THE EXPERIENCE OF UNDEREMPLOYMENT FOR FEMALE UNIVERSITY GRADUATES: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

by

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate the experience of underemployment for female university graduates. In this investigation, the term underemployment was used to refer to the underutilization of one's formal education on the job, also known as overeducation. Borgen, Amundson, and Harder's (1988) definition of underemployment was adapted for use in this study: Participants were considered underemployed if they possessed more formal education than required to perform the duties of jobs held at the time of the study (as determined by 1993 National Occupational Classification [NOC] skill levels) and if they felt overeducated for their work. An opportunistic sample of 10 women was gathered through referrals, personal contacts, networking, and active recruitment. To participate, co-researchers met several criteria, including but not limited to being: (a) female, (b) university graduates with at least Bachelors' degrees, (c) objectively and subjectively underemployed (as defined in this thesis), and (d) living and working in the lower-mainland. In terms of design, a phenomenological approach was used. Data was collected through unstructured, open interviews. To extract common themes of experience from the protocols, Giorgi's (1975a, 1975b, 1985) phenomenological analysis procedures were followed. A general structural description of this experience was generated from the findings. Final results were compared with existing literature and implications for counselling theory, research, and practice were offered. Rather than relying on male-based data, the researcher hopes this information will help counsellors develop more appropriate models and interventions with which to assist underemployed female university graduates.
Table of Contents

Abstract ........................................................................................................... ii
Table of Contents .......................................................................................... iii
List of Tables .................................................................................................... viii
List of Figures ................................................................................................... ix
Acknowledgments ............................................................................................. x
Dedication .......................................................................................................... xi

CHAPTER I  Introduction ............................................................................... 1
  Statement of the Problem ........................................................................... 1
  Purpose of the Study ................................................................................. 2
  Research Question and Subquestions ....................................................... 2
  Rationale: Addressing the Gaps ................................................................. 3

CHAPTER II  Literature Review .................................................................... 6
  Existing Research ....................................................................................... 7
    Defining Underemployment .................................................................. 7
      Underemployment as Low Income ....................................................... 7
      Underemployment as a Lack of Employment ...................................... 7
      Underemployment as Mismatch ........................................................ 8
    The Subjective Component .................................................................. 10
    Focusing on Overeducation: A Combination Approach ...................... 11
  The Extent of Underemployment Among University Graduates ............ 13
  Links to Gender ....................................................................................... 14
  The Causes of Underemployment for University Graduates .................. 16
    Oversupply of Educated Labour ............................................................ 16
    Labour Market Changes ....................................................................... 18
  Career Development Theory for Women in General ............................ 21
  Causes of Underemployment Linked to Female University Graduates .... 22
Worse Labour Opportunities Open to Women ........................................ 22
Marriage Effects .............................................................................. 23
Pregnancy and/or Motherhood .......................................................... 23
Role as Secondary Wage-Earners ....................................................... 24
The Psychological Consequences of Underemployment .................... 24
Work-Role Dissatisfaction ................................................................. 25
Effects of Underemployment on Future Career Patterns ................. 26
Linking Emotional Stability to Underemployment ............................. 27
Chapter Summary ............................................................................ 29

CHAPTER III Methodology .................................................................. 31
Design ............................................................................................... 31
The Phenomenological Approach ..................................................... 31
Characteristics of the Phenomenological Approach ......................... 32
Researcher's Explanations ................................................................. 33
Researcher's Perspective and Personal Assumptions ....................... 33
Definitions of Terminology ............................................................... 35
Operationalizing Underemployment ............................................... 35
Objective Underemployment: Using 1993 NOC Skill Levels ............ 35
Establishing Subjective Underemployment ...................................... 37
Study Setting ..................................................................................... 37
Study Participants ............................................................................ 37
Population ......................................................................................... 37
Recruitment Procedures .................................................................... 38
Selection Procedures ........................................................................ 38
Selection Criteria .............................................................................. 39
Characteristics of Selected Participants ............................................ 41
Data Collection .................................................................................. 43
Theme: The Experience of a Lack of Career Identity ..............................................97
Theme: The Experience of Regret and Loss .........................................................100
Theme: The Experience of Depression ...............................................................104
Theme: A Need for Emotional Support ..............................................................107
Theme: Channeling One's Energy .......................................................................111
Theme: The Experience of Altered Career Expectations ....................................116
   Subtheme: The Experience of Pessimism and Hopelessness ............................116
   Subtheme: The Experience of Optimism and Motivation .................................118
Chapter Summary .............................................................................................119

CHAPTER V Discussion ......................................................................................121
A Review of Participants' Backgrounds .............................................................121
Present Status ....................................................................................................122
Ethical Considerations .....................................................................................124
Reliability, Validity, and Limitations of the Study .............................................124
   Reliability of Results .....................................................................................124
   Validity of Results .........................................................................................126
   Limitations of the Study ...............................................................................129
Theoretical Implications: Comparisons to Existing Literature .........................132
The Psychological Experience ..........................................................................133
   Theme: Feeling Stuck in Underemployment ..................................................133
   Theme: Feeling Unfulfilled at Work ..............................................................135
   Theme: Feeling Disrespected at Work ..........................................................136
   Theme: The Experience of Self-Doubt and Self-Blame ..................................137
   Theme: The Experience of Regret and Loss .................................................139
   Theme: The Experience of Depression .........................................................143
Career Identity ................................................................................................145
   Theme: The Experience of a Lack of Career Identity ....................................145
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal Relationships</td>
<td>147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative Effects</td>
<td>147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme: A Need for Emotional Support</td>
<td>149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pregnancy and/or Motherhood</td>
<td>151</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actions Taken</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme: Channeling One's Energy</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocational Expectations</td>
<td>155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme: The Experience of Altered Career Expectations</td>
<td>155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graphic Illustrations</td>
<td>159</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implications for Future Research</td>
<td>164</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implications for Counselling Practice</td>
<td>166</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Epilogue</td>
<td>172</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>174</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendices</td>
<td>184</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix A: Personal Assumptions</td>
<td>184</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix B: Advertisement for the Study</td>
<td>187</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix C: Explanatory Letter</td>
<td>188</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix D: Participant Consent Form</td>
<td>190</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix E: Interview Questions</td>
<td>191</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix F: Second Interview Letter</td>
<td>192</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix G: Validation Letter: Common Themes of Experience Across Participants</td>
<td>194</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix H: Thank-You Letter</td>
<td>195</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
List of Figures

Figure 1: The dichotomous aspects of the experience of underemployment for female university graduates. ................................................................. 161

Figure 2: Interconnections between the general and specific aspects of the experience of underemployment for female university graduates. ............................................. 163
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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to all underemployed female university graduates who believed their degrees would lead to stimulating, rewarding occupations. In reality, they are only "slightly ahead in the queue for jobs requiring a lower level of educational attainment" (Redpath, 1994, p. 104). Always remember, your personal identity can be much more than what you do for a living!
CHAPTER I

Introduction

For many university graduates, securing adequate employment has become a social and political issue. Finding work that complements their educational levels is a difficult, if not impossible, task. An increasing number have been forced to accept work for which they are overeducated. In this study, the term underemployment has been used to describe the underutilization of one's formal education on the job. Frustrated, many have questioned the value of higher education. Is it worth pursuing a university degree if subsequent employment does not reflect educational investments (Harder, 1986)? A few decades ago, graduating from university virtually ensured a wide range of career opportunities. However, in today's more complex and competitive world, a degree does not guarantee satisfactory employment. Indeed, Khan and Morrow (1991) estimated that by the end of 1995, 2.2 million American university graduates were overeducated for their work.

As the number of people affected by underemployment grows, its psychological consequences will become a serious concern for mental health professionals. It has already been associated with higher levels of job dissatisfaction, frustration, discontent (Borgen et al., 1988; B. Burris, 1983), psychosomatic stress, depression, hostility, and insecurity (Jones-Johnson & Johnson, 1992). Jones-Johnson and Johnson stated that underemployment may result in a deterioration in mental health and according to Stack (1982), it may even lead to suicide ideation!

Statement of the Problem

Evidently, the underemployment experience can have widespread psychological ramifications. The need for more information concerning its impact on individual lives will grow as university graduates, both male and female, seek help to cope with this situation. And, as more women graduate from university each year, gender specific data is necessary to fully understand their unique experiences. The results of male-based
studies cannot be extended to women, nor do they compensate for this gap in underemployment literature.

**Purpose of the Study**

Given the dearth of research on this topic, the purpose of this investigation was to examine, in-depth, the experience of underemployment for female university graduates, from an experiential viewpoint. A phenomenological approach was used to derive the characteristics and core meanings of this experience. Specifically, the study aimed to uncover and describe common themes of experience as expressed by participants through an examination of their accounts. Based on their reality, the researcher hoped to generate valuable insight and contribute to counselling theory, research, and practice.

**Research Question and Subquestions**

Because the investigation was of a qualitative nature, a foreshadowed problem was generated. Summarized as a condensed problem statement, the problem that was investigated was the experience of underemployment for female university graduates. Logically, a fundamental question guided this investigation: *What is the experience of underemployment for female university graduates?* Out of this, six subquestions were constructed which this study attempted to address: (a) What do they describe as the psychological experience of underemployment; (b) what do they describe as the impact of the experience of underemployment on their career identities as working women; (c) what impact, if any, has the experience of underemployment had on their interpersonal relationships with significant others (e.g., married, common-law, or other partners, parents, friends, etc.); (d) if applicable, what has been the relationship between the experience of underemployment and pregnancy and/or motherhood; (e) what have they done about the situation; and (f) what are their expectations about their vocational futures and how have their views been affected by the experience of underemployment? Although deliberately broad, these subquestions provided a structure upon which procedures were developed. Research objectives were then outlined in a logical order.
Rationale: Addressing the Gaps

There were several reasons for examining the experience of underemployment for female university graduates. First, although research on underemployment has expanded since the 1970s, few studies have examined its impact on individual lives. Quantitative studies that report aggregate statistics at the macro-level have failed to tap subtle nuances in experience (Donati-Marciano, 1987). Although questionnaires and large-scale survey results are suggestive, much of the quantitative research has not examined the phenomenon as a human collective process or event. In general, what is lacking is an in-depth, qualitative analysis of the interrelationship between education and work at the microsocial level (Borgen et al., 1988; B. Burris, 1983; Donati-Marciano, 1987; Harder, 1986; Jones-Johnson & Johnson, 1992). B. Burris (1983) noted that most of the protagonists in this drama have neither been studied, nor have they spoken. Only a few studies, such as those done by Borgen et al. (1988), B. Burris (1983), and Rosen (1987), have examined this phenomenon from the individual's perspective. By conducting comprehensive interviews with a small number of women, this study added to the limited qualitative data already gathered.

Second, many underemployment researchers have restricted their focus to the experience of low income, lack of employment, or overqualification in terms of expertise acquired over time (or a combination of these definitions). For example, some have studied disparities between the amount of time employed relative to the amount of time workers desired to work, concentrating on skills that are underutilized in quantitative rather than qualitative terms. Lichter and Landry (1991) used a combination of income level, hours worked, and quality of work to define underemployment, instead of isolating the overeducation aspect. Few have investigated, exclusively, the experience of overeducation, perhaps, because low pay, lack of hours, and experiential overqualification often accompany it.

Third, some researchers have excluded women from their studies rather than
broadening their theories to incorporate the female experience (Rosen, 1987). However, existing models that are based solely on men's experiences are inadequate when applied to women. Several investigations have offered cross-gender perspectives instead of isolating women's experiences to offer an exclusively female viewpoint. A few researchers have attempted to address this empirical gap, with limited results. Lichter and Landry (1991) studied female underemployment, but interviewed women in general, instead of concentrating on the experience of university educated women. When studies have been conducted on educated women, the focus has been so specific that results seem idiosyncratic. For example, the results of Donati-Marciano's (1987) study of female attorneys are particular to the sample she selected. Her findings cannot be extended to the general population of female university graduates. To avoid this problem, this study included a range of experiences rather than focusing on a restricted, homogeneous set of women. Interviewing female university graduates of varying age groups, with different backgrounds, who held a number of jobs, and who had diverse lifestyles and personal situations (e.g., married, single, with or without children) made results less "peculiar." Generalizability was not the goal, but common themes were extracted from the various women, illustrating that data collected was not simply idiosyncratic. The researcher was concerned with readers' recognition of (and, possibly, identification with) the reality of participants' responses, which is more likely since a variety of women were interviewed, rather than examining an exclusive group.

Finally, most underemployment studies have been conducted in the United States. For anyone interested, the results presented here may actually highlight subtle differences between American and Canadian data. In this investigation, all informants were Canadian citizens, offering another perspective on this issue. Readers could, on their own, compare results presented to those of American studies.

Clearly, this study has increased knowledge by addressing gaps in methodology, focus, gender, and location of study. A phenomenological approach was used, the focus
was overeducation, only women were interviewed, and it was conducted within the Vancouver area. The researcher could not find any other phenomenological study, Canadian or otherwise, which isolated university educated women's experiences of underemployment. As such, this research has been justified, appropriate, and significant. Because this is a new area of investigation, this study was considered exploratory in nature and may serve as the impetus for acquiring more comprehensive data.
CHAPTER II

Literature Review

The researcher reviewed existing literature to set the context in which this study was pursued. Because "underemployment is both conceptually and empirically elusive" (Glyde, 1977, p. 246), investigators have, apparently, avoided its study. As a result, it was very difficult to find recent articles on this topic. References have been kept as current as possible, but past research is offered to obtain a grounded view. Consequently, most of the literature cited was written in the 1980s. For some reason, after that time, work in this area lapsed and has only minimally surged in the early 1990s. Perhaps, underemployment is such a well established phenomenon, it is no longer the "hot" research topic it once used to be. As well, recession periods may have stimulated underemployment research, as the 1980s and early 1990s were both marked by unstable economies. For these reasons, articles have been included on the basis of relevance and quality versus recency, and carefully selected from well respected, peer-reviewed journals. To give detailed, original information, primary rather than secondary sources have been used. Research reports, synthesis articles, theoretical articles, and edited books have been examined to ensure an exhaustive, exclusive, yet topical review. Conceptual articles that have cited opinions without the benefit of research were avoided.

The following discussion is logically organized by topics and ideas, not by author. Central themes were extracted from existing literature, which formed the subheadings for this review. The review flows from the general to the specific, beginning with a definition of terms, moving to the extent and causes of underemployment (including statistical data), followed by an examination of possible psychological consequences. In each subsection, general findings are first presented, followed by more specific research. Studies are classified, compared, and contrasted in terms of how they have contributed or failed to add to present knowledge on underemployment, including criticisms of content, style, and methodologies used. A comparative approach was taken in that contradictory
viewpoints were examined.

**Existing Research**

Generally, literature devoted to underemployment has addressed four main areas: (a) how it has been defined, (b) the extent of it, (c) its causes, and (d) its psychological consequences. Because of the nature of this study, research pertaining to university graduates was considered most relevant and examined closely. Key studies that have highlighted women's experiences have also been included. With limited success, the researcher made a concerted effort to locate studies that investigated the experiences of university educated women.

**Defining Underemployment**

Defining underemployment is a complex task. The literature has characterized it in four basic ways: (a) in terms of income, (b) as a lack of employment, (c) with reference to skills, training, and/or educational attainment, and (d) as a self-assessed phenomenon.

**Underemployment as low income.** Income level has been used to define underemployment. This definition includes those who work in full-time, year-round jobs and receive earnings that are below subsistence level (Lichter & Landry, 1991; Redpath, 1993). According to the Labour Utilization Framework (LUF) developed by Hauser in 1974, anyone whose earnings were less than 1.25 times the individual poverty threshold, belonged in this category. With some mathematical adjustments, his formula is still used to define underemployment in terms of income level, although created 20 years ago. People in this situation are often referred to as marginalized workers, the working poor, or low income workers (Lichter & Landry, 1991). This type of underemployment has also been called invisible (Sabot, 1977) and is often referred to as subemployment (Dabelko & Sheak, 1992).

**Underemployment as a lack of employment.** A second definition includes those who would accept more work, but are working part-time involuntarily because there is none available (Donati-Marciano, 1987; Lichter & Landry, 1991; Redpath, 1993; Tipps
& Gordon, 1985). According to the LUF revised by Clogg and Sullivan (1983), this category includes those working less than 35 hours per week because they cannot find full-time employment. This type of underemployment is called visible (Sabot, 1977) and is referred to as low hours or involuntary part-time employment (Lichter & Landry, 1991). A related subcategory includes seasonal or part-year workers who are currently out of the labour force but are seeking full-time, full-year employment (Lichter & Landry; Toppen, 1971).

Thus far, underemployment has been defined in quantitative terms. Qualitative descriptions have been captured in the following sections.

**Underemployment as mismatch.** Underemployment has been described in terms of the underutilization of skills, training, and/or formal education (Khan & Morrow, 1991; King & Hautaluoma, 1987; Redpath, 1993, 1994; Richards, 1984a; Rumberger, 1984; Tipps & Gordon, 1985). This type of underemployment has been variously referred to as overqualification, mismatched underemployment, educationally inappropriate employment, education-job mismatch, and educational underemployment (V. Burris, 1983; Linde, 1988; Redpath, 1993, 1994; Richards, 1984a, 1984b; Rumberger, 1984). All of these terms imply a discrepancy between the level of skills, training, or education a person has acquired and the level required by the job. When the term underemployment is used to refer to the situation in which a worker possesses more formal education than is required to perform the duties of his or her job, then overeducation seems to be a suitable synonym.

That stated, how does one decide who is overeducated for work? Individuals possessing at least one standard deviation more schooling than the average educational attainment of workers in their respective fields were considered overeducated by the original LUF (Hauser, 1974). However, this formula was unreliable: As a baseline, it relied on the average educational attainment of workers already in their occupations, instead of considering the actual educational requirements necessary to perform jobs
(Redpath, 1993). In today's competitive employment market, making use of such a definition is dangerous. It is not unusual to find university graduates in jobs that require far less than a degree. For example, the secretarial field has become increasingly crowded with university educated individuals who cannot find more appropriate work. To use their average educational attainment as a baseline measure of what is required for that work would be a grave error, indeed! Surprisingly, King and Hautaluoma (1987) measured objective underemployment in this manner, a major flaw in their study.

Another mistake in determining overeducation, is to rely, exclusively, on employers' estimations of what educational levels are appropriate for particular jobs. Certainly, their views can be taken into consideration, but should not be used in isolation. In an "employers' market," those hiring can ask for higher credentials than are actually necessary, simply because there is an oversupply of educated labour. Using the secretarial example, some employers now request that job applicants hold university degrees, although, generally, far less education is sufficient to perform such duties. However, if a high percentage of candidates are university graduates, why not raise educational requirements based on the average profile of applicants?

Tipps and Gordon (1985) have used the General Educational Development (GED) scale to estimate the actual education needed to perform the duties of each job, instead of focusing on the average educational attainment of workers in each job or what the employer requests. The GED scale has been used to measure the functional or performance requirements of jobs and was constructed by the United States Department of Labour. A similar definition was provided by Clogg (1979) and Sullivan (1978): A person is underemployed if his or her education is one standard deviation above the mean education actually required to perform that occupation, implying that one is working at less than one's full educational capacity. Stated another way, when an employee possesses education which exceeds that normally required to perform the duties of the job, he or she may be considered underemployed (Khan & Morrow, 1991), regardless of
the average educational attainment of workers in that job or what the employer requires.

In Canada, educational levels that are required to perform the duties of particular occupations are outlined in the 1993 NOC. As noted in the abstract, the acronym NOC stands for National Occupational Classification, which is a systematic taxonomy of Canadian occupations compiled after extensive, Canada-wide research, analysis, and consultation. This index has replaced the 1971 CCDO (Canadian Classification and Dictionary of Occupations), reflecting occupational changes that have occurred over the last two decades. It can be used to assess underemployment for two reasons. First, the NOC has classified each job according to skill level, which is defined as the amount and type of education and training required to enter and perform the duties of an occupation. In determining skill level, the complexity and difficulty of the tasks the worker performs were taken into consideration, as were the responsibilities typical of the job. Instead of using the average educational attainment of workers already in that particular job as the baseline, the NOC examined its functional requirements to determine what educational level is actually necessary, thereby avoiding the error made by the LUF. Second, employers' educational requirements were taken into consideration, but were not exclusively relied on when determining what education is necessary for each job. When the NOC was created, both job incumbents and their supervisors were surveyed to make a more reasonable estimation of what is needed, avoiding the mistake of relying solely on employers' demands, which may be inflated. In fact, NOC analysts consulted a number of sources to establish educational levels required for jobs (e.g., employers' demands, employees' estimations, vocational consultants, associations, unions, and other experts), offering well-grounded assessments. Consulting third-party job analysts removed most of the biases of job occupants and employers.

**The subjective component.** The degree of perceived overeducation has been discussed by several researchers (Borgen et al., 1988; B. Burris, 1983; Jones-Johnson & Johnson, 1992; Khan & Morrow, 1991; Redpath, 1993, 1994). Jones-Johnson and
Johnson have argued that subjective underemployment has two underlying components: (a) the individual's perception about the extent to which the job allows him or her to use acquired skills and abilities (viz., the feeling that they are not fully utilized on the job), and (b) the perceived lack of opportunity to develop new talents through advancement. B. Burris (1983) and Khan and Morrow (1991) found that redundancy, boredom, and an inability to grow on the job were key issues in subjective underemployment. However, over 60% of B. Burris's sample, whether high school or university graduates, felt overeducated simply because they had mastered their jobs.

Shockey (1985) noted that bias can surface when respondents are directly asked whether they feel overeducated. V. Burris (1983) supported this claim, maintaining that widely differing interpretations tend to produce inflated estimates of underemployment. Variables, such as age, experience, and gender, have been shown to influence individual evaluations of the experience. But, should it not be assumed that social actors know what their experiences "mean" to them, as Jones-Johnson and Johnson (1992) insisted? Supporting the latter, Angel and Gronfein (1988) stated that "the socially constructed nature of subjective information does not constitute distortion, but is, rather, an integral part of the reality itself" (p. 471). Reports of subjective states cannot be wrong, they argued, in the same sense that objective information can be distorted (e.g., income, age, etc.), because only individuals can judge what constitutes happiness, satisfaction, and emotional health for themselves. O'Brien (1986) would agree and showed that individual perceptions of job attributes and skill utilization are valid indices of actual job situations, citing various studies that have demonstrated a high correlation between employee and expert job descriptions.

**Focusing on overeducation: A combination approach.** Because this investigation focused on overeducation, the latter two definitions were of interest. When examining the mismatch phenomenon, several researchers used purely objective definitions, failing to measure underemployment in terms of how one feels about work. In contrast, relying
exclusively on subjective data could prove to be problematic. For example, a person cannot be considered underemployed just because he or she feels overeducated. In contrast, if one is overeducated for his or her work but does not feel that way, what classification is appropriate? Clearly, using either an objective or subjective measure is unsatisfactory, since only one part of the experience is tapped. Combining both aspects allows for externally and internally based assessments, establishing objective and subjective validity. In their study, Borgen et al. (1988) selected participants if they possessed one standard deviation more of formal education than they needed for jobs presently held and if they considered themselves to be underemployed. This definition was useful as it took both objective and subjective components into consideration. However, they used the CCDO (1971) to determine average educational levels for jobs, an outdated resource. In addition, assessing standard deviations can be a complex process. As such, their approach was modified for the purposes of this investigation. Participants in this study were considered underemployed if they possessed more formal education than required to perform the duties of jobs held at the time of the study (as determined by 1993 NOC skill levels) and if they felt overeducated for their work. The NOC was considered the best source for assessing educational requirements of jobs, for the reasons mentioned previously. For a detailed description of skill levels and how the objective and subjective components of this definition were operationalized, refer to the next chapter, Methodology.

The definition used in this thesis was based on the overeducation criterion, which may be the most salient aspect for university graduates. As such, the terms underemployment and overeducation have been used synonymously. Although low pay and scarce hours may have been subsumed issues, they were not specifically addressed. Additionally, the researcher did not examine overqualification in terms of expertise acquired through vocational experience. For example, an individual may be considered overqualified because of accumulated work experience, however, her formal education may not be
above that required for the job in question. As such, studies and statistics cited below have focused on underemployment as overeducation, not low income, lack of employment, or experiential overqualification. Unless indicated otherwise, the term graduates refers to university graduates and the word college is used to indicate accredited, degree granting institutions (not junior, community, or technical colleges).

