A NARRATIVE STUDY ON THE EXPERIENCE OF UNDEREMPLOYED EDUCATED YOUTH

by

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A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS

in

The Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies
(Counselling Psychology)

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA
(Vancouver)

July 2014

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Abstract

The purpose of this research was to contribute experiential understanding of the lived experience of underemployment for youth who have graduated from college or university. This study utilized a narrative approach to answer the question: “What is the experience of underemployment for educated youth?” Eight youth (between the ages of 24 and 30) were asked to write a narrative on their experience with underemployment. Participants were invited to reflect on their personal experience of having completed post-secondary education and their experience working in fields that don’t require these years of study. They were asked to write the story from their perspective with no rules or guidelines given. A thematic reflection was utilized to understand, organize and reveal the ways these participants experienced underemployment. The narrative thematic methodology selected for analysis is in line with Riessman’s (2008) work, where content is the exclusive focus, and what is said explicitly is what is of great value. The findings acknowledged a transition through loss and stress, and coming out the other side. From this, seven themes emerged: that of unmet expectations, disappointment, career indecision, pressure (internal, external and financial), a reflection on the value of education, a negative impact on psychological well-being and ultimately hope for the future. Then an analysis on the use of metaphor was discussed, as a secondary goal of this research.

The findings of this study reveal important information to better understand this population. The study hopes to greater prepare students exiting education and entering the workforce, and to normalize the myriad of emotions or reactions associated with this complicated experience. Finally, specific recommendations are made for future research.
Preface

This is an original unpublished intellectual work by the author. This research was approved by the University of British Columbia’s Behavioural Research Ethics Board on January 24, 2014. The certificate number of the ethics certification obtained was H13-03594.
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Acknowledgements

This thesis, while a product of my participant’s stories, is permeated with my own perspective, heart and depth of perception. I could not have completed this important piece of work without the people in my life who never cease to amaze me with their support of me as a person, and my craft as a student and counsellor.

I would like to acknowledge these individuals and attempt to express my inexpressible appreciation.

Firstly, to my supervisor, Dr. Norman Amundson, and committee members Dr. Marla Buchanan and Dr. William Borgen, for offering their support and expertise. To Bill, thank you for sharing my passion for this topic and for seeing the value in my study. To Marla, thank you for embracing my need to make research feel congruent, and willingly taking me under your Narrative wing. I would not have felt prepared to utilize this methodology without you in my corner. And to Norm – my supervisor and program advisor – thank you for all your mentorship, unwavering belief in my abilities, and positive guidance. I am forever grateful that you granted me the space and independence to thrive, while never failing to come to bat for me when called to the plate.

Also, to my Expert Reviewer, Steve Norris. Thank you for taking the time to review my analysis, for inviting me into your experience with underemployment, and collaboratively discussing your thoughts on this piece of the inquiry.

Next, I offer endless gratitude to my family. To my dad, for instilling in me a strong work ethic that kept me moving through the ebbs and flows of completing this research. To my mom, for the myriad of ways in which you have actively supported, encouraged and nurtured me in my determination to find and realize my potential.
To my older sister for not hesitating to passionately engage in this rhetoric with me; and my younger sister for your ability to infuse my life with laughter.

To my co-captain in life, thank you for not only believing in my goals but for making them a priority. Your ability to expand the depths of both my heart and my mind helps me to grow and learn each day I’m with you.

A loving thank you to my friends and learning partners, who played such important roles along the journey of this degree and the writing of this thesis. An enormous appreciation goes to those few who endured endless study dates and enthusiastically volunteered to edit my work – you are true gems.

Finally, to all the people who participated in this inquiry – formally and informally – thank you for sharing your poignant, personal and rich career stories, which assisted me in identifying emerging patterns across your experiences. This work could not have been accomplished without you.
Dedication

I began this inquiry with generation Y in mind, my generation, a generation of youth wrought with barriers to satisfying employment. With that being said, this thesis is dedicated to its participants and all new graduates who identify as underemployed. May we continue to value and pursue post-secondary education while trying to expect less because of it, but not from it.
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

“Canada’s weak economic recovery – now in its fourth year since the financial crisis of 2008 – is a driver of remarkably high stress levels, particularly among young adults across the country,” the study says.

“The good news is stress tends to ebb as people age. But for young people, work is a key source of worry, with nearly four in 10 respondents under the age of 34 describing themselves as underemployed, or not able to make full use of their skills in the workplace…”

(Tavia Grant, Globe and Mail – Published Sunday November 4, 2012, 5:47PM EST)

The Research Problem

Youth unemployment and underemployment is a hot topic in today’s society. This societal issue has been catapulted most recently into various articles in reputable newspapers like the Globe and Mail referenced above. A recent Statistics Canada report shows youth unemployment has increased to a 14.1% high, double the unemployment rate of the general population, with more than 400,000 young people (ages 19-30) unable to find work. These numbers, while staggering, are overshadowed by another population, those whom are employed in positions that are not fulfilling or utilizing their education and skill set. Unemployment is at the forefront of research, but its counterpart – underemployment, while highly relevant – is an understudied area of interest.

This research looked at the largely overlooked problem of underemployment, among recent college and university graduates. For increasing numbers of educated youth, after graduation neither full-time work in their field of interest nor unemployment result, instead they fall into a position of underemployment. Underemployment refers to jobs which are part-time, have no potential for advancement and most important of which do not require the
level of education that the graduate possesses (Borgen, Amundson & Harder, 1988). Today, underemployment has been defined as a worldwide phenomenon and 21st century global normality (MacDonald, 2011). In this category, statistics worldwide are rising, specifically in 2009 Canada’s labour force saw just over 15% underutilization (a conservative economic approximation of underemployment) which was a significant jump from just over 10% at the onset of an economic recession in 2007 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2011). The rise in underemployment has most strikingly affected youth in the labour market and when looking at underemployment across the age span. Through analyzing questions included in the country-wide Labour Force Survey (LFS), Tam (2010) measures underemployment in the UK. In this study Tam (2010) documented an ultimate peak at age 19-24 with a slow decline thereafter. In addition to a high prevalence of youth in this position, it is worthwhile to note that highly educated workers in general appear more likely to experience under-employment since they are more likely to find employment that does not correspond with their education level (Weststar, 2009). A 2009 British Columbia Baccalaureate Graduate Study surveyed 18,888 people, with a survey respondent and valid response rate of 9,830 (3,777 females and 6,057 males) with a majority between the ages of 25 and 29 living in the lower mainland. Results of the survey conveyed that 27% of graduates did not feel that their job was very or somewhat related to their program of study at university, and more significantly 45% viewed their skill level as under-utilized (BC Student Outcomes Survey, 2011). These statistics are especially staggering when we look closely at this study’s population of interest. These statistics highlight the relevance of selecting youth as the context for the study. Due to the normalization of post-secondary education and the encouragement toward having high aspirations, it appears young people have come to assume that being qualified is synonymous
with having an enduring and instant professional career after graduation. Upon reviewing ninety life history interviews of graduates in their mid-twenties, Brooks and Everett (2009) argue that due to these assumptions, youth and young adults are often left disappointed when they do eventually enter the labour market, and experience uncertainties while struggling to find a position.

That being said, this thesis explored the experience of being underemployed as a new graduate. The themes and knowledge gained as a result of the current research will help to understand the experience of underemployment. It will also add insight into the relation of underpinning variables that typically entrench one’s life and career story, during a time of transition that is only becoming more and more commonplace. The findings of this research hope to inform counselling practice through growing understanding and normalizing the experience of underemployment for youth.

**Defining Underemployment**

For the purposes of this research, the construct of underemployment will play quite a significant role. In the literature, underemployment has taken on a number of definitions and has been discussed in areas outside of counselling psychology. For instance: fields of economics, sociology, and human resources to name a few. In summary, articles identify about six dimensions that encompass various definitions of underemployment as seen in this vast and varied body of literature. These items can be used alone or in combination with one another. Loosely, these criteria are: possessing more education than is required in the job, being in a job outside of one’s area of formal training, possessing skills that are not utilized in the job, being involuntarily employed in a part-time temporary or intermittent job, earning 20% less than in one’s previous job or than one’s peers, and lastly, subjective
underemployment (i.e., feeling under-utilized). This paper selected a definition that resonated with the population of interest – university and college graduates. With that, an operational definition for underemployment, in a two-part form, was taken from Borgen, Amundson and Harder (1988). Participants were selected if they “possess one standard deviation more of formal education than they needed for the job presently held” (p. 151) and “participants must consider themselves to be underemployed” (p. 151). In this 1988 study, the first criteria was defined using the Canadian Classification and Dictionary of Occupations published in 1971, this study however, utilizes a more recent classification system through the National Occupational Classification (NOC) which is a systematic catalogue of all occupations in the Canadian Labour Market, last updated in 2011. The classification was published by Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, and Statistics Canada, and is revised every five years according to the census cycle. For this research, no other relevant constructs are in need of a definition.

**The Research Objectives**

The purpose of this study was to explore in narrative terms, the lived experience of youth who are underemployed and have completed post-secondary education. This study aims to assist in understanding the experience of this phenomenon for a youthful, new graduate population. Lastly, this study will contribute to the literature of underemployment as a whole. This niche is an under-researched but relevant field that appears to lack concrete discussions on the experience of youth who are underemployed. This thesis would serve to add to the body of knowledge in this area while filling a void through joining this problem, with the population of interest – currently underemployed youth.
The Research Question

The research question that was considered and reflected upon was: What is the experience of underemployment in the career stories of post-secondary graduates? To answer this question, the current study looks to understand the experience and its influence on an individual’s personal and career story during times of high underemployment. The primary goal of this research was to understand the story of their occupational and career goals from the period before graduation up until the present day.

As a secondary goal, this research also looked for the use of metaphor in how participants construct their stories. Discussion on the importance and role of metaphor in this research will be explored in chapter two. Through a review of the literature, the importance of both goals within the current study should come to light for the reader.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter reviews employment literature and research as well as explores studies surrounding metaphor. These two broad areas of study were selected based on the research questions outlined in this work. To assess the significance of the research topic, particular attention is paid to surveying conceptual and empirical bodies of research on transitions (particularly the school to work transition), career development for a youth population, and underemployment as understood through a lens of psychological well-being and coping. Finally, the chapter will end with a discussion on the use of metaphor through a career perspective, and the benefits of such a medium of expression, as related to this study’s topic of interest.

Review of Employment Literature and Research

School to Work Transition

Life transitions are hallmarks of the human existence and are great motivational forces for seeking counselling – career being a very common over-arching type of transitional stressor. Particularly within the higher education system, for youth and young adult populations, launching a career is a likely theme of unrest. The school to work transition has been studied by countless researchers and is a growing interest within the field (Ohler & Levinson, 2009). The first major work adjustment for youth is the transition from student life to work life. Here research shows that the outcome of this primary transition predicts one’s sense of self-efficacy, their decision-making abilities and their means of coping with change in later life (Taylor, 2005). The experiences to follow appear to be fueled and tainted by one’s first experience with this transition. It can be a time full of stress, anxiety, shock, fear, uncertainty, loss, and loneliness. Feelings of negative self-worth may
also emerge, which are emotions not generally expected from graduates. They are also experiences not widely understood by the community as a whole, specifically the business community and institutions in the working world (Perrone & Vickers, 2003). To this point, Ng and Feldman (2007) studied the role identity perspective on the school to work transition, and garnered that a major identity shift occurs as a student moves, or attempts to move, into a work role as a core life role. That being said, a major task for youth during this transition is to develop a high level of work role identification. This is important because while youth may have had summer or part-time work experience, life in a full-time work role is foreign and vague to most (Ng & Feldman, 2007). Through a case study analysis, Perrone and Vickers (2003) also pointed out that with a fluctuating graduate labour market moving to a place of uncertainty and discomfort, the identity of the graduate also underwent a fluctuation and shift in perspective; both within themselves and with the situation. Feelings of personal worth and rejection, and bitterness toward employment options available and choices made, were compounded with one’s unmet expectations and their present reality. An array of emotion is experienced; the transition from post-secondary school to work is wrought with ups and downs.

This group cannot be lumped in with the rest of society, as college graduates are a very unique population whose experience after college or university completion is distinct. With a goal of proposing a model for understanding the experience of entering the workplace for new graduates, Wendlandt and Rochlan (2008) reviewed literature that specifically focused on challenges associated with the college-to-work transition. In the 2008 study, they outlined a three-stage transition process of organizational socialization to better understand the experience. Stage one is Anticipation and Exploration, moving out and entering a new
stage while leaving something behind and reconciling a loss of the familiar. Stage two deals with *Adjustment* as it begins once a graduate enters the workforce and the individual looks to evaluate the environment, test their expectations and comes to terms with their new reality. The last stage is *Achievement*, where socialization is the key. It requires the employee to adopt values, new behaviours and a new self-image congruent with their work role. If successful, then socialization, commitment and motivation will emerge. This is an important model for career counselling, especially in the higher education market, so that counsellors can provide insight and interventions relevant to the stage and experience their client is in during this weighted college to work transition (Wendlant & Rochlen, 2008). More significantly though, it can also help to predict unrest, when one is not transitioning as expected or feels stagnant – which might be the case for the underemployed.

Issues of career are a major concern to most young people and it is the role of a counsellor to listen to those in transition in a way that enables exploration, so the client can better understand the situation and cope more creatively. Unfortunately if an individual has a stagnant first work transition, this literature suggests there may be a long-lasting effect.

**Career Development for Youth**

Career development is both an internal motivation, and an external reality. Recent and emerging evidence has focused on the attitudes of students, as they strive to develop careers and engage further education. As a result of the normalization of post-compulsory education and the encouragement of high aspirations, young people have come to assume that being qualified is synonymous with having a lasting and instant professional career after graduation. It has been argued that due to these assumptions, young adults are often disappointed when they do eventually enter, or attempt to enter, the labour market, and
experience uncertainties while struggling to find a placement (Bolam & Sixsmith, 2002; Brooks & Everett, 2009). It has also been found that, in contrast, barriers to employment also contribute to enrollment into full time courses as a coping strategy (Bolam & Sixsmith). Utilizing the Career Decision-Making Questionnaire (CDDQ) and the Vocational Decision Style Indicator, Amir and Gati (2006) examined factors associated with career decision making on 299 college bound youth. In this study, they found that career decision-making is correlated negatively with student’s career decision-making self-efficacy and was found to be insignificantly impacted by students’ aptitude or IQ (Amir & Gati, 2006). Such self-efficacy may be gained through positive career related experiences.

This expectation and entitlement to instant career progression after graduation is a helpful tool for counsellors to discuss with clients in this position. The 21st century job-market reality that new graduates face, while being taught to dream big, is a mark of the generation and, as such, counsellors can help to mediate the effect, in an effort to lessen any imminent and prolonged disappointment.

**Underemployment**

Many professional areas of study are invested in research that looks at the underemployment phenomenon. Specifically MacDonald (2011), through his 30 years engaged in youth research, reflected on youth entering the labour market and noted changes that have occurred since he began his research in the 1980s. A main focus of his 2011 article was to look at youth transitions and the effects of underemployment. He uncovered four diverse fields affected: A) management, where the interest lies in individual and organizational outcomes, B) economists investigate the underutilization of the labor force, how this influences wages and the market, C) sociologists focus on the impact on society,
while D) psychologists study the health outcomes and community based effects of underemployment. While not universal, a dominant theme in the research is that of an external stance (looking at causes, for example). In contrast, the proposed study is interested in the internal experience of underemployment; while many facets of these fields may come into play, as narrated by the underemployed youth, the latter (psychological health and the effect on the individual) is most in focus.

What does it mean to the individual who is underemployed? In an exploratory case study, using semi-structured interviews and a thematic analysis, Perrone and Vickers (2003) uncovered several clearly defined themes within the experience of underemployment through a case study of a newly graduated individual. These themes were that of an uncertain feeling, inflated expectations, the work experience paradox (the expectation from prospective employers that new graduates would also have substantial work, even management, experience) and a low time (shock and disappointment of unrealized expectations). Disillusionment with one’s job situation, frustration with the deficiency of growth opportunities and lack of challenging work were key experiences of underemployed youth (Borgen et al., 1988). They were also worried about stagnation and had negative reflections of their abilities, future prospects, dreams and career decision making skills (Borgen et al., 1988). Moreover, through a survey based study, Feldman and Turnley (1995) analyzed responses of 283 post-secondary business graduates during 1992 and 1993, in the United States of America. They found that underemployed workers can be expected to have lower levels of commitment, job involvement and motivation as they have less reason to invest themselves in a job that they are adamantly trying to escape for better. A study conducted by Burris (1983) looked at the effects of underemployment on 32 clerical workers and analyzed
their attitudes and behaviours, based on their level of education. What she found was that the college educated underemployed participants would outright state their dissatisfaction and framed their grievances as lack of autonomy, entitlement to more and a need for task diversity to name a few. In contrast however, respondents with fewer than two years of college were less likely to express any dissatisfaction with their job although they identified with being underemployed. Why? Essentially what was found was that these participants often took responsibility for the situation they are in for not utilizing their full potential and continuing with higher education. These respondents internalized their grievances while the college educated respondents externalized the blame and focused on structural causes and explanations. There is also a noted bitterness when reflecting on the current disappointment compared to the original illusion of comfort and expectation that a degree was supposed to bring to the job market (Perrone & Vickers, 2003). In summary, a feeling of entitlement to a better job is likely reflective of the time and commitment that was put into a degree, and a need to make it all worthwhile.

