Dar & Rahman, 2020). In both cases, it may be an undesirable and unavoidable condition that needs to be managed (Erdogan & Bauer, 2021; Fine & Nevo, 2011). Private organizations tend to reject overqualified applicants (Erdogan et al., 2011; Kulkarni et al., 2015). However, this is not the case in the Brazilian civil service, where the selection process may favor the admission of overqualified applicants.

Since private organizations reject overqualified candidates, studies about overqualification have reported undesirable outcomes of this condition for individuals who were just-qualified at the time of selection and became overqualified after being hired, which is called the *overqualification paradox* (Feldman & Maynard, 2011). In contrast, selection processes for the Brazilian civil service may admit overqualified applicants and reject some just-qualified ones. What are the consequences of overqualification – as described by several research studies – in the context of the Brazilian civil service? Can they be managed?

Brazil has experienced an expansion in higher education without a corresponding increase in jobs requiring higher levels of education (Marioni, 2020). This has resulted in frequent overqualification, especially in the civil service. For instance, 78% of public servants holding clerical positions in Brazilian higher education institutions are overqualified (Castro & Oliveira, 2023). The impact of such overqualification has not been investigated. The consequences of overqualification in the Brazilian civil service are unclear. Few studies have investigated such phenomena in the country, and most of them have sampled private sector workers. This gap and the likely answers to these two questions inspired the objective of the present study: to assess the relationships between perceived overqualification and (affective and continuance) organizational commitment and turnover intention. These job attitudes are often reported to be

negatively associated with overqualification, as described in the next section.

## 2 Theoretical framework

### 2.1 Perceived overqualification

Overqualification is defined as a condition in which individuals have more qualifications (i.e., formal education, experience, and skills) than required by their job (Maynard et al., 2006). It is classified as *objective* – e.g., more years of formal education than required by a job – or *perceived* – a self-assessment of being more qualified (Erdogan & Bauer, 2021). This study focused on perceived overqualification, which is more influential on individuals' attitudes and behaviors at work than objective overqualification (Johnson et al., 2002).

Overqualification is also classified as *apparent* or *emergent* (Erdogan et al., 2011). Apparent overqualification occurs when individuals who start a job are already overqualified. Overqualification is emergent when they become overqualified afterwards – by finishing a degree or training, acquiring more skills, or developing a perception of having surplus qualifications. Hiring managers can observe apparent and objective overqualification during the selection process. However, they cannot observe emergent and perceived overqualification. Among new entrants, it is not easy to predict who will acquire new qualifications or develop a perception of being overqualified after joining and experiencing the job.

Variables at different levels predict overqualification (Ramos & Ramos, 2020). These authors reviewed studies and proposed a model. Its predictors are: the economy, labor market and educational system; organization and job characteristics; and career planning, job search, work history and values, academic and family background, and personal variables. This model also synthesizes the impacts of overqualification on job attitudes and well-being, job performance, job search, and turnover. These consequences have a higher level of concordant evidence than the predictors. According to these authors, overqualification may more often become a trap for workers rather than a stepping stone in their careers.

Perceived overqualification is usually explained by three theories. According to the *human capital theory* (Becker, 1994), perceived overqualification occurs when there is no return on the investment in qualifications (i.e., a job that is compatible with the qualifications in which

the individual has invested), and this leads to a perception of injustice (Luksyte & Spitzmueller, 2011). The *equity theory* (Adams, 1963) hypothesizes that perceptions of injustice are promoted by an imbalance between individual contributions and organizational rewards (Liu & Wang, 2012). In such cases, the perception of the individual's contributions (i.e., surplus qualification) is higher than the perception of job rewards (e.g., status, pay, and career opportunities). The perception of unfairness increases as this surplus qualification is not rewarded. The *relative deprivation theory* (Crosby, 1976) states that individuals compare their current job, which is perceived as inferior to their qualifications, with a desirable job, which is perceived as compatible with their qualifications. They feel deprived of a job they believe they deserve, can have, and do not blame themselves for not yet having. The result is a sense of injustice (Erdogan et al., 2018; Lee et al., 2021).

These three theoretical frameworks invoke knowledge that may not allow generalization to national societies where human capital, equity, and relative deprivation may play different roles when associated with individual values, beliefs, and perceptions (Borges-Andrade et al., 2018). These authors compare Latin American (LA) work and organizational psychology with its equivalent in Europe and the USA. According to Feitosa et al. (2018), there is a “need for the development and validation of universal frameworks” (p. 153) in industrial, work, and organizational psychology in LA countries. Nevertheless, they start their chapter by highlighting the importance of understanding “the nuances and complexities of each context before generalizing any scientific finding” (p. 149). The present study seeks to generate knowledge about the attitudinal consequences of perceived overqualification in a specific LA context. This knowledge may have autochthonous characteristics – as claimed by Borges-Andrade et al. (2018) – although the research approach adopted here does not intend to lose the connection to these frameworks, as they also suggested.