**The Extent of Underemployment Among University Graduates**


American census data from the 1950s and 1960s showed a drift of overeducated people from higher to middle level jobs (Berg, 1970; King & Hautaluoma, 1987). In Canada, Harvey (1974) studied the same shift: over the period 1960 to 1968, first full-time jobs obtained by university graduates were in the middle rather than higher level prestige range. The Carnegie Commission report, *College Graduates and Jobs* (1973), estimated that 25% of American college graduates would hold jobs for which they were overeducated. In a 1976 Statistics Canada survey of underemployed university graduates, 32% were overeducated for their work (Clark & Zsigmond, 1981). *The Overeducated American*, a book by Freeman (1976), documented the growing number of university graduates in low-level jobs and the lack of return on a college degree. In the mid-1980s, Rumberger (1984) estimated that as many as 25% to 50% of recent college graduates were overeducated for their jobs and predicted it would become even more widespread in the future. Richards (1984a) also noted the problem and argued that the bulk of college graduates' work experience would be in underemployed jobs. More recent data has shown that a general downward trend in rates of return to education exists in Canada.
The 1984 National Survey of Graduates showed that 29% of Canadian university graduates with Bachelor's degrees were working full-time in jobs that did not require a degree (Clark, Laing, & Rechnitzer, 1986). A 1986 survey of college graduates from Ontario, revealed that 26% of respondents were working in jobs that required less than a university education (Denton, Robb, and Spencer, 1987). In 1988, Myles, Picot, and Wannell reported a net downward shift from higher to lower-level job categories for Canadian college graduates. More recently, the 1994 Occupational Outlook highlighted problems faced by university graduates who attempted to secure appropriate employment. That issue, published by the Canadian Occupational Projection System, a branch of Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC), examined the 1992 National Graduate Survey which was conducted to collect occupational data from individuals who had graduated from post-secondary institutions in the 1990 calendar year. Focusing on British Columbia, data showed that by 1992, 38% of Bachelor's and 48% of Master's graduates were working in jobs requiring less formal educational credentials than they had earned. Khan and Morrow (1991) estimated that at the end of 1995, 2.2 million American university graduates were forced to accept jobs that did not require the skills and knowledge they had obtained through educational pursuits. Redpath (1994) has stated that for many university graduates, the chances of finding a job that matches their education is less than 50%. She further noted that in Canada and the United States, "there has been a gradual erosion in the economic position and occupational status of university graduates" (1993, p. 68).

**Links to gender.** Research has shown that specific groups have been more susceptible to underemployment. As this study addressed the experiences of women, the issue of gender is salient, although links to ethnic background and social class have been made in other articles.

It is no secret that women are over-represented in secondary labour markets; inadequate employment has been a factor at all levels of the female workforce. Recent
labour force transitions have reinforced inequalities in the assignment of males and females to adequate or marginal jobs. Lichter and Landry (1991) illustrated a gender difference in mobility between job levels and transitions to adequate employment. Women were found to be more likely than men to shift from adequate employment to underemployment and remain in that position. Although noteworthy, their findings are limited as they used a combination of income, hours worked, and quality of work to define underemployment. Additionally, their statistics were based on underemployed women in general, not necessarily underemployed university educated women.

However, this effect has been documented for female university graduates. In Canada, Harvey (1974) found that approximately 35% of female university graduates felt their education was not adequately utilized at work. In the 1980s, Rumberger (1984) found that 20% of all recent female college graduates in the United States were employed in clerical-type positions, a greater proportion than in the 1960s! Smith (1989) supported this data: Between the years of 1970 and 1982, the proportion of females with four years of college working in sales and clerical jobs had increased from 27% to 59%.

When rates of underemployment are compared along gender lines, surprisingly, the same percentage of women are found to experience overeducation as men (Lichter & Landry, 1991; Rumberger, 1981; Tipps & Gordon, 1985). In fact, V. Burris (1983) reported that men were slightly more overeducated than women. As for Canadian university graduates, Harvey and Kalwa (1983) found that, on average, males achieved higher occupational status than females, but the difference was negligible. In 1993, Redpath noted that underemployment was not affecting Canadian women any more adversely than Canadian men.

It appears then, that there are no substantial gender differences in overeducation, an interpretation that must be cautiously made. First, Redpath's (1994) detailed examination of occupational outcomes has shown that underemployed female university graduates tend to concentrate in "dead-end" clerical jobs, whereas underemployed male university
graduates enter the sales arena which has more opportunity for advancement. Sales jobs for males are typically higher paying and lead to higher status jobs, such as sales supervisors or representatives. In contrast, the majority of female clerical jobs are lower level, non-supervisory positions (such as receptionists, secretaries, tellers, and cashiers) that offer few advancement opportunities. Redpath has stated that women tend to rely on traditional, "women's work" when they encounter barriers to employment, which is probably why female university graduates tend to be more severely underemployed than their male counterparts. Second, it has been shown that a higher proportion of females than males enter teaching, health, and welfare occupations where certification standards call for degrees. The resulting effect is that a larger number of females are matched, although occupational gender stratification still exists (V. Burris, 1983; Tipps & Gordon, 1985). Finally, according to Dabelko and Sheak (1992), this shrinking gap between men and women results not so much from improvements in the employment situations of women, but from the deterioration of men's employment status. Redpath (1994) would concur, having noted that skill upgrading in the female labour force has been counterbalanced by a decline or stabilization of skill levels in various occupations held by males.

The Causes of Underemployment for University Graduates

To explain why so many university graduates are underemployed, the literature has offered two main causes: an oversupply of educated workers and changes in the labour market.

Oversupply of educated labour. Educational expansion, or an increase in the proportion of students who attend university has occurred since World War II, along with the size of the college age population (Richards, 1984a). By the late 1950s, one-third of American high school graduates were registered in college, and by the late 1960s, this had increased to one-half (Bowles & Gintis, 1976). In a discussion of "generational crowding," Redpath (1994) noted that underemployment came to the forefront during the
1970s when the "baby boom generation descended upon the post-secondary education systems in Britain, Europe, and North America" (p. 90). In Canada, university enrollments steadily rose throughout the 1980s. According to Education in Canada: A Statistical Review for 1992-1993 (1994), full-time university enrollments rose annually during the 1980s, reaching 569,000 in the 1992-1993 academic year. This represented a 33% growth since the 1982-1983 academic session and over a 45% increase since 1978!

As noted by the 1991 Statistics Canada census (the latest available at the time of this study), between 1981 and 1991, the number of Canadian university graduates increased by almost one million. According to Educational Attainment and School Attendance: The Nation (1993), educational attainment levels in Canada reached historical highs in 1991. The 1991 census also showed that 2.4 million people aged 15 years and over now have university degrees, 11% of the Canadian population. As noted by Education in Canada: A Statistical Review for 1992-1993 (1994), in the 1992 year alone, 120,700 Bachelors' degrees were granted, 33,600 more than ten years earlier. Of that number, 57% were awarded to women, compared with 51% in 1982. The same year, 19,400 Masters' degrees were earned, an increase of 6,300 over the 1981-1982 session; 48% were obtained by women, up from 39% a decade earlier. Finally, 3,100 Doctorates were granted in 1992, 1,400 more than ten years earlier. Women received 32% of them, versus 25% in 1982. Given such statistics, it makes sense that the proportion of university graduates (and in particular, female university graduates) in almost all occupations has increased (Picot, Wannell, & Lynd, 1984). The Labour Market Information Unit (LMIU), a now defunct Vancouver based branch of HRDC, examined this issue. Using 1993 NOC skill levels, they compared the levels of education actually required to perform the duties of particular occupational groups to those obtained by workers. For the Vancouver area, the 1991 census revealed that of those employed in technical and skilled occupations (which require two to three years of post-secondary training, apprenticeship training, or secondary school and more than two years of on the
job training), 10.6% had university degrees. Of those working in "supporting" jobs, 7.5% had university degrees when only secondary school is required. Furthermore, 4.4% of those working in labouring and "elemental" jobs, which require up to two years of secondary school, had university degrees (LMIU, 1995). Clearly, the oversupply of educated labour is reflected at all levels of work.

**Labour market changes.** A restructuring of the global economy, technological developments, and periods of economic recession have affected employment opportunities for university graduates (Redpath, 1994). In North America, this changing economy has caused significant shifts in employment patterns (Belcher & Diblasio, 1993; Dabelko & Sheak, 1992). The result has been a disparity between the work requiring university degrees and the number of university graduates seeking employment. The number of professional jobs has not expanded enough to accommodate the number of people qualified for them, creating a "job squeeze" (V. Burris, 1983; Donati-Marciano, 1987; Khan & Morrow, 1991; Richards, 1984a, 1984b; Rumberger, 1984). As a result, society has become "increasingly bipolar, with some people having high-level, professional managerial jobs, while others are employed in low-level, low-paying service jobs" (Borgen et al., 1988, p. 149).

Such information is not new. In 1984, Rumberger predicted that most new jobs would be in low-level positions, such as sales clerks, cashiers, and janitors. His prediction became a reality. A decade later, Redpath (1994) examined a survey of Canadian university graduates. She found that clerical, sales, and service jobs were the leading occupations for underemployed graduates from all faculties. Lichter and Landry (1991) have noted that much of the recent job growth has been concentrated in the low-wage service sector, in so called "non-quality work." Dabelko and Sheak (1992) have also observed a rapid shift to retail work and the same has been documented by the Economic Council of Canada (1990). The 1995 Occupational Outlook for British Columbia and the Yukon (published by the Economic Services Branch of HRDC), has estimated that
between 1995 and 2005, there will be a 25% growth in employment in British Columbia. But of 417,000 new jobs, 255,000 will be in the sales and service sector, accounting for one out of every three job openings in the province. Sales and service jobs that offer the most openings to 2005 will be retail salespersons, food and beverage servers, janitors, building supervisors, cooks, and cashiers. The same publication further illustrated that while 70% of future job openings will require a post-secondary education, only 17% will require a university degree. A variety of entry level positions are and will be available, many requiring no previous training or education beyond high school. Unlike other sectors, jobs in the service industries tend to be either high or low-skill. Given the oversupply of educated labour and the limited number of high-skill jobs available, it is feasible that more and more university graduates will accept low-skill work, choosing underemployment rather than unemployment. This pattern has serious implications for less educated individuals whose jobs may be filled by university graduates.

Having mentioned unemployment, a related point noted by Lichter and Landry (1991) is that declining unemployment rates in the late 1980s may be counter-cyclically related to current growths in underemployment, as more educated workers accept low-level jobs as alternatives to unemployment. In a Canadian study, Redpath (1994) noted that the percentage of underemployed graduates working in cities with higher unemployment rates was actually less than the percentage of underemployed graduates working in locations where unemployment rates were low. In the United States, from 1986 to 1989, the employment rates increased and the unemployment rates decreased for women, but underemployment rates increased overall since "improvements" in the labour force were generated by increases in marginal, low-level type jobs (United States Bureau of Labour Statistics, 1990). Apparently, closing the gap between employment and unemployment may not translate into decreased rates of underemployment, especially for women. Clearly, underemployment can co-exist with a high demand for labour (Redpath, 1994). However, statistical reports continue to mislead the public by neglecting growths in
underemployment. For example, Education in Canada: A Statistical Review for 1992-1993 (1994) claimed that in 1992, unemployment was the lowest among university degree-holders and highest among non-secondary school graduates. Higher levels of education were associated with rising labour force participation and declining rates of unemployment, for both men and women. The publication failed to note that increased underemployment may have contributed to the decline in unemployment rates among Canadian university graduates. Indeed, higher educational credentials may have improved their chances of becoming employed, but not, necessarily, in jobs that were at an appropriate level. For example, in an article on underemployment, Kilian (1995) provided anecdotal evidence of the plight of some university graduates. He described the resume of a fellow who had obtained a history degree from a recognized Eastern Canadian university: His most demanding job was that of "server's assistant" in a Vancouver restaurant.

In various articles, HRDC has urged prospective students to become informed consumers of educational services, before wasting time and money on training that may not provide an adequate return on investments. Students have been advised to pursue specialized training in areas that are short of qualified candidates. Indeed, government and industry representatives have complained about skill shortages, claiming the education system has not prepared many university graduates to enter the modern labour market (Economic Council of Canada, 1992). With tales of underemployed university graduates working at hamburger stands and driving taxis, the university is, indeed, under scrutiny. "Once revered as a shrine of higher learning, it is now being treated more and more as a financial liability . . . students who graduate with unmarketable degrees are a drain on taxpayers" (Fulton, 1996, p. 1). However, as Fulton noted, the university is not a trade school: it trains minds, not technicians. And, as Green and Ashton (1991) have argued, making effective use of existing human resources should be the goal, rather than focusing on what is wrong with the education system. Redpath (1994) has questioned the
extent employers actually utilize the varied skills and abilities of those with higher education credentials. The oversupply of skilled labour coupled with a decline in the number of jobs requiring university degrees, may have caused the value of higher education to decrease (Anisef & Axelrod, 1993). Many employers have taken advantage of this trend, unfairly inflating job-entry requirements (Berg, 1970; Sullivan, 1978). Employers must consider the transferability of knowledge and skills among various disciplines. Instead, they tend to underestimate the importance of humanities or social science backgrounds in preparing graduates for managerial or administrative roles (Redpath, 1994). "Ironically, some of the strongest support for liberal arts education comes from the business community . . . graduates who are literate, flexible, and have refined analytical and critical thinking skills are in high demand" (Fulton, p. 4).

In summary, it is imperative that statistical publications document both employment and underemployment rates. Redpath (1994) has highlighted the necessity of monitoring both underemployment and traditional labour market indicators. It is not enough to state that higher educational credentials improve the chances of becoming employed. Potential university students, students in progress, and those who have already graduated need to be informed of rising underemployment rates that often accompany surges in employment. Because this trend has not been given adequate attention, another gap in vocational data exists.

**Career Development Theory for Women in General**

Before discussing causes of underemployment linked to female university graduates, it is necessary to examine gaps in existing career development theory. Many theorists continue to neglect the special circumstances surrounding women's career development and the differences between men and women's career patterns.

According to H. Astin (1984), for example, work has the same meaning for both sexes. She has used a socio-psychological model to explain career choices and work behaviour, illustrating psychological components (work motivation, expectations),
environmental variables (sex-role socialization), and the construct "structure of opportunity," which is used to depict how social forces shape occupational decisions. Her model, she has argued, is equally applicable to men and women, because basic work motivation is the same for both sexes.

Supporting H. Astin's (1984) theory, Harmon (1984) has argued that if we accept the premise that women's experiences differ from men so substantially that they require a different model for understanding, our theories will reinforce the notion that some behaviours are more appropriate for one sex than the other, employment patterns of men and women will then reflect this dynamic.

Gilbert (1984) offered a contrasting view, questioning whether H. Astin's (1984) model sufficiently addresses the realities of women's career development. Assumptions about the demands of work preclude most women from combining family life with a viable career. For example, many male scientists believe a 90 hour work week is necessary, which is impossible for women with child care duties. H. Astin's assumption that active participation in family roles is harmonious with occupational achievement is questionable, especially for women who are still the primary care-takers of children.

Khan (1984) has shown that traditional, male-based theories of career development cannot adequately address women's work experiences: The data on women does not "fit" the male conceptual framework. When studying the experiences of women, subscribing to a life-course model that contains no modifications or interruptions is inappropriate. Transitions in to and out of work must be taken into consideration in any discussion of women's employment status. Unlike the pattern for men, whose work histories are generally linear, marriage, pregnancy, and motherhood can make the career trajectories of women less predictable. Because of career discontinuity associated with raising families, women are at greater risk for unemployment and underemployment than men.

**Causes of Underemployment Linked to Female University Graduates**

**Worse labour opportunities open to women.** Even highly educated women have
worse labour market opportunities than men, especially when they age (Lichter & Landry, 1991; Rosen, 1987). Men and women begin at very different positions in the labour force: Women's first jobs are generally lower in earnings and status than those of men. In fact, monetary returns for education are often higher for men than women, despite the diminishing gap between educational levels (Marini, 1989; Tienda, Smith, Ortiz, 1987). Additionally, Redpath (1994) illustrated that women continue to choose arts and education degrees, which tend to lead them into occupations with lower pay and limited opportunities for promotion. And in an earlier study, Rumberger (1981) found that women were less likely to use their post-secondary educations the more education they received.

**Marriage effects.** Marriage, in general, may have an effect on women's employment status. Lichter and Landry (1991) found that stable marriages reduced the probability of downward mobility for men, but increased it for women. For example, Gottfredson and Swatko, (1979) found that female psychologists were more likely to be underemployed than their male counterparts, especially if they were married. Husband-initiated geographical moves can play a role in women's rates of job turnover, increasing movements in and out of appropriate employment (Ickovics, 1990).

**Pregnancy and/or motherhood.** Combining family and work obligations may increase the likelihood of female underemployment by diminishing professional women's ability to fully utilize their educations on the job (Donati-Marciano, 1987; Gottfredson & Swatko, 1979; Mutchler, 1988; Rosen, 1987). As women continue to shoulder the burden of childrearing, parenthood affects the career patterns of university educated men and women differently. Lichter and Landry (1991) found that differential effects of fertility on men and women exacerbate gender stratification in the employment market. In their study, past and recent fertility had no significant effect on men's labour force transitions, but affected women's career patterns negatively. For example, high levels of education were less likely to prevent women than men from suffering a downward
transition, such as exiting the labour force to start a family.

Educated women are often forced to make "trade-offs" between domestic duties and career advancement. Role-conflict may be experienced when women attempt to simultaneously fulfill more than one role, such as mother/housewife and employee. In a study of female attorneys, Donati-Marciano (1987) showed that even high-level professional lawyers can become underemployed when their careers are interrupted by childbirth. Many of her participants were unable to make a smooth return to work after maternity leave. A glut of lawyers on the market coupled with the time they had been away made them less competitive. Others could not donate enough time to work because of their child care and domestic duties. For such women, motherhood became a career penalty, severely reducing chances for career advancement, forcing some to accept research positions, simpler cases, or non-legal work. Four of 26 subjects resolved the career-motherhood conflict in favour of motherhood, voluntarily accepting underemployment as a creative, viable, and satisfactory alternative.

**Role as secondary wage-earners.** As secondary wage-earners (Rosen, 1987), jobs flexible enough to accommodate mothers' schedules are often underemployed positions that "trap" them over time. Unable to afford not to work, many educated women rationalize their situations, telling themselves underemployment is a temporary solution until the children are grown and full-time, "quality" employment can be secured. However, when they are ready to accept full-time work, they are unable to compete with younger, more recent graduates.

As shown, applying male oriented career models to women's experiences of underemployment is inappropriate, which provided much of the impetus for initiating this particular investigation.

**The Psychological Consequences of Underemployment**

For many university graduates, underemployment can have serious psychological consequences (Redpath, 1993, 1994).
**Work-role dissatisfaction.** The assumption that underemployment can lead to discontent, frustration, and dissatisfaction at work is consistent with common sense and most findings that have emerged from the literature on work-role satisfaction (Borgen et al., 1988; B. Burris, 1983; V. Burris, 1983; King & Hautaluoma, 1987; Quinn & Baldi de Mandilovitch, 1979; Richards, 1984a, 1984b; Rumberger, 1984). Berg (1970) and Solomon, Kent, Ochsner, and Hurwicz (1981) have found substantial correlations between underemployment and job dissatisfaction. Richards (1984a) noted the following:

The assumption that workers who are not underemployed will find greater intrinsic satisfaction in their work can be made for two reasons. First, those who can utilize interests and skills developed in the course of their educational preparation should find their jobs more interesting and rewarding. Second, most jobs unrelated to educational preparation are also lower status jobs. In our industrial economy, higher status jobs, on the average, offer more substantial sources of intrinsic satisfaction. (p. 306)

In Richards' (1984a) study, higher job-fit index ratings were associated with higher work-role satisfaction scores, measured at one and three years after graduation from university. She also found that higher income did not bring about any increase in satisfaction unless the job was also educationally appropriate. Solomon et al. (1981) also found that feelings of job dissatisfaction due to overeducation increased, even with vocational tenure and resulting salary raises.

V. Burris (1983) conducted a national survey of American college graduates and found that overeducation by a single GED level did not produce as sharp a decline in job satisfaction as overeducation by two GED levels. Apparently, the strength of any attitudinal effects of overeducation will depend upon the degree to which workers subjectively perceive themselves as overqualified for their jobs. Jones-Johnson and Johnson (1992) illustrated the paramount importance of intrinsic sources of satisfaction...
among college educated workers and how experiences are internally assessed. King and Hautaluoma (1987) have shown that the influence of overeducation on job satisfaction partially depends on the individual's perceptions, expectations, or judgments about the work situation.

These findings are consistent with psychological theories. Relating underemployment to equity theory, Adams (1963, 1965) suggested that overeducated workers who are assigned the same tasks and status as their less educated colleagues will naturally feel a sense of inequity and job dissatisfaction.

According to Festinger's (1954) social comparison theory, when comparing themselves to former classmates who hold more appropriate jobs, overeducated workers should have feelings of job dissatisfaction. This is consistent with V. Burris's (1983) claim that a worker's subjective experience of overeducation will depend as much or more on the inability to fulfill aspirations for status and occupational goals as it will on the underutilization of technical skills. Redpath (1993) has also noted that the psychological consequences of overeducation may depend on perceptions and expectations of status attainment.

Contradictory arguments are made by Khan and Morrow (1991) who found no significant relationship between job satisfaction and overeducation. Explanations for this are twofold. First, employees can possess surplus schooling relative to job requirements and not feel overeducated because education obtained may not be directly related to the job field. This conjecture is supported by Solomon et al. (1981) who found that one's job does not have to be related to one's college major in order to feel that one's skills are being adequately utilized. Second, for some workers, university educations secured in the past may have lost relevance over time.

**Effects of underemployment on future career patterns.** For university graduates, underemployment has been shown to affect longterm employment patterns. For instance, Richards (1984a) found that graduates' occupational positions the year after completing
their degrees were highly correlated with occupational outcomes two years later. Some of her participants remained stranded in dead-end jobs, resigned to their situations. Job dissatisfaction associated with overeducation was shown to have dissipated with time due to changing work values, a reduction in cognitive dissonance, and reconcilement.

In contrast, B. Burris (1983) found that underemployment led to more emphasis on future aspirations, such as plans to return to graduate school. In Borgen et al.'s (1988) study, some underemployed graduates went through a renewal period and developed new priorities, seeking ways to redefine their situations. Their emotions oscillated from initial disillusionment, to a high feeling after obtaining a job, to despair and resignation, followed by renewed hope for the future. These findings mesh nicely with Feather and O'Brien's (1986) study of underemployment, which depicted an emotional roller coaster comparable in its impact and stages to Kubler-Ross's (1969) grief and loss model. Denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance were evident psychological stages.

**Linking emotional stability to underemployment.** In contrast to the findings presented by Borgen et al. (1988), V. Burris (1983) found that the most probable outcome of overeducation is not a new zest for living, but the continued privatization of discontent, leading to self-blame and low self-esteem. Loss of goal attainment and an inability to define oneself in terms of work, may lead to identity problems and depression, which can result in suicide (Stack, 1982). Indeed, 67% of Borgen et al.'s male participants reported incidents of depression severe enough to interfere with daily living; one instance of suicide ideation was also noted.

Other studies have supported the notion that underemployment may result in a deterioration in mental health (Gardell, 1982; Ickovics, 1990; Jones-Johnson & Johnson, 1992; Rumberger, 1984). Rumberger's (1984) synthesis article has shown that underemployed workers exhibit poor mental health as compared to their appropriately employed counterparts. Jones-Johnson and Johnson have offered collaborating data, linking qualitative work underload to a deterioration in mental health. Their study
revealed a significant positive relationship between subjective underemployment and five indices of psychosocial stress: psychosomatic stress, frustration, depression, hostility, and insecurity. The more underemployed a person felt, the greater the manifestation of these symptoms. Their sample was composed primarily of white males (67%) and was based in the United States. Localized, more heterogeneous samples using an in-depth qualitative design may validate their claims.