**Psychological well-being**

Underemployment has been seen as negatively related to well-being across a variety of outcomes. In a survey study with a sample size of 212 and a 71% response rate, Johnson and Johnson (1992) completed a multiple regression analysis and found a significantly positive relationship between several symptoms of psychological stress and feelings of underemployment. To elaborate, it appeared that subjective over-education, over-qualification, and skill utilization are significantly and positively correlated with psychosomatic symptoms such as depression, frustration, hostility, and insecurity (Johnson & Johnson, 1992). Implicit in this discussion of mental health among the underemployed is the
assumption that the negative emotions which come from a sense of discouragement and defeat in one’s career and job market, overflowed into an individual’s personal life. In looking at college graduates, life satisfaction and positive mood were greater for those in a job requiring a degree and in a degree-related field (Feldman & Turnley, 1995). Participants with permanent, full-time occupations indicated higher life satisfaction but not positive mood, while skill utilization proved unsuccessful to predict neither life satisfaction nor mood (Feldman & Turnley, 1995). In addition, through sheer adaptation, difficulties in finding appropriate employment after graduation, especially if prolonged in nature, may result in learned helplessness. Learned helplessness is said to “lower performance by reducing the incentive for instrumental responding, which results in lowered response initiation” (Miller & Seligman, 1975, p. 228). Miller and Seligman (1975) demonstrated that depressed college students were more likely to exemplify learned helplessness in their study which induced a series of laboratory tests in a participants naturally occurring depressed state and assessed the outcome. The idea of a situation feeling inescapable also may lead to decreased feelings of control over one’s life, lower self-esteem and ultimately depression. So, it appears depression may affect underemployment as both a potential cause and effect of learned helplessness. To this point, Winefield et al., (1993) are even so bold to say that the psychological damage of unsatisfactory employment is comparable to that due to unemployment.

Coping

For the underemployed, problem-focused coping mechanisms have been consistently noted in the research. Specifically underemployed workers are likely to search for new jobs, or look to obtain more formal education as a means to shed their underemployed state (Borgen et. al, 1988; Burris, 1983). This coping strategy to avidly search for new
opportunities is commonly utilized as an ongoing process, as well as a positive source of alleviating the stress of their underemployment status. There is a sense of accomplishment in the motivation and act of searching and not settling with what one currently has. Through analyzing survey responses from a sample of 2500 employed Canadians, ages 18 and over, Wald (2005) concluded that hours of underemployment and subjective over-qualification both positively predicted intention to look for a new job or delve into the world of self-employment. Another coping strategy was examined through the qualitative response portion of a self-report survey that Feldman and Turnley (1995) utilized in their study. With a sample of 283 recent business college graduates, the study analyzed the significance of underemployment on participants’ attitudes towards their jobs in specific, and their lives in general. The short answer portion turned up interesting details concerning further education. While many participants indicated an interest in pursuing a graduate level education, they also included that they would wait a few years before entering the program for logistical reasons (i.e., money). On the same token, many also saw that education failed them in getting good jobs during their first attempt to enter the labor market and in light of that, saw no benefit to spending more money to further their education. To this point, underemployed college graduates saw potential in improving their technical skills in the workplace as equally valuable as classroom education, and about 50% were in the process of learning new skills (Feldman & Turnley, 1995). As noted, the sample in this study consisted of business college graduates, who may have seen less benefit in terms of skill development in getting an MBA while arts undergraduates might be more optimistic about the instrumentality of graduate school in securing satisfying employment afterwards (Feldman & Turnley, 1995). Those in
an underemployment situation are suffering to some degree, and, as noted through the selection of literature, a variety of strategies have been employed to assist in coping.

**Review of Metaphor Literature and Research**

A metaphor by definition is “a figure of speech in which a word or phrase, literally denoting one kind of object or idea, is used in place of another to suggest a likeness or analogy between them (as in drowning in money)” (Merriam-Webster’s Online Dictionary, 2013). In story, metaphors are used quite naturally by their authors to offer detail, expand knowledge, and illustrate a feeling. In fact, Geary (2011) asserts that people utilize about six metaphors per minute so he claims that in a span of ten to twenty-five words, people will use about one metaphor. This is a common and natural occurrence. Gibbs (1992) conducted a review of research on metaphor and uncovered at least four kinds of evidence that support metaphor as an important part of the human conceptual system. This research claims that expressed metaphors reflect pre-existing inherent mappings in the human memory bank, the study underscores that “this evidence comes from an examination of the systematicity of literal expressions, novel extensions of conventional metaphors, polysemy, and data from recent psychological research on the metaphorical roots of everyday language” (Gibbs, 1992, p. 573). Due to the natural inception of metaphor in language use, an added benefit is that metaphors assist people to express accurately what they are feeling or thinking through the use of symbols; this is especially helpful when finding the words may not be possible or as descriptive (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003). Also, using metaphors may help both the speaker and receiver to see a situation clearer, in that “metaphors are excellent ways of capturing essential elements of the problem, as perceived by the client” (Amundson, 2009, p. 176). Metaphors
are not just important for the expression of the person utilizing them, but for the receiver as well; there is much information one can glean from the use of a metaphor.

Summary of the Literature

In light of the diverse challenges and mental health concerns faced by youth who identify as underemployed, it is important that society better understand the experience. In summary, underemployment is an employment state that is taxing on post-secondary graduates. Many factors play a role, but the researched experiences have thus far solidified a common negative self and future work success assumption. As indicated previously, research on underemployment, while dealing with and acknowledging psychological well-being, has been focused on quantitative measures or mixed-method design and therefore hasn’t really been able to dive deeper into individual understanding – something this research hopes to have remedied. The literature on this offers a piece of the experience of underemployment, and gives clarity into the negative consequences and level of unrest it has on those who live it. The current study hopes to have assisted in narrowing the gap between common understanding, external impact and uncovering the individual experience.

As this selection of literature points out, metaphor is a natural form of expression. With that being said, this research, without the instigation of probes, will be interested in looking at metaphors used through the telling of participants’ underemployment experience. To this point, Cochran (1997) looks at metaphors through a theoretical lens, and denotes that they fit well within a narrative approach, of which this research has engaged. Since metaphor functions as such a rich source of information, this study hopes to extract a greater understanding of the lived experience of underemployed youth through the analysis of metaphors used, if used at all.
Given the above noted gaps in the selected review of the extant literature, this research conducted a narrative study exploring the experience of underemployment in an educated youth population. The central question guiding this study was: What is the experience of underemployment for educated youth? An analysis of emerging themes and metaphors occurred in hopes to better understand what it feels like to be in an underemployed situation, as a recent graduate.
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

The present study employed a narrative method to answer the following research question: What is the experience of underemployment for educated youth? The following chapter is dedicated to discussing the methodological design. In situating the current study, I articulate a rationale for utilizing a narrative strategy of inquiry and then detail the study’s research procedures in a chronological matter. The chapter will also outline the epistemic criteria used to ensure truthfulness of the inquiry, in addition to discussing ethical considerations. Finally, the chapter will close with a personal narrative illustrating my position as the researcher.

Research Design

At its core, this study asks the following research question: What is the experience of underemployment for educated youth?

In order to answer the research question, this study utilized a qualitative research method. Specifically, I operated within a narrative strategy of inquiry and analysis. Narrative research falls within a social constructionist paradigm, where reality is seen as constructed and not inherent.

Rationale for a Narrative Study

Research methods are mediums for conducting studies and carrying out certain research questions. Thus, in exploring underemployment, I turned to potential methods that could answer the following question: what is the experience of underemployment for educated youth? It was clear that quantitative methodologies, while selected more often in the overall area of underemployment, were not an approach that would yield the depth of information sought. The trend in the published quantitative literature functioned to better
understand why underemployment was occurring, but this study was particularly interested in understanding the deeper experience of an individual in an underemployment situation. This research I therefore deemed as a qualitative inquiry, and concluded that a narrative study was highly suited to explore the experience in question. A 2013 study by Blustein, Kozan and Connors-Kellgren, used a narrative analysis with unemployed men (seven) and women (six) in an effort to understand their experiences and learn how they were coping with job loss. The narrative approach in this study, through a thematic analysis uncovered three main themes: their unemployment story, factors that affect their experience, and techniques to cope with their unemployment situation. This study is not a replication of Blustein et al., 2013 research; but functioned as a point of reference for the use of a narrative methodology in the qualitative underemployment research of the current study. A narrative research strategy is in line with the goal of this study, which is to elucidate an understanding of underemployment as experienced by youth who have graduated from a post-secondary institution.

**Utilizing a Narrative Approach**

Narrative research can provide a very rich data source. The process of telling and interpreting personal life stories, and stories of transition, can be a poignant vehicle in understanding what meaning is created of one’s experiences. It is not just the meaning however, that takes precedence within this method. A lot of information can also be gained through the way in which one tells their story via the words that are used. Freeman (1997) states that “narrative is the basic medium in which human beings speak, think, grow into selves and understand others. In this sense… it is the most fitting and appropriate language we could use to comprehend human lives in culture and in time” (p. 175) – what one says when constructing and making sense of their story, is key.
A component of a narrative methodology is an interest in the individual experience. As a researcher, I am concerned with exploring the personal experience of each participant in the study while abiding by a necessity toward the chronology of experiences. The central ontological assumption is that of relativism, that the world is encompassed of an array of realities (Polkinghorne, 2005), where knowledge and meaning are constructed relationally so the story is situated in a specific time and place and can be understood through interpretation.

This study looked at an individual’s personal experience, utilizing a narrative strategy of inquiry, through collected stories written by people who had lived this experience for greater than one year. Participants identified with being underemployed and were asked to recount a retrospective story of their life through their experience before graduation and after, up until present day. I prepared my participants with probes, and requested, in lieu of a semi-structured interview, that the participants write their narrative (with a five page maximum). A five page limit was selected, in an effort to create enough scope so participants could detail their stories, but not so large a task that it appeared to be daunting. As suggested by Lieblich et al. (1998), while this study included probes to assist with the writing process, many participants shared their stories and addressed core questions without needing the specific prompts to guide them. Having participants write their story, allowed for greater ownership over what is told, greater assurance that their experience was appropriately portrayed, and eliminated potential error in the transcription process.

After contacting the researcher to express interest in participating, all participants were screened to ensure they met the criteria for inclusion outlined later in this paper. From here, the process included three steps for participants: (a) Participants were invited to meet with the researcher to get more information about the study and their participation, including
obtaining informed consent, (b) then participants were asked to write and submit their narrative via email, and (c) participants were contacted to collaborate and check the thematic analysis.

Participants

Population and Sampling

In order to make a fair case, a purposeful number of six to ten stories, with the option to lean toward less or more, within this range, based on the length of narratives received. Ultimately, this study conducted an analysis on eight participant narratives. In looking at a variety of narrative studies, this number of participants is common. The participants included in this study satisfied the criteria for underemployment as defined in this research – they were working in fields that did not require their level of education, as evaluated via the National Occupational Classification (2011), and they identified as feeling underemployed. They also had graduated from post-secondary education, were underemployed for at least a year and were between the ages of 24 and 30. A criterion for exclusion was an individual who had been underemployed for over five years. This study selected these particular parameters with the specific population of interest in mind. In an effort to keep the nature of each participant’s underemployment as structurally similar as possible, the exclusion criteria were in place. This study made the assumption that if a participant had been underemployed for greater than five years, the story and experience may likely be of a different nature than one who is newly experiencing underemployment. This research looked to target a specific niche population of new graduates who were looking to make this school to work transition. With this in mind, the current study was able to uncover stories of the process and experience
of underemployment. Through this, the research also looked at how underemployment has affected other parts of the participants’ lives.

**Procedures**

**Recruitment**

Recruitment was limited to a few avenues. I created a recruitment poster and used this item as a primary way to relay the key study information out swiftly and succinctly (see Appendix A). The poster was directed toward those who feel underemployed and are currently experiencing it. It included information about the research project, the topic’s significance, method used, level of involvement required form the research participants, and also advertised the small honorarium awarded for participating. Utilizing this poster I recruited participants online, through posting on social media platforms like Facebook. This occurred both through my personal page and it was also voluntarily ‘shared’ by some of my contacts on their personal pages as well. In addition, I connected with several college and university alumni services that granted me permission to post about my study on their Facebook pages. Through sharing the poster via social media and email, snowball sampling proved a fruitful way to recruit participants. Friends and contacts interested in my research graciously informed others of my study and from there, interested individuals contacted the researcher.

**Data Collection**

**Screening process**

Interested participants contacted the researcher exclusively via email, even though a telephone number was also provided. I then corresponded with interested participants to briefly clarify the purpose of the study, to gauge what led them to respond to the call out and
to verify that they met the inclusion and exclusion criteria. Here I also assessed whether or not both the prospective participant and the researcher see a good fit to continue, and invited the individual to a first meeting. At this time, I emailed the participant with the informed consent documentation (see Appendix B), as well as detailed explicitly their commitment if part of the study. Participants were asked to review the documents and were encouraged to get in touch if they have any questions or if they change their mind about participating. Due to the minimal risk attached to this study and the voluntary nature of the recruitment, the participant was given from the time they express interest in participating, up until the day of the meeting to decide whether or not to continue. That being said, the time lapse between the two contact points varied with each participant. For all participants the first meeting was scheduled within a week or two of the initial call.

In this study, all participants who showed interest, met the criteria and continued with the research process through to the end.

**First meeting**

The focus of the first meeting was to provide information to the participant. Meetings were scheduled at the participants’ convenience, and took place at a location of their choosing; all clients in the study opted to meet at a coffee shop. First meetings ranged from 1 to 1 ½ hours. At the onset of the meeting I explained, once again, the purpose of the study and outlined the main points inherent to the informed consent process. Specifically, I highlighted the voluntary nature, any foreseeable risks, and the commitment that is expected of the participant. Questions, of any nature were welcomed. As compensation for their involvement, all participants received a $25 gift card. At this point, I obtained a signature of informed consent prior to continuing with the meeting. Once consent was obtained, I went
over the next task at hand. I began by introducing three forms: A) Demographic & Contact Information form, B) Lifeline Graph C) Narrative Handout.

Brief demographic and contact information was collected (see Appendix C). Then, if they felt comfortable, participants were invited to begin and/or complete a life line from the year leading up to graduation up until now, during this meeting (see Appendix E). Here, I acted as a scribe, noting all key events and experiences that came to mind for the participant when reflecting on their life and career journey through those years. According to Cohler (1991) it’s important “to understand the personal narrative or life story both in terms of an ordered sequence and in terms of context, frame or plot which the author employs in providing narrative integrity for a particular life story at a particular time” (p. 177). The chronology that the lifeline fostered helped to keep the story within a time sequence. This assisted in creating an outline which then would assist participants when writing their story. Once the lifeline was concluded, I handed participants a handout titled ‘Possible Probes for Narrative Accounts’ (see Appendix D). This document explained that participants were asked to write their own narrative account, gave the purpose, offered optional probes to think about if needed, and detailed any instructions. To close the meeting, I invited any final questions and then we collaboratively decided on a deadline for submission of the participant’s underemployment narrative. Participants requested anywhere from two to four weeks to submit their story. Before leaving, a time and medium for follow-up was also discussed. Following the meeting, I emailed all participants with a thank you for participating, a reminder of the agreed due date, and attached the three forms that were given in hard copy to the participants; just to ensure a back-up copy is available to them if lost.
Follow-up to submission

Once participant narratives were submitted, a personalized thank you email was issued. All narratives were submitted on time and via email.

Tools for Data Analysis

This study approached the reading, interpretation and analysis of the narratives using Riessman’s (2008) narrative thematic analysis model. Lieblich et al, (1998) will also inform the checks for trustworthiness. This research has identified thematic analysis as a relevant tool for analyzing the narrative data set.

Thematic analysis

Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns or themes as it minimally organizes and has the capacity to describe data in rich detail (Braun & Clarke, 2006). There is quite a range of different possible thematic analyses, and its true flexibility is one of the benefits of this technique. This study will utilize Riessman’s approach to thematic analysis where content is the exclusive focus, “primary attention is on ‘what’ is said, rather than ‘how’, ‘to whom’ or ‘for what purposes’” (Riessman, 2008, p. 53-54). While word choice is attended to, language and form are not analyzed.