There are undesirable consequences of overqualification – for both people and organizations – that have been reported in several studies. Perceived overqualification was negatively associated with psychological capital and positively associated with turnover intention (Vinayak et al., 2021). Perceived overqualification showed an effect on turnover intention that was mediated by perceived organizational support (Ye et al., 2017). Perceived overqualification has been negatively related to job satisfaction (Arvan et al., 2019; Wassermann et al.,

2017), life satisfaction (Allan et al., 2020; Erdogan et al., 2018; Wassermann & Hoppe, 2019), career satisfaction (Erdogan et al., 2018), organizational citizenship behaviors targeting others (Erdogan et al., 2020), and job crafting (Sesen & Ertan, 2020). In addition, perceived overqualification has been positively related to job search behaviors (Maynard & Parfyonova, 2013), anger toward employment situations (Liu et al., 2015), somatic symptoms (Triana et al., 2017), cyberloafing (Cheng et al., 2018), depressive symptoms (Wassermann & Hoppe, 2019), depression (Allan et al., 2020), and counterproductive behaviors (Kim et al., 2021; Liu et al., 2015).

Undesirable consequences of overqualification have also been reported among Brazilian workers. It has been negatively associated with job satisfaction (Gonçalves & Borges-Andrade, 2018; Maciel & Camargo, 2013; Weymer et al., 2014) and cooperative behavior and turnover intention (Maciel & Camargo, 2013). Perceived overqualification and job satisfaction were also negatively associated among home office workers, but non-significant results were found for conventional workers (Gonçalves, 2021). However, almost 90% of the participants in these studies were private sector workers. Their results are unlikely to be generalizable to the civil service.

Given these undesirable outcomes, hiring managers tend to reject overqualified applicants (Erdogan et al., 2011; Galperin et al., 2020). These applicants are considered to be a risk for organizations (Kulkarni et al., 2015). However, in the Brazilian context, such rejection is interpreted as a discriminatory selection practice and a crime (Boucinhas, 2008). Therefore, if overqualification has undesirable consequences among Brazilian public servants, there should be another way to deal with it.

Overqualification may also represent an investment for employees and organizations (Kulkarni et al., 2015). Individuals who voluntarily accept a low-skilled job could increase their social capital and reduce work-family conflict (Erdogan et al., 2011; Feldman & Maynard, 2011). They could benefit from overqualification by increasing their own status in the group, their group status, and members' group identification (van Dijk et al., 2020). Organizations that hire overqualified individuals could have a stock of new competencies that could be useful in the future – for increasing competitive advantage (Erdogan et al., 2011; Hu et al., 2015; Russell et al., 2016).

As previously described, overqualification can lead to desirable or undesirable outcomes. Individuals and organizations could benefit from understanding when and

how one of these outcomes would occur (Galperin et al., 2020). For this reason, moderators of the relationships between overqualification and its outcomes have been investigated. For example, perceived overqualification and job satisfaction were negatively correlated when empowerment was low, but this correlation was not significant when empowerment was high (Erdogan & Bauer, 2009). Higher perceived supervisor support reduced the negative association between perceived overqualification and psychological capital (Vinayak et al., 2021). In individualistic cultures, perceived overqualification was negatively correlated with well-being when job autonomy was low, but there was no significant effect when job autonomy was high (Wu et al., 2015). High job autonomy moderated the negative relationship between perceived overqualification and withdrawal from the organization (Debus et al., 2020). Commitment of overqualified individuals may increase if they experience career development (Russell et al., 2016). Examples of such development include empowerment and job autonomy.

Financial needs, work values and preferences, job characteristics, and organizational practices are the moderator variables of overqualification outcomes in the model proposed by Ramos and Ramos (2020). These authors highlight the relevance, prevalence and persistence of overqualification in most countries and call for its examination in specific contexts. The findings included in their review and in previous reviews tend to come from research conducted in the Northern Hemisphere. These individual needs, values, and preferences may play a different role in the Southern Hemisphere. Furthermore, public service practices have peculiarities that may shape these job characteristics, as in Brazil.

## 2.2 The Brazilian civil service

The Brazilian civil service can be an alternative to labor market uncertainties for two reasons. First, tenure is guaranteed after three years of experience, although dismissal is possible in some cases, such as certain criminal convictions (Brasil, 1991). Second, public servants' salaries are high. In November 2019 – before the COVID-19 pandemic – average real earnings were R\$ 3,596 for public servants and R\$ 1,723 for private sector employees – R\$ 2,129 for those with formal contracts, R\$ 1,371 for those with informal contracts, and R\$ 1,670 for the self-employed (Brasil, 2020). These benefits attract thousands of candidates, regardless of

work activities and job requirements (Bichett & Vargas, 2021; Mendes, 2011; Santos et al., 2015). For example, in a study of undergraduates in administration, 45% of them intended to enter civil service after receiving their bachelor's degree (Sales & Xavier, 2017).