With the latter in mind, B. Burris (1983) conducted a qualitative analysis of the more subtle and unanticipated consequences of underemployment at the microsocial level, linking it to lowered self-esteem and psychosomatic malaise. Her study revealed the human implications of underemployment, which included blocked creativity and individualism, a lack of learning, and stunted emotional growth. She also found that increased educational attainment that fails to result in occupational advancement often results in blame being placed on the individual: He or she is deemed, by others, to have irrationally wasted resources and educational opportunities.

With respect to women, specifically, one study suggested that underemployment has adverse consequences on both emotional well-being and physical health (Ickovics, 1990). Ickovics studied women who were forced to accept inadequate employment because of their husbands' work relocations. She found that mental and physical health were affected by involuntary underemployment. As the author noted, the adequacy of employment should be examined as an intervening variable when work has been an important predictor of women's well-being and health. More research is needed to determine whether the effects of underemployment differ for women who are involuntarily forced into it, versus those who view it as an acceptable compromise during parenting years and beyond.

The studies cited in this latter section share a common theme: the relationship between jobs and mental health problems are a result of both external effects and internal dysfunctions. Berg and Hughes (1979) emphasized that each person experiences
underemployment differently; mental health outcomes will vary, precipitated by sociogenic and eugenic (within the individual) factors. According to Herr (1992), those overwhelmed tend to blame themselves for circumstances beyond their control, instead of considering external obstacles. "Personal adjustment and work adjustment exist in a symbiotic relationship. The workplace becomes an environment in which both positive and negative, healthy and unhealthy, and good and bad outcomes are stimulated" (Herr, p. 285).

**Chapter Summary**

In summary, the review of literature has revealed the complex nature of underemployment. Several definitions were explored, but overeducation was the decided focus for this study. The extent of underemployment among university graduates was discussed. Based on statistical data, it has been a longterm, widespread phenomenon that shows no signs of decreasing. As the economy worsens, it is likely that university graduates will face this crisis in ever increasing numbers. Causes and potential psychological consequences were also offered.

Because this study focused on female university graduates, special attention was given to women's issues. In addition to an oversupply of educated labour and labour market changes, marriage, childbirth, and motherhood make women more susceptible to underemployment. What has been insufficiently addressed is whether women and men experience underemployment differently and what those differences are. As well, when female university graduates are compared to each other, are there within group differences that depend on personal circumstances and situations? For example, do women who view underemployment as an acceptable compromise (e.g., to accommodate childrearing responsibilities) experience underemployment differently from those who are forced in to it because of the economic situation?

A careful review of the literature has shown that little research has examined the actual experience of underemployment in terms of overeducation. Even less is known
about how women experience it. The experience of female university graduates has been the least researched area of all, providing justification for this study and the particular methodology chosen.
CHAPTER III

Methodology

In this chapter, the following have been addressed: (a) the methodological design (the phenomenological approach), (b) researcher's explanations (assumptions, definitions, operationalizing underemployment), (c) study setting, (d) study participants, (g) data collection and (h) analysis procedures.

Design

To investigate the experience of underemployment, a qualitative approach was used, which provided a detailed account of the phenomenon, from the unique perspective of the participants. Clearly, this topic did not lend itself to quantitative techniques which often ignore the richness of human reality that can be revealed by small sample, in-depth, qualitative strategies. The goal of this study was to understand the experience of underemployment in its perceived immediacy instead of explaining, predicting, or controlling it, as per a quantitative design. An inductive research strategy was required, rather than approaching the topic with a predetermined hypothesis. As such, "what" was asked, instead of "why."

From the qualitative perspective, the logic of natural language is the preferred form for understanding human affairs. Verbal descriptions (such as unstructured interviews) are used for its data and results are usually presented in a descriptive format (Polkinghorne, 1989). Such descriptive studies discover the essential attributes of phenomena, providing close, thorough, neutral accounts of the topics under investigation.

The Phenomenological Approach

Phenomenological research, which is both qualitative and descriptive, allows for the comprehension of a phenomenon as it is lived, existentially, behaviourally, and reflectively (Fischer, 1979). Phenomenological methods are devised to investigate everyday human experience. The term experience has several synonyms, including "[to] undergo, sustain, suffer, brave, encounter, go through, bear, endure, feel, apperceive, and
sense" (Lewis, 1976, p. 146). Everyday human experience, which involves thoughts, feelings, and actions, is considered to be a union of the individual and his or her unique world. In exploring this "lebenswelt" (or "life-world"), phenomenologists search for the meaning that presents itself in experience (Lee, 1989), that is, what is the person perceiving and how does he or she make sense of that experience? This involves the explication of "the structures that produce a common appearance and similar characteristics to each person's experience" of a phenomenon (Polkinghorne, 1989, p. 51). In doing so, three steps are followed: (a) gathering a number of naive descriptions from people who are having or have had the experience under investigation. These unbridled descriptions reflect the personal realities of those interviewed (Smith, 1989); (b) engaging in a process of analyzing these descriptions, to understand the constituents or commonalities that make the experience what it is; and (c) producing a research report that gives an accurate, clear, and articulate description of the experience. After reading the report, the reader should have "a deeper and clearer understanding of what it is like for someone to experience something" (Polkinghorne, p. 58).

**Characteristics of the phenomenological approach.** The phenomenological approach has eight vital characteristics, as described by Giorgi (1975a): (a) "Fidelity to the phenomenon as it is lived" (Giorgi, p. 99). The subject and researcher provide a double context for research. What is studied is understood within the lived context of the one in the experience and perceived and understood also by the researcher; (b) primacy of the life world by being true to the everyday experience as it is lived, prior to explanations and theoretical interpretations; (c) a descriptive approach, using the power of language for communication; (d) the expression of a situation from the subject's viewpoint, being sensitive to the individual's own interpretations of the experience. Data collected includes the subject's context and specific expressions, viewing the phenomenon from the "inside"; (e) biographical emphasis, formulating key terms by dialoguing with the data. Initial data for human subjects is, of course, biographical and
personal, and in that vein, all descriptions are understood in terms of the biography or history of the individual; (f) an engaged researcher who admits, as explicitly as possible, any existing presuppositions; (g) a search for meaning by interrogating the qualitative aspects of the phenomenon; and (h) using the situation as a unit of research, which implies a structural approach. A holistic stance is taken in that no factor is considered independently of the total context. The relative weights of the emerging meaning units are assessed in terms of temporal and lateral relationships. Here, the lived situation is the basic unit of research and significant factors are the meanings attributed to that situation by the subject and the researcher.

With respect to this study, phenomenology was an appropriate methodological choice: (a) A contextualized experience was examined, specifically, female university graduates' experience of underemployment; (b) the researcher was interested in how this experience was meaningful to the women interviewed; and (c) the experience could be systematically described, as it was differentiated and structured rather than indistinct or chaotic in nature.

Researcher's Explanations

Since bias cannot be completely removed, phenomenologists strive for "presuppositionless description" (Giorgi, 1975a, p. 101). Any description of human experience cannot be completely free of preconceptions, but bracketing assumptions allows for a detached viewpoint from which to explore the data. Stating presuppositions as explicitly as possible, up front and openly, will delineate particular beliefs, attitudes, prejudices, hunches, and hypotheses regarding the topic, so that a fresh perspective can be adopted. This prescientific step attempts to ensure a rigorous starting point, "since no investigation can be better than its point of departure" (Giorgi, p. 84).

Researcher's Perspective and Personal Assumptions

The writer of this thesis was the primary researcher and data analyzer. So that the researcher's biases and their potential influences are more visible, it should be known that
the identification of this particular research problem stemmed from three sources. First, the researcher gained personal insight into this experience as she had been underemployed in the past. Her lived experience benefited this research in that "the knower had some fit with the thing to be known," sensitizing her to the phenomenon (Sandelowski, Davis, & Harris, 1989, p. 78). Second, for the past few years, the researcher observed fellow university graduates experience underemployment, noticing their thoughts, feelings, and actions. Third, having examined a similar thesis on men’s experiences of underemployment, the researcher believed that elucidating women's personal meanings of this phenomenon would be a valuable addition to the literature.

Personal experience and casual observations gave the researcher a logical premise upon which to base the problem. However, unwittingly imposing her own expectations on the study was a concern. To guard against such bias, before initiating the study, she engaged in a self-reflection process to enunciate personal assumptions regarding the topic (Fischer & Wertz, 1979; Polkinghorne, 1989). Based on her own experience, she outlined what she expected to learn from others which highlighted presuppositions that could have influenced the findings (see Appendix A). By bracketing these assumptions, she adopted a fresh perspective and was more open to experiences which differed from her own. In addition, recorded anticipations alerted her to possible themes of experience that required clarification when alluded to by participants. Later, she found that most of her own experiences and expectations for others had been confirmed. Only a few were modified.

Although the researcher made every effort to read each participant's description without prejudice (Giorgi, 1975a, 1975b, 1985), protocols were thematized from the perspective of the participants as understood by the researcher. Consequently, the researcher allowed certain kinds of meaning to emerge and another position with respect to this data could be adopted. Certainly, other investigators could look at the same raw data slightly differently, thereby modifying, contradicting, superseding, or expanding the
results (Giorgi, 1975b). However, by examining her own experience and carefully outlining personal assumptions, the researcher allowed others to adopt a similar context in order to validate her extractions. In this way, rigor and discipline were applied in that readers who adopt the same viewpoint as the researcher can "see what the researcher saw, whether or not he [or she] agrees with it" (Giorgi, 1975a, p. 96).

**Definitions of Terminology**

Defining technical terms is an integral part of the researcher's explanations. Already noted in the previous chapter, Literature Review, unless indicated otherwise, the term graduates refers to university graduates and the word college is made in reference to accredited, degree granting institutions (not junior, community, or technical colleges that only grant diplomas). Although low pay, scarce hours, and experiential overqualification may have been subsumed issues, underemployment has been defined in terms of overeducation. As such, the two terms have been used interchangeably. Participants in this study were considered underemployed if they possessed more formal education than required to perform the duties of jobs held at the time of the study (as determined by 1993 NOC skill levels) and if they felt overeducated for their work.

**Operationalizing Underemployment**

The objective and subjective components of the above definition were operationalized using two measures: (a) an objective measure, using 1993 NOC skill levels, and (b) a subjective measure, a self-assessment question used at the preselection screening stage to determine whether volunteers felt overeducated for their work.

**Objective underemployment: Using 1993 NOC skill levels.** Mentioned in the review of literature, the NOC classifies each occupation according to skill level, which is defined as the amount and type of education and training required to enter and perform the duties of an occupation, intended to reflect actual occupational entry requirements. In determining skill level, the complexity or difficulty of the tasks the worker performs and responsibilities typical of the occupation were considered, which reflect the
functional or performance requirements of the job.

Skill level categories are broad aggregates reflecting four commonly accepted entry routes for employment: (a) Jobs classified under skill level A require university degrees (Bachelor's, Master's, or post-graduate) and are called *professional occupations*; (b) jobs classified under skill level B require two to three years of post-secondary education at a community college or technical institute, two to four years of apprenticeship training, or three to four years of secondary school and more than two years of on-the-job training, training courses, or specific work experience. These occupations are called *technical, paraprofessional, and/or skilled*; (c) jobs classified under skill level C are referred to as *intermediate occupations*, which require one to four years of secondary school education or up to two years of on-the-job training, training courses, or specific work experience; and (d) *labouring and elemental occupations* are classified under skill level D and require up to two years of secondary school and short work demonstration or a period of on-the-job training.

The 1993 NOC uses a system of codes to identify occupations. Except for management positions (which none of the participants held), the second digit of each NOC code identifies the occupation as belonging to one of the four skill level categories. When the second digit is one, skill level A is indicated. When the second digit is two or three, skill level B is identified. Skill level C is represented by second digits four or five, and skill level D is indicated by a second digit of six. As an example, 6453 is the code for a waitress. The second digit indicates skill level category C, an intermediate occupation.

During the preselection screening stage, the 1993 NOC skill levels were consulted to determine whether participants were, indeed, objectively underemployed. Because all participants were university graduates, by virtue of the definition of objective underemployment used in this thesis, all necessarily possessed jobs at skill levels B, C, or D, which required less than a university degree for performance of duties. University
graduates who were employed in jobs at skill level A (coded with a second digit of one) did not possess more formal education than required to perform their work and were, therefore, excluded from participation.

**Establishing subjective underemployment.** To assess the subjective component of underemployment, potential participants were asked a self-assessment question at the preselection screening stage: "Do you feel underemployed in the sense that you are overeducated for all jobs presently held?" If they answered affirmatively, the subjective criterion was met.

Participants were not accepted unless they were both objectively and subjectively underemployed, as defined in this thesis. Ideally, both objective and subjective measures should validate one another (Myles & Fawcett, 1990). It is feasible, however, that some university graduates having jobs classified at skill level A may feel overeducated because their working environments are, somehow, unsatisfactory. In contrast, some university graduates work in jobs which are classified at skill levels B, C, or D, but do not, necessarily, feel overeducated for their work. Candidates in either situation were not included in this study, as either the objective or subjective component had not been met.

**Study Setting**

The setting for the study was the Lower-Mainland (Vancouver and surrounding suburbs) of the Province of British Columbia, Canada.

**Study Participants**

During this study, the researcher and participants worked collaboratively. As such, participants were considered co-researchers.

**Population**

Participants were drawn from a population of women who had last graduated from university with at least Bachelors' degrees in or between the years 1987 to 1992. They were both living and working (in underemployed positions as defined in this thesis) within the Lower-Mainland area of British Columbia.
Recruitment Procedures

Participation was voluntary. An opportunistic sample was gathered through referrals, personal contacts, networking, and active recruitment using posted advertisements (see Appendix B), which were placed in various locations: libraries, community centres, women's resource centres, the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA), fitness centres, employment centres, and career exploration group sites. Additional recruitment involved the use of a snowballing technique (Morse, 1986). Initial selected participants were encouraged to tell other knowledgeable informants about the study and distribute the advertisement. Once recruited, all volunteers were screened to determine eligibility for participation (see Data Collection).

Selection Procedures

Since statistical generalization (as defined in quantitative studies) was not the goal, participants were chosen according to the criteria of appropriateness and adequacy. Appropriateness refers to the degree in which the method of sampling fits the purpose of the study as determined by the question (Morse, 1986). The purpose of this study was to describe the structure of an experience, not to describe the characteristics of a group who have had the experience (Polkinghorne, 1989). As such, the researcher actively sought volunteers who (a) were underemployed at the time of the investigation, and (b) were able to function as useful informants by providing rich, full, and sensitive descriptions of their underemployment experiences (Polkinghorne, 1989).

The criterion of adequacy was determined by the quality, completeness, and amount of information contributed by the respondents. Adequacy was achieved by interviewing as many women as necessary, to ensure that a full and coherent understanding of the phenomenon was gained. The researcher stopped recruiting only after she experienced "redundancy [across] informants' descriptions" (Parse, Coyne, & Smith, 1985, p. 17). Ten participants were used, but a small number was justified; in phenomenological research, after a minimum threshold is reached, each additional interview produces
declining and marginally useful information (Finsterbusch, 1976; Gordon, 1975).

**Selection criteria.** Selection criteria fixed the boundaries of the investigation, reducing the scope of the study while increasing its manageability. Although Colaizzi (1973, 1978) insisted that "experience with the investigated topic and articulateness suffice as criteria for selecting subjects" (p. 58), some limitations were imposed to ensure that informants were describing their experiences with a common phenomenon. This point is particularly relevant with respect to criteria (g) and (h), below.

To be included in the study, participants had to meet the following criteria: (a) They had to be female; (b) they had to be university graduates with at least (but not restricted to) Bachelors' degrees; (c) throughout the study, each participant had to be objectively underemployed, possessing more formal education than required to perform the duties of all jobs held, whether paid or volunteer, full-time or part-time. Partially underemployed candidates (e.g., who also held part-time jobs commensurate with their levels of education) were excluded because of their "mixed" employment status. As noted, 1993 NOC skill levels were used to determine whether candidates were objectively underemployed; (d) they had to be subjectively underemployed, feeling overeducated for all jobs held at the time of the study, whether paid or volunteer, full-time or part-time. They had to answer affirmatively to the self-assessment question asked at the preselection screening stage: "Do you feel underemployed in the sense that you are overeducated for all jobs presently held?"; (e) at the time of the study, they had to be describing "in vivo" underemployment, a present and ongoing experience; (f) their jobs had to be their main source of vocational involvement. Waitressing, part-time, was not the main source of vocational involvement for one full-time Doctoral student who was excluded from participation; (g) to ensure that all participants were describing their unique experiences with a common phenomenon, the researcher decided that all informants had to have been graduated from university for a significant amount of time. It is possible that an underemployed female who graduated from university only one or
two years ago may experience a substantially different phenomenon than a woman who is experiencing underemployment several years post university graduation. As such, all women interviewed last graduated from university in or between the years 1987 and 1992, which represented an acceptable span of time and ensured the issue was more than just a novel one; (h) at the time of the study, they had to have been consistently underemployed for at least one year, to ensure the experience was a salient one and not just a brief, transitional phase. Phenomenological research requires that participants have experienced the phenomenon under investigation for a sufficient length of time, so they are able to reflect upon it (Colaizzi, 1973, 1978); (i) they had to be living and working in the Lower-Mainland area which ensured that meeting locations were convenient to both the researcher and co-researchers; and (j) they had to possess the ability to convey descriptions in an articulate manner, in the English language.

Within these limitations, a range of women were purposefully selected to guard against obtaining restricted, idiosyncratic data from a marginalized group. As Polkinghorne (1989) noted:

> The point of subject selection is to obtain richly varied descriptions . . . [so] the researcher needs to choose an array of individuals who provide a variety of specific experiences of the topic being explored. . . . The error that phenomenological researchers can make in selection is to choose subjects that produce a narrow range of descriptions. (p. 48)

Participants of varying age groups, with different educational backgrounds, who held a variety of jobs, and who represented an array of lifestyles and personal situations (married, single, with or without children) were selected. For example, the experience of a single working woman with no dependents was quite different from that of a married mother of a small child. It was beneficial to explore differences and similarities between the experiences of such informants, extracting common themes from women who represented a variety of situations. And as Ladd (1992) and Yin (1984) have shown,
external validity of findings increases when common factors can be extracted from vastly different experiences. Giorgi (1975a) would agree: the greater the variation, the better the ability to determine what is essential in their experiences.

**Characteristics of selected participants.** Table 1 summarizes relevant demographic data. Table 2 presents basic educational and occupational information. A more detailed biographical synopsis of each participant has been provided in the next chapter.

Table 1

Participants' Demographic Data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondent</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Marital Status</th>
<th>Children</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>C.</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>common-law</td>
<td>4 step-children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K.</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>involved</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A.</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>single</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J.</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>involved</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L.</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>married</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S.</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>divorced/single</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H.</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>single</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T.</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>single</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R.</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>divorced/single</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M.</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>married/separated</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table 2

Participants' Educational and Job Related Data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondent</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Year Graduated</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>1993 NOC Skill Level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>C.</td>
<td>BA</td>
<td>1989</td>
<td>child care worker*</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K.</td>
<td>BA</td>
<td>1991</td>
<td>receptionist registration clerk*</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A.</td>
<td>BA</td>
<td>1991</td>
<td>display advertising clerk</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>classified advertising clerk*</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J.</td>
<td>BA</td>
<td>1988</td>
<td>immigration officer*</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L.</td>
<td>BA</td>
<td>1987</td>
<td>library clerk*</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>network operator*</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>proofreader*</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S.</td>
<td>BA</td>
<td>1980</td>
<td>secretary*</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>MEd</td>
<td>1987</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H.</td>
<td>BA</td>
<td>1991</td>
<td>secretary*</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T.</td>
<td>BA</td>
<td>1992</td>
<td>office clerk</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>waitress</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>telephone survey clerk</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>group home worker</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>hostess*</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R.</td>
<td>BA</td>
<td>1988</td>
<td>administrative assistant*</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>MA</td>
<td>1991</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M.</td>
<td>BS</td>
<td>1982</td>
<td>community service worker*</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>MA</td>
<td>1987</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. BA = Bachelor of Arts; LLB = Bachelor of Laws; MEd = Master of Education; MA = Master of Arts; BS = Bachelor of Science. For each respondent, all occupations have been held since the most recent university graduation date. * = current position.
**Data Collection**

After the researcher recruited candidates using the strategies mentioned, those interested in participating were asked to contact her by phone, at which time the study's purpose was outlined: (a) to fulfill requirements for a Master of Arts degree at the University of British Columbia (UBC), and (b) to gain insight into the underemployment experience for female university graduates, extending existing research. If further interest was expressed, the selection criteria were used to screen candidates, so the researcher could ascertain whether they were suitable for participation. After assuring anonymity, confidentiality of information, and the right of refusal to answer the screening questions, some demographic data (such as age, ethnicity, marital status, and number of children) was collected. The researcher asked each candidate to outline occupational information, including the number of jobs she currently held, how long she had held them for, what their titles were, and whether they were paid or volunteer, full-time or part-time. Each was asked whether her job (or jobs) was her main source of vocational involvement. The researcher recorded what type and level of formal education the volunteer had attained, and where and when she had graduated from university. NOC (1993) skill levels were used to assess objective underemployment for all jobs held. To establish subjective underemployment, each candidate had to answer affirmatively to the self-assessment question: "Do you feel underemployed in the sense that you are overeducated for all jobs presently held?" Each was given an opportunity to ask questions. If she met all criteria and was willing to proceed, an explanatory letter (see Appendix C) was sent to her home, which clearly stated the purpose and nature of the study. The letter noted that participation would entail two audio-taped interviews, the first an initial discussion (lasting 60 minutes or more) which would be fully transcribed for analytical purposes, and the second, to check the accuracy of data extracted from the participant's particular account (approximately 60 minutes or less). Reviewing a list of common themes of experience that would emerge across the women's accounts would be
required, some time thereafter. The overall time commitment was estimated to be approximately three hours. Confidentiality of information was guaranteed. Participants were told that letter codes, rather than names, would be used to identify informants as all would be quoted verbatim in the results of the study. All identifying information (such as places of employment or obscure or idiosyncratic data) would be deleted from the results and published or unpublished material to preserve anonymity. In addition, all raw and sensitive data would be destroyed at the end of the project (viz., signed consent forms, co-researchers' phone numbers and addresses, audio-tapes, transcripts, and any related notes). Voluntary participation was emphasized. Participants were told they could (a) refuse to answer any questions, (b) request that the tape-recorder be turned off during interviews or that audio-tapes (or portions thereof) be erased, and (c) withdraw at any time without prejudice of any kind. Two weeks later, this letter was followed by a phone call initiated by the researcher, at which time confirmation of participation was requested and a date, time, and location was set for the first interview. To encourage a relaxing, comfortable atmosphere that would promote authentic discussion, it was suggested that interviews take place at a mutually agreed upon location. Most participants did not want to meet at their work sites, fearing repercussions from their employers. Interviewing at home was discouraged, for the safety of both parties involved and because an environment free of distractions was necessary. As such, interviewing rooms at a local university were used, because they were quiet, uninterrupted, confidential, and promoted serious, purposeful interaction.

**Phenomenological Interviews**

Phenomenological interviews were used to gather a set of naive descriptions, from which the researcher teased out the structures of the underemployment experience (Polkinghorne, 1989, p. 46). The researcher interviewed all informants in a face-to-face setting. Such personal contact gave her deeper insight into the fundamental features of the experience, facilitating the analysis stage. Each participant was interviewed twice,
the first to collect raw data by exploring her experience in a broad, general sense, and the second to clarify and validate data extracted from her account. To enhance reliability of results, the researcher's interactive style and data collection procedures were consistent across all participants. For example, all initial interviews followed the same format and style. Similarly, second interviews were conducted with the same in mind.

**Pilot Interview**

Because the interviewing method was the "backbone" of data collection, the researcher took great care to ensure the process was sound. Before proceeding, a pilot interview was conducted to validate the interviewing format (e.g., does the format fit the nature of the study and actually elicit the information sought by the researcher?). Although she met all selection criteria, the pilot informant's responses were not included in the analysis. To begin, the opening question was asked: "With respect to your current underemployment situation, what has been your underemployment experience? Begin with the time just before you felt underemployed, and continue to describe your experience (in terms of thoughts, feelings, and actions) to now." The interview progressed in an unstructured manner as discussed in the next subsection, First Interview. Upon completion, the respondent was asked for feedback to determine (a) if the opening question was confusing or difficult to answer in any way, (b) whether the researcher's comments skewed her responses (e.g., "Did you, at anytime, feel that you needed to adapt your answers because of my comments?"), (c) what her overall perception of the interview was, and (d) if she had any suggestions for facilitating the descriptive process.