Riessman’s narrative thematic approach does not outline concrete steps for the analysis, but rather informs the process. That being said, the current study was analyzed in the following manner. Upon receiving participants written narratives, I read and re-read the stories in an effort to familiarize myself with the data. In my process each story was regarded individually as Riessman’s (2008) approach claims that “narrative scholars keep a story ‘intact’ by theorizing from the case rather than from component themes (categories) across cases” (p. 53). In one sitting I would read a narrative at least three times. In the first reading I
read with curiosity and without pausing; only stopping at the end to note any initial ideas and gut reactions. Directly following, I read the narrative once again, this time highlighting any key quotes. No labels for the quotes were offered at this time. In the third reading I looked to my initial ideas, and as I re-read all highlighted quotes I worked toward offering a thematic label or code to the item. This process continued for all narratives. Assembling data in relevant thematic codes was the next step to the data analysis. From here I searched for themes across narratives, and create a thematic map of the analysis with sub-themes where needed. Defining and naming the themes while creating definitions for each was an ongoing refining process.

Once the thematic analysis was completed, a separate analysis consisted of combing through the narratives and looking for metaphors that may have emerged as a means of explaining their story. The examination included pulling out the metaphors, while extracting and assuming meaning that were conveyed as a result. Finally, these items were analyzed for recurring themes within the metaphors of the holistic participant pool.

**Trustworthiness of Findings**

While narrative inquiry does not offer validity and reliability checks like quantitative methodology, it does have a process of consensual validation (Lieblich et al., 1998). Lieblich et al. (1998) outlines various criteria of which to measure consensual validation in qualitative research endeavours, through a member check and expert reviewer.

All participants were emailed the Findings chapter as the last requirement of their participation in this research. They were first asked to review the document for their quotes specifically, and carefully, to ensure they felt represented accurately. At this stage, they were also reminded that their narrative would be included in the report, and were given the
opportunity to make any changes they felt necessary. Then, they were asked to read the analysis for the following things:

(a) Resonance: Do the themes ring true and make sense, even if they weren't part of their particular experience?

(b) Comprehensiveness: Does the analysis offer a complete description or does the participant feel like there are things missing?

(c) Pragmatic Value: Will it influence or transform work in this context? Does the participant feel like the research/analysis will help people in this position going forward? Is this something that we better understand now?

The goal is for mutual agreement and this took place through feedback and collaboration with participants. While several modes of feedback were proposed to participants, this member check occurred exclusively through email. Participants did not elect to alter their narratives, or make any additions to their story after reviewing the analysis.

The current study underwent two check points. First, as discussed, was through member checks, and second, with an expert reviewer. The expert invited to review the findings was someone who works with this population and has an extensive background in career counselling. This expert reviewer evaluated the worth of this study using the same three selected criteria that were proposed to the participants. Specifically, from his work with underemployed educated youth, he was asked: do the themes resonate with what they have heard, is it comprehensive and does it offer pragmatic value? To receive feedback, this expert and I met in person, and discussed at length the findings and themes that came through.
With this thorough collaboration piece, my final interpretation was very much informed and confirmed by these member checks and through feedback from the expert reviewer.

Reflections on Research Process

Upon completion of the process and receiving feedback from participants, two participants in particular included more information than just their answers to my questions. They offered up some insight into their experience going through this research process with me. Both participants echoed a sentiment of the process having therapeutic effects for them. Participant EC said, “Thanks so much for including me. I feel strangely comforted by the fact that my experiences are shared by others”. The normalization she received after reading the results chapter left her feeling at ease with her underemployment experience. While I never asked that particular question, it was enlightening to know that this study could aid such a perspective shift from occurring within its reader. Participant GH, while reflecting on the research process, sent an update on her life since submitting her narrative, while also noting some personal gains from participating in this study.

You may be happy to know that I received a job offer two months ago which I accepted for full-time work. Not only is the work interesting and fairly compensated, but it is a supportive and positive work environment. Re-reading what I wrote reminds me of how I felt at the last job; it's completely different in this job. I really enjoy everything about it and have rediscovered my passion for editing and marketing. This was such a useful process, to process my experiences, and understand my own thoughts. It's been very healing, if that is not too corny to say! I'm glad I participated in something so worthwhile.

She too got something deeper out of the process than merely making a contribution to research. It appears she was able to decode her very complex experience, get it out into the world, and find lingering restorative effects after sharing her story. This similar healing property we notice in counselling.
It was evidently a powerful exercise for these participants to write their story, and hear of the stories of others in a similar experience. I’m hopeful that this effect may also follow for those who elect to read this work as well.

**Situating the Researcher**

Within this method of qualitative inquiry, one should be aware of any potential issues. A key issue for discussion is the level of engagement with the text that a researcher must undergo in an effort to produce this work. Transparency around my involvement as a researcher, a member of the generation in question, and an individual who has temporarily felt underemployed, is an important piece to this work. As a researcher working within this form of inquiry, being aware of and acknowledging my bias and interpretations is crucial, as the researcher is personally entrenched in the produced analysis.

My own personal experiences, curiosity, and training provided an initial source of information for this research. An interest in underemployment was ignited through my own reflection on my life and career story. For this reason, it was important that I review my own lived experiences, for they are accessible to only me, and may reflect the experiences of others, and unintentionally effect the interpretation of this data. I believe transparency to be an important piece of rigor and trustworthiness, and as such, I have opted to include a section of my own positioning on, and experience with, the subject of the present study.

**The Ninth Participant**

I am the ninth young person who participated in the inquiry. My career story actually began at a fast-food establishment, at the ripe old age of sixteen, where I got my first part-time job and was paid $6.50 an hour to take orders. Yet the first true milestone of my career journey lies in my experience as a member of a large organization’s Community Youth
Team, which catapulted my ever-evolving career path within the organization. After three grueling interviews, being hired to this team was one of my greatest accomplishments. As a former participant in the program, a team leader, a front line staff member, a community assistant, then as a Youth Team Coordinator, I dedicated nine years to this company. I feel the opportunity that presented itself at seventeen truly spearheaded my experience within the business environment from such a young age. I feel grateful for the opportunity I was given, and for the many doors such an experience had opened up for me, and the plethora of business and event planning skills I have gained.

I held numerous positions within the company while working part-time. I always had a yearning to grow and realize my potential through new challenges. However, even though I was then coordinating the very team I began my career on, I was overrun by feelings of stagnation. It was as if I had hit the end of the road, and growth was no longer an option within the department and company for me. Having a baccalaureate degree in psychology, I always knew I wanted to utilize this skill set, and help the individual personally. I had a passion for counselling, that was somewhat met through my mentorship role at work, but that was merely 30% of my ultimate workload. I felt unchallenged, and unhappy, and I truly only realized that I felt this way after graduation hit. It was as if school had fulfilled my thirst for a challenge, and so the routine of work was a fine pairing for it. Yet, doing this job without academia left me feeling bitter. I despised the hour long commute to be paid peanuts. I was annoyed that one day I spent stuffing envelopes and the next I was writing important letters on behalf of my boss. I now had extra time to dedicate to my work, and I was yearning for projects my title alone wouldn’t allow me to take on. I had put in my time, I had the ability,
but hierarchy was valued over experience. I put energy into my work, I strove to do my best, but I just didn’t feel like I was getting any joy from it, at least not like I used to.

After graduation, it was clear to me, I had hit a wall. I applied for a number of positions and was met with one of two rejection statements – I was either over-qualified or under-educated. I was sure now, that it was not my path to delay my ultimate dream. So, I stayed with this organization, studied for my GRE, prepared my applications and applied to graduate school about five months directly after graduation. I decided I needed to get my education up to the standards necessary to have a career that would challenge me and utilize both an innate and learned skill set every day on the job. While I was feeling underemployed on the job, I found great comfort in knowing that I was on route to a career. During this time I felt that my love for the company and my role as a mentor had left me with mixed feelings of both enjoying my job but not feeling fulfilled by it. There are many emotions that I had around this job which friends and family dismissed and didn’t understand. On the outside, it sounded and looked like a fantastic career, but it wasn’t enough for me, and I didn’t want to feel bad or guilty about that.

After being accepted to graduate school, I continued working part time during my first two years and I ended up leaving the company during the practicum year of my degree.

My personal experience has driven me to better understand the experience of underemployment, specifically on educated youth because I believe their voices aren’t always heard above the anecdotes of “you’re still young”, and “you have time”. Due to my past first-hand experience, I expected a number of other individuals might feel the same way – misunderstood, guilty and thirsty for more. I see some of the most important people in my
life struggling to get an opportunity to utilize their hard earned degree and it is a reality that there are countless others in the exact same position.

**Ethical Considerations**

This inquiry shared general ethical considerations common to other studies in human science research. These include, affirming the participants’ right to withdraw at any time, identifying possible risk to participating and being rigorous when protecting confidentiality and privacy. In the present work, confidentiality was maintained through the use of pseudonyms via false initials, and through altering or generalizing any identifying information within the presentation of the findings and when storing the data. Next, as participants wrote their own narratives, I emphasized that they should only share what they felt comfortable with. Participants were also asked to review their story and the findings, to ensure they felt comfortable with what was being portrayed. Finally, I also created a list of supportive community resources that I provided to participants, even though none expressed need or interest in utilizing them (see Appendix F).
CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

In this chapter, I present the study’s findings of this narrative inquiry into the experience of underemployment for educated youth. I attempt to paint a picture of the lived experience of underemployment through themes that emerged within the stories of the eight participants featured in this study. Firstly, I introduce the young adults who shared their written underemployment story with me, and then identify commonalities, through themes, in the stories of these educated youth who are underemployed, and have been for at least a year. Finally, this study also looked for elements of metaphor used in the stories, and extracts them for discussion as well.

Participant Summary

A purposeful sample of eight participants was selected, comprising individuals with some variety of educational backgrounds. Undergraduate majors attained were most generally in the faculty of Arts: English, Geography, Communications, Psychology, and Political Science; then there was also Business Administration, Health, and one Masters in Publishing. Some participants had also attained minors in History, Cultural Studies, Early Childhood Education, and diploma’s in Business Management, and Rehabilitation Assistant Programs. While all college or university graduates, during their participation in this study, these individuals were employed as delivery drivers, cashiers, support workers, administrative assistants, and involved in freelance work. Of the eight participants, seven were female and one was male with ages ranging from 25 to 30. See table 1 below for a detailed layout of participant demographics. Participant cultural backgrounds comprised European, Canadian, First Nations, South Asian and Asian. In addition, they were all residing
in British Columbia and completed post-secondary education in this province. It is through the written stories of these participants that the themes discussed below were extracted.

Table 1: Participant Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender Identity</th>
<th>Cultural Identity</th>
<th>Area of Education Experience</th>
<th>Current Occupation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>South Asian</td>
<td>Communications</td>
<td>Administrative Assistant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Canadian</td>
<td>English, History, Cultural Studies, Publishing</td>
<td>Freelance Editor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>European</td>
<td>Political Science, History</td>
<td>Truck Driver</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>European</td>
<td>Geography</td>
<td>Grocery Store Cashier, Tutor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>European</td>
<td>Human Resources, Business Administration</td>
<td>Office Support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>First Nations &amp; European</td>
<td>Pre-Health, Rehabilitation Assistant</td>
<td>Office Support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>English, Early Childhood Education</td>
<td>Host / Receptionist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Canadian</td>
<td>Psychology</td>
<td>School &amp; Student Support Worker, Behavioural Interventionist</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Participant Narratives

In a textured and complex manner, the following narratives answer this research question: What is the experience of underemployment in the career stories of college and university graduates?

Following the inclusion of the complete narratives, I explore themes that have suggested themselves to me, which came through in many if not all of the narratives. These cross-narrative findings are meant as a proposed interpretation and understanding of underemployment for a young and newly graduated population.

Participant 1: KG

_Hoping the Frustration of not Knowing what I’m Searching for will not Trump my Will to Find it_

When I was in the middle of my undergraduate career, the thought of graduating seemed so far away— but so exhilarating to me. As a student during convocation season, in between classes, I would watch graduates on their way to their ceremony and I could feel the joy and relief emanating from them. I could see the families proudly waiting in the wings for the chance to present their new graduate with a bouquet of flowers or a stuffed animal. Perhaps I was living vicariously through them because I would feel overcome with emotion and I was so happy and proud of these strangers whose experiences I would soon be able to relate to.

When I finally did complete all the requirements of my undergraduate degree, my convocation ceremony was two, long months away and the lead up to the actual event became anticlimactic to me.
I graduated with a B.A. in Communications in June of 2012. I had been unemployed for the two months prior to the ceremony. Needless to say, my convocation was not the proudest or happiest moment of my life the way I had imagined it to be. It’s not that I wasn’t proud of myself—I just didn’t think I had done something exceptional. I never found school to be that difficult, I didn’t get straight A’s, but I did relatively well given that I didn’t put all my energy into my studies. I feel that my co-op positions were more of a learning experience and challenge for me than my academic experience.

In 2010, I landed quite a coveted co-op position with the government, as a Communications Officer. My first job in the real world paid well, it equipped me with invaluable experience—both personal and work-related and I truly felt like I was valued and needed. In this position, I had in-office and out-of-office duties, I was involved in teamwork, independent work; I was forced outside of my comfort zone, I got to exercise creative independence and I had wonderful mentors. I had the chance to continue the position after my 6-month term but I chose instead to do a semester abroad in Southeast Asia. I often wondered if I had made the wrong choice by not continuing on and gaining more work experience. My second co-op position was a Communications Liaison with a non-profit. While this position was not as multi-faceted or exciting as the prior, I did gain some useful technical skills (website design, managing social media for organizations, and writing techniques). After this position ended, I felt like I was well enough quipped to join the working world. I started to send out application after application (over 100 in total) and never had any responses. I began to feel extremely disheartened and somewhat depressed—this continued for the next 7-8 months. I believe that I was under-qualified for communications jobs I was applying for and over-qualified for admin jobs I was applying for out of
desperation. Not being able to land a job made me feel inadequate and this feeling was compounded by the fact that I had a student loan and other debts that needed to be paid off. I felt that it might be a good idea to look into going to BCIT to get some more practical learning experience (something I don’t feel like my University did too well of a job of given that most of my education was based on theory), I also thought about doing a master’s degree. The fear of picking up additional student loans with the hope that I might get an interview, and eventually a job, stopped me from going back to school. In retrospect, and even in the moment, I felt that I could have been putting myself out there during my unemployment, volunteering, talking to people, going to informational interviews, researching ways to make my applications and myself more competitive. But I felt unmotivated and trapped; I didn’t want to leave my house.

Refusing to go for menial, retail jobs, I tutored a few times a week. It was nice to be able to exercise my brain and help people out while making a little bit of money.

In November, a friend who knew of my situation put in a word at the company where she worked and got me an interview as an administrative assistant. The Human Resources manager who interviewed me felt that I had a lot of potential and decided that while I wasn’t right for the admin assistant role, she wanted to create a brand new role that would utilize the skills I had while filling a void for the company. I was excited for my new position as a HR Marketing Assistant and felt confident knowing that the manager had created a role especially for me. Unfortunately due to the manager’s own personal and professional problems at the time, she was unable to find the time to develop my position and work with me to establish goals or a plan. She gave me redundant and tedious projects to work on and would go weeks without any follow up. She would berate me for little things she felt I was doing improperly.
and express discontent that I didn’t have adequate HR knowledge, knowing full well when she hired me that that I had no training in the field. It made for a terrifying and horrible work environment. Three months later, she laid me off, admitting she saw a great potential in having me at the company but that it was the wrong time. She apologized that she took her anger and frustration of having hired me at the wrong time out on me. I can’t say that I wasn’t frustrated—but I was so relieved knowing that I was not longer going to feel like I was constantly walking on eggshells.

I spent the next month and a half applying for jobs, going for interviews, and meeting job recruitment agencies. I finally landed a full-time permanent position as a marketing assistant for a small securities company. On my second day of the job, I was contacted by a University, I had applied to their temporary pool 6 months earlier and they were offering me a part-time, temporary position as an office administrator in the Public Affairs and Media Relations Office. I left for the university because it’s a reputable institution, one of B.C.’s top employers, and because a family member of my fiancé who is also employed by a University, was involved in the decision of hiring me.

Two months into the job, I got switched to full time, and I have now been here for a year. My contract has been getting extended every three months. Having a job and a steady, satisfying income gives me a sense of security that was previously lacking in my life. However, because I am still a temporary employee, I have no medical or dental benefits, no vacation time and no sick time—this is extremely frustrating for me, having been in the position for one year. Initially the work I was doing felt unchallenging, boring and tedious—typical administrative assistant tasks. I expressed interest in doing more communications-focused work, so I have been able to assist with some article writing, event planning and
special project assistance. I enjoy exercising my brain and creativity, but I still feel like I am not being challenged to my full potential. Observing my senior colleagues in communications management positions, I have started to have second thoughts about working in the field and this worries me because I’m not sure where to go from here. This is the first time in long time that I don’t have any mentorship from senior colleagues. I’ve always felt like there was someone I could talk to and discuss my thoughts and get advice from in my past jobs, but there’s no one here who has taken on that role for me.