Admission to the civil service takes place through highly competitive entrance exams, a process aimed at selecting the best candidates (Almeida et al., 2020; Fontainha et al., 2015). These entrance exams include objective tests for high school diploma positions, and objective tests and assessments of educational attainment for college degree positions (Brasil, 1991). Selected candidates have higher test scores and higher educational degrees. This favors the admission of (objectively and apparently) overqualified individuals. Most candidates are overqualified and invest in special training offered by a large “industry of courses” to achieve the level of knowledge and skills required by these exams (Maia, 2021). For example, in a public entrance exam for high school positions, having a college degree (or higher) had a positive effect on admission, while having a high school education had a negative effect (Castelar et al., 2010). In a study of college graduates who took entrance exams, 39% were candidates for high school graduate positions (Albrecht & Krawulski, 2011). Overqualified individuals have a greater chance of becoming public servants because entrance exams aim to select the best candidates (Almeida et al., 2020; Fontainha et al., 2015).

Admission by entrance exam is not without its criticisms. It is criticized for not assessing the candidates' job skills and abilities, and for wasting candidates' educational background (Mendes, 2011). It is also criticized for being misaligned with the strategic plans of public organizations (Fontainha et al., 2015). Despite such criticisms, the entrance exam is the best option available, since it reduces the probability of illegal (and immoral) selection practices, such as patronage and nepotism.

The Brazilian civil service may not offer proper careers. Individuals admitted to a formal position remain in that position until voluntary turnover or retirement. Moving from a high school diploma position to a formal college degree position requires passing another special exam and being dismissed from the previous position. Consequently, no matter how qualified public servants are or become, they may be doomed to the same pay, work activities, and status – unless they pass another special exam. This situation may represent a waste of qualifications in the civil service (Mendes, 2011).

A higher salary is not enough for satisfaction and engagement. Public servants see pay as a source of attraction and retention rather than satisfaction (Xavier, 2021). Person-organization fit – between individual and organizational values and culture – was positively related to work engagement (Andrade, 2020). These results suggest that a higher salary has no effect over public servants' satisfaction, and their engagement is associated with the fit between them and the public organization they work for. This fit can promote organizational commitment.

### 2.3 Organizational commitment

The visibility and sustainability of organizations depend on their members' strong psychological attachment to them (Ravangard et al., 2013). This highlights the importance of the organizational commitment construct – workers' identification with their organizations' values and objectives, as well as their efforts to achieve these objectives (Reade & Lee, 2012). This construct was found to be positively associated with work behaviors, such as organizational citizenship behaviors (Jehanzeb & Mohanty, 2020), and negatively associated with job search and voluntary turnover (Kampkötter et al., 2021).

Organizational commitment is a construct that can include three types of psychological components corresponding to desire, need, and obligation (Meyer & Allen, 1991). *Affective commitment* is defined as an individual's emotional attachment to, identification with, and involvement in the organization that leads to a desire to remain in it. *Continuance commitment* is the awareness of the costs associated with leaving the organization that leads to a need to remain in it. *Normative commitment* is described as a sense of duty (moral obligation) to remain in an organization. These three components are not mutually exclusive – people can have all of them to varying degrees – and they can have different antecedents and consequences.

These three components of commitment were originally proposed as a one-dimensional construct (Meyer & Allen, 1991). However, continuance commitment can be unfolded into four types of losses: social, investment, reward, and professional (Siqueira, 1995). *Social losses* consist of the loss of job security, prestige, colleagues, etc. – associated with leaving the organization. *Investment losses* correspond to the loss of investments made in the organization, such as time dedicated to it and hierarchical positions achieved. *Reward losses* are related to the loss of

pay and benefits provided by the organization. *Professional losses* refer to the loss of status achieved in one's career and the costs of adapting to a new job and learning new tasks.

Perceived overqualification and affective commitment have been negatively associated in studies by Guo et al. (2022), Johnson et al. (2002), Lobene and Meade (2013), and Maynard et al. (2006). Furthermore, this overqualification was negatively related to continuance commitment when career calling was low, and non-significantly when career calling was high (Lobene & Meade, 2013). However, there is no conclusive evidence in the literature on the relationship between perceived overqualification and continuance commitment (Harari et al., 2017). One of the consequences of organizational commitment would be turnover (Hur & Abner, 2024; Meyer & Allen, 1991).