In response to the first question, the informant expressed discomfort with the opening question, which she described as "too directive." Instead, she suggested that the researcher introduce a "framework" from which to respond, a more relaxed approach. Noting that underemployment can be defined a number of ways, she also urged the researcher to emphasize overeducation as the focal point of the study. Additionally, she found it difficult to focus, exclusively, on her "current experience," because it was
inextricably linked to past underemployment situations that warranted discussion.

Addressing the second question, the informant stated that she had not felt swayed during the interview. She did not have to adapt her answers because of the researcher's comments or questions and appreciated the use of active listening skills.

With respect to the third question, her perception of the interview was highly positive. She said, "I liked the open interviewing style, which allowed me to tell my story my own way, as it came to me, instead of being restricted to talking about one bit of information at a time."

In response to the final question, she had no suggestions for facilitating the descriptive process and said, "The interview worked really well. I felt I could direct the process and tell my story as I wished. You're going to get more from that unstructured style."

Conducting the pilot interview was a useful experience. Suggested modifications were implemented, adding dimensions to the interview that had been overlooked. The opening question was transformed into an orienting statement, overeducation was highlighted as the focus of the study, and "current experience" was deleted, which allowed participants to personally contextualize the experience rather than making it time contingent. The pilot interview allowed the researcher to become familiar with the interviewing process. During this "practice" session, she realized the importance of having a list of questions ready to prompt elaboration of topics already raised by participants. Although pilot responses were not included in the analysis, emergent themes of experience were an indication of what would be extracted from the real interviews. The pilot revealed a rich source of data from which themes of experience could be explicated, supporting the use of the phenomenological approach.

**First Interview**

Approximately one week in advance, the researcher contacted the participant to confirm the date, time, and location of the first interview. In preparation for the meeting, the informant was asked to reflect on her experience of being overeducated for her work.
The first interview began with a recapitulation of the purpose and nature of the study. Once again, confidentiality of information, voluntary participation, and the right to withdraw at anytime were emphasized. A consent form was presented and explained by the researcher (see Appendix D). The participant was given adequate time to read it thoroughly and any questions or concerns that arose were immediately addressed. It was dated and signed by both parties and a copy was given to the co-researcher for her own records. To protect privacy, a separate form was used to record co-researchers' phone numbers and addresses and filed in a different location. Each participant was given a letter code which was noted at the top of the consent form. The same letter code was used to label an empty audio-tape, to preserve anonymity. To gain authentic descriptions, the establishment of trust, rapport, and a climate of collaboration was considered a priority (Colaizzi, 1973, 1978; Osborne, 1990). After a sense of equality and respect had been built, the tape-recorder was turned on.

To begin the interview and focus the discussion, an orienting statement was read, ensuring the context of the study was consistently presented to each participant:

I'd like you to describe your experience with underemployment. By underemployment, I am referring to overeducation, although some have defined it in terms of low pay, scarce hours, or overqualification through work experience gained over time. However, I'd like you to talk about your experience of being overeducated for your work. Tell me as if it was a story with a beginning, middle, and an end. Begin with the time just before you felt underemployed and continue to describe your experience (in terms of thoughts, feelings, actions, and what you have done about the situation) to now.

In terms of style, the interview was minimally structured, open-ended, and flexible. Conceived of as a conversation, this discourse allowed for natural diversions and flow of discussion (Borg & Gall, 1989). Participants told their stories in a personally contextualized, self-reflective manner. This allowed them to relay personal meanings of
the experience and how they have made sense of it. Although free to direct the course of
the interview, it was important that participants described their own experiences with
underemployment, not their worldly depictions of the phenomenon. To help participants
move toward nontheoretical, experientially based descriptions, the researcher asked,
"What, specifically, did you experience?" or "What was it like for you?," instead of
"What happened?" or "Why?"

Elaboration was encouraged by using paraphrasing, reflection, clarification, linking,
and summarizing skills as required (Borgen & Amundson, 1984). Facilitating comments
(such as "Please go on . . .," "Can you tell me more?," or "Do you have anything else to
add?") and minimal encouragers (such as "Uh huh," "Yes," and "I see") were used to
promote discussion, elicit detail, and gain a thorough understanding of the participant's
responses and the reasons behind them. Active listening was used throughout, but if
confusion arose, the researcher's task was to gain clarity. In addition, when necessary,
she referred to a prepared list of questions (see Appendix E) to elicit additional
information or to encourage a participant who had "run out of steam" (Osborne, 1990, p.
84). These questions were only used if the topic had already been raised by the
participant. Time was taken to fully explain what was being asked. Before using such
probes, silence was employed as much as possible to allow participants full expression of
what seemed relevant to them (Gordon, 1975). The interviewing process was a temporal
one, in that descriptions often became richer and clearer in the latter portions.

Noteworthy, is that extreme care was taken to avoid interviewer bias. Giorgi (1985)
emphasized that participants should not be familiar with the researcher's theories or
biases; their descriptions should be naive. To avoid swaying the course of the dialogue, a
non-directive approach was used. Advanced empathy, leading questions or comments, or
summaries that directed conversation were never used. Because the experience had been
traumatic for some, compassion, gentleness, and reflective listening were necessary.

Generally, the first interview lasted 60 minutes or more, until the participant had
sufficient time to exhaust herself of the topic. After its completion, the participant was thanked and reminded that she would be contacted regarding the second interview. She was encouraged to record any additional thoughts and feelings regarding her experience and present them for discussion at that time. After interviewing all ten women in the same manner, the audio-tapes were fully transcribed and used in the analysis.

**Second Interview**

All ten participants were interviewed twice to ensure that a thorough, accurate account was obtained. A second interview was used to clarify and validate data extracted from each participant's transcribed account, ensuring it matched her particular reality. Approximately three weeks before the second interview, the researcher phoned each participant and reminded her of the follow-up session. Each was sent a copy of her own transcript, a biographical synopsis summarized from her description, and data extracted from her account. In an accompanying letter (see Appendix F) which included a set of instructions, she was asked to check them before the next meeting, noting any changes that were necessary. She was reminded to bring all of this information to the second interview so it could be discussed with the researcher. During the second interview, the transcript was checked for accuracy, making sure the first interview had been properly transcribed. In some cases, participants elaborated on certain aspects, so additions were made. The biographical synopsis was also verified to ensure it was a fitting representation. Next, the data analysis procedure was briefly explained, to illustrate how material was elicited. Attention was focused on the participant's central themes (from step three of the analysis procedure) and her transformed meaning units (from step four of the analysis procedure). See the next section, **Analysis Procedures: Interpretive Strategies**, for more information. She was asked to determine whether they were a true reflection of her particular experience, referring to her original transcript when necessary. At this time, the researcher checked for "goodness of fit" (Osborne, 1990, p. 87) by asking: "Does extracted data feel true or untrue to your experience?," "Does it convey the
essence of your particular story?" "Is there any significant aspect that is still missing?" "Have I added anything that should not be there?" "Are there any parts that need changing?" Each participant was invited to add, delete, or modify information which actually resulted in very few changes. These procedures increased validity by ensuring that omissions or false additions had not distorted data and that the outcome accurately reflected the experiences of those interviewed. The second set of interviews were audi-taped in case the researcher needed to refer to portions at a later time. Transcription was unnecessary since detailed notes were taken regarding any necessary revisions, which were included in the final results. With all participants, this interview lasted approximately 60 minutes (or less) and occurred within four to six months of the initial session. At the end of the interview, participants were thanked and informed that they would be contacted to review a list of common themes of experience that would emerge across the women's accounts. This list was later mailed to each participant, accompanied by a letter from the researcher (See Appendix G). For validation purposes, each was asked to examine the list and add, delete, or modify information to make it more accurate. The researcher later contacted each participant to discuss any revisions (see Chapter 4, Results, subsection Modifications to Extracted Data, for an overview of changes made) which were included in the final results. At the end of the study, each woman was sent a thank-you letter (see Appendix H) to notify her of its completion. If they had any post-study concerns, they were encouraged to contact the researcher at any time. All raw and sensitive data (viz., signed consent forms, co-researchers' phone numbers and addresses, audio-tapes, transcripts, and any related notes) were destroyed at the end of the project. Please note, data collection and analysis occurred concurrently.

Analysis Procedures: Interpretive Strategies

Although several analytical strategies could have been adopted, the researcher used Giorgi's method outlined in Duquesne Studies in Phenomenological Psychology (1975a, 1975b) and Phenomenology and Psychological Research (1985). He emphasized the
psychological perspective of his research and his interest in structures that are relevant for typical situations. Since all the women studied had experienced a common phenomenon, Giorgi's strategy fit well, indeed.

Depending on the phenomenon under investigation, Giorgi (1975a, 1975b, 1985) encouraged researchers to modify his steps and suggested that a flexible, free approach be adopted. And as Polkinghorne (1989) emphasized, "methods based on phenomenological principles function as general guidelines or outlines, and researchers are expected to develop plans of study especially suited to understanding the particular experiential phenomenon that is the object of their study" (p. 44). Although Giorgi did not include validation checks in his analysis, in this study, they were implemented to ensure the final outcome accurately represented the experiences of those interviewed.

**Analytical Steps**

Data collection and analysis occurred concurrently. Although some qualitative researchers use ethnographic computer programs to facilitate data analysis, the researcher personally analyzed all data. To ensure reliability of results, the following analytical steps and interpretive strategies were consistently used for each protocol:

1. After audio-taping the initial interview, the discussion was fully transcribed, and referred to as a protocol. To become familiar with the content of the protocol, it was read through several times to acquire a feeling for it and "get the sense of the whole" (Giorgi, 1975a, p. 87). As Giorgi (1985) affirmed, lengthy descriptions take multiple readings to obtain a good grasp of the content. Ten protocols were transcribed, so one can appreciate the quantity of data that had to be analyzed.

2. After deleting the researcher's comments, the protocol was divided into "natural meaning units," manageable units or blocks that seemed to express a self-contained meaning from a psychological perspective. These were "spontaneously perceived discriminations within the subject's description arrived at when the researcher [assumed] a psychological attitude toward the concrete description, and along with it, the set that
the text [was] an example of the phenomenon" being investigated (Giorgi, 1985, p. 11). The researcher simply recorded each time a sensitive transition in meaning for the participant was perceived (e.g., a change in subject matter or activities being described), resulting in a series of context-laden constituents. An open attitude was retained; the text was treated as a naive presentation of the experience. Care was taken to seek divisions that were naturally a part of the participant's own experience, versus those imposed by the expectations of the researcher's theoretical position (Polkinghorne, 1989). As such, the participant's language was not changed in any way.

3. The researcher then eliminated redundancies, but otherwise kept all meaning units (Giorgi, 1975b). Next, the central theme dominating each meaning unit was outlined. The researcher tried to express in an explicit way, the implicit psychological aspects of each meaning unit, and then wrote out a sentence in her own words that expressed this discovery (Polkinghorne, 1989). The meanings of constituents were clarified and elaborated by relating them to each other and to the sense of the whole (Giorgi, p. 74). These transformations were stated in a simple, concise fashion, in the third person, and retained the situated character of the subject's initial description. They constituted the "psychological equivalents of the meaning units of step two that were originally expressed in the subject's own words" and were the first transformation of data from the participant's words to the researcher's words (Polkinghorne, p. 54).

4. Using "reflection and imaginative variation" (Giorgi, 1985), the meanings of given constituents were transformed "from the everyday, naive language of the subject into the language of psychological science, insofar as [they were] revelatory of the phenomenon" under investigation (Giorgi, 1975b, p. 75). In other words, each meaning unit and its central theme was systematically interrogated in terms of the specific purpose of the study by asking, "What does this tell me about the experience of underemployment for female university graduates?" If there was nothing explicit about the topic under investigation in a given meaning unit, the researcher passed it over, leaving a blank for
this step. However, it is noted that all information relayed during the interview had some sort of significance and was salient to the whole.

The researcher double-checked these transformations against the original, naive description. At this time, the second interview was conducted to validate extractions. As noted earlier, the transcript was checked for accuracy and any elaborations were added. The biographical synopsis was then verified to ensure it was a fitting representation.

Attention was focused on the participant's central themes (from step three of the analysis) and transformed meaning units (from step four of the analysis). She was asked to determine whether they were a true reflection of her particular experience, referring to her original transcript when necessary. Each participant was invited to add, delete, or modify information which actually resulted in very few changes. All revisions were completed before moving on to the next step so that any changes or relevant new data that emerged during the second interview were worked in to the final research product.

After each protocol was analyzed as above, the following steps were conducted:

5. The insights achieved were tied together into a descriptive statement of essential, nonredundant psychological meanings (Giorgi, 1975a). Since multiple protocols were used and all participants were subsumed under one typology, Giorgi's instructions allowed the researcher to directly synthesize and integrate transformed meaning units from the various protocols in to a single general structural description (Polkinghorne, 1989). To accomplish this, from all the protocols, the aggregate transformed meaning units (from step four) were organized in to tentative groups based on similarity. Each group was referred to as a theme of experience. The labels for these themes of experience were formulated using the co-researchers' words, as much as possible. The researcher then identified common themes of experience that had emerged across the women's accounts, organizing them in to a tentative framework. Already noted, for validation purposes, this list was reviewed by participants who were invited to add, delete, or modify information, ensuring it accurately represented their experiences. Some
revisions occurred, as outlined in the next chapter. The thesis supervisor examined this
final list.

As stated, each common theme of experience consisted of a group of transformed
meaning units (from step four), which were woven in to a descriptive statement to
capture its fundamental features. Verbatim quotes, and, in some cases, entire meaning
units from participants' accounts were included to support the description of each
particular theme of experience. Presented together, these common themes of experience
(each explicated as such) constitute the general structural description of the experience of
underemployment for female university graduates.

6. This general structural description was then presented to a colleague (who had no
prior contact with the study) for validation purposes. This "confederate" was a graduated
Master of Arts student (from the Counselling Psychology Department at the University of
British Columbia), familiar with the phenomenological research method. After reading
through the general structural description, his task was to determine if each theme of
experience was actually supported by the researcher's description and participants'
accounts. Were explications representative of participants' comments? Were any
additions, omissions, or modifications necessary? His minor changes (outlined in the
subsection Modifications to Extracted Data, Chapter 4) were worked in to the final
version, which was then reviewed by the thesis supervisor who provided confirmation.
Besides validating data, this process of peer examination enhanced reliability.

To summarize, three basic stages of analysis were followed to move from raw
interview data to a general description of this experience: (a) Each protocol was divided
in to meaning units (step two), (b) these units were transformed by the researcher in to
meanings that were expressed in psychological (step three) and phenomenological (step
four) concepts, and (c) these aggregate transformations were tied together in to themes of
experience which were explicated at a general level of description (step five)
(Polkinghorne, 1989, p. 55). This report is presented in the next chapter, Results.
CHAPTER IV

Results

This chapter begins with a summary of each participant's underemployment experience. A review of how common themes of experience were formulated and presented is offered, including modifications made during validation procedures. The general structural description is provided, which consists of an explication of each theme of experience. A short summary concludes this chapter.

Summary of Each Participant's Experience

A brief synopsis of each participant's underemployment experience provides background information to contextualize the study. Prominent aspects of each account are highlighted, to familiarize the reader with each woman's unique contribution. When the stories are compared and contrasted, common areas of experiencing are evident within the range of situations. Each respondent has been given a letter code, to enhance readability without jeopardizing anonymity.

Case C.

At the time of the interview, C. was 30 years of age. Born and raised in Alberta, she lived and worked in the Vancouver lower-mainland area. A graduate of the University of Victoria, in 1989, she earned a Bachelor of Arts degree with a major in psychology. Since 1994, she had been employed as a child care worker for a local school district. The educational requirements for this position were far below what C. had obtained, but other opportunities were unavailable. According to the 1993 NOC, completion of a junior-college program in social work, counselling, or another social science discipline is usually required, but can be substituted by relevant work experience. Although her employers did not demand a degree, C. accepted the job aware that she would be underemployed. The salary was low, but it offered the financial stability she needed to provide for her family.

C. had been involved in a common-law relationship since 1992. She left a
lucrative position in Alberta to accommodate her partner's return to full-time studies at the University of British Columbia. The sole wage-earner, C. supported her partner and four step-sons (aged seven, nine, 13, and 14 at the time of the study). If she had been single, C. admitted she would have quit and conducted an in-depth job search. Because her family relied on her income, she felt trapped in underemployment. Having received career and educational counselling, her partner's vocational goals were well planned and practical. Although supportive, C. felt jealous that she had not received such assistance while at university.

For C., underemployment was very stressful. Frustrated with the repetition of duties, her job lacked challenge and responsibility. Underpaid and disrespected by school personnel, C. felt her position was at the bottom of the workplace hierarchy.

The stress of underemployment manifested itself at work and home. C. became unproductive, leaving work early and taking long coffee breaks to shorten her day. At home, she felt unmotivated and lethargic, unable to equally share the burden of parenting. Additionally, her relationship with her spouse suffered since C. demanded attention she might not have desired if her work was more stimulating.

To cope with underemployment, C. implemented her own ideas to make the job more interesting, such as creating treatment plans for her clients. In her spare time, she participated in sports and cultivated her garden. The search for more appropriate work had not been a fruitful venture. Consequently, C.'s career expectations drastically changed. Upon university graduation, C. desired a fulfilling career that would allow some vertical movement over time. Eventually, she believed she would never ascend the workplace "ladder," and resigned herself to accepting work there is a demand for, even if she dislikes it. Returning to school was an option, although she feared it might be a waste of time. She tried to place less emphasis on the importance of career and convinced herself that work was a source of income that enabled her to support her family and pursue extra-vocational goals. Generally, C. felt pessimistic about her
vocational future and considered underemployment to be an unwanted reality.

Case K.

K. was born and raised in Vancouver, where she resided and worked at the time of the study. When interviewed, she was 28 years old and single with no children, but she planned to marry her boyfriend of five years in the near future. K. graduated from the University of British Columbia (UBC) in 1991, where she earned a Bachelor of Arts degree, with a major in English. Three years later, she enrolled in a commercial appraisal diploma program, taking courses on a part-time basis after work.

Immediately following university graduation, K. took a short vacation abroad. Upon her return, oral surgery delayed her search for employment. Once she recovered, she looked for work, but quickly discovered that her skills were limited. Because she had some clerical experience, on a whim, she applied to a local university and was hired as a full-time receptionist. Although overeducated for the job (the 1993 NOC indicates that completion of secondary school is adequate; her employer demanded a high-school diploma and the ability to type 50 or more words-per-minute), she considered it a temporary position until she secured more appropriate work. However, she remained in the same department, eventually moving to a registration clerk position for which she was also overeducated. According to the NOC, completion of secondary school, some business administration courses, computer skills, and clerical experience are sufficient. K. disliked her work but received a good salary, excellent benefits, and some financial stability. Additional perks, such as extended vacations, overtime hours, and free university tuition also made the job bearable. She decided not to quit until she had completed her commercial appraisal diploma.

For K., underemployment was a negative experience. She had difficulty assimilating as most of her co-workers lacked a university education and she had trouble relating to them. Because her duties were completely unstimulating, K. feared her brain power was diminishing daily. In addition, she felt stigmatized by the job's stereotypes, especially
when people underestimated her knowledge and abilities. When she socialized with more successful friends, she resented having to justify her underemployment. Although her self-esteem suffered, she never felt she had failed. Rather, she blamed the economy and biased advancement practices for her plight. Within her organization, K. realized she would never escape underemployment. A unionized worker, her degree was overlooked; upward mobility was based on seniority rather than capability. Her applications for non-unionized, managerial positions had been discarded; internal, unionized candidates were never considered for such jobs. Instead, external applicants of her age and educational level were hired. Frustrated, K.'s resentment for workplace supervisors steadily increased. In general, she described her bosses as disrespectful, paternalistic, and condescending to clerical workers. Because the university reduced its staff, she was required to perform tasks she was not originally hired to do, such as making coffee or delivering mail. As a result, she held even more disdain for her managers, who seemed to enjoy comfortable jobs with high salaries, extended lunches, and catered parties.

Working as a receptionist and registration clerk made K. realize how important a role career played in her life. The experience of underemployment motivated her to complete her diploma and pursue a professional career in real-estate. Self-employment was also an option, an idea that was reinforced by her negative experiences working within a hierarchical environment. Understanding the obstacles she faced, her parents and siblings offered financial assistance, but K. was determined to create her own successes. Her boyfriend was highly supportive; his vocational progress gave her hope. Unlike the previous participant, she felt optimistic about her vocational future, despite the competitive job market. By revealing her story, K. hoped her contribution would normalize the experience for others.

Case A.

When she was interviewed, A. was 28 years old, single, and had no children. Raised and living in North Vancouver, she worked in Vancouver. A graduate of UBC, she
earned a Bachelor of Arts degree, majoring in political science. After her 1991 university graduation, she traveled alone for one year, which included a visit to Australia where she worked on boats. When she returned, she searched for a position that would complement her degree and offer vocational fulfillment. Frustrated by the weak job market, eventually, she accepted a job as a display advertising clerk with a community newspaper. After 1.5 years, a larger, provincial newspaper hired her as a classified advertising clerk, where she was still working at the time of the study. Neither position matched her educational level: according to the 1993 NOC, some sales experience is preferred, but only secondary school education is necessary. In fact, most of her co-workers had not graduated from high-school. However, she felt pressured to accept almost any job that would pay her rent, bills, and student loan.

A. had trouble socializing with co-workers; they had different interests and goals, so she found their conversation unstimulating. Her duties were also boring, lacking challenge and variety. Because she had no responsibility or sense of achievement, she was totally unmotivated. Working in a unionized environment did not inspire her. Her degree was irrelevant and none of her individual strengths were recognized; vertical advancement was based on seniority. Whenever she applied for work elsewhere, employers focused on her sales experience, assuming her interests and abilities were in that field. Ironically, she loathed sales but was being type-cast because of her underemployed work history. As a result, her job-search was unsuccessful and she felt stuck in underemployment.

Reflecting on her educational and career paths, A. regretted many of the decisions she had made. For example, she had always wanted to become a photo-journalist, but instead of transferring to Carlton's photo-journalism program, it was easier to remain in Vancouver and major in political science. She also felt she may have had more opportunities if she had first secured a trade and then pursued a university degree. In addition, she believed relevant volunteer experience would have made her a more
attractive candidate for various positions. Finally, when companies were recruiting university graduates, she ignored the process and traveled instead. When she returned to Canada, she found herself competing with people who had gained relevant work experience immediately following university graduation. As time passed, she feared permanent underemployment because her degree was becoming "stale."

During the first interview, A. discussed links between her underemployment experience and significant relationships. After she returned from traveling, she and her (now ex-) boyfriend shared an apartment. He could not appreciate why it was so difficult for her to find appropriate work. When she finally accepted an underemployed position, he did not understand its psychological effects. Her complaints about work were met with frustration and a lack of patience. From that point forward, they experienced constant conflict and, eventually, terminated the relationship. Her family was also disappointed with her lack of progress. A. had always been a good student and there was an expectation that she would have a prosperous career. Operating from an outdated perspective, her parents still believed a degree automatically translates in to vocational success. Consequently, she felt she had failed to meet their expectations.

In recent times, A. has felt quite depressed. She claimed she had no career identity and considered her job to be a source of income that contributed nothing positive to her life. Because high-school, university, and traveling were such a success, she wondered if she was to blame for her occupational situation. Laziness, weight gain, and a general disinterest in hobbies were constant problems. Feeling unhappy, lethargic, and out of control, she sought help from her family doctor who prescribed anti-depressant medication.

The experience of underemployment changed A.'s views about the progression of her career. Initially, she hoped to work for an organization and make a transition in to freelance projects. She has realized self-employment is her only chance for career satisfaction. For a fresh start, she planned to return to Australia, but felt pessimistic
about her chances of becoming a photo-journalist.