My personal interests and passions aren’t exactly completely with the world of communications and it’s a frightening thing when you are a grown up trying to figure out what you want to be when you grow up! I feel like if I could find an exciting, meaningful and challenging position in this field, I could perhaps stay in it. I have two more months in this position and then management will decide to extend me and make me permanent or decide that they no longer need my position. In the meantime, I continue to look into other possibilities. Entrepreneurship has always intrigued me, as does the idea of further schooling. In addition, I wouldn’t mind spending some more time in the communications field, in hopes that I might find a position which challenges me creatively and mentally and provides opportunities for growth.

Participant 2: GH

All Jobs Not Created Equal

Hello, this is the story of how I came to be underemployed. At university, I initially considered pursuing an academic career. My brain is overactive and needs regular entertainment, so school never seemed like a chore to me. I could lose hours in the library
reading books and making connections. However, I quickly realized that academia was not for me. I did not want to live in the so-called ivory tower. I took a leave of absence and worked in a children’s refuge in Ecuador. There I worked to develop art therapy courses and decided that I wanted a significant degree of human interaction with my employment.

The next step was part-time work at a small community nonprofit while I finished my degree in English, history and cultural studies. I was considering a Master’s degree in Social Work, and everything was great. I then lost my job. I was then hired by a small poetry magazine. Their defining feature was chaos. I pitched stories, interviewed writers, mastered the postal system and designed marketing campaigns. I loved it. Although the job didn’t have a lot of potential for growth within the company, it was good to start off with. I also had a lot of autonomy and I learned something new every day. I felt like my work was important, and that what I did was worthwhile. Moreover, I could pay all my bills and I wasn’t in debt. I was even saving for a down payment on a condo.

My next step was to seek more education, so I moved from Montreal to Vancouver to get a Masters of Publishing. My grandmother had passed away and left money specifically for further education for her grandchildren. It turned out to be not the most challenging academic program, and that frustrated me. I had wanted to gain a lot of skills but in an attempt to be all things to all people, the program was not rigorous enough. I was a bit depressed about that, but I got a great paid internship at a university press. It was quite competitive to get in, and I felt really good about myself when I got it. There were a few growing pains when I first got to the Press, but I soon found my groove and was involved in several important and exciting projects. There was even the prospect of full time employment on the horizon. I felt like I was on the cusp of achieving my dream that had brought me to
Vancouver. Unfortunately the relevant funding didn’t materialize and I had to leave the press.

I then spent 5 months unemployed. It was a drain on my savings. I tried to keep positive by achieving my goals. I had difficulty with my thesis, but tried to stay motivated. However, I was feeling very anxious when I got my job offer at the magazine I finally worked at. The job was sold to me as a core marketing position; I felt that there would be a lot of growth. There were some red flags, but my need for money outweighed my concerns. However, they soon became manifest. I found myself performing menial tasks such as mailing letters, weighing parcels, ordering office supplies, data entry, and endless work. I never seemed to get anything done. I just was frustrated. I began to have headaches and my dentist remarked that my teeth were damaged from grinding. I would sit in my room with the blinds drawn, unwilling to go out or do things. I practiced hobbies less and less.

My personal behavior was not good. I was a bitter, dried-up husk of a human being. I had a de facto Master’s degree, but I felt that I wasn’t even good enough to do data entry. No degree was really needed for my job. I was convinced I was worthless. I was unkind and harsh to those who sought to love and help me, including my mother. I felt that I was just a cesspool of negativity, and that I didn’t deserve love. I don’t think I was suicidal, but I did know I didn’t want to be alive. At my six month review, I was promised that my job would change, but I didn’t see any evolution.

In July 2013, I was hit by a car and injured. I broke my arm but received no sick pay. I worked through agonizing pain just to make rent. I cried every morning when I would struggle to get up to get through the day. It was the last straw. I quit.
Immediately I felt a return of peace in my life. I am still not employed, although I have freelanced part time. I hope to find full time work soon. I feel better, and really that is all that counts.

Participant 3: MC

Stumbling to Success

School always came easy to me. I was the student who never did homework, rarely paid attention in class, skipped class all the time, and my 8am courses more often than not I came straight from the couch of my friends’ place still reeking of alcohol from the night before. Despite this I graduated from university in 4 years with a solid B average with a major in Political Science and a minor in History. I was going to get into politics and change the world and so on and so forth.

Within 6 months of graduating I had gotten the interview for my dream job with the political Association in Alberta. The interview went great and I was ready to pack my things and move to Edmonton….And then the politician went bankrupt and the world economy almost collapsed. I was told in a very polite email that the job I had interviewed for and had every reason to believe I had gotten, no longer existed as the government was belt tightening. I was told it wouldn’t exist for at least a year but I should really re-apply again when it did exist again because they loved me and so on and so forth.

At this point I was 5 months shy of my 23rd birthday and for the first time in my life I really didn’t have an end goal or a plan at all. Pure inertia meant I volunteered for some local riding associations of a local political party and by the time I was 23 I realized that Politics and the people who do it full time suck and/or are douches to put it in the most polite terms.
So I didn’t want to go into politics anymore…would’ve been nice to have that revelation 3 years and $15000 earlier but such is life.

Which left me with a new problem…I now had no idea what to do with myself. I didn’t want to do the thing I had gone to school for…..there was nothing that interested me enough to go back to school ( I considered child care, accounting among other things but I felt like I would hang myself from boredom sometime in my 40’s if I did them.)….and I knew I didn’t want to stay in my job as a delivery driver for the next 40 years even though it was; and still is; an enjoyable job.

I fell into a bit of a funk for most of a year. I had always been and still am a goal oriented person and with nothing to work towards there was nothing to do. It wasn’t depression but it was sort of similar. I went to work, came home, than either watched TV or went out with friends. Finally one day I just sat down and wrote out what I would be tomorrow if I could and at the top of the list was policing.

Having a goal again energized me. I got on about 6 months later as a volunteer with the Police Department. Last year I applied to be a full time constable and actually got a lot further than I thought I would through the application process only being deferred for a year near the end.

I was down on myself for a day or two after I was deferred partly because I was so close to getting through but I quickly bounced back when I realized a year long deferral really isn’t very long and if the police didn’t think I had the capabilities to be a police officer they would have told me so as they did do to numerous people. So I am looking forward to applying again in July.
Despite these ups and downs in my professional life I have in general enjoyed my time since I graduated university even though it hasn’t gone at all how I planned it. I’ve always had a group of close friends and family that are generally supportive even if they are overbearing sometimes.

Participant 4: SB

My Story of an Underemployed Youth

As the oldest of 4 children I have definitely felt pressure from my parents to set a good example for my siblings. I was always the most academically successful member of my family and I felt a lot of pressure to attend University. My sister in particular (who is 10 years younger than me) was experiencing a lot of problems at school around the time I was attending University and my parents wanted me to be a good role model for her. They thought if she saw me graduating from University it would encourage her to stay in school and make her look at her future goals and aspirations.

My parents did not financially support me while I was attending University. Before starting University I had a job working at a grocery store and I was lucky that it was very flexible to work around my schedule. I had enough seniority at my store that I could tell them the times that I wanted to work and I was able to get shifts. My job also gives me benefits if I maintain an average of 24 hours/week.

After I graduated from University I was really excited because I had made plans to move to England with my boyfriend. He was still in University himself but was able to study abroad for a term. I was able to take a leave of absence from the grocery store for a year so I always knew that I had a job to come back to if I needed one. My family is from England and I have British citizenship so I was hoping to get a job and travel around Europe. My plans
for a job didn’t exactly go as planned. I had heard the economy in Europe around 2010 was not very good but I thought I would still be able to find something. My boyfriend and I moved to England at the end of summer 2010 without much of a plan. We were lucky that we were able to stay with my relatives until we could find a place to rent. It was more difficult than we thought to find a place to rent and we ended up in a small military town about 1.5 hours outside of London. I went to the government job center to meet with someone who would help me look for employment. They basically told me that it would be extremely difficult to find any jobs in the area I was living because unemployment was fairly high at that time. The only jobs they had advertised were for a pizza delivery driver and a hairdresser - I wasn’t qualified for either. I was slightly disappointed but not working also meant that I was able to travel whenever I wanted. I had been very stressed out from going to school full time and working that it was a nice break to be free for a while. I couldn’t stay in England without working forever though so I came back to Vancouver after 5 months.

When I came back from England it was like coming back to reality. I was living with my parents again, I wasn’t working and my sister was now involved with a bad group of friends and was making some horrible decisions. I did feel some guilt over leaving my sister when she was going through a difficult time, as we have always been very close and now that I was back my parents were hoping that she might listen to me because she certainly wasn’t listening to them.

I was casually looking for work during this time but I didn’t have a focus. I wasn’t really sure what I wanted to do anymore. In high school I had expressed an interest in teaching and my parents really wanted me to pursue this plan and any other ideas I had after this were always shot down. My parents were always saying how great teaching is and
strongly encouraged me to only focus on this one plan even though I was having a lot of doubts. One of the main reasons why I chose Geography as a major was because it was an approved major if I wanted to continue with an education degree. But I found that if I didn’t want to continue with my teaching goal I had no idea what kind of job I could get with my degree. I found that in my classes at university it was never really discussed what kind of job opportunities you could get with your degree. I was feeling lost and like I may have wasted the past 5 years of my life completing a degree that didn’t offer any value to me. This was being reinforced by my brothers, neither went to any post-secondary education, and were employed in better jobs than me. One of my brothers in particular teases me about what a waste my degree was. I was facing a lot of pressure from my parents to go back to school and get my education degree. By this point a few of my friends had already graduated from the education program and none were able to find any work. This was very discouraging for me because I was worried that if I spent another year of my life pursuing this goal I would be in the same situation I was in now—with a crappy job with barely any money.

Everyone around me was constantly telling me what kind of job I should be looking for but I didn’t really know where to look. The jobs that I was finding were asking for experience and skills that I didn’t feel like I had or only paid minimum wage. I felt that I couldn’t work in a minimum wage job because I had expectations that a University degree meant I should do better and my job at the grocery store paid more. I ended up going back to the grocery store after my leave because I couldn’t find anything better. This was my safety net and I knew what to expect working there. I thought it would just be temporary and hoped that I might be offered a buyout by the company. I thought it would be the best-case scenario to be paid to quit my job.
I was starting to find out that getting a better job was more about whom you knew. I knew a few people working in the special education field and I decided to take a short course to be a certified tutor in the hopes it would lead to better employment. I was able to find a job in this field but it wasn’t exactly what I was expecting. My job as a tutor is on a contract and can be unpredictable. Most of the children I work with are from low-income families that are receiving funding to attend classes and when their funding ends so does my paycheck. Working as a tutor is much more rewarding but it is very difficult to pay bills when the work can be unpredictable. Because I don’t have a guaranteed income I only work as a tutor 2 days and a grocery store 3 days per week. Working 3 days at the grocery store also means that I get my benefits. I am hoping that since I have been working as a tutor for 2 years now that I can get a more stable job working in the special education field as a student support worker. I have been able to meet more people in the field and I feel like there are more opportunities to advance in the future. Most of my family, especially my Mum, has been very supportive over the years. My Mum has met with people who work at the school board and helped me meet the right people who can hopefully help me get a better job in the future.

Participant 5: TK

On my Way

My educational story is one that spans over many years, trial and errors, and moments of severe underemployment. Academic courses did not come easy to me in school, in part I struggled through many highly academic courses- such as math and science. Therefore my post-secondary education was geared to completing a “program” that would lead to
immediate employment – well in essence that did occur but I am left feeling un-fulfilled.

Here is my story:

September 2003-April 2005: A year into my post-secondary education -taking courses such as criminology, English, and sociology- I decided that these courses would not assist me in getting quick employment so in 2004 I decided to apply for an Applied Business Technology Certificate Program with a specialization in Administrative Assistant. I studied hard, asked the right questions, and successfully completed a 2-week practicum in hopes of getting quick employment. I was on a high, I thought I was setting myself up for success; struggling with an disability that’s future is unknown, I thought a career that would allow me to exercise my brain and not overexert my body would be the perfect fit. And it was, about 2 months after graduating with my certificate I landed employment with a Notary Office- I was so proud of myself. I felt that I worked hard and now I am reaping the rewards. However that was short lived- it turned out I was a glorified receptionist whose big responsibility was making weekly deposits and going for battery runs. I didn’t create documents/spreadsheets, manage databases, or even balance the books- I simply answered phones and greeted clients. If this wasn’t bad enough- I was shown little respect from my superior and then it dawned on me, I was a receptionist in the 50’s- you know the kind that make coffee and need little or no education, but are female. Ultimately this was not for me.

September 2005-April 2007: Although discouraged, I did not feel hopeless, I registered for another semester at a local college. I took courses that I enjoyed and in turn I was excelling in- Business. Therefore instead of “hypothetically” wasting my time-in retrospect I realize now that no education is wasted- I spoke with an academic advisor and together we outlined a plan that would minimize the amount of courses and maximize the
end result. I was so pleased that I had a plan and I was determined to put this plan into action. I graduated in April of 2007 with two diplomas: one in Business Management (my business classes) and one in General Studies (the accumulation of my first year courses). With this additional education under my belt I decided to re-enter the workforce yet again- ultimately expecting different results.

By July 2007 I landed employment with a school board and I was ecstatic! Not only did I feel that my hard work paid off but I was working for a highly reputable employer. I was over the moon. Although as I am reflecting on this now, it was my first educational conquest- my Administrative Assistant certificate and not my diplomas- that helped me land this opportunity; however, I still do not regret my educational choices. In my first few years with the School Board I was applying my education associated with my certificate- I was an actual administrative assistant- one who created memos, drafted newsletters, performed necessary data entry, balance budgets, and prepared for meeting/events. I felt useful and proud of my accomplishments.

However, as the years went on I started to believe I was capable of more- I was feeling stuck. So in the spring of 2010 I enrolled in night classes with hopes of completing the pre-requisites for the teaching program. I was working full time as well as simultaneously working towards this new goal. But in June 2010, I was laid off from my current full time position, so I was given a choice- do I take severance or do I go back on-call? Well needless to say this was a trying time, although the financial burden was causing some of the stress but it was the uncertainty that was the most troubling. After careful consideration and weighing my options, I opted to continue my employment as an on-call staff member while pursuing my studies.
Fall 2010: As my studies progressed and the bitterness I felt after my 2010 lay off; I decided to look into further my education in business. I facilitated my own counselling and researched all my options and then it dawned on me- Human Resources! I was told about this option during my academic advising back in 2005-2007 and I was intrigued. I always wanted to help people and what better than a career that combines two of my passions: working with people and business concepts. I contacted an advisor and if luck were to have it, I was eligible to apply immediately. So I took a chance and filled out the paperwork and then in November 2010 I got the email- I WAS ACCEPTED and I was able to register and start in January 2011! The funny thing I still have the email saved- I guess I have subconsciously saved it as a permanent reminder of the elation I felt that day!

January 2011 to April 2012: I officially started my Human Resources program! Due to my late acceptance I was only able to register for three courses- a light semester, as I was planning to fast track my completion of this program. The semester went smoothly and I was averaging a B+ average. I high achievement based on my past reports!

As a student of this program I was given priority registration for the upcoming semesters; therefore, that spring I registered for FIVE classes. Five, what was I thinking?- I was going to dedicate myself, after all my on-call work with the school board was nonexistent in the summer and I was able to commit my time for this Everest I was about to climb. The semester was a gleaming success, I challenged myself but the benefits far outweigh the cost (ironically a little economics humor- my worst class of the entire program). I continued with five classes the following semester (September to December 2011).

In January 2012 I started my last semester of the program, my nerves were at an all-time high, and I registered myself for the last 3 required courses! You would think I would be
on cloud 9, but no, the last three courses were the most intense courses of the program. Everyone was puzzled why I would do this to myself, but although I was nervous I pressed on wanting this semester to be the start of something great, not an ultimate failure.

Why was this semester so intense? Not only was I taking two heavy courses that encompassed a major project for both, but I was registered in a practicum class that required a tangible project to be presented to an actual organization but also a detailed report - outlining my project, its results and reasoning behind it - for my teacher.

Although daunted with task of finding my own practicum placement, I was excited for the possibilities. With minimal effort on my part, I was able to secure a practicum with a non-profit organization - what I thought would be my dream job!!! After meeting with the HR manager of this organization we agreed that I would build a Health and Safety Program for them. I would have to ensure that BC regulations were adhered to as well as creatively present the information in a useful and user-friendly way!! I appreciated the flexibility my practicum supervisor showed me, she allowed my creative juices to flow. I worked countless hours and weeks to complete this project and the best part, the organization implemented it and my teacher LOVED IT!!!! I was so very proud of myself - it may have been the first time that I realized that I was meant to work in Human Resources. Of course even with this intrinsic feeling of accomplishment I was extrinsically hoping that this job well done would lead to employment after graduation - Unfortunately that didn’t happen. Although I was disappointed, I am no stranger to hard work and disappointment so I decided I can always take time and continue my on-call work after graduation. On a side note I choose not to attend my graduation, for personal reasons, I still celebrated my success in a non-traditional form - dinner out with my immediate family!!!! I thought that receiving a certificate and two
diplomas would be enough for me, but I have to say being able to complete a Bachelor of Business Administration is an accomplishment that not everyone can speak to…. So it doesn’t matter what others do around me, no one can take that away!!!