### 2.4 Turnover intention

Turnover intention is the intention to voluntarily leave an organization (Mowday et al., 1982). This intention has been negatively predicted by both affective (Falatah & Conway, 2019; Moreira et al., 2020; Yang et al., 2019) and continuance commitment (Ayari & AlHamaqi, 2022; Wang et al., 2023). Moreover, turnover intention has been positively related to perceived overqualification (Bao & Zhong, 2023; Kaymakci et al., 2022; Harari et al., 2017; Lobene & Meade, 2013; Maynard et al., 2006; Vinayak et al., 2021). This relationship was moderated by power distance (Harari et al., 2017), perceived organizational support (Ye et al., 2017), autonomy, and job crafting (Debus et al., 2020). The relationship between perceived overqualification and turnover intention was also fully mediated by organizational commitment – the indirect effect was positive and significant, and the direct effect was non-significant (Piotrowska, 2022).

## 3 The present study

The objective of the present study was to assess the relationships between perceived overqualification, as the predictive variable, and (affective and continuance) organizational commitment and turnover intention, as criterion variables. The Brazilian civil service selection process favors the admission of more qualified individuals, making overqualification more prevalent than in the private sector. Therefore, it is an appropriate context for studying the associations between overqualification and job attitudes.

Overqualified public servants would perceive their jobs as inferior to those they believe they deserve and are capable of having, as proposed by theories of relative deprivation (Crosby, 1976), human capital (Becker, 1994), and equity (Adams, 1963). These workers would perceive the rewards of public service as insufficient to return their investments in qualifications and to compensate for their contributions. Consequently, the more they perceived their jobs as inferior and their rewards as insufficient, the more they would perceive unfairness in this situation, and the less affectively attached they would feel to their organizations (Guo et al., 2022; Johnson et al., 2002; Lobene & Meade, 2013; Maynard et al., 2006). This led to **Hypothesis 1**: Perceived overqualification is negatively related to affective organizational commitment among public servants.

As previously stated, public servants would perceive their jobs as inferior to what they believe they deserve and can have (Adams, 1963; Becker, 1994; Crosby, 1976). The more they believe they are overqualified, the more they believe they can find a better job (Maynard & Parfyonova, 2013) and the less they perceive leaving their job as a loss (Lobene & Meade, 2013). This led to **Hypothesis 2**: Perceived overqualification is negatively related to continuance organizational commitment among public servants.

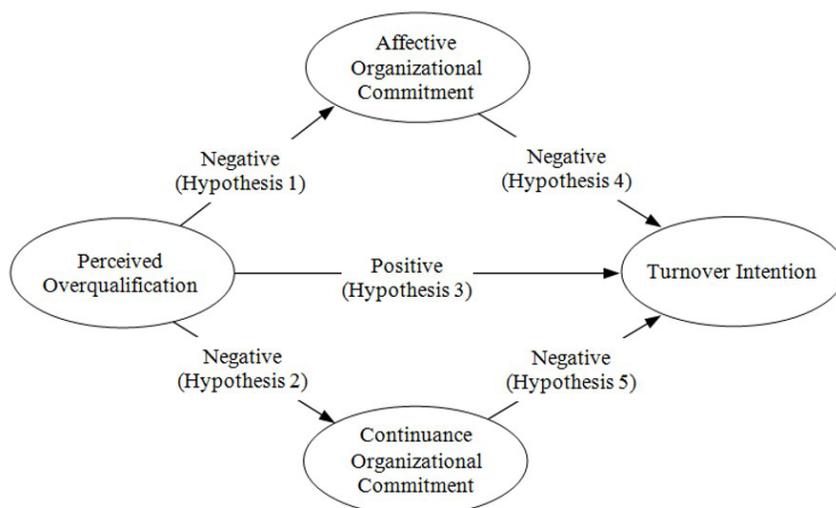
Overqualified public servants desire a job that is compatible with their qualifications – consistent with the relative deprivation theory (Crosby, 1976). Therefore, the higher this desire, the higher the intention to leave the civil service (Bao & Zhong, 2023; Kaymakci et al., 2022; Lobene & Meade, 2013; Maynard et al., 2006).

Since affective and continuance commitment are negative predictors of turnover intention (Ayari & AlHamaqi, 2022; Falatah & Conway, 2019; Moreira et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2023; Yang et al., 2019), the lower these commitments, the higher the intention to leave the organization. Consequently, three additional hypotheses were formulated: Perceived overqualification is positively related to turnover intention among public servants (**Hypothesis 3**); affective commitment is negatively related to turnover intention among public servants (**Hypothesis 4**); and continuance commitment is negatively related to turnover intention among public servants (**Hypothesis 5**). The study hypotheses are organized in the theoretical model shown in Figure 1.