**Case J.**

J. was 31 years old, single, and had no children at the time the study was conducted. She was born in Manitoba and grew up in Saskatchewan, although she worked and resided in the lower-mainland of British Columbia. A graduate of McGill University, she earned a Bachelor of Arts degree with a major in English. After her 1988 graduation, she attended law school at UBC, completing her Bachelor of Laws degree in 1991. At the time, she was sick of school, disillusioned about the world, and unsure whether she wanted to practice law. Having worked as an immigration officer the summer before graduation, she decided to remain at Canada Customs and Immigration, rather than articling right away. Initially, she considered it a temporary solution for unemployment and could not resist the high wages, benefits, and extended holidays. Short-term contract extensions and the lure of overtime pay made it difficult to resign, although the atmosphere was tense. Clearly, she was overeducated for the position: her employer required only high school graduation, although the 1993 NOC indicates that a junior-college diploma and government training program are necessary.

Having to deal with disrespectful managers every shift, J. dreaded going to work. Resentful of her less educated superiors, she felt she could outperform them and believed they were threatened by academic employees. In what she perceived as a paternalistic environment, she loathed her bosses, who were very controlling. Sexism was also prevalent, for example, female officers were referred to as "girls" and advancement appeared to be easier for male employees.

Immigration work was highly formalized; most tasks, such as stamping passports, were routine and quickly become automatic. Consequently, J. was totally bored at work as there was no challenge or creativity involved. Like K., she feared she was losing brain cells. Unmotivated, she never performed beyond the call of duty which made her question her worth as an employee. Self-doubt surfaced: She wondered if she was
competent enough to do other jobs.

For J., a negative working environment and unstimulating duties affected both her psychological and physical well-being. Initially, she went through a "wild phase" that included partying until late hours of the night. During her interviews, she described herself as miserable, both at work and home. When she contemplated her future, she feared permanent underemployment and was overwhelmed by self-doubt and a lack of confidence. Embarrassed by her position, she felt she had failed in comparison to more successful friends. She described her career as "out of control." Physical effects of depression included severe headaches, mild nausea, and lethargy. Because she had no energy or motivation, she stopped her exercise routine and gained a considerable amount of weight.

Like A., J. felt underemployment contributed to the break-up of a former relationship. J. shared an apartment with her (now ex-) boyfriend. Instead of offering sympathy when she complained about work, he told her to stop whining. As she became more discontented over time, he witnessed her self-esteem plummet and her attitude change from positive to negative. Eventually, they moved into separate apartments and, shortly thereafter, terminated the relationship. At the time of the study, J. had been dating a new man for approximately one year; they did not live together, which made it easier to avoid burdening him with her vocational concerns.

At the end of the second interview, J. described herself as having a source of income, but no career identity. She has looked for other work, but employers focused on her years with Canada Customs and Immigration. Although she feared being "pigeon-holed," ironically, her experience as an immigration officer may help her secure an articling position, as she is determined to pass the bar. She has also considered returning to school to do a Master's degree in immigration law. Self-employment as an immigration consultant is also an option. Whatever she chooses to do, she has become optimistic about what her future holds. The experience of underemployment has become a catalyst
for positive change. J. hoped her contribution to the study will educate others about the experience of underemployment.

**Case L.**

When interviewed, L. was 38 years old, married, and had one child, a female toddler. She was born in Kamloops, but grew up in Seattle. She lived in Burnaby and worked in Vancouver. Several years after high school, she entered UBC as a mature, married student, graduating with a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1987. Majoring in economics, political science, and French, she had hoped to enter the foreign service and work abroad. Before graduating, she discovered that her husband would have problems obtaining visas. As they did not wish to live apart, she had to alter her career plans. Feeling lost, she applied for several jobs, but, like other participants, could find nothing suitable. Frustrated, she resumed working for a municipal library system, where she had worked part-time during her studies. Prior to completing her degree, she was already overeducated for her job as a library clerk. According to the 1993 NOC, a high-school diploma is required, although her employer demanded only typing skills. Shortly thereafter, a temporary job at a commercial wire-service became available. Lured by an attractive job advertisement, L. applied for the network operator/proofreader position. During her interview, the boss overlooked her degree and focused on her clerical experience; all he demanded was some typing and the ability to speak French. According to the NOC, network operators need a high-school diploma; computer courses are preferred. Proofreaders must also complete high-school; writing or journalism courses are usually required, along with some clerical or administrative experience. Relegated to low-level, clerical work, she quickly realized it was not as fascinating as the advertisement had promised. Although disappointed, she later accepted a permanent, part-time position (while retaining limited hours with the library system) because it offered decent wages and stable hours.

For the next few years, she continued to seek alternative employment with little
success. After volunteering for two years as a literacy tutor, she was, eventually, hired as an English as a Second Language (ESL) instructor. Unfortunately, this position lasted only four months due to funding cutbacks, so she resumed her jobs at the library and wire-service. Dissatisfied, she sought career and educational counselling from the university, but was turned away because she was no longer registered. Angry at the lack of support, she hired a private employment counsellor, which she found to be a waste of time.

In 1993, she became pregnant, at which time she put her vocational goals on hold. She believed potential employers would not be interested in her because she would have to take maternity leave after nine months. After her daughter was born, she returned to the wire-service because it offered benefits (such as medical and dental) and flexibility when her daughter was sick. Although it meant a demotion, she also accepted a job-share position within the library system, to accommodate her parenting role. Ironically, the mindless work suited L.'s first year of motherhood which demanded so much of her energy. Clearly, she made personal sacrifices to raise her child, but felt her daughter's needs for stability, time, and attention had to be taken into consideration.

Like other participants, both jobs bored L. Tasks were dull and repetitious. At the wire-service, she formed a social committee to enhance working conditions. For a short time, she published an employees' newsletter for the library system. Working in a patriarchal system was also frustrating. At the wire-service, network operators/proofreaders were devalued, although their duties were vital to the company's success. The workplace was stratified along gender lines. L. disliked her boss's sexist behaviour: he referred to female employees as "girls" and favoured males when advancements arose. Paternalism was also a problem as he was very controlling, constantly patronizing the women he supervised. L. resented her boss's authoritarian attitude, knowing she could out-perform him if she held his position.

The sheer monotony of tasks and tense environment at the wire-service affected
L.'s emotional and physical health. Approaching 40, she felt increasingly pressured by her age. She felt disappointed in her vocational accomplishments and regretted her lack of relevant work experience. Bitter that her degree was not being utilized, she felt her education was becoming irrelevant over time. She worried that potential employers would type-cast her as a clerical worker based on her underemployed work history. Lacking confidence, her self-image was poor. Rather than blaming external factors for her underemployment, L. internalized the problem and believed she had failed. She questioned why she was unable to break out of the clerical field, thinking there was something wrong with her networking abilities. Like other participants, she felt out of control and experienced bouts of depression. Physical manifestations included problems sleeping, stomach trouble, headaches, anxiety, and weight loss.

Underemployment not only made L. unhappy, it affected her relationship with her husband. She described him as very patient, but tired of her constant complaints about work. Having provided financial support while she completed her degree, he was also disappointed that it had not enhanced their economic situation. As a consequence, she felt extremely guilty about her occupational status. Little support was offered by her family members, who did not appreciate her difficulty in securing appropriate work.

After several years of underemployment, L. was still floundering and felt she had no career identity. Except for health benefits and flexible shifts, her jobs offered little compensation, financial, or otherwise. Returning to school was an option, but she was afraid it would yield minimal returns. Becoming a self-employed editor/proofreader was a tentative plan, but she would have to complete some computer courses first. L. claimed the experience of underemployment jaded her career expectations. In the past, she dreamed of having a successful, respected, professional job. However, she was now willing to place less emphasis on the importance of career. Feeling quite pessimistic about her vocational future, she maintained that even a minimally satisfying job would suffice.
Case S.

Also Caucasian, S. was 45 years of age, single (divorced), and had no children at the time of her interviews. She was born and raised in Ontario, but worked and lived in Vancouver. Interested in the career patterns of women, she was prompted to participate in the study. She obtained her first degree in 1980, a Bachelor of Arts with a major in anthropology, at York University. In 1987, she graduated from UBC with a Master of Education degree, specializing in educational psychology and special education. When she graduated, she encountered a dry job market and was unsure about opportunities for someone with her credentials. Lacking appropriate job search skills, S. felt shy about promoting herself to potential employers. Desperate for work and financially pressured, she lowered her expectations and sought secretarial work. Since the age of 18, she had worked in various clerical capacities, so she already possessed the necessary qualifications. Because her education far exceeded their requirements, many employers refused to hire her, believing she would be a transient employee. S. was caught: She could not secure a job that would complement her degrees, yet her education was being held against her. In 1988, she was finally offered a full-time secretarial job with a university publishing department. Clearly, she was overeducated for this job: her employer demanded only high-school graduation and some typing skills. According to the 1993 NOC, beyond high-school, a secretarial program or previous clerical experience is required. Despite underemployment, S. accepted this position because it offered a decent salary, benefits, stability, and upward mobility. During her interview, S. was promised advancement into an editorial position, which was later denied when the director was fired by the university. By 1989, S. was so frustrated, she took a leave of absence for six months. When she returned, she applied for several managerial openings. As noted by K., within the university hierarchy, unionized support workers are never moved in to management positions; external candidates are hired to fill supervisory positions. Angry that her education and experience had been overlooked, she felt trapped
in underemployment. At first, she used denial and rationalization strategies to cope. She refused to dwell on her situation and tried to convince herself that her degree was not being wasted because publishing is, after all, an educational field. Eventually, these strategies were replaced with a sense of failure; she blamed herself and questioned why she was unable to secure a professional position.

Beyond self-blame, the experience of underemployment had a limited effect on S.'s psychological well-being. Although minimal weight loss and anxiety were mentioned, in contrast to other participants, her reaction was less dramatic. For example, she disliked her lack of control within the office hierarchy, but did not feel out of control. Resentment of their less-educated bosses was of great concern to many participants. The fact that her boss did not hold a degree did not bother S.. However, she felt he was threatened by her schooling and she became annoyed when he minimized her educational qualifications. When strangers learned she was a secretary and automatically underestimated her abilities, S. got angry. In addition, some of her friends made derogatory comments about her employment status, casually referring to her as a "union lackey." When she compared herself to more successful peers who were academics and business owners, she wondered how her life would have been different if she had held a professional job. When asked about her family, she described them as unsupportive. Her parents thought she had wasted her time in school and frowned on her job. In fact, she had little contact with them because she found their opinions so distressing.

When she reflected on the past, S. deeply regretted her lack of career planning as she completed her studies. Like many students, she did not research job opportunities and requirements before undertaking her program. For example, she thought about working in a school system, but did not realize that a teaching certificate was required. As time passed, she found it increasingly difficult to break out of the secretarial slot. Like other participants, she felt type-cast as a clerical worker, based on her underemployed work history.
Having spent a decade stagnating in underemployment, when interviewed, S. was finally motivated to change her occupational status. She realized that she had put her vocational goals aside, just to earn an income. After evaluating her vocational options, she decided to leave British Columbia and move to Alberta, where she believed she would have greater success finding work that complements her education. She planned to stay within the publishing realm to retain a marginal income, but was considering self-employment as a freelance researcher. In general, she felt very optimistic about her future and looked forward to this fresh start.

**Case H.**

H. was 34 years old, single, and had no children when interviewed. Born and raised in Prince Edward Island, she resided in Vancouver, but worked throughout the lower-mainland. A graduate of Acadia University, she received her Bachelor of Arts degree in 1991. Intending to become a research writer, she majored in English. However, she did not engage in career planning and had no idea how to market acquired skills after she graduated. After expending little effort, eventually, she relied on her clerical skills and applied for a secretarial position with a temping agency. Although her employer required only high-school graduation and word-processing abilities, she accepted the job to meet financial needs. According to the 1993 NOC, H. was overeducated for her work: beyond high-school, a secretarial program or some previous clerical experience is required. She has been underemployed since that time, having remained with the same agency for over five years.

As a temporary employee, H. enjoyed her transient status as it allowed her to transcend "office politics." Having worked for numerous organizations, in general, she found managers to be disrespectful of support staff. She loathed being reprimanded for petty mistakes, especially by supervisors who had only completed high-school. When she encountered younger bosses, she felt pressured by her age, feeling she had made few accomplishments. In comparison to more successful friends, she felt totally inadequate.
Reflecting on her underemployment experience, H. described the losses she suffered. Before attending university, she worked as a stamp expert with Canada Post. Had she remained, eventually, she would have moved in to a senior position. Although she cherished her university experiences, her degree did not advance her vocational status. Expectations for a creative, challenging, fulfilling occupation were unmet. Besides feeling personally disappointed, her family was dissatisfied with her progress and offered little support, emotional or otherwise.

The second type of loss involved her career identity. Never having had the opportunity to demonstrate her capabilities, she felt type-cast, stigmatized by her job's stereotypes. Based on her position, the public often assumed she had no education and treated her with disrespect. As a result, she was embarrassed to reveal her occupation and wished she had a more professional image to portray. In contrast, she feared co-workers and supervisors were threatened by her degree, so she failed to mention it. Hesitant to discuss her job and highlight her degree, she had trouble defining who she was.

Third, she suffered a loss of confidence. Immediately after university graduation, she felt fantastic, bursting with pride. After working as a secretary for a few months, she became less self-assured and hesitant to market herself as a worthy employee.

Finally, H. linked underemployment to a loss of potential friends. Like other participants, she isolated herself from less educated co-workers as she did not share their interests. She argued that she would have more in common with colleagues if she was not underemployed, and as a result, would have a bigger social network.

Since she became underemployed, H. has felt trapped in a negative cycle. At first, she felt angry that her educational qualifications, experience, and hard work had not translated into vocational success. She felt cheated and became increasingly pessimistic. Suffering from bouts of depression, she lacked the energy necessary to engage in a comprehensive job search. Recently, however, she realized she must act positively
instead of react negatively to her situation. Rather than stagnating in underemployment, she evaluated her options and planned to become an ESL instructor. While attending night classes, she hoped to volunteer to gain practical experience. At the time of the study, she was highly motivated and felt very positive about her future. In closing, she remarked that her account might be of some significance to others experiencing the same phenomenon.

**Case T.**

The youngest participant, T. was 27 years of age, single, and had no children when the study was conducted. Born and raised in Ottawa, she lived and worked in Vancouver. In 1992, she graduated from McMaster University with a Bachelor of Arts degree, majoring in psychology. Rejected by the graduate school she had applied to, T. resumed work as a university office clerk, the same position she had held before graduating. After saving some money, she and a friend traveled abroad, eventually, settling in Ireland. Financially troubled, T. obtained a four month work permit and searched for employment. Finding nothing suitable, she finally accepted work as a waitress. Feeling degraded because her managers were younger, less educated, and highly patronizing, she quit after earning enough money to pay for her return fare to Canada. Instead of moving back to Ottawa, she resided in British Columbia, where she moved in with a friend and started looking for work. Feeling confident, she searched for jobs that required degrees. After two months, she was desperate and accepted work as a telephone survey clerk for a market research company. Barely surviving on the low wages, she quit and became a group home worker, which offered a minimal salary increase. Once again, T. was overeducated for the position: Although the 1993 NOC indicates that group home workers need to finish high-school and complete a related junior-college diploma, her employer had no specific requirements. Instead of utilizing the psychological expertise T. offered, her degree was ignored. Allowed to carry out only limited duties, T. joked that she was a "glorified baby-sitter." Until a brain damaged client was admitted, she was totally bored. Having
studied memory issues at university, she kept herself motivated by helping him develop his retention skills. Unfortunately, he was transferred to another institution and a woman requiring nursing care was admitted. Expected to assist with personal management (such as hygiene care), T. refused and quit, shortly thereafter. For approximately five months, she collected employment insurance and attended a job-club offered by the local employment centre. Unable to find suitable employment, she has been a restaurant hostess since that time.

T.'s emotional well-being was affected by this cycle of underemployment. Depressed, she was unmotivated, lethargic, and cried easily. At work, she had little patience and was easily annoyed. Like some, she blamed herself for her plight, doubting her worthiness as a job applicant. Attending graduate school, she believed, was her only chance for escaping underemployment.

Constant complaints about her situation put stress on her interpersonal relationships. Socializing with friends who held satisfying jobs or were enrolled in graduate school was difficult; she was humiliated by her job and made excuses for her situation. For emotional support, she relied on her parents. Proud of her educational achievements, they did not pressure her about her vocational status.

Realizing she had allowed her job to consume too much of her identity, she wished she could place less emphasis on the importance of her career. However, having no hobbies, she had no other way of defining herself. Extremely angry at the government and university system, she felt she was misled into expecting vocational success. Although she enjoyed university, she considered it a waste of time because her scholastic efforts remained unrewarded. Feeling regretful about her lack of career planning, she wished she had obtained highly specific, practical training that would have translated into a professional occupation. Having encountered so many blocks, she felt extremely pessimistic, fearing her future includes permanent underemployment. Moving back to Ireland was a tentative plan at the time of her second interview.
Case R.

When interviewed, R. was 43 years old and single (divorced). Born and raised in a small town in Manitoba, she lived in Vancouver with her only child (a teenaged son) and worked in the downtown core. After completing her Bachelor of Arts (majoring in international relations) in 1988, she searched for work but eventually returned to her former cashiering job. Frustrated with the lack of employment opportunities, she later obtained a Master of Arts in geography in 1991. Both degrees were completed at UBC. She then worked as a coordinator in a number of non-profit organizations. Because advancement was not possible, she quit her former job and took a six month holiday. After conducting a fruitless job search, she accepted an administrative assistant position with a non-profit women's organization where she has worked for two years. At the outset, both R. and her employer acknowledged that she was overeducated for the position. According to the 1993 NOC, beyond high-school, some administrative courses and word-processing skills are usually required. However, R. took the job because it offered financial stability and she was promised advancement to a managerial position. Six months after she was hired, a supervisory job was posted, but, as an internal candidate, R. was not permitted to apply simply because she had worked in the organization less than one year. Ironically, she was told she would have been hired for the position if she had had no affiliation with the organization.

Angry at their biased hiring and advancement practices, R. felt bitter about her employment status. Like T., she felt cheated because her degrees have not translated into vocational success. Led to believe that a liberal arts education would give her general, transferable skills, she found that the job market actually demanded highly specific training. Consequently, she felt regretful about her lack of educational and career planning which resulted in workplace dissatisfaction. Much of R.'s work was unchallenging and repetitious. For example, she performed clerical tasks such as word-processing, photocopying, formatting reports, and relieving the receptionist.
Occasionally, she was expected to assume managerial duties, such as serving on the housing committee, organizing facility tours, and writing research proposals. She felt disrespected because her expertise was utilized when convenient, but never compensated. Despite her credentials, managers did not consider her an equal because of her occupational status. Having worked in cooperative environments in the past, dealing with this hierarchical structure was an uncomfortable transition. Also frustrating, was the fact that she had held advanced positions at other agencies and knew that she could do a better job than her managers.

Underemployment affected R.‘s emotional and physical health. Often leaving work in tears, it was impossible for her to enjoy time off without fretting about negative incidents that occurred during the week. Depressed, she was physically and emotionally drained, had constant headaches, and suffered from insomnia. Because she was constantly devalued at work, her self-esteem rapidly diminished.

Although constant complaints about work affected her interpersonal relationships, R.‘s friends were extremely supportive. Divorced, her only family was her son who advised her to quit and find something more appropriate. R. felt guilty that she was unable to support him at the level to which he was accustomed. Feeling he had suffered because of her underemployed status, she questioned her worth as a care-giver.

Upon securing more appropriate work, R. planned to quit her job. Refusing to accept underemployed work, she has limited her search to jobs that complement her educational qualifications. In addition, she decided to complete a counselling certificate so she could work in women’s programming. Concerns about her age and the inflexible job-market have made her pessimistic about her vocational future.

Case M.

At the time of her interviews, M. was 40 years old, recently separated from her husband of 12 years, and a mother of an eight year old boy. Born and raised in the Philippines, she was the only member of a visible minority group. She lived in
Richmond with her son and worked at a nearby office. After obtaining a Bachelor of Science in business administration in 1982, she received her Master of Arts in international relations in 1987. Both degrees were granted by Ohio State University in the United States. Since that time, she earned a Teacher of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) instructional certificate and worked as a program coordinator for several non-profit agencies. After a period of unemployment in 1994, she searched for work, but could find nothing that would match her educational qualifications. Eventually, she accepted work as a community service worker in a government settlement office. According to the 1993 NOC, a related junior-college program is usually required, but may be substituted by work experience in a support capacity. Although overeducated, the job offered decent benefits, was close to her home, and accommodated the demands of child care.

Working within a bureaucratic organization was a frustrating experience for M. She described her work environment as highly paternalistic. Forced to answer to government officials, she was never allowed any creativity. Her educational qualifications were totally unrecognized and her expertise ignored. Although she had many skills to offer, she was forced to follow the job description which severely limited her duties. Overworked and underpaid, she had no decision making authority. In addition, office morale was very low: Downsizing rumours had been circulating and there was concern that settlement work would be totally phased out.

M. highlighted how her marriage had been negatively affected by underemployment. When they moved to Canada, both she and her husband were unable to find work that complemented their educations. The stress of underemployment exacerbated existing issues between them and, eventually, they separated. Had it not been for this additional tension, M. believed their problems could have been solved.

With respect to her son, M. sacrificed her vocational goals for his welfare. After he was born, she stayed home for a few years, which drastically affected her career path. As
he grew, she settled for work that was unfulfilling but would accommodate his care. Even recently, her job options have been restricted as she has to consider how her work affects his life.

Dissatisfied with her career, financially strapped, and upset about her marital problems, M. lost her enthusiasm; each day, she had to motivate herself to go forward. At work, her own issues were highlighted when she dealt with clients who were experiencing similar problems. Depression was a concern: Physical illness and lethargy surfaced. She sought counselling to address self-esteem issues and develop coping skills. Realizing her job could be eliminated at any time, she felt pressured to find alternate employment. After evaluating the market, her options seemed limited. Self-employment was a fantasy: She dreamed of operating her own non-profit program, but had no capital to start the project. Feeling pessimistic, she worried about Canadian employment trends which include part-time work, low pay, and no benefits. To increase her vocational opportunities, M. planned to move back to the United States.

**Formulation and Presentation of Results**

As noted by Giorgi (1985), the researcher has the freedom to express phenomenological findings in a variety of ways. A situated level of description remains more faithful to the particular situation of the concrete subject. In contrast, the general description departs from the specifics to communicate the most general meanings of the phenomenon, centering on those aspects of the experience that are transsituational (Giorgi 1975a, 1985). Although the resultant description does not claim to be of a universal structure, it possesses a general validity beyond the specific situation of each participant (Giorgi, 1975a; Polkinghorne, 1989). Some phenomenologists develop a separate general description of the situated structure for each protocol. However, these two levels do not serve the same function and both do not have to be obtained in the same study. The situated description has value in trying to understand the particular world of the subject, whereas general descriptions have nomothetic value in that they can
be related to other findings and with other phenomena in a more theoretical context (Giorgi, 1975a).

Since this topic is largely un researched, the researcher wanted to provide a full sweep of the meanings involved. Illustrating structures that were common to several women has enhanced theory by revealing the fundamental nature of this experience. Because the researcher began with multiple protocols and all participants could be subsumed under one typology, Giorgi (1975a) allowed that producing a general description for the situated structure for each protocol was not necessary (Polkinghorne, 1989, p.55). Instead (as discussed in the previous chapter in the section, Analysis Procedures: Interpretive Strategies), a single general structural description was produced, which consists of a number of explicated themes of experience that are common across participants’ accounts. The labels for these themes of experience were formulated using the co-researchers' words as much as possible. Verbatim quotes and, in some cases, entire meaning units from participants' accounts support the description of each theme of experience, highlighting what has been critical for each individual and the unique meanings they attach to their experiences. This report has captured the participants' naive descriptions in a clear and psychologically relevant manner (Giorgi, 1975b). In other words, implicit awareness of this complex phenomenon has become explicit formulated knowledge (Van Kaam, 1969).

Modifications to Extracted Data

At various stages of the analytical process, extracted data was scrutinized by the researcher, participants, the thesis supervisor, and an external colleague, resulting in modifications to the final report. Two points, in particular, resulted in revisions worthy of separate discussion: (a) when participants were asked to review the list of common themes of experience that had emerged across the women's accounts, and (b) when the general structural description was verified by the confederate.