March 2012 to Present- Yes I am still employed with the School Board, a whopping 7 years later, but I am working for them in a different capacity. I am a part of the Human Resources Department. I actually started in this department in a temporary one month assignment that turned into 7 months that eventually became permanent. And yes on the surface it looks right- I have a BBA in Human Resources and I am working in Human Resources, so what is the problem? The problem is that this opportunity could have presented itself with my initial education, my Administrative Assistant Certificate, I mean in union office work you don’t need education, it is about seniority. At first I was absolutely thrilled with the opportunity- I saw it as I chance to put my HR skills into practice, but I slowly realized that my role was less HR and more clerical. Don’t get me wrong, I don’t sit around and suffer. I have applied for positions that would better utilize my skills; however, seniority is the deciding factor not skills or even education. These “rejections” are not only disappointing but at worst, demoralizing. I am working next to people who have less education then myself, no BA to speak of, and they are in position of authority and receiving higher pay. For instance, I am currently part of the recruitment team but besides on-boarding sessions, which touches on health and safety and compensation, I basically perform important, yet menial, data entry tasks. My pay has not been furthered since my initial employment back in 2007 and therefore my education has not put my any further ahead or provided me with opportunities that BA’s are or were expected to bring. I don’t believe that pay is the only deciding factor on job satisfaction, but it is high contributing factor to job
motivation and empowerment. Thus I believe that I am currently over educated but underemployed.

Participant 6: AH

My Job Experience as an Educated Youth

I have always felt that having an education was the most important thing I could do for myself. The pressures I felt from high school about picking my career path and applying to various universities was intense. I have always been a people person, easily approachable, and caring of others. Right after high school I enrolled in the Pre Health Degree offered at a university. Working with Aboriginal youth interested in entering the medical career world, I was able to gather credentials and an a little understanding on where I would like to head. After this, still unable to make a decision on which program I would like to spend all my time... and money on next, I enrolled in a Rehabilitation Assistant Program. I didn’t know much about the program when I enrolled...my first mistake. I was told that many people make a career out of this program, and that there are always tons of jobs. Eager to finish and start making the 18-22/hr RA’s are supposed to make, I paid the 22k for my 1-year course. Now with a private college things are a bit different. I had to receive 70% or higher on every single marked item (quiz, project, midterm, final) I only would get a pass on 2 until I would be removed from the program. Luckily I had a science back ground because my 15-person class only graduated with 7 students. After I completed my practicum I graduated and starting looking for jobs. No jobs. I had been working part time with my practicum clinic but that was not enough to get me by and I was making $5/hr less then what was the respectable rate of an RA. That being said I was a new graduate, so I understood the lower rate. It took me 7.5 months to find a full time RA job offer. I was almost ready to give up. I didn’t
understand why I could not find any positions. They talked up the program so much but then when it came down to it, I couldn’t even find one posting. I knew people that had RA careers, either in hospitals or private clinics. One grad was even working with the BC Lions!

Unfortunately I had no contacts in the field and I didn’t know where to look other then what was being posted on the websites. I was hired on the spot and I finally was happy with what I was doing. I had a full time job making $18/hr and also worked part-time at a different clinic on Saturdays. My part-time job I was making minimum wage only because most of the staff they hired were Kinesiology students that didn’t have my qualifications or experience. I worked at these clinics for about 4 months before I got sick. I was diagnosed with a syndrome that left me unable to work due to excruciating amounts of pain. Now being unemployed still having to deal with the debits of living on your own and paying $300/month in student loans I was stuck. I tried to get EI but because I was a contractor at one of my RA jobs I did not meet the minimum hours per year needed for EI. It hadn’t even been a year since I graduated. I then had to turn to income assistance in order to pay for my monthly student loan payment, my rent and new medication costs. Not how I figured my first year of my “career” would go. 6 months of treatment passed and I was given the OK to return to work. The fun part. No jobs! It only took me 2 months to find a few job postings, yay! I had a whopping 3 interviews and offered a position at all 3 clinics as an office assistant. These clinics were all very different so the decision-making was hard. Do I go for a clinic that is going to pay me what I deserve to be getting paid, do I go for a clinic that seems to have a great atmosphere and feel, or do I go for a clinic that had an alright atmosphere and decent wage? Being the person I am I chose the great atmosphere, with promises to increase wage and responsibility when the clinic got busier. Do I enjoy my job? Yes. Do I love the people I
work with? Yes. Am I glad I chose the clinic that I did? Yes. Do I feel that I am being undervalued for my education? Yes. Do I think I should be making around the standard wage for my education? Yes. Do I feel like this “career” was the right choice? No. I had high hopes for myself and where this career path would take me. But as it pans out, I am not making enough to keep up with the student loans that I took to take the course. Ironic. I am just hoping that it will all work out for me in the end.

Participant 7: LL

The Pursuit of Ambition

I knew I might be in trouble when in 2009, entering my third year of university. It dawned on me that being a teacher was not going to be the path. And I was nearly finished my undergraduate degree in English, with a minor in Early Childhood Education. Years of figure skating and time spent coaching had me convinced teaching was the next logical step. Instructional versus classroom settings were so completely different that I soon thought otherwise. Pamphlets at school regarding underemployment, words of encouragement from professors and the scoffs received from fellow schoolmates verified the skepticism regarding what my studies would reveal. What would I do with my degree and where would it lead me? Fast forward to 2010, the month of January. Graduation. I had been predominantly working full-time for most of my university tenure at a restaurant, and was promoted to a managerial position. During this time, I was able to learn how to delegate, coordinate and multi-task an array of situations. I was given the opportunity to maneuver between my fellow coworkers and the guests that came through the door. All in all, this was a great learning experience. However my studies were not being utilized to their fullest potential and I knew that this was not my forever. So in the fall of 2011, I decided to leave my position and take some time to
figure out what I wanted. As I will still coaching part time and working various part time jobs, I felt like I made the right decision. The restaurant hours and overall general lifestyle was not something I wanted any longer. In actuality there was no plan. Perhaps an epiphany of sorts, realizing that the unhealthy lifestyle and good money was not allowing me to be clear to the best of my abilities. Just after this change in my lifestyle, I was at my lowest point to date. Eventually, I took on multiple miscellaneous part time work, mostly by contract. Varying from being an assistant to and also furthering and continuing my roles in the previous roles aside from the restaurant. I have learned and want to make sure that learning and growing stays a part of my life long career. Passions are there and they need to be explored. That is a definition of career to me. Following your muse. I do not regret what I have studied. Fast-forward to 2014 and I am working in real estate marketing, albeit a host or receptionist type position. I have also considered Public Relations and social media. For the time being, the real estate industry is a monstrous beast, and it is something I am considering exploring. No longer is my attitude towards work defining me although it is something that taxes my thoughts. The negativity is now detached from the word career and the feelings of underemployment. As so long as I am happy with my surrounding friends and family, I will not be defined by my career. I have discovered that figure skating and coaching, being around children is something I love to do. Funnily enough, I am considering going back to school for that PR certificate that I was too afraid to chase after when I quit my full time job. I do battle with the thought of more school only to fall into internship after internship. However, this is the way of the job market and reflection of the times and economy. And as long as I am developing and experiencing, becoming more self-aware I will be content. Everything will work itself out and if not, one will just have to find a way to find peace.
addition to considering more school, I have taken up Mandarin classes, adding to what I barely remember from high school. I have also taken the Meyers-Briggs personality and career test, leading me to a better picture of the careers that are better suited to my demeanor. All of which suggested to me are ones I have already dabbled with. This is comforting. I haven’t found all the pieces to the puzzle, but I am very grateful for those supportive friends and family who are always there for me.

Participant 8: EC

*A Crappy Job and a Good Education*

Growing up I never worried much about what career I would end up choosing. While I wanted to be many things over the years I always knew that I would go to university at some point and find myself in a good job that I liked. While in some families post-secondary education is the norm, I grew up amongst a slew of hippies who, while extremely intelligent and creative people, had not completed a degree or beyond. My parents did however have what I considered good jobs. Both being of the baby boomer generation were able to obtain union jobs on minimal college courses and ambition. As a kid however I just saw that they were successful and since I would of course go to university I had nothing to worry about. I kept this ease about my career (give or take) until my third year of university. My third year of university was the year that I chose to get serious and took on a slew of upper level psychology courses and quit working in the bars (knowing full well that once I finally quit the restaurant business I would never be able to allow myself to go back). While this felt amazing and I felt good about growing up and out of the Bar scene I was quickly broke and swamped with school. Reluctantly I realized I needed another part time gig and this is where things got scary. I had become so accustomed to making basically minimum wage and not
caring since I paid my rent in tips, that I was astonished how many other jobs pay not much more than minimum wage with no tips and if that wasn’t bad enough for the first time ever in my life I was applying to jobs and not getting them even though I was qualified because there were people brutally overqualified willing to work for peanuts. An example of this is when I applied to work in a daycare in someone’s home. To be honest I didn’t want the job when I applied for it. It was $12 an hour and I hate working in people’s homes because the professionalism generally lasts about a day then you end up being the maid when you were supposed to be a child-minder and so on. I set my pride aside however and went for an interview only to lose the position to someone who had been a teacher for twenty years and was willing to teach as well as child mind for basically minimum wage. So, I didn’t feel awesome about myself or where I was going with my life after that. A second example is when I went to another one of these in home daycare interviews but this time she asked me to spend the entire afternoon with them (unpaid!) and then ended up just using a family friend instead of hiring someone. From here I found a job working at an afterschool care and was by now in my 4th year of university. This is where I had a full realization about how few jobs there are in the field of work I wanted and the type of study I had focuses on (psych and sociology) when I was working with people who had their masters in education and were making $14 an hour at a part time gig. Around this time I definitely felt a bit hopeless but soon found another gig working for a nonprofit that did summer care/school break care for the most at risk kids in East Vancouver. Even though it didn’t pay much better it was closer to what I want to do career wise so I was satisfied. I kind of coasted through the next 6 months until I was approved for graduation and for some reason I knew I had to have a “grown up job” aka something that I could actually live off by the time I graduated. Because
I had such a huge wakeup call about how many people there are out there willing to work in jobs that they are super overeducated and qualified for because of the lack of well paid jobs out there in the field I was looking, I didn’t feel like I had a grace period after graduation to just coast in a random job. I probably sent out fifty resumes out over the next few months (the reason I despise cover letters to this day) so any job I thought I had a hope in hell of landing. Lots of them were out of my league but I didn’t care, I was on a mission at this point. Finally, exhausted and a bit discouraged I got a call from a school board saying I was hired and would start in two weeks. Funnily enough I got this call about an hour before going in to get a major surgery done. Looking back, the fact that I was in constant pain over the previous year while on a waitlist to have surgery behind my eye and in my forehead might have put me in an uncomfortable position which heightened my sense of gloom regarding my work situation. This could have been a good thing; however, since it gave me the kick in the ass I needed to send out so many resumes. That was almost two years ago and ever since has been pretty smooth sailing since then career wise. I started with the school board on the on call list as a substitute and right away got a long term job through someone I subbed for the day for. After this, I got another long term job at an alternative high school that they extended to eight months. This job is by far my favourite thus far. Because it was an alternative school I was able to set my own schedule for the most part and because the woman who had the job before me was fired and hated around the school by staff and students, I was given free range to take the position in any direction I saw fit. I ended up taking more of a counselling role with some of the girls at the school and for the first time really felt like my job made a difference. I was able to make connections with detox centers and counselling services and felt as though I was learning a lot. Because of seniority I was
not able to stay there and was moved to another long term job. This next school was so
pleasant and friendly and I felt comfortable right away. Without all high needs that the high
school job had, I got bored and for the first time since working with the school board became
super agitated that I seemed to be the only person doing this job with a bachelor’s degree. I
think because I didn’t feel as needed in this position, I felt insecure about what I was doing
and then became a bit pissed that I was paying a student loan off with the money from a job
where I didn’t even need the degree! Until this point I didn’t realize how low I had set my
standards for a job. I think because Vancouver has a “broke is the norm” kind of vibe and I
felt as though because I chose a “soft science” major in university I should just take what I
could get. It hit me about 4 months ago that I might have just settled a bit so I started sending
out resumes again and got a job at a counselling service doing trauma and behaviour
intervention. While I don’t think I had to have a degree for this job, it was clearly one of the
reasons they hired me and the knowledge I acquired out of my child psychology/abnormal
child psychology courses did help me in this position. So, this brings me to the present. I am
still working with the school board though I have vowed to have a different job come
September (one that I need my degree for and pays better or one that has the possibility of
upward mobility to a position where I need my education) and am doing the BI work at night.
While the BI work doesn’t pay much because I can only do 2 hour sessions I have this job to
keep me feeling like I’m working towards something more because I can expand the amount
of families I work with and can have a reference from a counselling service if I continue on
with my education in that field. So while I still feel underemployed I think I have got a better
grasp on why that is and how to remedy this in the future. I don’t want to be one of those
people who settle in a union job and disregards the fact that I have an education (and will
continue on to further my education) and therefore deserve a job that reflects my skills and hard work.

**Narrative Thematic Analysis**

The findings identified a movement through feelings of loss, moments of stress, and coming out the other side. To illustrate the evolution of this complex experience, seven predominant themes came through: one of unmet expectations, an overall disappointment, a residue of career indecision, being faced with a multitude of pressures, reflecting on the value of education, a discussion on the impact on one’s psychological well-being and a continued sense of hope for the future.

**Table 2: Themes Summary**

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Theme 1: Expectations

The theme of expectations looks specifically at one’s post-degree expectations of what work would be like for them. This was explicitly stated by SB, who said, “I felt that I couldn’t work in a minimum wage job because I had expectations that a University degree meant I should do better…” For those who, post-graduation, were still working in jobs they had while going to school, a drastic shift in satisfaction in the role occurred once a degree was attained. The sentiment that it was not okay to continue working at a level below the degree was evident for five out of eight of my participants. EC said, “my third year of university was the year that I chose to get serious and took on a slew of upper level psychology courses and quit working in the bars (knowing full well that once I finally quit the restaurant business I would never be able to allow myself to go back).” Despite a need for full time work, KG noted that because she had a degree, she would not let herself interview for jobs she did not want, “refusing to go for menial, retail jobs, I tutored a few times a week.” Having completed four years of study, it was difficult to be in the same role as individuals who had no degree in hand. EC revealed,

I got bored and for the first time since working with the school board became super agitated that I seemed to be the only person doing this job with a bachelor’s degree. I think because I didn’t feel as needed in this position, I felt insecure about what I was doing and then became a bit pissed that I was paying a student loan off with the money from a job where I didn’t even need the degree! Until this point I didn’t realize how low I had set my standards for a job.

There appears to be a note of bitterness in the words EC uses to describe her experience as a graduate, working alongside colleagues with little to no education. EC goes on to say, “I don’t want to be one of those people who settle in a union job and disregards the fact that I have an education (and will continue on to further my education) and therefore deserve a job that reflects my skills and hard work.” Key words like ‘deserve’, carry the weight of such an
unmet expectation. The expectation that education would, as participant SB put it, mean you would do ‘better’ wasn’t being fulfilled in the job market.

Participant TK had a similar experience, “I am working next to people who have less education than myself, no BA to speak of, and they are in position of authority and receiving higher pay.” She continues to note “I have applied for positions that would better utilize my skills; however, seniority is the deciding factor not skills or even education”. This quote shatters the expectation that education should be a stepping stone, when a union environment does not allow for that. The expectation of education truly seems to seep through here, as there appears to be little regard for, and ability to see, the value of experience and knowledge gained through working in a field for years. A thread of disappointment was evident, as a degree didn’t open up doors to opportunities nor higher pay. TK says,

My pay has not been furthered since my initial employment back in 2007 and therefore my education has not put me any further ahead or provided me with opportunities that BA’s are or were expected to bring. I don’t believe that pay is the only deciding factor on job satisfaction, but it is a high contributing factor to job motivation and empowerment.

Increased pay, was the payoff, one expected for the time, effort, ability and costs originally invested through education. It was evident in the majority of stories that one’s expectation for work changes once school was finished. What was okay, and even enriching and satisfying before, is no longer acceptable. Having earned a degree now meant one expected, desired and deserved a job that reflected the qualifications gained by attaining the degree.

**Ongoing search for meaning**

The change reflected in these participant’s expectations were further evident through a desire for fulfillment and value through work. A distinct theme in these narratives was a search for more than a wage or a pay check, but wanting a challenge and longing for reaching
one’s potential. TK says, while in a prolonged state of underemployment that “…as the years went on I started to believe I was capable of more- I was feeling stuck”, especially when her excitement to exercise her skills was floundered. “I am a part of the Human Resources Department… At first I was absolutely thrilled with the opportunity- I saw it as I chance to put my HR skills into practice, but I slowly realized that my role was less HR and more clerical.” While a seemingly common reality when first entering the work force, it appears difficult to understand when not expected.