## 4 Method

### 4.1 Research context

This study took place in a northern Brazilian state located in the Amazon region. In the third quarter of 2019, before the COVID-19 pandemic, public service represented a considerable part of the labor market in this region, compared to other regions of the country. Among the active Brazilian labor force, public service represented 15.92% in the North region, while this participation varied between 10.63% and 13.99% in the other four Brazilian regions (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística, 2023). Moreover, the participation of private formal jobs in the labor market was higher in these four regions (25.47% to 43.55% of the active labor force), compared to the North region (21.58%) (Instituto



**Figure 1.** Theoretical model proposed for this study

Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística, 2023). Public service has a different role in the labor force of the North region, as suggested by these data.

## 4.2 Participants

There were 264 participants in this study, 53% female, aged 20-65 years old ( $M = 40.84$ ,  $SD = 10.70$ ). They had entered the civil service through entrance exams ( $M = 10.49$  years,  $SD = 9.44$ ) and occupied positions that required elementary school education (12%), high school education (53%), or a college degree (35%). However, 2% had elementary school education, 42% had high school education, and 56% had a college degree.

## 4.3 Measures

A questionnaire obtained information on sociodemographic variables and included four scales to measure the antecedent and criterion variables (Supplementary Data 1 – Instrument and Supplementary Data 3 – Legend). The Scale of Perceived Overqualification, SPOQ (Maynard et al., 2006), assessed the antecedent variable. It was adapted to the Brazilian context by Gonçalves and Borges-Andrade (2018). The SPOQ has nine items that are answered on a scale from 1 (*completely disagree*) to 7 (*completely agree*). Two first-order factors include these items: perceived overqualification by Needs and by Requirements. These two factors are included in a second-order factor: global Perceived Overqualification – POQ. An example of a SPOQ item is: “My job requires less education than I have.” The composite reliabilities were: .76 for Needs; .84 for Requirements; and .90 for POQ.

Three job attitude scales were used: the Scale of Affective Organizational Commitment (SAOC) and the Scale of Continuance Organizational Commitment (SCOC), developed by Siqueira (1995), and the Scale of Turnover Intention (STI), developed by Siqueira et al. (2014). The SAOC has five items (1 = *completely disagree* to 5 = *completely agree*), with a composite reliability of .90. An example of the items is: “The organization I work for makes me feel proud.” The SCOC has fifteen items (1 = *completely disagree* to 5 = *completely agree*), organized into four factors: Social, Investment, Reward, and Professional losses (composite reliabilities of .66, .82, .77, and .84, respectively). An example of these items is: “It would not be worthwhile to leave the organization I work for and work for another organization because it would be difficult to get as good a salary as I have now.” The STI

is a three-item scale (1 = *never* to 5 = *always*), with a composite reliability of .95. An example of the items is: “I plan to leave the organization I work for.”

## 4.4 Procedures

The respondents were drawn from sixteen training classes in a public governance school. The school’s director initially authorized their recruitment during classes, when the research objectives were explained. Volunteer participants were given the printed questionnaires. The researcher waited for the participants to respond (approximately 20 minutes) and return the completed questionnaires, which were excluded if they had blank or missing data ( $n = 21$ , 8%).

## 4.5 Data analysis

The dataset inspection found no univariate outliers, but 11 multivariate outliers were detected. There is no consensus in the literature about how to deal with multivariate outliers. Moreover, the corrections recommended for dealing with univariate outliers are ineffective for multivariate outliers (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2009). Therefore, the suggestion of Hair et al. (2009) that this type of outliers should not be excluded unless it can be demonstrated that they do not belong to the population under study was adopted. Since such a demonstration was not possible, these multivariate outliers were maintained in the dataset, resulting in 243 (92%) cases for analysis (Supplementary Data 2 – Dataset).

Given the violation of the assumptions of univariate and multivariate normality, the analysis was performed using robust maximum likelihood estimation, robust standard errors, and the Satorra-Bentler chi-square ( $SB\chi^2$ ), as recommended by Brown (2015), Kline (2015), and Tabachnick and Fidell (2009). A model for hypothesis testing was specified and estimated using structural equation modeling (SEM). Its fit was assessed using indices and cutoff points suggested by Schumacker and Lomax (2010) and Hair et al. (2009). These were: factor loadings greater than or equal to .50; comparative fit index (CFI) and Tucker-Lewis index (TLI) greater than or equal to .90; root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) less than or equal to .08; and composite reliability coefficient (for latent variables) greater than or equal to .70. The R software version 4.0.4 was used for the analysis (R Core Team, 2021).