Modifications to the list of common themes of experience. During the analysis, the
researcher identified common themes of experience that had emerged across participants' accounts, organizing them into a tentative framework. This list was reviewed by participants who were invited to add, delete, or modify each theme of experience, making them a more accurate representation of their experiences. Some revisions occurred, enhancing the validity of results.

Thirteen themes of experience and five subthemes were reduced to 10 and two, respectively, after suggested changes were incorporated. The Experience of Displacement was dropped because participants did not provide sufficient experiential data to support it. Two themes, The Experience of Self-Doubt and The Experience of Self-Blame, were combined into one theme, The Experience of Self-Doubt and Self-Blame. The women felt the two themes were so much a part of each other that they could not be separated. Similarly, The Experience of Regret and The Experience of Loss were woven into one theme, The Experience of Regret and Loss. The Experience of Embarrassment, originally a subtheme, was considered an extension of The Experience of a Lack of Career Identity and was woven within it. As one participant noted, "It's awkward to say I have no career, that I'm just a waitress. Being embarrassed about my job is an integral facet of my lack of career identity." The theme Channeling One's Energy had originally been subdivided into two subthemes, Vocational and Personal, to differentiate between vocationally oriented pursuits and personal tasks done outside of work. However, some participants argued that vocational activities are, necessarily, personal, so the researcher dropped the two subthemes and referred to "vocational" and "extra-vocational pursuits" within the overall theme.

Although the labels for the themes of experience were formulated using the participants' words as much as possible, some were modified to reflect their experiences more sharply. Feeling Limited at Work was changed to Feeling Unfulfilled at Work, which allowed for a broader interpretation. The theme Emotional Support was changed to A Need for Emotional Support which better captured the participants' desire for
emotional support from their social networks, whether or not it was forthcoming. Channeling Energy into Activities was shortened to Channeling One's Energy as several participants expressed discomfort with the word "activities." As one woman stated, "For me, the word 'activity' connotes physical performance, yet, I channeled my energy in a mental way, for example, by placing less emphasis on the importance of career."

After making suggested changes, the final list was confirmed by the thesis supervisor. The following common themes of experience (and subthemes) emerged:

1. Feeling Stuck in Underemployment.
2. Feeling Unfulfilled at Work.
4. The Experience of Self-Doubt and Self-Blame.
6. The Experience of Regret and Loss.
7. The Experience of Depression.
10. The Experience of Altered Career Expectations.

   Subtheme: The Experience of Pessimism and Hopelessness.
   Subtheme: The Experience of Optimism and Motivation.

**Modifications to the general structural description.** After making the above changes, the themes of experience were then explicated and presented as a general structural description. As noted in the previous chapter in the Analysis Procedures: Interpretive Strategies section, this written report was examined by an external colleague who made a few, minor revisions. For example, in the description of the theme Feeling Disrespected at Work, he changed the word "belittling" to "dehumanizing" to better capture the devastating effects of feeling disrespected. Additionally, he disapproved of the word "superiors" when referring to bosses, managerial, or supervisory
staff. This word was eliminated to prevent the implication that persons occupying such positions are, in some way, better than other staff members. After reading the description of the theme Channeling One's Energy, he agreed that vocational and extra-vocational pursuits adequately distinguished between vocationally oriented ventures and those unrelated to one's job. In general, he was highly impressed by the written report and was convinced of its authenticity. Commenting on the quotations which support the description of each theme of experience, he stated, "It seems as if participants could have said any of them!" He further stated, "Even though it is a compact overview of the experience, it manages to reveal all the necessary parts." His minor changes were worked into the final version which was reviewed by the thesis supervisor.

**General Structural Description**

During the initial interview session, each co-researcher typically responded by reflecting on her particular underemployment experience and discussing what events had occurred. The meaning of the situation was relayed in descriptions of how it had affected her life. Each spoke of how she had coped with its negative ramifications and disclosed her career plans and future outlook.

As the results will indicate, the underemployment experience is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon. Although presented in a linear fashion, the themes of experience are not placed in order of priority or frequency; no one, pair, or group can be set apart as more important. Each has significance, although some co-researchers emphasized certain aspects more than others since the depth of involvement with each theme of experience varies across the participants. In order to "single out and focus its meaning," each theme of experience had to be "temporarily suspended" (Claspell, 1984, p. 88). Although identified individually, they are actually interlaced, making little sense out of context with the others as they represent an ongoing process shared by participants. Overlapping in occurrence and duration, each theme of experience moves, flows, and meshes with the others, bringing the experience into fullness by interacting together.
This interconnection connotes a weaving of separate parts to complete a whole, a synergistic effect, or gestalt, in that the total experience is much more profound and meaningful than the sum total of all the parts (Lee, 1989).

Each common theme of experience is now described, supported by verbatim quotes and, in some cases, entire meaning units from participants' accounts. This constitutes the general structural description of the underemployment experience for female university graduates.

**Theme: Feeling Stuck in Underemployment**

All of the participants felt stuck in underemployment. The weak employment market forced them to accept and remain in jobs for which they were overeducated. Although most used modern, practical, and creative strategies for finding work, nothing suitable was available. T. described her search for a "real job":

Initially, I thought I'd apply for jobs that require a degree. I started out being specific, things that I thought were related to psychology. Then I realized it wasn't going to happen. I just started being more general, applying for things I didn't really want but I would take because of the pay. By a couple of months into it, I had taken on a part-time job at a market research company, just doing phone surveys. I kept looking for work, I networked, I 'cold-called,' I used all of the techniques they advocate in job-clubs, but nothing happened. Finally, I just took another underemployed job.

A. revealed a similar experience after she returned from traveling: "I wasn't lazy and I didn't just look in the classifieds. Everyone knew I needed a job. I phoned, I pounded the pavement. Eventually, a unionized job at a newspaper came up. I had nothing, so I took it." Only two participants admitted they lacked proper job searching skills. H. said, "I didn't make much of an effort to find a good job, I suppose. I looked in the newspaper, that sort of thing, but I didn't know how to network." S. felt uncomfortable about "selling [herself]" to potential employers: "I'm a shy sort of person. I don't like to blow my own horn. I guess I hoped that a great job would just fall in to my lap."
Financial pressure forced all of the women to accept underemployed work. Most considered underemployment to be a temporary solution for unemployment. If money had not been an issue, they would have remained unemployed and availed themselves of more lucrative opportunities. However, as their bank accounts depleted and bills mounted, most panicked and took what was available. T.'s comments were symbolic of this dynamic:

I would have rather been unemployed than underemployed, but I was in a lot of financial trouble, so I had to take what I could get. I wasn't interested in the job, I was just taking it because it paid slightly more than minimum wage. If I had money, I would have had more time and choice in the matter.

Informed her job would be phased out, M. applied for anything that would "put food on [her] table." S. also noted, "I was told by people I was interviewing with that I was way overeducated for the jobs I was applying for. But, I wanted to pay my rent." Although many received low wages, they were hesitant to quit, fearing unemployment. They felt lucky to be working: It was better to earn something rather than have no income. In contrast, high salaries, great hours, extended holidays, and excellent benefits made a few feel trapped. Although welcomed, such "perks" were difficult to abandon, given the uncertain job market. R. agonized over her decision to leave her job with a large, non-profit women's organization: "They had a great pension plan, which made me second guess my decision to leave." As a receptionist at the university, K. enjoyed long vacations, which allowed her to travel to various countries: "I'm scared to leave until I have something better lined-up. If I quit now, I'd probably only get some minimum wage job with no benefits." As an immigration officer, J. admitted that "the money is so good, it's hard to say no to extensions. There is a lot of overtime."

Some women accepted long-term underemployment to meet child care demands. Placing their vocational goals on hold to raise children, they felt trapped in underemployment for an indefinite time period. When L. discovered she was pregnant,
she decided to remain underemployed, fearing potential employers would not hire an expectant mother. "During an interview, how do you tell an employer that in nine months you'll have to take maternity leave? I had to put everything on the back burner."

As the sole provider for a family of six, C. felt trapped because of her obligations:

I feel like I have to do things other than for my own reasons. My family's welfare depends on my ability to get and keep a good job. If I didn't have these other obligations, I think I'd feel more free to do what I wanted, I wouldn't feel so stuck. I might have saved up some money and quit and looked for something really good. But, I can't do that because so many people depend on me. Or, if I worked for a bookstore or something for minimum wage, I'd probably be much happier, but I can't because we could not survive on that wage.

M. discussed the sacrifices she has made to raise her son:

When I look for work, I always have to think about my little boy and how it will work with him. Having a child, I really have to sacrifice what types of jobs I take. One of the reasons why I took this job was because of the nine to five schedule, daily. I can't just quit and take any job I like just because it's interesting to me. I have to make sure my schedule is compatible with his. For now, that means I have to be underemployed.

L. made a similar point:

Although I'll be demoted, I'm taking a job-share because it will give me stable hours. I'm going backwards but if I remained in a higher position, I'd be on-call and traveling around a lot. That poses difficulty with daycare, working evenings, emergency calls, and all of that. I don't see how I could possibly push my career ambitions now. It wouldn't be fair to my daughter. So, my career is on hold... once she doesn't need me as much, I can push on.

Whatever the reason for feeling stuck in underemployment, it always included frustration with workplace hierarchies. Powerless against the strength of management, participants were unable to broaden the scope of their duties. Disappointed that they
were relegated to lower positions, the women felt their talents were wasted. H. discussed her position as a secretary:

You're just pigeon-holed when you're a secretary. People have an idea of what you should be doing and that's all they want you to do. They limit you and you're not even allowed to have an opinion. You just have a lot more to offer and you don't even get a chance to offer it.

Supervisors overlooked participants' degrees, rather than utilizing available expertise. The women felt insulted that their efforts and achievements were ignored. For example, K.'s credentials were irrelevant: "It's really frustrating that my degree is not recognized. They make no distinction between me and the person next to me, who only has high school." As an administrative assistant, R. spent most of her time performing clerical tasks. On occasion, she was given more responsibility, but her education was largely unacknowledged. T. described herself as a "glorified baby-sitter," although her psychology degree could have been used more effectively while she was employed as a group home worker.

A few participants felt they had been denied equal consideration when applying for jobs within their organizations. With no chance of upward mobility, they felt "boxed in" and "stunted." For example, S. and R. accepted entry-level positions because they were promised advancement. Both applied for relevant openings, but were never promoted. R.'s remarks reveal bitterness at this situation:

I took this job with the idea that it was an entrance level position, a foot in the door. I was aware and my employer was aware that I was underemployed, but she promised me a managerial position as soon as something came up. Well, that didn't happen. I began to feel quite trapped. . . . I felt stuck, as if there was no hope for me in that organization.

T. complained of favouritism within her workplace hierarchy:

You don't get bumped up unless you're their favourite and there has been a lot of
sucking up going on, "butt kissing," excuse the expression, or if you flatter the right people. I never seem to have an opportunity because they create jobs for little miss so and so who is one of their favourites.

Some claimed they had been denied advancement to managerial or professional jobs because they already held internal positions. L. stated, "I've made no advancements because they hire from the outside. They hire people that don't have degrees in to more lucrative and responsible positions. I find this incredible!" The same dynamic was mentioned by unionized staff members, such as A., K., S., and J.. A. said, "Because I'm part of a union, vertical advancement is based on seniority. My degree is irrelevant." K. commented on her experience:

Once you work in this union, I feel that you're stigmatized. When you do apply for non-unionized, management-type jobs, you never get a chance. They'd rather hire someone from the outside, who's "fresh," who hasn't been tainted by the union.

A unionized secretary, S. claimed similar discrimination: "The administration doesn't allow unionized personnel to apply for professional positions. So, I can't move up within this organization. They're refusing to advance me, so I feel trapped. I have the education, yet they're taking someone from the outside." As a government worker, J. believed the better she performed as an immigration officer, the less chance she had for advancement: "They need good people at the lower ends too. They don't want the good, smart people to be downtown in an office building. They want them at the border where they are used." L. described unfair hiring and advancement practices, based on gender:

Because you're a woman and it's clerical work, you're just honed in. I am just considered one of the girls. Yet, I always see memos about male employees, saying they have degrees and advertising their advancements. The fellow I work under, he feels that women have a different sense of the world than men. I've gotten really cynical. I think that if I wasn't a woman, would they have looked at my clerical experience when they were hiring me? If I was a male, would it have been so
important, so relevant?

Unable to advance internally, several applied for external jobs but felt "type-cast" because of their underemployed work histories. Having been a secretary for several years, S. found it difficult to secure other work. Also a secretary, H. noted her difficulties escaping the "clerical label":

It's a really hard thing to get out of. It bugs me that other people can go out and land something, but I keep getting slotted in to clerical work. At the same time, I have to make a living and support myself. I have to use the skills that are marketable right now, which are secretarial.

L. also said, "I just seem to be continually stuck in a clerical rut. It's like I have a big sign on my head that says, 'I know the letters on a keyboard.'" A. raised similar concerns:

When I was looking for work, I was hired in to sales. Now, I've got years of sales experience. I hate sales. Whenever I try for more creative jobs, everybody says, "You've got great marks in school, you have a degree, but, look, you've got a sales background. We don't need somebody with that much sales." They assume that's what I'm interested in and what I want to do because that's where my experience is.

Even J. was afraid that when she articled, she would be "slotted into doing immigration law, because of [her] work experience."

For the reasons mentioned, all of the women felt as if they were trapped in a never ending cycle of underemployment. Living with self-imposed ultimatums was common. Several women told themselves, "If you don't leave soon, you're not going to." A few participants placed age-related deadlines on how much longer they would tolerate underemployment. For example, L. disclosed her fear of being underemployed at 40: "I'm absolutely terrified of getting older and still being underemployed. I cannot allow that to happen." Fear of complacency was another aspect of this theme. Participants felt concerned about losing the motivation to change their situations. As time passed, some worried that they would, eventually, accept underemployment as a necessary evil. T.
dreaded losing her "drive" to be vocationally successful:

I think there is so much in me and I have a lot of ambition, but I'm going nowhere.
What I'm afraid of is that I'm going to lose it . . . and I won't go anywhere, I'll just end up as a nothing, as if I'm going to lose my visions entirely. I've always been self-motivated, but now I don't know what to do.

A. felt that the longer she remained underemployed, "the harder it [would] be to find work which uses [her] degree. If you let it go on too long, it will probably destroy you. Then you'll wake up at 40 and be a very unhappy person."

Stagnating in underemployment, participants experienced a high level of workplace dissatisfaction, which was exacerbated by a lack of fulfillment generated by the duties they had to perform.

**Theme: Feeling Unfulfilled at Work**

All participants held jobs that required the repetition of mundane tasks, such as stamping passports, typing, or serving food. Consequently, they felt unfulfilled at work and consistently described themselves as "utterly bored" by their duties. As a community service worker in a government settlement office, for example, completing standardized forms and writing redundant reports consumed a large portion of M.'s time. Referring to her duties, A. noted, "Whether I'm there Tuesday or Friday, it's the exact same thing." A receptionist and then a registration clerk, K. mentioned how "completely dull" her work was and admitted "it is so easy, anybody could do it." L. claimed she could perform her jobs "with [her] eyes closed." J. also highlighted the "automatic nature" of her work as an immigration officer, where she could do most things "by rote." Frustration with a lack of variety was illustrated by C., a child care worker, employed by a local school district:

One of the greatest expectations is that you take this child out of the classroom for two hours. Well, I had ten kids, and there are only so many things you can do. Going to the park is a joy for a child, but doing that 20 times in 10 months is not fun for me.

For some participants, workplace boredom affected interpersonal relationships at home.
C. admitted to pressuring her partner for attention. T. also expected others to entertain her: "When I get home, I need to talk to people, to get out. I want them to amuse me because my work is so mindless."

The repetition of unchallenging tasks concerned many who worried about "losing brain cells" if they continued to be underemployed. As R. stated, "For me, to just do this krap over and over again . . . I feel like I'm losing brain cells if I do that for too long, you know." J., a former law student, highlighted the importance of intellectual stimulation: "After a short time on the job, I felt like my mind was turning to mush. Law school taught me to use my brain, but with this job, you don't really have to nor do supervisors want you to." After a while, she began to question her mental abilities:

What if I can't do things, what if my mind has completely turned itself off? I wonder if it can be used again because it has just been lying dormant for so long. I can see myself becoming slower or just not paying as much attention to detail. And that's pretty frightening when you're used to being the opposite way.

Realizing their knowledge and talents could be utilized in a more effective manner, the women felt extremely limited by their work. As C. explained, "The type of work I'm allowed to do is very limited, such as taking the kids to a park or going swimming. I could do so much more." Many participants felt they had been "targeted" by employers to remain in unchallenging work. For example, S. requested, but was denied, more interesting work: "I could have filled in more, but I was in the secretarial slot and that's where I remained. They didn't allow me to branch out." For women who had held supervisory positions in the past, this sense of restriction was particularly salient. As a community service worker, M. was forced to follow a very simple job description. Unable to use many transferable skills she had developed as a program coordinator for larger organizations, she disclosed her bitterness: "Most of what I do is limited to giving out information, referrals, doing translations, and interpretations. It's ridiculous because I have so much more to offer and it's going to waste." In the past, C. had held a job where
she "felt [she] had gone to school for a reason and was actually using what [she] had learned while at university," a dramatic contrast to her current experience of underemployment.

Feeling unfulfilled engendered a lack of motivation and productivity among participants. Any enthusiasm that was initially present, gradually disappeared. This transition was captured in M.'s comment about her dwindling motivation: "There's not that 'oomph' there that I used to have in the beginning, you know, that drive to do well on the job." Embarrassed by her lack of productivity, C. admitted, "I have started taking pretty long coffee breaks and I will just leave early if my work is done. I have no motivation to put in any extra effort." H. began to "condition" herself in to doing "what [she] had to do to get the job done and nothing more." J. evaluated her work performance: "I haven't been a good employee at this job. I have never taken it all that seriously. I don't really care. I know that I will never get fired because it's a government job." For many women, this lack of enthusiasm was not limited to work. For example, A. felt lazy at home: "I'm just not interested in the things I was before. Maybe, it's an extension of not being motivated to go to work when I get up in the morning."

For a few participants, feeling unfulfilled was somewhat dulled by compensations such as high wages, flexible shifts, vacation time, or excellent benefits. However, most women felt their work had no redeeming qualities, which made the experience unbearable. T. outlined her viewpoint: "If I had a job that I was unhappy at, but at least paid well, I would feel financially rewarded. But, right now I feel that it's dead at both sides . . . there's no intellectual challenge and no money." These sentiments were corroborated by L.'s claim that she gets "no compensation at work, not intellectually, not monetarily . . . nothing." For these women, work was described as a "waste of time" because it provided no fulfillment at all.

In addition to a lack of fulfillment, the experience of disrespect heightened levels of workplace dissatisfaction.
Theme: Feeling Disrespected at Work

All of the participants felt disrespected at work, which they found to be a dehumanizing experience. Stigmatized by their job titles, the women felt stereotyped by the general public. Those who worked in the sales and service industries were often mistreated by complete strangers. K. provided a relevant example: "Once, I answered the phone at work and someone said 'Hi, I'm calling about the ______ program. Do you know anything or are you just the receptionist?" S. also noted differential treatment: "As soon as people find out that I am a secretary, the way they interact with me changes, they're more patronizing. When they mistakenly think I'm an editor, they confer power and influence on me. There's a real difference." As a waitress, T. complained, "I'm treated like a nobody. But, if I was wearing a white jacket and had a stethoscope around my neck, I'd be treated with respect."

In addition, several women complained about their supervisors' biased attitudes. Participants sensed that their abilities were underestimated by managers. As a child care worker, C. felt her skills were devalued by school principals: "They have a low opinion of me because of my job title." Because she did not hold a managerial or professional position, R. felt her contributions were dismissed by top executives. An example was provided in the following excerpt from her protocol:

I was invited to join their advisory committee, not as an administrative assistant, but as a housing professional, because I have a lot of experience in that area. So, when we all sat down, I was asked to take minutes. And I said, "I would just like some clarification. Am I here to take minutes or am I a participant in this committee?" And they said, "Oh no, you're a participant, but we just need someone to take minutes and as that is your job anyway, you could take minutes." So, I took the minutes . . . I realized that because I was taking minutes, because I was identified that early in the meeting as having a dual role as a clerical person as well as a housing person, I wasn't taken seriously. And when the next meeting came up, I was not invited to go.
When they felt threatened by participants' university educations, supervisors would often react with hostility. A government employee, J. said, "If you have any sort of university degree, the supervisors feel threatened. They desperately want to think they're better than you, there is that chip on their shoulders about people who have more seniority." T. also commented, "People who have less skills than me, who are in jobs that have more responsibility . . . I have sensed a lot of hostility because of my education." Having worked in numerous settings as a temporary employee, H. refused to disclose her educational qualifications because "it does more harm than good . . . it challenges their authority, and then you pay for it later."

Participants frequently described their managers' behaviour as "inappropriate," "unacceptable," and "reprehensible." Paternalism was a problem, especially within unionized settings. In several cases, the women felt they were "treated like children," constantly "watched over" and "kept in place." Respondents complained of timed coffee breaks, having to request visits to the bathroom, and not being allowed to make phone calls during shifts. Many were chastised for petty mistakes, a degrading ordeal. As A. put it, "If I make the slightest error, the supervisors start screaming. I feel totally devalued when they do that." H. was punished for leaving two blank spaces on a typed page, instead of three. J. recalled a particularly insulting incident:

One time, my supervisor approached me about my stamping skills. Everyone has their own stamp. He made me stamp a whole page to get them straight. I just said, "Are you kidding? Do you think that when I have a good line-up of 100 or more people out the door that I'm going to care if my stamp is straight?"

Described as "difficult to swallow," such mistreatment created an antagonistic atmosphere and prompted negative reactions from participants. K. outlined her responses to paternalism:

There was one man on staff, he was a lawyer who wrote some course materials. He used to stand in front of the reception counter every morning and write down the
names of people who were late. I just felt like saying, "Don't you treat people like that." And then I would laugh because his ignorance floored me. Another time, a woman and I became friendly at work. One day we started talking because our desks are side-by-side. Anyway, this manager, he was only a few years older than me, he speaks to us individually about talking too much. I just wanted to scream at him, "What are we, in Kindergarten? What in the hell are you talking about?" Whenever I worked with him after that point, I didn't work as diligently as I could have.

R. relayed her handling of paternalism:

One of the managers hauled me into her office and chewed me out for half an hour because I refused to type something for her. But, I was adamant because she is supposed to be doing her own typing. She just wanted someone to boss around. She wanted someone subordinate to do her menial tasks. There's no recognition at all that we have any kind of equality. She considers me beneath her because of my position.

L. outlined her reaction to her boss's paternalistic behaviour:

After three years and a big battle, I finally got him to come around to the point where he acknowledged that I was a competent individual and I was completely capable of doing the job. I made it clear that he didn't have to remind me of things, as if I was a child.

The experience of sexism was also prevalent in the women's stories. Participants cited numerous examples of inappropriate comments made by their male supervisors. T. conveyed her disgust:

The male supervisors will make comments about how "juicy" a certain woman is or when a beautiful woman comes in to the restaurant, they will go out of their way to help her and joke about it afterwards. One of my supervisors says he prefers female staff to wear skirts, because we have a choice of uniform pants or a skirt.

At her workplace, J. noted that supervisors "refer to male officers as 'officers,' but the women are called 'girls.' It's, 'Well, that girl over there will help you.'" Feeling
undermined, some women confronted their managers to initiate change. L. commented on her efforts:

I kept trying to get them to refer to us as women, not girls, hoping this would make some kind of change. I would go out of my way and say, "I am not a girl." It would stress the hell out of me. I was continually getting stomach aches and everything. Others felt too intimidated to voice their concerns and tried to ignore such comments. However, all stated that sexism was not easily dismissed because it generated awkward feelings and contributed to overall workplace dissatisfaction.

Feeling "used" was another aspect of the theme of disrespect. Many women felt mistreated when they were expected to perform tasks absent in their job descriptions. T. recalled an incident that occurred while she was employed as a group home worker:

A client who required nursing care was admitted to the home. I'm not a nurse. I don't have a nursing background. And I left because of a very bad situation. They had expected me to perform personal care, hygiene, and so on. I had no clue how to deal with it. And my manager wasn't going to assist me. I had to leave.