Participant KG had a very similar experience, where she also worked in a field related to her degree, but her particular role was not. She says,

Initially the work I was doing felt unchallenging, boring and tedious—typical administrative assistant tasks. I expressed interest in doing more communications-focused work, so I have been able to assist with some article writing, event planning and special project assistance. I enjoy exercising my brain and creativity, but I still feel like I am not being challenged to my full potential.

The hunger to grow, and proactive creative approach, to garner change was invoked, yet this participant was not getting entirely what she had hoped. This sub-theme leaves me to question whether it is the person who seeks education that wants a challenge, or whether education sparks a desire for continued learning and growth. This deep-rooted want to expand one’s skill-set and knowledge is very significant in the stories presented in this study.

Despite this desire for more, it appears that the cycle of underemployment continues because of the fundamental need for money. This basic need results in a job that one is not happy in, and leaves the individual with little to no time to explore other options. LL speaks to this experience. Her need to not remain stagnant resulted in a hiatus from her restaurant job.

I had been predominantly working full-time for most of my university tenure at a restaurant, and was promoted to a managerial position. During this time, I was able to
learn how to delegate, coordinate and multi-task an array of situations. I was given the opportunity to maneuver between my fellow coworkers and the guests that came through the door. All in all, this was a great learning experience. However my studies were not being utilized to their fullest potential and I knew that this was not my forever. So in the fall of 2011, I decided to leave my position and take some time to figure out what I wanted.

Her desire to work in the field she went to school motivated her to take a risk, leave her job in an effort to focus on what career she ultimately would seek out.

This need for meaning in one’s work was evident for participant AC, she felt more satisfied when involved in a role that was on the right path as her degree, even if it didn’t pay more. She speaks about how she “…found another gig working for a non-profit that did summer care/school break care for the most at risk kids in East Van. Even though it didn’t pay much better it was closer to what I want to do career wise so I was satisfied.”

Lastly, participant AH enjoys her job, and yet her feelings of disappointment stem from not feeling recognized for the value she brings through having education. There appears to be an underlying expectation, that one should be valued by their colleagues, and employer, for this. She says, “Do I enjoy my job? Yes. Do I love the people I work with? Yes. Am I glad I chose the clinic that I did? Yes. Do I feel that I am being undervalued for my education? Yes. Do I think I should be making around the standard wage for my education? Yes. Do I feel like this “career” was the right choice? No.” For this participant, the need for value is so strong, that she is left to question her overall career decision.

The expectation that education and a degree will advance one’s career, allow them to pursue an area of deep interest and continue to be challenged and engaged in meaningful work, is unfulfilled for these youth. The disappointment that arises from such a circumstance is a battle these individuals face.
Theme 2: Disappointment

Broken promises

Prior to graduation, there appears to have been an unwritten promise disguised as a belief system, of what opportunities, advancement and salary an education would provide. When underemployment ensues, these remembered promises make reality even more unacceptable. The promise of immediate employment after completing her education was a very real and disappointing experience for AH. After pursuing a pre-health education at a university, she was looking for an in-demand and applicable career path to pursue. She states,

Still unable to make a decision on which program I would like to spend all my time... and money on next, I enrolled in a Rehabilitation Assistant Program. I didn’t know much about the program when I enrolled...my first mistake. I was told that many people make a career out of this program, and that there are always tons of jobs. Eager to finish and starting making the 18-22/hr RA’s are supposed to make, I paid the 22k… After I completed my practicum I graduated and starting looking for jobs. No jobs.

She continues to say, “I was almost ready to give up. I didn’t understand why I could not find any positions. They talked up the program so much but then when it came down to it, I couldn’t even find one posting.” Here, misinformation and lack of diligence left this participant with a lived experience that was far opposite to the experience she was promised.

In participant TK’s case, education did assist her in getting immediate employment, but not at the level she had been promised, “…my post-secondary education was geared to completing a ‘program’ that would lead to immediate employment – well in essence that did occur but I am left feeling un-fulfilled”. She got a job, was making a wage, but it’s the expectation of doing a job that is meaningful and that utilizes all her newly learned skills, was unfulfilled.
EC comments on the confidence she felt when looking forward to the future, always knowing she’d attend university – “Growing up I never worried much about what career I would end up choosing. While I wanted to be many things over the years I always knew that I would go to university at some point and find myself in a good job that I liked… since I would of course go to university I had nothing to worry about.” Underemployment turns one’s confidence, in the promise of education, on its head. EC has now gone to university, found an area she likes, and is unable to find that good job she never doubted would follow the completion of a degree.

These participants expressed sentiments of being let-down by the education system that wears a guise of being the one necessary piece for career advancement. The blame that shows through appears to be a direct result of the belief system of the expectation of education. Where did these promises and this belief system come from? This is a rare occurrence in today’s society, and therefore a promise that is constantly being broken to new graduates.

With workforce
Post-graduation, this sub-theme looks at the disappointment with the process of searching for employment and then also considers the disappointment felt upon entering the workforce as an underemployed young graduate. First, it can be devastating when you find a job that meets your criteria, and then it doesn’t work out. MC speaks to this,

Within 6 months of graduating I had gotten the interview for my dream job with a political organization… I was told in a very polite email that the job I had interviewed for and had every reason to believe I had gotten no longer existed as the government was belt tightening. At this point I was 5 months shy of my 23rd birthday and for the first time in my life I really didn’t have an end goal or a plan at all.
This was disenchanted for MC who had spent his educational career working toward this goal, which was now non-existent.

Unlike MC, SB, after graduating with a degree in geography, was unable to find anything that inspired her at all. When looking for work while abroad, SB noted that the postings were slim, she said – “the jobs that I was finding were asking for experience and skills that I didn’t feel like I had or only paid minimum wage”. This participant appears to be realizing the discrepancy between the theoretical education she earned, and the lack of skills gained in the process, that were required for jobs that were hiring.

Second, having entered the workforce now, after believing in the promises, disappointment with what was experienced was evident in all narratives analyzed in this study. Participants detailed specific examples of post-graduation workforce experiences to illustrate the disappointment they faced. TK speaks about her first job after graduation and the almost immediate ups and downs she faced, emotionally, when working in her field.

About 2 months after graduating with my certificate I landed employment with a Notary Office- I was so proud of myself. I felt that I worked hard and now I am reaping the rewards. However that was short lived- it turned out I was a glorified receptionist whose big responsibility was making weekly deposits and going for battery runs. I didn’t create documents/spreadsheets, manage databases, or even balance the books- I simply answered phones and greeted clients. If this wasn’t bad enough- I was shown little respect from my superior and then it dawned on me, I was a receptionist in the 50’s- you know the kind that make coffee and need little or no education, but are female. Ultimately this was not for me.

Similarly, KG speaks to management’s role in creating an unhappy work environment. Specifically she tackles the subject of management’s impact on employees who are already vulnerable and disappointed with their situation, but are looking to simply make the best of a new role they are taking on.

I was excited for my new position as a HR Marketing Assistant and felt confident knowing that the manager had created a role especially for me. Unfortunately due to
the manager’s own personal and professional problems at the time, she was unable to find the time to develop my position and work with me to establish goals or a plan. She gave me redundant and tedious projects to work on and would go weeks without any follow up. She would berate me for little things she felt I was doing improperly and express discontent that I didn’t have adequate HR knowledge, knowing full well when she hired me that that I had no training in the field. It made for a terrifying and horrible work environment.

This participant appeared to feel victimized in her role as it seemed she was not treated humanely.

Unfortunately, GH had an experience like this as well; she too entered into a work environment that was not only disheartening and emotionally exhausting, but frustrating as well.

I was feeling very anxious when I got my job offer at the magazine I finally worked at. The job was sold to me as a core marketing position; I felt that there would be a lot of growth. There were some red flags, but my need for money outweighed my concerns. However, they soon became manifest. I found myself performing menial tasks such as mailing letters, weighing parcels, ordering office supplies, data entry, and endless work. I never seemed to get anything done. I just was frustrated.

There is a post-graduation excitement, where one looks forward to leaving the student life behind, and beginning life in the work-force. The disappointment that ensues is tied quite closely to the theme of unmet expectations. Youth work to complete school so their lives as adults can start, and when this milestone is not achieved in the way one imagines, it can be devastating and leave them to assess their original employment plans.

**Theme 3: Career Indecision**

This theme of career indecision came through in the wake of underemployment. It encompasses everything from a lack of direction, to a reconsideration of previous goals, to evidence of a fear of future decision making. This experience resonated for half of the participants in this study. SB speaks to how, post-graduation, she was contemplating her future career aspirations. “I was casually looking for work during this time but I didn’t have a
focus. I wasn’t really sure what I wanted to do anymore.” There appears to be a lack of confidence and commitment here. Her idea of what she would do in a career was changing, “in high school I had expressed an interest in teaching and my parents really wanted me to pursue this plan and any other ideas I had after this were always shot down. My parents were always saying how great teaching is and strongly encouraged me to only focus on this one plan even though I was having a lot of doubts”. Others aspirations for her, seem to be making an already difficult decision that much more complicated. A fear of not finding employment, after completing a second teaching degree, was a big piece of the doubt she was facing.

By this point a few of my friends had already graduated from the education program and none were able to find any work. This was very discouraging for me because I was worried that if I spent another year of my life pursuing this goal I would be in the same situation I was in now—with a crappy job with barely any money.

Through some experience teaching children in a non-classroom environment, LL was also rethinking her goal to be a teacher. “I knew I might be in trouble when in 2009, entering my third year of university. It dawned on me that being a teacher was not going to be the path. And I was nearly finished my undergraduate degree in English, with a minor in Early Childhood Education”.

Selecting a career is an ever evolving decision and so, MC also had a change of heart, from his original goal to be a politician. “Pure inertia meant I volunteered for some local riding associations… by the time I was 23 I realized that Politics and the people who do it full time suck... So I didn’t want to go into politics anymore…would’ve been nice to have that revelation 3 years and $15000 earlier but such is life.” There appears to be a belief that he was being job trained but an academic degree, while the key to a professional future, was not training him to be a politician. In fact, learning the university content seems to entail a polar opposite experience than the job he was getting educated to work towards. He
continues, that while he did not entirely know what he wanted, he surely knew that he did not want to remain underemployed.

I now had no idea what to do with myself. I didn’t want to do the thing I had gone to school for…..there was nothing that interested me enough to go back to school (I considered child care, accounting among other things but I felt like I would hang myself from boredom sometime in my 40’s if I did them.)….and I knew I didn’t want to stay in my job as a delivery driver for the next 40 years even though it was; and still is; an enjoyable job.

Participant KG, captures the experience of indecision best, “…it’s a frightening thing when you are a grown up trying to figure out what you want to be when you grow up!” With an ever changing and uncertain job market, this indecision is likely a product of the urgency felt toward finding work, and the environment in which new graduates are making decisions.

**Theme 4: Pressure**

**External pressure**

This subtheme of pressure looks at family and the influence of others on one’s underemployment state. SB had this thread of familial pressure weaved throughout her narrative. She begins her story speaking to this family dynamic, “as the oldest of 4 children I have definitely felt pressure from my parents to set a good example for my siblings. I was always the most academically successful member of my family and I felt a lot of pressure to attend University”. Then once graduated from her bachelor’s degree the pressure continued, “I was facing a lot of pressure from my parents to go back to school and get my education degree.” The external pressure looks at the expectations of important people in the lives of the underemployed, as seen through the narratives in this study. Managing these opinions and advice makes the process that much more challenging.
Internal pressure

This subtheme speaks to the pressure the participants put on themselves, and the awareness gained as a result. This kind of pressure can be positive, but in the narratives presented it was largely overwhelming and regretful. EC speaks to the personal pressure she put on herself when working toward gaining employment.

I kind of coasted through the next 6 months until I was approved for graduation and for some reason I knew I had to have a ‘grown up job’ aka something that I could actually live off by the time I graduated. Because I had such a huge wakeup call about how many people there are out there willing to work in jobs that they are super overeducated and qualified for because of the lack of well paid jobs out there in the field I was looking, I didn’t feel like I had a grace period after graduation to just coast in a random job. I probably sent out fifty resumes out over the next few months (the reason I despise cover letters to this day) so any job I thought I had a hope in hell of landing. Lots of them were out of my league but I didn’t care, I was on a mission at this point.

While this may appear to be a misplaced strategy, the pressure to find employment appears all consuming, and the process internally exhausting.

KG’s narrative had elements of regret lingering. She speaks of a missed opportunity, “I had the chance to continue the position after my 6-month [co-op] term but I chose instead to do a semester abroad in Southeast Asia. I often wondered if I had made the wrong choice by not continuing on and gaining more work experience.” Through her underemployment, she also wondered if she’d done enough to make herself marketable to employers, “in retrospect, and even in the moment, I felt that I could have been putting myself out there during my unemployment, volunteering, talking to people, going to informational interviews, researching ways to make my applications and myself more competitive”. There’s an element of awareness and of questioning one’s role in this underemployment reality. This self-inflicted pressure then grows into a desire to find solutions so they can get out of this underemployment state. After all, the debt of education is hard to ignore.
**Financial pressure**

This subtheme of pressure was pronounced in five out of the eight narratives, yet I imagine while not mentioned, it’s a factor in all cases as money and garnering a fair wage comes up in all. The financial pressure associated with the cost of school is likely a driving force in why youth seek underemployment over unemployment even though they are unhappy with their underemployment situation. They have no choice – paying the bill is non-negotiable. For SB, financial pressure is what caused her to return to the grocery store job she had while in university, “I ended up going back to the grocery store after my leave because I couldn’t find anything better. This was my safety net and I knew what to expect working there.”

This was the case for GH as well. Even though she had hesitations about a job she was interviewing for, she accepted. She explains, “There were some red flags, but my need for money outweighed my concerns.”

EC also states this explicitly,

…I was quickly broke and swamped with school. Reluctantly I realized I needed another part time gig and this is where things got scary. I had become so accustomed to making basically minimum wage and not caring since I paid my rent in tips, that I was astonished how many other jobs pay not much more than minimum wage with no tips and if that wasn’t bad enough for the first time ever in my life I was applying to jobs and not getting them even though I was qualified because there were people brutally overqualified willing to work for peanuts.

Financial pressure also closes doors that could offer potential for rewarding job opportunity. It keeps those in an underemployment situation from taking financial risks. KG says, “The fear of picking up additional student loans in the hope that I might get an interview, and eventually a job, stopped me from going back to school.” In fact the money
used to get someone through undergraduate university in the first place is enough of a financial burden.

AH talks about her experience with financial stress. “I had high hopes for myself and where this career path would take me. But as it pans out, I am not making enough to keep up with the student loans that I took to take the course. Ironic.” The cost of education is a huge barrier and contributing factor to the pressure individuals in an underemployment situation face. It appears to block future studies which could assist those with a theoretical degree to specialize and gain applied skills through professional and graduate education.

**Theme 5: Reflecting on Education**

**Positive reflection**

Two of my participants explicitly reflected on their educational accomplishments through a positive lens, despite their current underemployment. LL has a perspective on learning that looks at education as intrinsically valuable, she says “passions are there and they need to be explored. That is a definition of career to me. Following your muse. I do not regret what I have studied.”

And TK looks at education as an accomplishment that she is emphatic and proud of, no matter what, “I thought that receiving a certificate and two diplomas would be enough for me, but I have to say being able to complete a Bachelor of Business Administration is an accomplishment that not everyone can speak to…. So it doesn’t matter what others do around me, no one can take that away!!!” The significance of education for these two participants is uncontended.
Negative reflection

This subtheme refers to those four of eight participants who explicitly questioned the value of education and a degree itself. Although participant LL had an overall positive reflection, there were some initial notes of negative reflections in her narrative as well. She speaks negatively on what she had accomplished with her English degree prior to graduation, “pamphlets at school regarding underemployment, words of encouragement from professors and the scoffs received from fellow schoolmates verified the skepticism regarding where my studies would reveal. What would I do with my degree and where would it lead me?”

For participant KG, the skepticism began from the onset of graduation; she didn’t really see her degree as the accomplishment she had envisioned it would be. She says,

I graduated with a B.A. in Communications in June of 2012. I had been unemployed for the two months prior to the ceremony. Needless to say, my convocation was not the proudest or happiest moment of my life the way I had imagined it to be. It’s not that I wasn’t proud of myself—I just didn’t think I had done something exceptional.

As SB struggled to find work, she began to question her education, “I was feeling lost and like I may have wasted the past 5 years of my life completing a degree that didn’t offer any value to me.”

And EC felt as though maybe the degree she chose was too theoretical, “…I felt as though because I chose a “soft science” major in university I should just take what I could get.” Questioning one’s education seemed to span all avenues of the underemployment journey.