## 5 Results

The estimated model showed a good fit, with  $SB\chi^2(453) = 802.00$  ( $p < .001$ ), CFI = .91, TLI = .90, RMSEA = .06, 90% CI [.05, .07] (Figure 2). It explained 42% ( $R^2 = .42$ ) of the turnover intention variance. The scales presented composite reliability greater than the cutoff points, and their factor loadings were .50 or greater. Exceptions were the second-order factors Requirements and Needs. The Social losses factor had values close to the cutoff points for composite reliability and for the factor loadings of two items. Perceived overqualification was negatively related to affective and continuance (four factors) commitment, providing support for Hypotheses 1 and 2. The direct positive effect of perceived overqualification on turnover intention was non-significant. However, affective

commitment mediated an indirect positive effect ( $\gamma = .11$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Hence, there was partial support for Hypothesis 3. The other indirect effects on turnover intention were non-significant. Affective commitment was negatively related to turnover intention, supporting Hypothesis 4. There was no support for Hypothesis 5, which predicted this negative relationship for continuance commitment. See Supplementary Data 4 – Output R.

## 6 Discussion

Could undesirable consequences of perceived overqualification also occur in the Brazilian civil service? The findings provide a possible affirmative answer to this research question. Perceived overqualification was negatively related to affective and continuance commitment. These

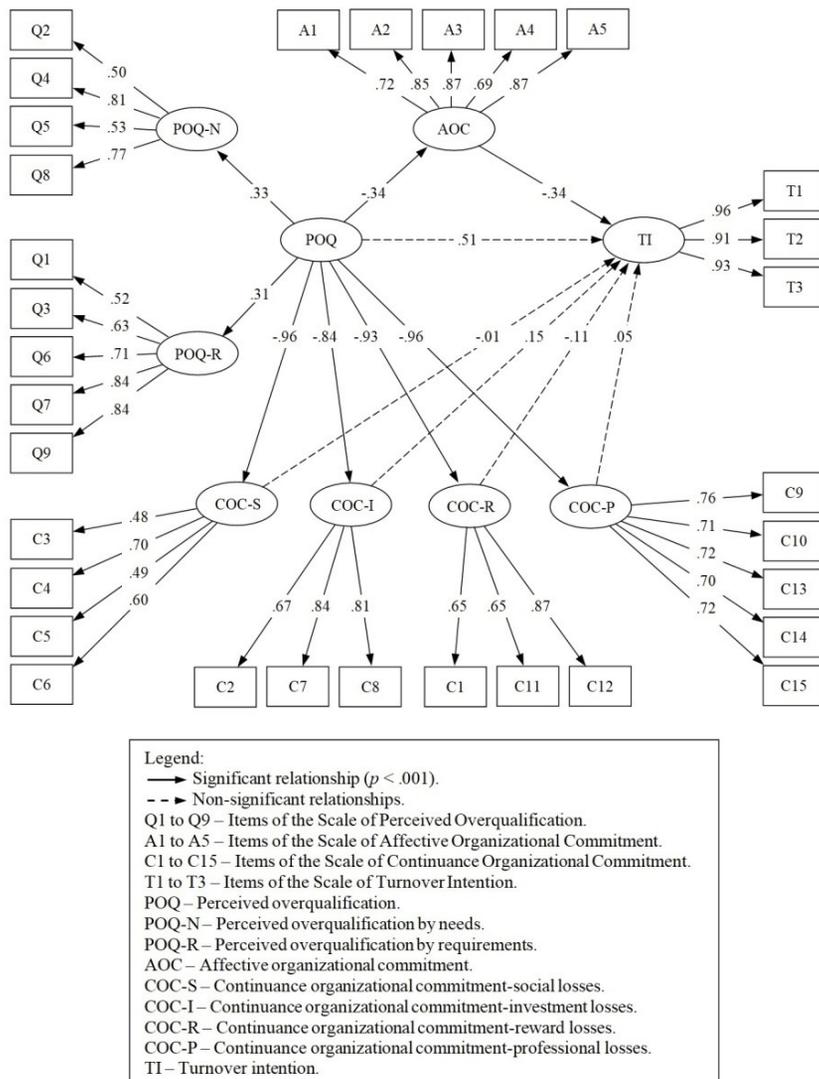


Figure 2. Structural model estimated for hypothesis testing

findings replicate those reported by Guo et al. (2022), Harari et al. (2017), Johnson et al. (2002), Lobene and Meade (2013), and Maynard et al. (2006). Despite the peculiarities of the Brazilian civil service, the consistency is sustained – with the theories of human capital, equity, and relative deprivation, and with the model synthesized by Ramos and Ramos (2020).

These two negative relationships suggest that the perception of having more qualifications than those required by their positions weakens public servants' affective and continuance commitment. It lowers their emotional attachment and identification with the organizations they work for, and their beliefs that they are receiving a return on the investment they made to join them. These effects may not be attributed solely to perceived overqualification, since the main motivation for entering public service may be the salary and job security of the position (Albrecht & Krawulski, 2011; Bichett & Vargas, 2021; Mendes, 2011; Santos et al., 2015). The risk of overqualification increases when individuals choose a job without considering whether the expected activities of the job match their educational background, interests, and values.