Other participants were expected to "pick up the slack" when personnel left the organization. As K. related, "They try to pile all this krap on us. Like, we are already doing the 'pionesque' jobs but because they are trying to cut corners, if someone leaves, like the mailroom guy, they want us to share his duties." M. made a similar complaint: "One of my co-workers left, but he was never replaced. Instead, the rest of us had to take more clients without any compensation." Although she worked for a temping agency, H. complained about being overworked by various companies who treated her like a "work horse." Several women found it demeaning to run personal errands for their supervisors, for example, picking up dry-cleaning, booking dental appointments, or returning library books on a lunch break. In contrast, R. was asked to assume supervisory responsibilities which were beyond her position, but not her abilities. Although excited by the challenge, her extra efforts were never rewarded. For example, she was "lent" to another
department to work on a research proposal. As a consultant, she would have been paid 50 dollars an hour for such work; instead, she received her regular salary. When an international conference was planned, R. was asked to organize a tour of their facility, for which she was given no credit. Despite her performance, her requests to be advanced into a higher position were always denied.

Being treated disrespectfully by incompetent supervisors was especially painful for participants. L. noted, "It's just defeating to have these people dictate to me. And I'm correcting their grammatical mistakes . . . and I think, oh God, if I was in that job, I could do so much!" C. made a similar argument: "It's pretty infuriating knowing that I could do the director's job better than he can, yet I'm stuck in a job that isn't even considered important." R. was "floored" by her supervisor's computer illiteracy: "How can you supervise someone when you don't even know what kind of work they are doing?" At Canada Customs and Immigration, J. was appalled by her managers' lack of immigration knowledge. K. commented on her boss's general intelligence level: "She's a nice person, but we could be talking about something and I might quote a well known phrase from Shakespeare. It will just go right over her head. I feel like saying, 'Give me your job, we'll switch.'"

Resentful of such abuse, a lack of trust and cooperation was evident among participants. Contempt for managers emerged; anger was a typical reaction. As T. proclaimed, "I hate going to work because I hate the people I work under, how they treat me. I have grown really resentful. They have started to notice my 'screw-you' attitude. It's obvious I don't want to be there." K. reiterated these sentiments:

I was an angry person almost every day that I was at work. All I'd ever ask is some respect. I was really upset about a lot of things. You just want to yell, "Who the hell are you? F-you!" It gets to the point where you're just not willing to take any more of their bull-s__. You're not willing to take any more of their attitude. I've never had an argument or verbal altercation with anyone at work. I make an effort to get along, but
inside, I'm resenting a lot of them.

Several women regretted the energy they had wasted "resenting instead of venting." H. described her feelings: "It's a bad cycle to be in, a real waste of energy to come out of university and become negative, angry, and tired. You're not channeling your strength into anything positive." Besides being angry, constant scrutiny by unforgiving managers made many participants question their performance. Self-doubt and self-blame surfaced.

**Theme: The Experience of Self-Doubt and Self-Blame**

The experience of self-doubt and self-blame was mentioned by all participants. Both aspects stemmed from a notable decrease in confidence and self-esteem over the course of their underemployment. Immediately after completing their degrees, the women felt self-assured, ready to face the world. After being rejected by potential employers and having to accept underemployed work, they felt insecure as their confidence quickly dwindled. As H. stated, "I felt fantastic after finishing university. But, having to accept such a degrading position was really demeaning. My confidence went way down." J. reflected on her transition from university to the work force: "If I had articulated immediately after completing law school, I would feel stronger. Working as an immigration officer has reduced my confidence." L. similarly noted, "I think if I had really pushed in the first few months to find myself something else, maybe I would have retained a certain level of confidence after coming out of university."

For the women interviewed, career was a vital component of their self-images. Because they were unsuccessful in the employment market, they felt poorly about themselves and their self-esteem plummeted. Lacking pride in their work, phrases such as "I'm a pion, a nothing, a zero," "I feel worthless," and "I'm a big loser" were common. R. emphasized the dramatic effects underemployment has had on her self-esteem:

It's not worth it to underemploy yourself. Because I thought I'd be advanced, I turned down another job that, in retrospect, would have been better for me because it was at a level that complemented my education and experience. It wouldn't have done my
self-esteem so much harm. When I underemployed myself, I put myself in a position to be devalued. I won't do it again. I'd be very cautious.

L. also commented on the "devaluing process" when she said, "I stayed too long. And you begin to devalue your degree, the knowledge that you have, and what you are capable of. That all begins to slip away." S. declared, "I guess this is it. I guess this is all I can do. That's how you start to feel after a while." M. consulted a counsellor to address self-esteem issues and develop coping skills.

Lacking confidence and self-esteem, their self-concepts were negatively affected. Self-doubt was inevitable. J. noted, "Whether or not you realize it's happening, self-doubt is guaranteed. It's pretty horrible to start feeling that way." Some doubted their abilities to secure appropriate employment. "It's a mind set," stated T., "After a while, you just don't know if you can promote yourself anymore." H. questioned, "Can I even get another job? If I can, why have I been stuck here so long?" Reflecting on their performance in underemployed jobs, many questioned their worth as future employees. Like J., some doubted their competence: "I guess I question my abilities more than anything. Am I always going to be like this, an unworthy employee?" These comments were mimicked by C. who said, "Am I really a poor worker? If I like what I'm doing and I'm more challenged, then I would be a valuable asset, I hope."

Eventually, self-doubt led to self-blame. Some participants expressed anger that they had "allowed this to happen." Self-deprecation was evident among the women who felt at fault for their underemployment. They blamed themselves for failing to establish thriving careers and searched for personal flaws to explain their situations. S. demanded, "What's wrong with me? I want to know what I'm doing wrong." After years of clerical work, L. had returned to university to enhance her career: "There must be something wrong with me because I went back to university and I'm still stuck in this clerical stuff." For L., R., and H., the notion of failure was linked to age. L. commented, "I'm not doing anything with my life. I've wasted all these years. I'm almost 40 years old and I haven't
contributed to anything. I feel horrible about that." Ageism in the employment market was a concern for such women. At 43, R. worried about her ability to compete with younger women. L. tried to convince herself that she missed her chance at successful employment, "It's too late, isn't it? Employers are going to look at me, a middle-aged woman, starting out on a job. That begins to intimidate me." For H., the issue of age was especially annoying when she worked for younger managers:

I find that sometimes I'm just too old to be working for some people. You know, I might be working for someone younger than I am, and I start worrying about where I am in life. You think you should be at a more advanced point in your life, compared to that person. That takes away from the positive energy when you're constantly faced with stuff like that, it's so demeaning. It's discouraging and hard to transcend. That's why I do temp work because if I'm working for someone younger than me, I don't dwell on it, it's temporary, I can forget about it. If it was more permanent, I'd have to face it every day and that would just stick with me, because those issues are really strong, and I feel I have to just catch up now.

Some participants rationalized their sense of failure by claiming their career goals were "too high," "unrealistic," or "unreasonable." A. said, "Perhaps, I'm foolish to think I could become a successful photo-journalist, given the competition." K. placated herself by claiming her friends had been helped: "All of my successful friends have had someone open that first door for them. I've relied on myself." A few women held external factors accountable. C.'s awareness of the larger employment picture helped her cope with feelings of inadequacy: "One of my friends is the coffee-man for a large company. He has a degree too. So, I feel like it's not all me. The employment market is just really tough." Both R. and T. pointed to inflated or highly specific employment requirements to explain, in part, their underemployment. T. criticized the government for funding university programs that offer little hope of vocational success.

Whether they blamed themselves or held external factors accountable, the women
described themselves as lacking career identities, a common theme of experience.

**Theme: The Experience of a Lack of Career Identity**

All of the participants claimed they had jobs, but lacked careers. This distinction was captured in A.'s comments:

A career would be my passion. If I made it as a photographer, which is my passion, if I could link that to writing and could support myself doing what I really enjoy, that would be my identity. Right now, I have a job that gives me money, but it doesn't say anything about me.

Feeling as if part of their identities were missing, the women described themselves as "incomplete," "undefined," and "fragmented." As S. noted, "I'm a secretary, but that's not a source of identity for me. I have no special hobbies. I'm not an artist on the side, so who am I?" In comparison to vocationally successful peers, they felt especially inadequate. Although she lived in a nice house, had a new car, and had traveled all over the world, K. felt inferior because of her occupational status. Reflecting on her friends' accomplishments, J. reported the same experience: "They're climbing up the corporate ladder and are very happy. I'm not happy. I'm wasting my life. I start to feel like they're something great, but I'm nothing." H.'s self-esteem also suffered from contrasts she drew between her friends' vocational achievements and her own occupation: "Some of the people I went to school with, they're doing better than I am. I feel badly about myself because I haven't accomplished much since university graduation."

Clearly, socializing with friends who had promising careers was difficult. In addition, many participants could not relate to their less educated co-workers who often had "different outlooks on life." Unable to identify with such colleagues, the women variously described themselves as "unanchored," "ungrounded," and "out of place." H. commented, "I have nothing in common with the other secretaries, so I don't relate to what they're saying. I just don't fit in." A. wished she worked with educated people who shared her interests. This problem was further illustrated in an excerpt taken from her
When I was doing my degree, I used to talk to people, it used to be interesting. Now, people at work, all they talk about is the new cars they bought, they're going camping on the weekend, how much they drank two nights ago. Even the articles in the paper, they aren't interested in the political side of things, just what Madonna or some other celebrity has done this week. If I was on the third floor, the editorial department, it would be totally different. I'm sure you still talk about the light stuff, but at the same time, there's an article to be written, or there's something that has just come in over the news wire. There's something more there that you can talk about. I'd feel more alive.

T. also complained about her less educated co-workers' choice of conversation: "I don't want to be lowered by anybody not on my level. I don't mean to say that in a snobby way, but I just don't want my energy taken away by talking about laundry or kids." K. feared "being brought down" by her union colleagues who spent their coffee breaks "bitching" about work: "I'm not into that scene. The people I relate to best have also been to university. They're just on the same wave-length." Feeling disconnected, several women deliberately avoided such colleagues and failed to attend work-related social functions.

Besides isolating themselves from their less educated co-workers, the women refused to be associated with their work and loathed being defined in terms of their job titles. "What do you do for a living?" was a question that caused great angst. As M. noted, "People always think you are what you do. But, I always emphasize that I'm much more than that." C. made a similar comment: "They try to define me in terms of my work, but my work is only something I do so I can do other things, at least right now." A. elaborated:

When most people talk about their jobs, it's because it's what they like doing, it's what they're proud of. For me, it's not. If they want to know about what I enjoy doing, that's fine. But, if they're going to equate my work with my identity, I feel uncomfortable. My job is just something I do, it doesn't carry any great pride, it's a
source of income, it's what pays my rent.

Many feared stigmatization if they revealed their job titles to others. As H. stated, "If I say I'm a secretary, people assume I have no education and all I want to do is type or talk about junky stuff." J. experienced a similar uneasiness: "I never used to tell people I am an immigration officer because I didn't want to be categorized as a government worker. They have a reputation for being lazy." Embarrassed by their jobs, some women gave false impressions of their positions. Ashamed of her work, A. told people she worked in advertising, "which sounds more glamorous than, 'I'm a classified ad taker.' I don't lie, but I also don't give them all the information." To avoid being stereotyped by labels, others highlighted actual work duties, rather than providing specific job titles. As K. noted, "I'm trying to divorce myself from the clerical label because it's so demeaning. So, I just say I do the accounts, registration, and the programs, as opposed to, 'I'm a receptionist or registration clerk.'" To camouflage her underemployed work experience, R. composed a resume that highlighted skills she considered noteworthy: "I left out the 'typed or filed this and that.' I just noted the things that used my research and writing skills, which is what I'm trying to sell." Other women emphasized their extra-vocational achievements, such as volunteer experience or educational qualifications. J. said, "When people ask me what I do, I say I have a law degree, but I'm not using it right now." By focusing on their hobbies, some were able to redirect work oriented conversations. A. stated, "I'd rather discuss sailing. I've got my instructor's certificate, a commercial license, it's a passion of mine and I've been successful in it. If my job were something along those lines, I'd be happy to discuss it." C. said, "If I'm asked about myself, I talk about the other parts of my life, such as my interests in sports and gardening, rather than focusing on my job." Others simply refused to discuss their work. K. said, "Sometimes, I just don't want to talk about it. I don't want to get into it, because I'll just start complaining." In the follow-up interview, H. stated, "I avoid the whole topic now. It has become such a sore point for me that I just don't discuss my work with anyone."
The women who disclosed their job titles felt pressured to justify their occupational status. L. commented, "When I say I work at the library, people often say, 'You have a degree, what else do you do? You do do something else don't you?' In a subtle way, they're putting me down." H. said, "To say I'm a secretary, but I have all this education, people look for reasons why I'm underemployed." R. felt compelled to explain why she was in an entry-level position:

People wonder why I'm only an administrative assistant. They probably say, "This woman has an MA and she's only an assistant! Well, maybe she's stupid, maybe she drinks." So, I feel I have to immediately tell them of my circumstances, how I was unemployed, looking for work, unable to find anything.

K. made excuses for her occupational status: "I often say, I'm studying, I'm doing this, but after two years, I'll be doing something else.' I hate saying all that." T. always portrayed her job as temporary: "I tell people I'm working as a waitress, but then I say, 'I have plans to go do this and that.'" While they defended their situations, themes of regret and loss emerged as participants reflected on past choices and actions that affected their vocational status.

**Theme: The Experience of Regret and Loss**

All participants experienced some degree of regret and loss. Many lamented their lack of career planning. Some blamed themselves for their lack of foresight; others felt bitter about the lack of career and educational guidance available at university. C. wondered why program planning was not offered as she entered university. L. commented on the lack of assistance available as she graduated from a liberal arts program:

There didn't seem to be a lot of information. I found the university to be a big void, you know, there was no carry through on what you could do with a Bachelor of Arts degree. If you came out as something specific, like an engineer or a nurse, then there was lots of push and lots of information. But, if your degree was quite
varied, you had to fend for yourself. I went back to the university a couple of times and tried to talk to counsellors. I said, "This is my dilemma, now can you give me some ideas on how I can use my degree? Are there other areas that this could be relevant in?" They were just no help because I was no longer a student. It was, "Well, I'm sorry, maybe you could get an appointment with the department head." You don't want to talk to them. I'm very disappointed with the support from the university and I've been floundering really.

As they graduated from university, most participants felt unclear about their vocational futures. In hindsight, they felt this indecision made underemployment inevitable. After completing law school, J. felt "disillusioned about the world" and "wasn't even sure [she] wanted to be in law." M. "lost sight of how to use her degrees. There were lots of places to look back then, in different fields, but I was confused."

Without defining their career goals, others assumed that once they had completed their degrees, some type of employment would be available. Reflecting on her search for work, H. admitted, "I went in blindly. I had no definite plans, I just figured something would come up when I graduated." Others anticipated more specific careers, but failed to research job possibilities and necessary requirements. While completing her Master of Education degree, S. assumed she could work in the public school system: "It never occurred to me that I would have to have a teaching certificate to work in a school library."

Most women regretted their lack of relevant work experience since they last graduated from university. Many wished they had secured suitable employment immediately following the completion of their programs. T. outlined her dilemma: "I haven't been working in something that's related to my degree. I haven't gained useful experience. When opportunities come up, I'm at a complete disadvantage." K. said, "Even if I had volunteered, my chances would have been better. Today, you have to find a great job right away or get stuck." J. wished she had articed immediately after law school,
whether or not she intended to practice law. L. stated, "I should never have settled for underemployed work because I got stuck in a rut. I should have kept looking, no matter how long it took."

The experience of loss was common among participants. Although most enjoyed their university experiences, unmet career expectations generated feelings of disappointment concerning their degrees. For those who had been underemployed before graduating from university, it was especially disheartening to realize their academic efforts had not broken the cycle of overeducation. Reflecting on their educational paths, several women wished they had secured more practical training. Commenting on her post-secondary education, T. stated, "I wish my degree was more practical and that I would have come out with some title or specialization. I should have gone to BCIT [British Columbia Institute of Technology] first, so my skills would have been more marketable." A. regretted her decision to forego a journalism program at Carlton University: "There is a better mix of political science, photography, and writing there . . . it's a more skills-oriented program that would have helped me find work." Some women described their degrees as "a waste of time." H. left a stable job to attend university, hoping to increase her vocational opportunities:

I'm sorry I did that because I gave away a lot of my expertise when I left that job.

Now, I'm nothing. There I was somebody and could have moved up, eventually. So, I just feel a sense of loss about that.

T. had hoped her degree would improve her chances of vocational success: "I really thought getting a degree would open doors, but, it really didn't change anything. I'm sick of myself saying this, but it was a waste of time." M. expressed similar sentiments: "It has been frustrating because I think, why did I bother? If this is as good as it's going to get, why did I spend time educating myself?" A. noted, "I never actually thought the degree in itself would translate directly in to a job, but I had expected it to help a little bit more. The older I get, the less and less I feel my education was worthwhile." L. and her
husband had hoped that her degree would improve their financial status: "I feel terrible that it hasn't improved our situation. We expected that I would get a good job, that it would benefit our financial situation. Economically it hasn't paid off. We're no better off than before." Three women described themselves as "ripped off," claiming they were misled in to believing a university degree would enhance their careers. They felt extremely angry at an educational system that does not guarantee some level of vocational success upon the completion of studies. R.'s comments were especially indicative of this experience:

When I realized what my job options were after I finished university, I felt ripped off. Before I attended university to complete my BA, I was a cashier. I went to school with the idea that getting a degree would help me get out of this horrible, dead-end job. But, when I finally got my BA, I went right back to cashiering, at the same place, in fact, because I couldn't find work elsewhere. I did that for a while and became so frustrated that I went back to do my MA. And by the time I finished my M.A., I felt equally ripped off because now I'm in my forties, and I'm competing with women who are in their thirties for management level jobs. What was the point of doing all that work? It's frustrating. I feel like I got tricked in to doing it. I could have just gone to BCIT to do a very specific program, but I thought, no, a liberal arts degree will be much more useful. I was, in fact, led to believe that all of those skills would be transferable, that it would be the best route to take. So, here I have an MA and now employers want very specific, concrete, job related educations.

T. expressed similar sentiments:

I tried really hard over those four years. I struggled and did well . . . so where's my chance, my lucky break? It's very frustrating. This degree has not helped me in the least. I'll always have the degree, but . . . the universities, they pump you up, they tell you you're going places, that you're the cream of the crop. They sort of brainwash you in to believing that you're better because you're there. When you graduate, you expect
a good job. You feel you're too good to be a waitress, or whatever. They lied to me, it's not that big a deal. It's such a disappointment. And I'm angry at the government for keeping the myth alive by funding programs that don't lead to vocational success. Like, what is the point of doing a degree in philosophy, medieval studies, or anthropology? Unless you get something more specific and practical why bother? H. said, "I feel cheated in many ways. Somebody at work suggested I get a degree, because without it, I wouldn't be able to get anything, but that was a crock."

Several women felt their degrees were "losing significance" by becoming irrelevant over time. M. stated, "It becomes a time pressure thing. I have the education, but it's becoming dated. That's a shame." L.'s comments captured this concern:

Now that I'm so far from university, with each passing year, it just seems to mean less and less. Every time I compose a new resume, I'm reminded that I acquired my degree in 1987, which seems so long ago. Because I haven't been using it, it has become so irrelevant. Its practicality is fading. Sometimes, I feel uncomfortable listing it because it hasn't been of any use. Instead, all the other little things, the computer courses, typing, all the clerical krap, you know, is becoming more relevant because it is more current experience, what I've actually been doing.

Feelings of regret and loss may have contributed to varying levels of depression, an experience shared by all participants.

**Theme: The Experience of Depression**

Feeling stuck, unfulfilled, and disrespected at work, all participants experienced depression severe enough to interfere with daily functioning. Self-doubt and self-blame, a lack of career identity, and feelings of regret and loss may have exacerbated negative emotions. For L., K., R., and J., extreme frustration with their managers' disrespectful treatment of staff contributed to depressive symptoms. L. commented, "It's absolutely depressing to be treated so badly every shift." K. emphasized the negative environment she worked in, where every support staff member seemed to be unhappy with the
Multiple disappointments spurred T.'s depression: "It's been the job itself, my financial situation, and rejections from universities and jobs I've applied to." Several women said they "lacked control" and felt "helpless" because they were unable to determine the direction of their careers. "In turmoil," "confused," and "not knowing where to turn," were some of the phrases they used. A. commented on her attempts to regain control of her vocational path:

I can't seem to beat the system. No matter how hard I try to find a decent job, it's out of my hands. I'm at the mercy of employers and this viscous job market. Sometimes, I feel like I'm in prison and there's no way out. It's very depressing to realize that I have very little or no control over my job satisfaction.

Some women said office politics contributed to their lacking sense of control. For example, S. resented having to violate her morals because of something her boss had requested:

There's just a general lack of control. I have to do things because I am the secretary. I do not appreciate the office politics, with respect to ethical or moral judgments I must make. I have to decide whether or not I want to do something that I don't agree with. I've been asked to lie. This makes you feel trapped because they do have the power over you. Often, I refuse, but it's difficult.

M. experienced similar concerns when her employer demanded she obtain personal information from clients: "It's been very depressing lately, very hard to come to work. Although we don't agree with what they tell us to do, we have to do it or we don't get funding. There is really low morale in our office."

Whatever the source, depression manifested itself in various ways. Emotional turmoil was evident: The women described themselves as "generally miserable," "totally unhappy," and "devastated" by their situations. T. was constantly on the verge of tears: "The littlest thing happens and I burst in to tears. It's a bad state really." Physical symptoms also surfaced. Lethargy was experienced by almost all participants who
complained about "lacking energy," feeling "slow," or being "drained." At one point, H. had no energy to search for more appropriate employment. As C. put it, "I find it hard to get up in the morning. I have felt very worn down by the job." J. also stated, "It's all I can do to drag myself out of bed to get to the shift." Oversleeping was a problem for T. who said, "Now, I just sleep, I could just sleep all the time. I hate that, but I just have nothing to get up for." In contrast, R. experienced bouts of insomnia, "fretting about a particular incident at work." Physical illness was a common occurrence. L. and M. often experienced headaches, stomach aches, and flu-like symptoms. Mild nausea was mentioned by J.. Weight-gain was a problem highlighted by A. and J.. Both had been avid runners, but had lost interest in exercising. A. commented on her weight problem:

I was training for a triathlon when I was in university. But, in the last three years, I have probably put on about 40 pounds. I used to train everyday, no matter how many term papers I had. It was part of my routine to get up and train in the morning, eat healthy, you know. But now, I'm just not motivated to do it. I've probably been using food as an outlet for my stress. Eating has been my way of comforting myself, I guess.

Weight-loss was experienced by L. and S. whose appetites were affected by stress-related disorders such as nervousness, anxiety, and panic attacks.

To cope with depression, several women consulted their family physicians for medical advice; some were prescribed anti-depressant medication. Although stress-reduction groups were recommended, none of them participated in relaxation training. A few sought career and educational counselling, to no avail. Only M. engaged in personal counselling to work on self-esteem issues and develop coping skills. Others "vented to anyone who would listen." As R. noted, "I would go home really frustrated and talk to my son and boo hoo to him. I was not happy with my job so I found myself complaining about it a lot, which was tedious and tiresome." To release stress, J. socialized with friends, often partying late into the night. "At one point," she admitted, "I went through
a wild phase. I needed to release some tension." Turning to family and friends, the women relied on their social networks for emotional support.

**Theme: A Need for Emotional Support**

Whether or not they received it, all participants expected sympathy and encouragement from "significant others." Some women felt emotionally supported by their partners. L. described her husband as "patient, kind, and uncritical." K. appreciated her fiancé's reassuring comments:

If I'm down on myself, he says, "Give yourself a break. You're trying." He has never made me feel bad about it. He reminds me that there are people out there flipping burgers, people who go in to real-estate sales and it doesn't pan out. He just helps me put everything in to perspective.

This type of support seemed to ease the stress of underemployment. They felt they could express their concerns without judgment. Talking with their partners helped them debrief particularly bothersome incidents at work, thereby releasing stifled emotions.