Theme 6: Psychological Well-Being

This theme, that focuses on psychological well-being includes everything from noted psychosomatic symptoms such as depression, to how the discouragement one feels about their to employment situation overflowed into one’s personal life. This theme was explicitly
noted in the stories of six out of eight of the participants; however I believe it was implicitly evident in all narratives. There were moments in these collected stories that spoke to a mental health decline during the process of searching for work, and the inability to find what they were looking for. For KG, the laborious process of sending out resumes was difficult to take in. She explains,

I started to send out application after application (over 100 in total) and never had any responses. I began to feel extremely disheartened and somewhat depressed—this continued for the next 7-8 months. I believe that I was under-qualified for communications jobs I was applying for and over-qualified for admin jobs I was applying for out of desperation. Not being able to land a job made me feel inadequate and this feeling was compounded by the fact that I had a student loan and other debts that needed to be paid off.

On this same token, participant KG continues to wonder if her past actions caused her to be in this underemployment situation. While she knew she should have been doing more, she didn’t feel she could—“I felt unmotivated and trapped; I didn’t want to leave my house.” This contemplation thereby perpetuated the depressed feelings she speaks about.

Much like KG, other participants took the inability to land a job personally. TK states “these ‘rejections’ are not only disappointing but at worst, demoralizing”, and EC says,

To be honest I didn’t want the job when I applied for it… I set my pride aside however and went for an interview only to lose the position to someone who had been a teacher for twenty years and was willing to teach as well as child mind for basically minimum wage. So, I didn’t feel awesome about myself or where I was going with my life after that.

The negative personal association of not getting the job was disheartening.

LL’s psychological well-being seemed compromised by the realization that what she was doing, or aspiring toward, was perhaps not the right path. LL says,

The restaurant hours and overall general lifestyle was not something I wanted any longer. In actuality there was no plan. Perhaps an epiphany of sorts, realizing that the unhealthy lifestyle and good money was not allowing me to be clear to the best of my abilities. Just after this change in my lifestyle, I was at my lowest point to date…. 
MC felt the lack of direction he was faced with, was difficult to bear, “I fell into a bit of a funk for most of a year. I had always been and still am a goal oriented person and with nothing to work towards there was nothing to do. It wasn’t depression but it was sort of similar. I went to work, came home, than either watched TV or went out with friends.”

For GH, it was the stress of the job she held, while underemployed, that caused much suffering. It started out slow, she speaks about some of the signs that she was on a personal decline, “I began to have headaches and my dentist remarked that my teeth were damaged from grinding. I would sit in my room with the blinds drawn, unwilling to go out or do things. I practiced hobbies less and less.” She continues to detail how her unhappiness at work spilled into her personal life quite quickly and drastically. She reveals,

My personal behavior was not good. I was a bitter, dried-up husk of a human being. I had a de facto Master’s degree, but I felt that I wasn’t even good enough to do data entry. No degree was really needed for my job. I was convinced I was worthless. I was unkind and harsh to those who sought to love and help me, including my mother. I felt that I was just a cesspool of negativity, and that I didn’t deserve love. I don’t think I was suicidal, but I did know I didn’t want to be alive. At my six month review, I was promised that my job would change, but I didn’t see any evolution.

Motivated by a separate personal trauma, she got herself out of the negative underemployment situation she was in, and is happy with the decision she made.

In July 2013, I was hit by a car and injured. I broke my arm but received no sick pay. I worked through agonizing pain just to make rent. I cried every morning when I would struggle to get up to get through the day. It was the last straw. I quit. Immediately I felt a return of peace in my life. I am still not employed, although I have freelanced part time. I hope to find full time work soon. I feel better, and really that is all that counts.

The suffering she was experiencing was all-encompassing. The stress she endured within her underemployment was directly affecting all facets of her life. This theme adds some value to
the claim that career is an overarching part of life and a major contributing factor to overall happiness.

Theme 7: Hope

The final theme to come through the eight collected stories was one of hope for the future. Hope that things will eventually work out; hope that underemployment will not be a lifelong battle. Six out of eight of the participants ended their narrative on a hopeful note; while seven out of eight had sentences of hope weaved into their narrative. Hope came through in many different instances. TK found hope through the potential of further education, “although discouraged, I did not feel hopeless, I registered for another semester at college. I took courses that I enjoyed and in turn I was excelling in…”

For SB, hope was garnered from the work she has been doing presently while underemployed, with aspirations for this to lead to future employability. She says, “I am hoping that since I have been working as a tutor for 2 years now that I can get a more stable job working in the special education field as a student support worker. I have been able to meet more people in the field and I feel like there are more opportunities to advance in the future”.

Similarly EC is building experience through this period of underemployment, and sees this as a positive step toward career development.

I am still working with the school board though I have vowed to have a different job come September (one that I need my degree for and pays better or one that has the possibility of upward mobility to a position where I need my education) and am doing the BI work at night. While the BI work doesn’t pay much because I can only do 2 hour sessions I have this job to keep me feeling like I’m working towards something more…

While taking steps in the right direction can be hopeful, so is the realization that one has opportunity through a multitude of possible future endeavours.
KG finds hope in identifying options for her future. She says,

In the meantime, I continue to look into other possibilities. Entrepreneurship has always intrigued me, as does the idea of further schooling. In addition, I wouldn’t mind spending some more time in the communications field, in hopes that I might find a position which challenges me creatively and mentally and provides opportunities for growth.

LL creates hope through changing her thinking and perspective on career, she says, “no longer is my attitude towards work defining me although it is something that taxes my thoughts. The negativity is now detached from the word career and the feelings of underemployment. As so long as I am happy with my surrounding friends and family, I will not be defined by my career.” She summarizes with, “…as long as I am developing and experiencing, becoming more self-aware I will be content. Everything will work itself out and if not, one will just have to find a way to find peace.” This positive and rational self-talk appears to have empowered her. She has released herself of any pressure to figure it out now and this has given her the space she needs to feel happy and content with life while she stays hopeful for her career in the future.

Participant MC has an ignited motivation, through finding himself a new goal that he is actively working toward, “finally one day I just sat down and wrote out what I would be tomorrow if I could and at the top of the list was Policing. Having a goal again energized me.” He continues to say,

Last year I applied to be a full time constable and actually got a lot further than I thought I would through the application process only being deferred for a year near the end. I was down on myself for a day or two after I was deferred partly because I was so close to getting through but I quickly bounced back… I am looking forward to applying again in July.

His resilience and ability to stay positive about his career despite that set-back speaks to the apparent power of hope in career development.
Participant GH has realized the importance of her personal well-being, and is now in a place where she feels hopeful for opportunities in the future. “...Although I have freelanced part time. I hope to find full time work soon. I feel better, and really that is all that counts.”

This resounding theme of hope was present throughout the narratives, and was a very exciting finding to uncover. The confidence with which these youth view the future is an uplifting discovery, as this theme shows that youth can overcome underemployment. Quite simply, because they believe that they can, we have no reason to doubt that they will.

Metaphor Analysis

A secondary goal of this study was to observe the use of metaphor, in the writing of the participant’s personal underemployment narratives. As the participants were asked to submit their own written account, it was not implied or encouraged that participants include any literary devices in their writing. This analysis is merely an extraction and compilation of any metaphors found within the stories submitted.

Metaphor is a tool used in many career counselling environments, so it was interesting to note that while it was not overwhelmingly used in the written descriptions, six metaphors were found and they showed up in five of eight narratives. In all cases the metaphors were utilized to better express a negative or difficult experience and feeling.

Participant TK employed metaphor in her description of the unsatisfactory work role she had taken on. She says, “If this wasn’t bad enough- I was shown little respect from my superior and then it dawned on me, I was a receptionist in the 50’s- you know the kind that make coffee and need little or no education, but are female.” From this statement, we can attribute a grand picture of the expectations placed on her in this position, and how for a modern career oriented individual this description is very disheartening. TK also brings in a
metaphor to explain just how long, arduous and potentially insurmountable her educational journey seemed “I was going to dedicate myself… commit my time for this Everest I was about to climb.” The course work is no longer seen as simple class time, the degree attainment is seen as an uphill battle that relies on the full mind and body commitment she says she gave to it.

Participant SB brought in a brief metaphor when describing her personal realization of the underemployment situation she was in. After graduation, SB had gone to England and while she looked for work abroad the lack of ability to find what she was looking for wasn’t too difficult to handle due to being on holiday. Yet, coming home it all set in, “when I came back from England it was like coming back to reality.” Essentially, she is saying that the dream or fantasy of life was over, and a reality wrought with underemployment was bleak and serious in comparison.

Participant EC brings metaphor into her narrative when describing the discrepancy in pay, versus qualification, that she was finding in her workforce competition. She states, “I was applying to jobs and not getting them even though I was qualified because there were people brutally overqualified willing to work for peanuts”. The use of metaphor here helps make the dichotomy she is presenting stronger, ‘brutally overqualified’, is contrasted with ‘work for peanuts’. It appears she is looking to make the distinction unmistakable, and she does so effectively with the use of this metaphor.

Participant KG uses metaphor to illustrate the fragility of a negative work environment she was exposed to through her underemployment journey. She had been let-go from a position due to management’s inability to find enough time to cultivate a position they created for her. Her reaction – “I can’t say that I wasn’t frustrated—but I was so relieved
knowing that I was not longer going to feel like I was constantly walking on eggshells.”

Having worked in this uncertain environment, being given little to no direction and then being penalized for things out of her control, this metaphor helps us to see how tentative she had to be to survive.

Finally, participant GH used two metaphors in her reflective narrative. She used a very picturesque metaphor to express her change of perspective on graduate education. Through her experience with academic circles, she stated, “I quickly realized that academia was not for me. I did not want to live in the so-called ivory tower.” She had discovered that her passions were much more grassroots than the college/university environment had exposed her too. With her use of metaphor, we can imagine two very distinct and different settings for learning, and better see how the pristine tower may not have been a good fit for her. Next, when detailing the emotional turmoil she underwent through her underemployment experience, she used metaphor to help articulate just how dire her situation was. When reflecting on her psychological position during that time, she says, “I was a bitter, dried-up husk of a human being.” This quote specifically impacted me, in that it left a very low, empty, almost discarded residue behind. I could distinctly feel how unfulfilled this individual was, and therefore how hollow she felt during this time. It was a very powerful image to invoke in a reader.

The metaphors helped command how important and difficult an experience underemployment is on the young and newly graduated. By pulling out the metaphors and conducting this secondary goal analysis, we are able to give greater weight to the feelings involved in the experience and the descriptive stories the participants gave us within this narrative methodology.
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

I came to select this topic from a place of curiosity into a prevalent new graduate experience in today’s society. After reviewing the literature wrought with articles on why this phenomenon was taking place, I questioned whether there was enough understanding on what it felt like to be underemployed. With that interest in mind, I began my examination into the experience. After consulting the relevant literature, generating and analyzing the data collected, working through a thematic exploration, and writing this text, I hope what I have created is a meaningful inquiry into an experience of value and of interest to the reader. Through this process, new insights were revealed and aspects of the experience uncovered. While I realize this piece could never fully capture the experience conclusively, my goal is to present a study that helps express a thoughtful understanding of the experience of underemployment through the career stories of eight educated youth.

Within this chapter, I begin by offering a summary of my findings, relate my research to theories of transition, and follow with a discussion on the study’s contribution to the literature. Here, I compare my findings to those already concluded and then I follow by looking at the meaning and significance of a new noteworthy finding that this study has uncovered. Next I examine the limitations of the study, offer options for further research and some implications for counselling practice. Then, I conclude with final remarks.

Summary of the Inquiry

In this narrative study, I engaged with eight participants who were all post-secondary graduates working in fields that did not require their education. These youth came from diverse backgrounds, with varied employment experiences and academic accomplishments. Yet, all of these individuals were both technically underemployed and identified as feeling
underemployed, were between the ages of 24 and 30, and were willing to share their career story.

The process of collecting data required three touch points with participants. I spoke with each individual in a face-to-face meeting to explain the project in greater detail and assist them in creating a lifeline to help with the writing process. The lifeline served as a vehicle for reflection on their story, from the year prior to graduation until present day. Marking key events and experiences chronologically on the graph, proved helpful as it then functioned as an outline for the writing of their narratives. At this point, participants were given the freedom to write their own narrative, with the only requirement being a page maximum. What unfolded through the written word was unique to each participant, taken from their viewpoint and entirely in their own voice. Any metaphors used helped enrich the stories. A thorough thematic analysis, followed by a process of writing and re-writing, which resulted in eight themes that I hope say something significant about the experience of underemployment. Finally, there was an expert review and a member check, in which the participants read the results chapter to assess for trustworthiness. It seemed that the experience was one that encompassed: (a) unmet expectations, (b) a layered disappointment when in the workforce and prior to entering it, (c) feelings of indecision regarding decision making, (d) a multitude of pressures, (e) a reflection on the value and process of education, (f) an impact on one’s psychological well-being, and (g) a rooted hope in the future. The themes, as they revealed themselves in the participant stories, can be seen as intertwining to tell a story of transition.
Stories of Transition

Through reading and re-reading the narratives, they displayed positive cognitive shifts, despite the down, or negative, time they were currently in. I read it as a transient, moving, evolving experience – a transition if you will. Specifically, what came through here is a strong connection to the theories of transition by Nancy Schlossberg and William Bridges. Notably, Schlossberg (1981) speaks about event and non-event transitions. She gives the model of an expected outcome that never comes through, as being a significant non-event transition (Schlossberg, 1981). For these new graduates, the non-event transition of not landing the job they expected, after graduating from post-secondary academia, was an impactful one. Schlossberg (2011) does not put significant weight on the non-event itself, in fact she notes that “it is not the transition per se that is critical but how much it alters one’s roles, relationships, routines, and assumptions” (p. 159) that gives the greater impact. And this, the effect this transition had on their lives, is precisely what the eight participants in this inquiry wrote about. As underemployment, for these participants, was not the result of a deliberate decision made purposefully by the individual affected, it proves more difficult to adapt to (Schlossberg, 1981), and so, in my eyes, it is an important transition to understand so we can empathize with those experiencing it. Some factors affecting adaptation to unexpected transitions, that Schlossberg discusses which were woven in the narratives, was that of loss, negative affect, internal and external sources of blame, the timing, and the uncertain nature and duration of the experience. Based on this, I would say these participants were exiting William Bridges (2005) *Letting Go* phase, the first phase in his theory of managing transition where people need to confront their losses. As they leave that phase, they begin to live in the *Neutral Zone*, where while the old melts away, the new is not yet
entirely operational. Here identity reformation, garnering new energy, finding purpose and real change starts to occur (Bridges, 2005). This is where I believe the theme of hope is found and grown in the narratives.

**Contribution to the Literature**

In correspondence to the review of the literature, this research contributes and supports past underemployment findings in a number of ways. Although there is little current research on the experience of this world-wide phenomenon, it was interesting to see that feelings associated with underemployment documented in the late 1980’s appear to ring true for today’s youth as well. More generally, previous research that explored concepts surrounding the illusion of comfort and unmet expectation that a degree was supposed to bring, followed by the appearance of psychological effects on the individual, are areas that encapsulate core findings from the current study.

**Effect of Expectations**

Past studies have revealed that expectations after graduation had significant effects on underemployed individuals. Much like Bolam and Sexsmith (2002), and Brooks and Everett (2009), the current study’s findings also indicate that due to expectations of high achievement right after graduation, new graduates are generally disappointed when they attempt to enter the work force. In line with Perrone and Vickers’ (2003) work, the disappointment may also come through as bitterness toward one’s situation. With the illusion of steady instant employment after graduation shattered, this research noted some resentment and frustration from participants when reflecting on their disappointing reality. Part of the disappointment comes from an expressed need for growth in a work environment. Although a more mature study, Burris (1983) found that college graduates wanted to continue to learn in
the jobs they take on and were unfulfilled when this expectation wasn’t realized. To this point, “respondents who had attended a four-year college for at least two years frequently compared the work they had done in college with the content of their jobs… and reached a nearly unanimous conclusion: their work… was more boring, more routine, less creative, and less autonomous than college work” (p. 99). Borgen, Amundson and Harder (1988) also found that college graduates were searching for opportunities for advancement, were frustrated with the lack of challenge within their work and were “more worried about being stuck” (p. 155). For the participants in the current study this appeared to also be the case. When reflecting on their current jobs, the lack of meaning, applicability of learned material, and need for growth was seemingly a significant piece of the dissatisfaction with their job. To further strengthen this finding, Feldman and Turnley (1995) also found that while the business college graduates in their study appreciated the transferable skills gained through their post-secondary education, “…they complained that the specific content of what they had learned in college was not relevant to their job” (p. 700). In this 1995 study, participants saw no benefit in pursuing further schooling as they attributed education as failing them in getting the jobs they had wanted in their initial attempt to enter the labor market. We saw this trend in some of the narratives of the current study as well, where the participants were reflecting on the value of their education, and weighing the risks of entering into further schooling. While there didn’t seem to be a strong pull toward the continued pursuit of academia, in terms of job search, past studies consistently suggest that underemployed individuals are more likely to continually be on the hunt for new jobs (Borgen et al., 1988; Burris, 1983). This, in turn, seems to be congruent with the findings of the current inquiry.
In this area, the themes of the present study which looked at expectations, disappointment, an ongoing search for meaning, pressure (in the form of ongoing job search), and reflecting on education, can be seen to resonate within the literature.