The negative relationship with continuance commitment suggests that those with higher perceptions of overqualification perceive lower costs – social, investment, reward, and professional losses – of leaving their jobs. Thus, admission into the civil service may not have been perceived as a (sufficient) return on previous investments in qualifications. Furthermore, those who perceive themselves as more overqualified may have a low career calling for their jobs, since this low calling would promote that negative relationship (Lobene & Meade, 2013). In the context of the Brazilian civil service, a low career calling may imply that entry is highly motivated by salary and job security.

The absence of a significant direct relationship between perceived overqualification and turnover intention does not replicate the research studies by Bao and Zhong (2023), Harari et al. (2017), Kaymakci et al. (2022), Lobene and Meade (2013), Maynard et al. (2006), and Vinayak et al. (2021). Nonetheless, the findings of the present study point to a fully mediating role of affective commitment, as reported by Piotrowska (2022). This commitment may be associated with social or cultural dimensions of the Brazilian Amazonian state where the participants live. They are extremely distant and isolated from other eastern and southern Brazilian regions, and affective bonds are strong. Higher perceptions of

overqualification may reduce affective commitment, which would increase turnover intention. These job attitudes may also increase social and organizational support and supervisor support. The perception of this support decreases the turnover intention resulting from the perception of overqualification (Ye et al., 2017). This may explain the absence of a significant direct relationship. Longitudinal studies in samples of public servants from other Brazilian regions may confirm this mediated causal relationship.

These findings may point to autochthonous characteristics in the studied Amazonian state or in Brazil (Borges-Andrade et al., 2018). Brazilian regions have large contrasts in economic development and labor market inequalities, which may result in dissimilar patterns of career entrenchment. These patterns may also be mediators of the relationship between perceived overqualification and turnover intention, given that this relationship was found to be mediated by affective commitment in the present study.

This study only replicated the association between turnover intention and affective commitment, whereas this and continuance commitment were expected to be negatively associated with turnover intention (Guo et al., 2022; Johnson et al., 2002; Lobene & Meade, 2013; Maynard et al., 2006). Evaluating the costs associated with leaving an organization was not positively or negatively associated with the participants' turnover intentions. These participants are from a state located in a Brazilian region that offers fewer employment opportunities in the formal economy compared to other regions (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística, 2023). Salary and job security may motivate the decision to invest effort in entrance exams (Albrecht & Krawulski, 2011; Mendes, 2011; Santos et al., 2015). Nevertheless, they seem to have less or no influence on permanence in public service. In addition, the results suggest that this permanence is likely to be associated with more affective bonds with this service and higher congruence between personal and public organizational values. Further studies with samples from other Brazilian regions may confirm whether this is an autochthonous characteristic of the North region.

Overqualification is an inevitable phenomenon that needs to be managed (Erdogan & Bauer, 2021; Fine & Nevo, 2011), since organizations cannot hinder individuals' educational and professional development. If they were not overqualified when they were hired (apparent overqualification), sooner or later they will acquire more skills, more experience, complete a training course or a

degree, or develop a perception of being overqualified for their jobs (emergent overqualification). If managed correctly, organizations can take advantage of members' surplus qualifications (Erdogan et al., 2011; Hu et al., 2015; Russell et al., 2016).

The lack of management of public servants' surplus qualifications (apparent or emergent) leads to the perception of overqualification, which can affect individuals' performance and well-being by reducing job satisfaction (Arvan et al., 2019; Gonçalves & Borges-Andrade, 2018; Maciel & Camargo, 2013; Weymer et al., 2014; Wassermann et al., 2017) and life satisfaction (Allan et al., 2020; Erdogan et al., 2018; Wassermann & Hoppe, 2019), and increasing depression (Allan et al., 2020) and counterproductive behaviors (Kim et al., 2021; Liu et al., 2015). These undesirable outcomes will be translated into poor quality services for the northern Brazilian population. Consequently, the overqualification of public servants must be managed, as suggested in the next section.

## 7 Final considerations

Among its limitations, this study conducted its data collection in only one Brazilian state. Its results could be cautiously generalized to other regions of the country, since they differ in terms of education, economy and labor market, among other characteristics. Their cultural origins also vary: the northern region has a larger indigenous population; the southern region has a larger proportion descended from European migrants who arrived in the 1800s and 1900s; and the eastern regions contain sub-Saharan Africans who arrived as slaves between the 1500s and 1800s. These differences may be associated with specific social and work values and social and organizational support, and thus with specific patterns of work centrality and commitment to work and family.

Another limitation is the lack of information about the participants' spheres of government (federal, state, or municipal), which have different salaries and statuses. The respondents also included civilian and military public servants from these spheres. Anonymity prevented the collection of this information, since most of the questions related to sensitive issues concerning personal bonds and intentions toward the organizations. Another particularity of the study was its source of data collection: a public governance school. Its resulting sample may have included participants who overestimated their qualifications. They

voluntarily enrolled in training courses, and this may interact with the perception of overqualification.

From a practical point of view, the findings suggest that the solution for avoiding undesirable consequences of overqualification in the sample studied may be distinctive. Private organizations reject (apparently and objectively) overqualified applicants (Erdogan et al., 2011). However, this only delays the occurrence of (emergent and perceived) overqualification, as described in the overqualification paradox (Feldman & Maynard, 2011). Moreover, such rejection may be a discriminatory practice and a crime (Boucinhas, 2008).

A more convenient approach would be to recognize that overqualification is an inevitable phenomenon that needs to be managed (Erdogan & Bauer, 2021; Fine & Nevo, 2011). While entrance exams favor the admission of overqualified individuals, these individuals chose to become public servants. They were volunteers and may acknowledge their surplus qualifications. Such voluntary overqualification does not necessarily have undesirable outcomes (Erdogan et al., 2011; Hu et al., 2015; Russell et al., 2016). Or it may have other benefits.

Assigning overqualified individuals to departments or sectors compatible with their qualifications is an example of achievable management. This would avoid wasting their competencies (Mendes, 2011). Investment in the development of these competencies could be supported by Brazilian public funds. This surplus could be an advantage (Hu et al., 2015), and it could be translated into higher quality services in a developing country that needs them intensively. It would also promote well-being in the public sector, as reducing perceptions of overqualification could reduce other undesirable effects, such as depressive symptoms (Triana et al., 2017; Wassermann & Hoppe, 2019). Better job design could promote meaningful work and a supportive work culture. These could restore psychological capital, which minimizes turnover intentions (Vinayak et al., 2021). These authors also confirmed that perceptions of supervisor support moderated the relationship between the "perception of overqualification and psychological capital and, in turn, employees' turnover intentions" (p. 12).

Another possibility would be career and management development plans. The filling of some special functions (e.g., management and supervision) could be based on qualifications rather than the educational degree required for the positions occupied by public servants. Then, individuals in high school diploma positions who have college degrees

could experience actual career development, which would reduce the undesirable outcomes of overqualification (Erdogan & Bauer, 2009; Russell et al., 2016; Wu et al., 2015). Support and assistance from managers can reduce the effects of perceived overqualification on family and work relationships and on career plans (Ye et al., 2017). Therefore, training and development programs for public managers could emphasize the systematic use of supportive practices. This may strengthen the affective commitment of overqualified public servants, which in turn will reduce turnover intentions.

There are few empirical studies on the overqualification phenomenon in Brazil. The present study is one of them. Overqualification has been present in the Brazilian civil service for a long time, but it has not been fully investigated. The present study contributes to filling the gap associated with three dispositional aspects. It supports some findings obtained in other cultures. However, it points to specific relationships that should be investigated in Brazil and in its public organizations. Overqualification may be abundant in them.

The participants in this study included public servants who held positions at the three educational levels (elementary school, high school, and college degree). Several were objectively overeducated (e.g., individuals who held college degrees but were in high school diploma positions). A future study could sample a larger number of overeducated individuals in the same position. This would allow the association between perceived and objective overqualification to be examined. Another possibility might be to compare the three spheres of government to assess whether perceived overqualification and its effects on job attitudes differ among them. Finally, other variables described in the scientific literature as being associated with overqualification deserve to be studied in Brazilian samples. Two of them are consequent performance and well-being at work.

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## Supplementary Material

Supplementary material accompanies this paper.

Supplementary Data 1 – Instrument.

Supplementary Data 2 – Dataset.

Supplementary Data 3 – Legend.

Supplementary Data 4 – Output R.

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/BLS7UA>

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The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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**Authors:**

**1. João Moreira Gonçalves Neto**, Master, Instituto de Ensino de Segurança do Pará, Belém, Brasil.

E-mail: [goncalvesnetojm@gmail.com](mailto:goncalvesnetojm@gmail.com)

**2. Jairo Eduardo Borges-Andrade**, Ph.D., Universidade de Brasília, Brasília, Brasil

E-mail: [jairo.borges@gmail.com](mailto:jairo.borges@gmail.com)

**Authors' contributions:**

**1<sup>st</sup> author:** Definition of research problem; development of hypotheses or research questions (empirical studies); literature review; definition of methodological procedures; data collection; statistical analysis; analysis and interpretation of data; critical revision of the manuscript; manuscript writing.

**2<sup>nd</sup> author:** Literature review; definition of methodological procedures; analysis and interpretation of data; critical revision of the manuscript; manuscript writing.