**Effect on Mental Health**

In line with the findings from the current study, past research has revealed that underemployment affects personal well-being. For example, among recent graduates, underemployment has been linked to poor health and psychological distress (Cassidy & Wright, 2008, Johnson & Johnson, 1992). Dooley, Prause and Ham-Rowbottom (2000), after controlling for prior depression, found that inadequate employment was related to amplified depression. Their findings also suggested a “sequential, reciprocal relationship between psychological well-being and employment” (p. 432). The narratives in this study may also allude to the cyclical nature of the depression. While underemployment contributed or intensified depression symptomatology, the symptoms then seemed to prevent some participants from having the drive to work toward exiting their underemployment situation. As an example, participant KG revealed, “I felt that I could have been putting myself out there… But I felt unmotivated and trapped; I didn’t want to leave my house”. In addition, lower self-esteem was a suggested effect of underemployment (Prause & Dooley, 2011) that was also seen in some of the narratives. Participants made comments like “I didn’t feel awesome about myself or where my life was going after that” or that applying for jobs and failing to get interviews “made me feel inadequate,” and rejections were “not only disappointing, but worst, demoralizing” for example. As seen in this study and in the literature, underemployment was quite consistently associated negatively with job satisfaction, commitment, motivation and one’s contribution in the work role or environment.
(Feldman & Turnley, 1995). Johnson and Johnson (1992) also note that symptoms like frustration, hostility and insecurity are also seen in underemployed youth. It is the very perception of underemployment that is believed to be an important influence on one’s attitude, like not only low mental health and feelings of being unappreciated, but an absence of career direction and a negative perception of their abilities to make the right professional decisions in the future (Borgen, Amundson, & Harder, 1988). For some participants in the current study, career indecision and lack of career routes was a theme that arose. This finding was also evident in Taylor’s (2005) work that looked at first transitions into work from school, and that trust in self and one’s decision making ability is affected by how that transition into work goes.

The theme of the current study which looked at psychological well-being can be seen as strongly coinciding with findings in the literature, on many of the personal associations of underemployment that the eight participants narrated.

**Unique Finding: Hope through Underemployment**

This research would like to highlight a novel and exciting contribution to the literature on underemployment. This study was the first of its kind to explore the experience of underemployment in narrative terms, as well as looking specifically at a post-secondary graduate millennial population. Through the choice in methodology, population and the specific research question addressed, a new understanding emerged when looking at underemployment and the feelings associated with the experience. It appeared that through identifying themes in the written narratives, an over-arching belief system had emerged within the dominant theme of expectations. The beliefs that appeared to direct feelings behind the core underemployment story could be that of an external locus of control, learned
entitlement, and a deep-rooted disappointment with one’s circumstance. While unmet expectations are something we have seen in the literature to date, it was rare to witness an evolution in thinking, as could be seen to emerge within the narratives analyzed in this study.

This evolution was soundly evident in seven of eight participants in the current study, where these individuals wrote of hope for the future. The presence of hope in the writings of their career stories, while in a state of underemployment, was an exciting finding. Here, we have what appears to be a shift in belief system, what could be referred to as an invitation for resilience, an appreciation for personal agency, and perhaps even an illustration of moving toward an internal locus of control. The words of hope that came through, if strengthened, may lead to greater self-esteem and positive action. It was a promising trend to find, as reading about the belief that things will get better, may allow us to assume that underemployment will not be a life-time reality. Perhaps we can view underemployment as more of an ephemeral transition that new graduates must learn to cope with, can survive, and will ultimately overcome.

**Limitations**

Prior to addressing the limitations of this study, it’s helpful to once again note the purpose of this research. It was not the intention of this work to provide answers, nor was it a goal of this research to uncover themes that could be generalized to the entire population of underemployed youth. While the current study had sufficient participation for a narrative inquiry, the findings of this study are in fact, limited to the stories of its eight participants, and their individual experience as expressed through the writing of their personal narratives. Furthermore, while I believe it is a great strength of this research, it also may be a limitation, that the participants wrote their own story, in lieu of participating in a narrative type
interview. While the writing process offered many benefits, it also prevented me as a researcher from clarifying any parts of a story I would have liked to understand deeper. In addition, the analysis could only look at what was said, there was no body language or tone to reflect on. Next, while the participants in this study represented a diversity of backgrounds, cultures and other individual traits, only one male voice was included. This is also true for the faculties in which participants had graduated from. As this is a study on underemployment, one’s educational attainment is of importance and the credentials were not as diversified as they could have been. This was not intentional, but merely an effect of the recruitment process, as this study only included participants who were interested in participating. Although the study is seen as contributing to the research on underemployment, much like other studies, it cannot capture the full scope of the experience.

**Directions for Future Research**

This study’s findings could be further illuminated with future research aimed to broaden the scope of understanding on underemployment. While this research was able to extract common themes about the experience, it is limited to the stories of its participants. As the current study was dominated by participants with Arts degrees, further research could duplicate this study but focus on specifically new graduates with a science based education, for example. It would be interesting to compare findings, and see if there are any differences in the experience. In addition, while culturally diverse, all participants were born and educated in North America. An area for ambitious study would be to inquire about first generation youth and international students who find themselves in an underemployment situation. I would be curious to see how, and if, the experience differs with this added cultural element.
The current study concentrated on understanding underemployment, and discovered that it’s a difficult and multi-faceted experience for new graduates. It would be helpful for future research to expand from this, and look at what makes coping easier or more difficult by utilizing an Enhanced Critical Incidence Theory and uncover the helping and hindering aspects of the experience. A suggestion would be to look at what enables one to cope with underemployment and perhaps what helped young adults exit an underemployment situation as well. Looking closely at what assisted or deterred shifts from occurring could be a great source of information when counselling young adults in this situation, or when preparing youth for graduation.

Finally, future researchers may be wise to look at where the expectations and belief system of newly post-secondary graduate youth came from. What is the source of the ever present theme of expectation and learned entitlement that education equates to garnering one’s dream job right out of the gate? Some of the themes of this work spoke to career education at the high school level. Understanding what depth of career information the underemployed were given and sought might be a place to begin such research. This could perhaps uncover a contributing source of misguided expectation and misinformation on career paths which, based on this study’s findings, is a cause of unrest for the underemployed.

**Implications for Counselling Practice**

The findings from this study resulted in helpful and practical implications for counsellors working with youth in transition. This work has lasting impact into how practitioners work with not only the population of underemployed youth, but those who are
about to enter into the workforce, or are exploring educational pathways to realize their career aspirations.

I believe one of the greatest contributions and pieces this research may bring into counselling practice would be the normalization this work can provide to clients experiences of underemployment. A few of the participants in this study shared their feedback that reading the results chapter was reassuring and validating. As mentioned earlier in this paper, one participant expressed gratitude for the process and when reviewing the finished work, EC says, “I feel strangely comforted by the fact that my experiences are shared by others”. This illustrates the power of reading about shared experiences, and the strength that can be ignited when knowing you are not the only one. For this reason, I elected to present all of the participants’ written narratives in full in this thesis; there is much to be gained from reading the stories in their purest form.

As a counsellor or practitioner working with this population, these findings offer a window into aspects of the experience the client is facing, or may face. Knowing the themes that came through in this research, for example those on unmet expectations and financial pressure, as counsellors there is an opportunity to expose clients to the realities of life after post-secondary education and help prepare them for what the future may have in store. This data offer potential for educators, counsellors, parents and professionals, to lessen the negative psychological impact of underemployment through dissemination of information, a deep empathic understanding and recognition of this, unfortunately, common experience for today’s youth.

Lastly, the theme of hope that was uncovered within the participant experience, may also offer hope to those working with a population that one might have previously imagined
feels hopeless. Knowing this, should help practitioners capitalize on its positive effects for change and coping. Snyder (2002) refers to hope as a “rainbow of the mind” (p. 269). Hope can be seen as something that can encourage a person to focus on possibilities for the future, and see potential for opportunity, and is therefore something to be fostered by counsellors.

**Final Remarks**

The focus of this research was to explore the experience of underemployment in post-secondary graduates. The study’s aim was to fill a gap in the literature and offer a voice to the prevalent experience for today’s educated youth. Underemployment is a topic that appears is of heightened importance in North American society, especially when concerning new graduates, and it is this study’s hope that we might better understand the experience after hearing from eight affected participants.
References


Appendices

Appendix A: Recruitment Poster

Do you feel underemployed? Are you working in a job that does not require your college or university degree?

Are you willing to share your story of this experience?
If you:

✓ Are a recent graduate
✓ Have earned a university or college degree
✓ Are between the ages of 24 and 30 years old
✓ Have been underemployed between 1 and 5 years

Then you may be eligible to participate in a study looking at the experience of underemployed educated youth.

Currently research is focused mainly on the causes of underemployment, but not what it feels like for those in this position, especially as newly graduated youth (ages 24 to 30). This study’s purpose is to understand the experience of underemployed educated youth. Your input may enhance the understanding of this prevalent experience for many new graduates.

For this study, participants will be invited to prepare a personal story on your experience of underemployment, with a five page maximum. Questions and probes will be provided to assist with the writing process. Participants will also play a collaborative role with the researcher throughout the process to ensure their experience is portrayed authentically.

In total, this study requires an approximate commitment of 4 hours (1 hour for the orientation meeting, 2 hours allocated for writing the story, 1 hour for a follow-up meeting).

A small honorarium, for taking the time to participate, will be awarded.

If you are interested in participating in this study or want more information, please contact:

Angela Katsamakis (Primary Contact, Co-Investigator)

or at angela.katsamakis@alumni.ubc.ca

Dr. Norman Amundson (Principal Investigator)

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This research is being conducted as part of the thesis requirement for a Master’s degree in Counselling Psychology.
A Narrative Study on the Construction of Career for Underemployed Educated Youth

**Principal Investigator:** Dr. Norman Amundson, PHD, Department of Educational and Counselling Psychology, and Special Education, UBC, 604-822-6757.

**Co-Investigator:** Angela Katsamakis, Master of Arts Student in Department of Educational and Counselling Psychology, and Special Education, UBC, 604-313-8008.

This research is being conducted as part of the thesis requirement for a Master’s degree in Counselling Psychology.

Dear participant,

You are invited to take part in this research study on the experience of underemployment for educated youth. Currently research is focused mainly on the causes of underemployment, but not what it feels like for those in this position, especially as newly graduated youth (ages 24 to 30). This study’s purpose is to understand the experience of underemployed educated youth. Your input may enhance the understanding of this prevalent experience for many new graduates.

**What happens if you say “Yes, I want to be in the study”?**

If you chose to participate in this study, here is what the process and steps will include:

**Part 1:** Please email the researcher, at angela.katsamakis@alumni.ubc.ca, inviting her to phone you to set up a meeting date and time.

**Part 2:** From there, you will meet with the researcher once, for a maximum of an hour, at a location of your choice or at the University of British Columbia. This meeting will begin by the researcher reviewing concepts and limits of confidentiality and will continue with telling you about the research project, and provide you with more information and an orientation on the second phase of the narrative research process.

**Part 3:** This phase invites you to prepare a personal story for the major life theme of career, specifically your experience of underemployment, with a five page maximum. Questions and probes will be provided to assist you, and this writing process will begin in the orientation meeting, and continue on your own personal time. Grammar, spelling and proper sentence structure does not matter, but we also seek your consent to use the narrative in full, as part of
the study data. A deadline for submission will be mutually agreed upon by the researcher and yourself.

**Part 4:** Toward the end of the study, you will be given the opportunity to review the analysis and verify the study’s findings for accuracy. The researcher will share the research findings with you and ask you if the findings represent your lived experiences, are comprehensive and are valuable. The follow-up interview will take up to an hour. This follow-up meeting can occur over a multitude of mediums (in person, phone or via email), as decided by you.

In total we ask for a commitment of approximately 4 hours (1 hour for first interview, 2 for written piece, 1 for follow-up meeting), pending the amount of time you elect to spend on your written narrative.

**Study Results**
The findings from this research project will be reported in a master’s thesis and may also be published in academic journal articles and/or books.

**Will being in this study help or harm you in any way?**
A potential benefit of this study is that you will have an opportunity to contribute to the knowledge of the field of counselling. You will help to increase understanding of the experience of underemployment.

There is minimal risk involved in this study. However, there is a possibility that, in the process of sharing your experiences, strong feelings may arise. If you deem any information too personal or feel distressed, please refrain from including it in your story or follow-up discussions with the researcher.

Although you may already have resources, you will be given a list of counselling services that you might want to process further with a trained mental health professional (please see Community Resources sheet).

**How will your identity be protected and privacy maintained?**
Your confidentiality will be respected. All emailed data will be maintained through password protected access and kept on a password protected USB drive. All paper copies will remain in a locked filing cabinet at the University of British Columbia.

This data will:
(i) Be accessible to members of the research team only
(ii) Be identified through code numbers and not through participant’s names
(iii) Any contact information you provide will be kept separate from your story
(iv) Be kept in a locked filing cabinet for 5 years and will then be destroyed

**Will you be compensated for your time?**
You will be awarded a small honorarium in the amount of $25 for taking the time to participate in this research.
**Who can you contact if you have questions about the study?**
If you have any questions or desire further information about this study, you may contact the Principal Investigator or Co-Investigator using the contact information provided in the beginning and end of this form.

**Who can you contact if you have complaints or concerns about the study?**
If you have any concerns or complaints about your rights as a research participant and/or your experiences while participating in this study, contact the Research Participant Complaint Line in the UBC Office of Research Services at 604-822-8598 or if long distance e-mail RSIL@ors.ubc.ca or call toll free 1-877-822-8598.

**Consent**
Taking part in this study is entirely up to you. You have the right to refuse to participate in this study. If you decide to take part, you may choose to pull out of the study at any time without giving a reason and without any negative consequences.

Your signature below will indicate:
   (i) That you have received a copy of this consent form for your own records.

   (ii) That you consent to participate in this study.

   (iii) That you consent to have your written narrative be included in the final research paper.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Name</th>
<th>Participant Signature</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Sincerely,

**Dr. Norman Amundson, PhD.** Principal Investigator, Department of Educational and Counselling Psychology, and Special Education, UBC, [norman.amundson@ubc.ca](mailto:norman.amundson@ubc.ca), 604.822.6757

**Angela Katsamakis,** Co-Investigator, Master of Arts Student in Department of Educational and Counselling Psychology, and Special Education, UBC, [angela.katsamakis@alumni.ubc.ca](mailto:angela.katsamakis@alumni.ubc.ca), 604.313.8008.
Appendix C: Participant Demographic Information

A Narrative Study on the Experience of Underemployed Educated Youth

Demographic Information

You are invited to complete the following information. This information is voluntary and you may decline to answer any question that you wish.

1. Age:

2. Gender:

3. Educational Degree:

4. Current Job:

5. Ethnic / Cultural Identity:
Appendix D: Participant Narrative Handout

A Narrative Study on the Experience of Underemployed Educated Youth

Possible Probes for Written Narrative Accounts

Research Question: To understand the experience of underemployment in educated youth.

Purpose: This research is asking you to prepare a personal story for the major life theme of career, specifically your experience of underemployment. Below is an outline that may assist you in the writing process.

Instructions:
1) Before you begin writing, using the attached lifeline please mark down on the line the most significant events you have experienced since you recognized your underemployment.

2) Write your story. In no more than 5 double-spaced pages, please describe your experiences. Below are some possible questions and suggestions you may wish to consider when writing your narrative account on your experience of underemployment.

Don’t be put off by all the questions, they are given as a guide to promote and encourage your thinking. Therefore you may find you won’t answer all of the questions provided, and that’s perfectly fine.

- What were some of your initial thoughts and feelings about finding employment?
- When did you first realize that you were underemployed?
- What did these experiences mean to you?
- How did these experiences affect your life?
- Can you describe some of the interactions you experienced?
- Were there any changes in your life during this time?
- What are your future plans in terms of employment?

There is something in the act of writing that stimulates reflection; I hope you enjoy this writing process, as you tell your story. Grammar, spelling and proper sentence structure does not matter.

If you have questions relating to the writing and preparation of your story, please do not hesitate to call me or email me at

The date to submit by is
Appendix E: Lifeline Graph

Lifeline

Mark the most significant events from the year before graduation to present day, chronologically, using the horizontal axis. The vertical axis indicates the positive and negative impact of these events.
Appendix F: List of Counselling Resources

A Narrative Study on the Experience of Underemployed Educated Youth

List of Low Cost/Free Counselling Resources

Community Counselling Services

- New Westminster Counselling Centre
- UBC Community Services: UBC Life and Career Centre
- Family Services of Greater Vancouver
- Living Systems Counselling
- Oak Counselling Services
- SHARE Family and Community Services

You may also wish to contact:
Dr. Norman Amundson, Registered Psychologist at

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