In contrast, some women felt emotionally unsupported by their partners who seemed to discount the devastating psychological effects of underemployment. Failing to appreciate the depth of frustration involved, they did not offer the level of understanding desired by participants. J. commented on her ex-boyfriend's perspective: "All he saw was how I was becoming more negative over time. He didn't comprehend how hard it was for me to work in that type of environment." "Well, why don't you do something about it?" was a typical response to the women's complaints. M. declared, "You tell females your frustrations and they just understand that you're frustrated. I find men want to solve it and sometimes it's just not solvable. It just doesn't help when they say, 'Why don't you do this or that?'" A. was shocked when her ex-boyfriend once said, "What are you going to do? Just keep the damn job. I'm sure it can't be as bad as you're saying it is. I can't stand listening to this anymore!"

Several women complained that underemployment placed stress on their
relationships with partners. Although her husband was very accommodating, L. noticed that he "got fed up with hearing me complain, complain, and complain." C. felt guilty about pressuring her partner for attention:

In my spare time, I want my partner to entertain me. I have baby-sitters planned weeks in advance so we can do something together. And my partner will say, "I can't, I have to study for midterms." And I'll say, "Well, I just need to go out, just with you, I just need to talk to somebody, I just need time for me!"

Three women felt jealous of their partners' vocational success, which contributed to existing tension. C. helped her partner seek career and educational counselling and research the employment market before enrolling in university: "I'm a bit jealous that I didn't get this kind of assistance. My partner is going to have this great job when school is done, and I'm still going to be underemployed." L. was envious of her husband's ability to "move up the corporate ladder," even without a degree. Although she admired her ex-boyfriend's educational and career achievements, A. insisted that "he had benefited from lucky breaks that [she] didn't get."

A few participants claimed that underemployment played a role in the break-up of their relationships with partners. The stress of workplace dissatisfaction permeated their homes, sparking arguments. Conflicts over underemployment issues were common. M. noted, "Work interferes with my family. I just separated from my husband. Neither one of us could find a good job for a long time. That stress made an existing problem worse, one that could have been salvaged." J. also linked underemployment to the end of her common-law marriage:

I don't think it was directly related to my job, or his, but I do know that I was going through a pretty rough time back then. I was feeling pretty low about myself. I had no self-esteem. I'm sure it was hard for him to live with someone like that, someone who hates her job, who is always complaining about this or that, who is not really a very happy person.
A. cried when reflecting on her relationship's demise:

For him, I changed over time. He knew me when I was in university, when I was training for the triathlon, when I was happy with what I was doing. And gradually, I would come home and sit down and never do anything. My motivation disappeared because I was so frustrated with work. He tried to appreciate that, but being so successful himself, he couldn't really understand why my situation wasn't changing. Things have always fallen in to place for him. He had no idea how difficult it is to find a decent job. Had he worked in some crummy job in the past, he would have had more sympathy. Instead, his patience wore thin. We started fighting a lot. I didn't feel as if he was in my corner. It was really tough.

Some women established strict boundaries between work and home to prevent the stress of underemployment from interfering with their personal lives. With her current boyfriend, J. avoids discussions about her work: "When we spend time together, the last thing I want to be talking about is my job and how much I hate it."

Emotional support from parents was welcomed by some participants. When their parents expressed concern about their welfare, they felt consoled. As C. stated, "My parents know I'm not really happy with the job that I found. They try to give me support and say, 'It's all right.' But, they notice I don't speak excitedly about work." J. noted, "They get worried because there have been times when I have been pretty despondent. I feel cared for when they reach out." T. said, "I don't get any pressure from home, in fact, I'll call my parents when I don't feel good about things and they are always very supportive." K.'s parents were proud of her accomplishments, despite her underemployment:

My mom always tells me she's so proud of me. My dad is the same way. I think he's really impressed that I haven't relied on him at all since I've graduated from university. When I complain about my job, he says, "Look, I'm in my fifties. How long did it take me to get to this position? You're young, relax!" They seem to understand how hard
it is. They just love me and want me to be happy.

In contrast, four women's parents offered little emotional support because they misunderstood the modern employment market. For example, L.'s father urged her to apply to large corporations so she could advance over time:

He didn't understand that I could put my resume in to these agencies, but I'd be lucky to get a receptionist position for five years. He has a totally outdated perspective. He still believes you can just walk in to a company with any degree, start somewhere, and move up. He doesn't realize it doesn't work that way anymore.

A. claimed, "My parents assumed I would get a good job after I finished university. They wonder what I'm doing with my degree." H. discussed her parents' perspective:

They can't understand why I'm still doing clerical work after completing my degree.

My father says, "You have a degree now, you don't have to be doing that!" My mom says, "What good did it do to go to university then?"

S. disclosed, "My parents have no idea why I'm underemployed. They frown on what I do and think I wasted my time in school. I can't even discuss it with them because it's such a touchy subject." Failing to meet their parents' expectations, these women felt extremely guilty. "I've disappointed them," "I've failed them," and "they've lost faith in me," were common remarks.

Beyond their parents' opinions, the views of other family members had an effect on some participants. K.'s siblings and grandparents have applauded her efforts, "My whole family is always telling me how proud they are of me. It's nice to be reinforced around your own people, your own family." In contrast, L. spoke of her brothers' patronizing attitudes: "Neither of my brothers have degrees, but they have jobs where they've advanced over time. As a joke, they always ask, 'What are you going to do when you grow up?'"

For many women, emotional support from close friends made a difference in their ability to cope with workplace tension. With no extended family in Canada, M.'s friends
were her only support system. They offered free baby-sitting and "shoulders to cry on." R.'s friends faxed her job advertisements: "It was almost like I had a job-club happening." When she felt desperate, L.'s best friend helped her "process feelings." In contrast, S. was mocked by her friends: "Some have jokingly referred to me as a union lackey, which really hurts my feelings." At social gatherings, A.'s employment status was often the "butt of jokes." Three participants blamed underemployment for jeopardizing their friendships. As T. noted, "A few months ago, I had a fight with my friend. I don't think that would have happened if I was in a better state of mind. Frustrations with my job have made me quicker to anger with everyone." She further stated, "I'm so bored at work, I expect my friends to be at my beck-and-call... to entertain me. That's a lot of pressure!" R. commented on how underemployment issues pervaded leisure time: "I can't relax and enjoy my weekends. My poor friends have to contend with my complaints about work. How fun can that be?" Consumed by her own worries, J. was unable to offer emotional support to her friends: "I feel guilty because I can't be there for them when I have so many problems myself." Because of the strain underemployment placed on their friendships, these women avoided social events and, consequently, felt lonely and isolated.

Besides relying on emotional support from others, participants tried to redirect their negative feelings by engaging in more constructive tasks.

**Theme: Channeling One's Energy**

To cope with underemployment, all participants channeled their energy into vocational and extra-vocational pursuits. In terms of the former, while they were underemployed, they continued to conduct lengthy job searches to find work that complemented their degrees. They desired interesting, challenging positions that would utilize their educations. As R. noted, "I'm looking for a job that will match what I have to offer, my skills, my degrees, everything." None of the participants felt comfortable remaining underemployed for an indefinite time period. J. said, "In today's job market,
some feel it's better to have a job that you're unhappy with than to have no job at all. But, I don't care anymore. At this point, I'd rather be unemployed." Many described the search for alternative employment as "highly frustrating." T. commented on her unsuccessful attempts to find appropriate work:

When I returned to Canada after traveling, I had interviews for a couple of decent jobs that required a psychology degree, but I didn't get them. Then, it was one rejection after the other. It was just the most frustrating period of my life. Finally, I got a job doing phone surveys. I quit and became a group home worker. I also quit that job and couldn't find anything. So, I became a hostess at _______. Here I am again, totally overeducated for my job. I can't find anything that suits my education. It's just killing me. I don't know what to do, so I'm looking for jobs again.

After realizing her managers were entrenched in their jobs and advancement was highly unlikely, R. raised her standards and looked for more suitable employment:

I've stopped applying for underemployed jobs. Now, I only apply for jobs that would use my degrees and abilities, the ones that would pay me what I think is a fair wage for the educational level and experience that I have. If someone is advertising a job that doesn't meet those expectations, I refuse to apply.

L. also resisted settling for unstimulating work: "Even if it's just part-time, I'm determined to do something that warrants my particular expertise and talents. It must challenge me at least a bit." After fruitless job searches, C. considered changing fields altogether: "Is it time for me to leave human services? Should I change paths and do something completely opposite, like work with computers? My field is stagnant. Perhaps, I should get out of it." H. also evaluated her vocational options:

I could research the job market and check out some companies. Most have communications departments that need writers. But, I've also rethought that. Writing is a real chore. I'm trying to get into something more professional, more creative, such as teaching ESL.
As they searched for more appropriate employment, a few participants attempted to enhance their jobs by implementing personal ideas. To tackle boredom, L. formed a workplace social committee to initiate positive changes and published an employee newsletter. While employed as a group home worker, T. designed a memory program for a brain-damaged client. Personally invested in the activity, she felt this aspect of her job was worthwhile:

The client needed extra one-on-one contact, so I set up a memory program for him. I was never asked to do this. I volunteered because it helped him and it kept me motivated. It gave me the feeling that I was doing something important and intelligent. It was going well and I became a little more interested in my job. I even considered applying to a graduate program that focused on head injuries, memory, and psychology.

As a child care worker, C. operated within very loose guidelines. To structure the job, she created treatment plans for the children she worked with. By setting goals for each child, C. felt she had something "more concrete to work towards."

To escape underemployment, self-employment was an option considered by many participants. M. contemplated operating her own non-profit organization. L. wanted to proof-read and edit from home and busily researched necessary computer courses to upgrade her skills. Some felt self-employment would give them more control over their work. Because of negative experiences as a receptionist, K. swore she would never work for someone else again: "I don't want to be bossed around by other people. I hate office politics. I want to work as an independent consultant, so I don't have to answer to anyone else." J. considered becoming an immigration consultant: "It would be so much nicer to be a self-employed immigration consultant rather than working for the government. I'd have more control over the job, I could pick my clients, I could decide what work I'd do."

Others viewed self-employment as their only salvation. A. said, "It's the only option I feel I have right now. Underemployment has made me realize that any sort of fulfillment
I want in a job, I'll have to do it myself." S. also stated, "I'm trying to figure out how to become self-employed. I can't see myself finding anything else, so I'll have to create work for myself. It feels brighter than being a secretary."

Several participants also planned to return to school. Many felt a Bachelor's degree was not useful enough. As K. said, "You need that extra something to get ahead. That's why I'm doing a diploma in commercial appraisal." J. considered doing a Master's degree in immigration law. L. pondered furthering her education, but feared it would yield little return: "I don't know if I should go back to school. What if I spend more money getting a Master's degree and I end up in the same position? I'm so afraid of that happening again." H. planned to complete an ESL instructor's certificate because she wanted "something more fulfilling and challenging." C. said, "I'm seriously considering going back to school. I might pursue it two years from now, because I think two students in the family is too much." T. believed that more education was her only escape from underemployment. Although rejected by several graduate schools, she continued to apply:

I remember working one day and I thought to myself, I can't work like this, I can't live like this, I'm going back to school because I can't survive this way. Although I've been rejected, the process of applying to universities just keeps me going. It's the light at the end of the tunnel.

R. found it frustrating that she might have to retrain, but resigned herself to returning to school:

Not only do I have a BA and an MA, I also have computer skills and a certificate to work with deaf people, so I have sign-language abilities. I also have theatre training and background. I've done lots of other things. I have some counselling courses. So, I really have a broad range of things that I can do, but I thought, I'm going to have to get more training to do the kind of work that I want to do which is women's programming. It looks like I am going to have to do a counselling
certificate.

Some women decided to move to increase vocational opportunities. A. planned to revisit Australia to "start afresh": "I'm going to Australia to rekindle my motivation. Maybe traveling will give me some inspiration. We'll see what develops."

S. planned to relocate to Alberta:

Vancouver has a reputation for being a difficult place for finding employment. I've known people who have looked for years for employment in Vancouver, people who are well connected, and they can't find appropriate work. I'm not expecting anything magical when I leave, but I hope my opportunities increase.

T. considered returning to Ireland: "Maybe, I'll find my way in some tiny, tiny village and forget about university, forget about all my career plans and just live a life that doesn't involve that." M. decided to leave Canada "if nothing improves":

I'm giving myself until the end of next year. If nothing changes, I'm going to look somewhere else. I'll go to the United States, or wherever work will take me, because I've worked with international organizations before, so my skills are more marketable outside than here. It's very disappointing though.

As they attempted to change their situations, channeling their energy into extra-vocational activities helped alleviate stress. During their spare time, R., J., and T. entertained themselves; going to movies, attending concerts, or touring the art museum were popular choices. As T. noted, "I make sure I have exciting things to do in my personal life." K. said, "I resent the time I have to spend at work. I'm so bored, I have to find stimulating things to do on my days off." Others devoted time to hobbies. M. enjoyed sewing and cooking, L. joined a ceramics class, and A. was an avid sailor. C. participated in sporting activities and developed an interest in gardening. Some participants became involved in the community by volunteering their services. At a local farm, C. volunteered as a ranch-hand so she could take advantage of free horse-back riding. M. helped her son's cub-scout troop by becoming a part-time leader. H. planned
to tutor ESL students to transition in to work as an instructor. S. and H. enjoyed reading at home, K. traveled as much as possible, and a few spent time with friends and family.

**Theme: The Experience of Altered Career Expectations**

All participants claimed the experience of underemployment altered their career expectations. The Experience of Altered Career Expectations emerged as a common theme, but was composed of two opposing subthemes: The Experience of Pessimism and Hopelessness and The Experience of Optimism and Motivation. Feeling pessimistic about their vocational futures, some said it reduced their drive to succeed. Motivated to change their situations, others argued it gave them strength to develop satisfying careers.

**Subtheme: The experience of pessimism and hopelessness.** Disillusioned with their situations, six women felt pessimistic about their vocational futures. Having conducted lengthy job searches only to find underemployed work, some felt quite hopeless about their chances of vocational success. R. explained her negative attitude:

> It is a very tight job market out there. I've been looking for work these past few months. I've sent out numerous resumes and got back a lot of rejection letters. I don't see anything opening up at my organization. People in management are very entrenched. If I stay, I'm doomed. If I leave, I face stiff competition. So, the future is bleak. It's hard not to become pessimistic about the whole business!

A few claimed their vocational perspectives had been drastically altered by the experience of underemployment. For example, A.'s ideas about how her career path would proceed gradually changed:

> When I graduated from university, I thought I'd be able to work for somebody else and be satisfied on the job. After five or ten years, I planned to travel, freelance, and then come back to a decent job, having accumulated some good experience. But now, if I try to freelance, I don't have anything stable to return to because my working background is so poor. The odds of getting in to photo-journalism decrease every year.
When she graduated from university, C. planned to secure an entry-level position and hoped to advance to a management job within the same company. Long-term underemployment changed her view of how modern careers develop: "I've learned that my goals were unrealistic and outdated. Today, the odds of moving up the corporate ladder are slim."

The underemployment experience made these six participants realize they may never achieve career satisfaction. A sense of resignation dominated their attitudes: "I guess this is it" and "things will probably never change" were common sentiments. Although uncomfortable with the idea, they eventually accepted the grim possibility of permanent underemployment. As A. stated, they simply "stopped fighting as hard." C. noted, "It seems I'll have to work to live, not live to work." M. said, "I feel like I'm on a treadmill. I'll probably never be employed to my liking." Predicting she would never find adequate employment, L. reconciled herself to accepting even minimally challenging work:

I'm trying to become more matter of fact about what I'm faced with in the job market. I've gotten to the point where I don't even expect something that is incredibly challenging and wonderful anymore. I think I'll never find that. I'm down to the point where I want to wake-up in the morning without saying, "Oh God, here we go again."

R. and T. vowed to continue their search for better work, although they realized their chances of vocational success were slim. M. also planned to renew her job search, although she described her occupational future as "depressing."

To cope with negative feelings, a few attempted to de-emphasize the importance of their careers. T. contemplated minimizing the role it played in her self-image:

I think I've become too consumed with my career. That's been me, that's where I've seen myself. Because I'm doing so poorly, the only way to cope is to turn it off and completely forget about it, or else, I'm not going to survive, you know. Maybe I should just completely change my goals, but, I don't know if that's possible. I have considered taking off and forgetting about the career issue by starting a new life
somewhere. But, is that possible? I don't have any other way of defining myself right now.

The experience of underemployment changed C.'s values:

I guess my values have changed. This whole thing has made me feel like I'm not going to go after a career so much. Before, the career thing was really important to me. I always wanted a career where I could move up and one that I enjoyed, that I was satisfied with. But now, I'm finding that the career thing might have less importance than I once thought it would. But, it wasn't always like that. That attitude has come out of my experiences with work. When I first thought about getting a career and stuff it was like, "Ya, this is what I want to do, this is why I went to school, I love working with people, I can't imagine doing anything else." But, that's all changed now. I'm more realistic now. I probably won't be able to move up the way I thought I would or to be happy at work like I thought I would. I'll probably have to place more emphasis on other aspects of my life. That's just how it might be for me.

Such introspection helped some develop a new set of priorities as the experience of underemployment made them realize how elusive career satisfaction can be, especially in the modern employment market.

**Subtheme: The experience of optimism and motivation.** The remaining four women in the sample refused to endure underemployment any longer than absolutely necessary. Initially, H., S., K., and J. reacted negatively to underemployment, but gradually became more optimistic about their employment opportunities. H. commented on her changing attitude:

I am starting to be a little more positive and reactive about my own situation, instead of letting myself be pigeon-holed. I was negative about having to do secretarial work. Now, I just see it as bread and butter, as a means to an end. Before, being negative about it drained all of my strength . . . I couldn't put any energy towards dreams I had because I was zapped. I've gotten rid of that negative cloud and I just grew. I'm a lot
more positive now. I have more energy to put towards my goals, you know. I guess I started off being resentful, but now I'm just trying to get rid of that and channel it in to more positive things, being proactive instead of reactive.

S. experienced a similar transformation: "Instead of stagnating in a negative way, the upside is that I'm finally starting to consider ways to do something about my situation."

K. also felt motivated to change her circumstances:

After questioning myself and where I'm going, I've been motivated to change. I said to myself, "You don't want to be 60 years old and still be doing this type of thing." I think my education has made the difference, it has given me a kick and made me say, "Hey, you can either stay here doing this for 20 years, or you can get out and do something else."

Although in a "constant battle" with depression, loss of hope, and pessimism, they felt they could deal with their emotions and escape the situation. K. described herself as a "survivor" and vowed she would not be "overcome by underemployment's negative influence." J. assumed a relaxed approach and believed "things would fall in to place."

Age was on her side, she argued: "I have until my mid-thirties to materialize things. I haven't been too worried about it, but if it was four or five years down the road and I was in the same position, it would really stress me out." In contrast, H. took a more active stance: "I've finally shaken the illusions I've been under these past few years. I'm not going to sit back and wait any longer. I have to start taking control now to beat this."

The experience of underemployment made these four women realize the importance of career satisfaction. The thought of permanent underemployment was so repulsive, they were inspired to set new vocational goals. They discovered personal power and inner resources that would help them change their status. From a very negative situation, a sense of optimism developed.

Chapter Summary

This chapter began with a biographical synopsis of each informant. The formulation
and presentation of results were discussed, including an outline of modifications made to
the common themes of experience. After revealing the final list, the confederate's
changes to the general structural description were revealed and the final version was
presented. Ethical considerations, reliability, validity, and limitations of the study will be
discussed in the next chapter, Discussion. Results will be summarized and compared to
existing literature in the subsection, Implications for Theory. Implications for future
research and counselling practice will also be provided, followed by a short conclusion
and epilogue which closes the chapter and study as a whole.
CHAPTER V
Discussion

To provide context for the discussion of results, this chapter begins with a brief review of participants' backgrounds followed by an update of their present status. Next, ethical considerations and the reliability, validity, and limitations of this study are presented. The results are summarized and compared to previous research in the section, Theoretical Implications: Comparisons to Existing Literature. Implications for future research and counselling practice are also discussed. A synopsis of this investigation is offered in the conclusion, followed by a short epilogue which closes this chapter.

A Review of Participants' Backgrounds

Nine participants had completed Bachelor of Arts degrees: A variety of majors were obtained, including psychology, English, political science, economics, French, anthropology, and international relations. Only one woman obtained a Bachelor of Science degree, specializing in business administration. After finishing their undergraduate degrees, four participants furthered their schooling. One obtained a law degree, another completed a Master of Education (specializing in educational psychology and special education), and two received Master of Arts degrees in geography and international relations, respectively.

All respondents last graduated from university in or between the years 1987 to 1992, three in 1987, one in 1989, five in 1991, and one in 1992. As "veterans" of underemployment, the experience was hardly novel. Since they last graduated from university, seven had never obtained jobs which complemented their degrees. Three actually remained in the same underemployed jobs consistently since that time. Some had switched from one underemployed position to another. Five had been underemployed before they had even graduated and actually returned to the same jobs (temporarily or permanently) after they completed their studies. After they finished their schooling, only three women had been able to secure jobs commensurate with their
university educations, but this work was eventually replaced by underemployment.

At the time of the study, all participants described in vivo underemployment, a present and ongoing experience. Objectively underemployed, all held occupations classified as either skill level B or C. Low-level, clerical positions were common. One had been a receptionist but moved to registration work. Another worked as an advertising clerk. One woman was both a library clerk and network operator/proofreader. Secretarial positions were held by two participants. One respondent had been an office clerk and, later, a telephone survey clerk. Another was an administrative assistant. Others worked in the human services arena: One was a child care worker, one was an immigration officer, one had been a group home worker, and one was a community service worker. One informant had worked as a waitress and was a hostess at the time she was interviewed. Given their work histories, it was not surprising that all of the women were subjectively underemployed in that they felt overeducated for their jobs.

In terms of demographic information, various backgrounds were represented: The women ranged in age from 27 to 45 years. An array of lifestyles and personal situations was evident. Of the two married women, one was separated at the time of the study. Another respondent was involved in a common-law relationship and two had longterm romantic partners, but both women lived alone. Five informants were single, of which two were divorced. Only four participants had children. One woman was a step-parent of four boys who ranged in age from seven to 14 years. The remaining had one child each, a female toddler, a teenaged son, and an eight year old boy, respectively. All participants lived and worked in the Lower-Mainland area. Nine women were Caucasian; only one (of Philippine descent) belonged to a visible minority group. All participants spoke fluent English and were able to convey their experiences in an articulate manner.

Present Status

At the time they were last contacted (in February of 1997), some of the women's
employment situations had changed, but most continued to be underemployed. C. had transferred to another school district and moved in to a higher position as a coordinator of child care workers. Satisfied by her job, she no longer felt underemployed. K. remained a registration clerk and was still enrolled in the commercial appraisal diploma program. A. had quit her job as a classified advertising clerk and temporarily moved to Australia to work on the boat she had mentioned. J. had taken a leave of absence to travel to Africa, but resumed working as an immigration officer when she returned to Canada. Although she had hoped to move to the Okanagan, she continued to accept long-term contracts as a casual employee. Because she wanted to have another child, L. had no plans to change jobs and had decided not to make any significant career moves until her child (and children, if the case may be) was older. S. was still working as a secretary for the same organization, but had become so dissatisfied, she cut her workload from 100% to 70%. Also a secretary, H. had quit her job, frustrated with the temping agency that employed her. Following a very short period of unemployment, she obtained another underemployed position as a dental receptionist. Teaching ESL was no longer a goal after she discovered how expensive the certification process would be. After finding work as an office assistant, T. quit her job as a hostess and moved to a new suburb of the lower-mainland. Although her income had increased substantially, she was still unfulfilled by the work. When her teenaged son graduated from high-school, R. took a short leave of absence from her job as an administrative assistant. They traveled to Quebec to visit friends and spent some quality time together before he started university. Financially pressured, she returned to work in the fall, but demanded she be given a pay raise and more stimulating tasks. Although the salary increase was not forthcoming, in addition to her original job, she was trained to co-facilitate a bi-weekly women's support group. Because this was such a rewarding experience, she would like to complete a counselling diploma so she can work in this stream of the organization. After a trial separation, M. divorced her husband. Worried that her job as a community service
worker would be eliminated, she decided to move back to the United States.

**Ethical Considerations**

Taking ethics into consideration, before initiating this study, the researcher obtained approval from UBC's behavioural sciences screening committee for research involving human subjects. As outlined in Chapter 3, *Methodology*, before they agreed to join, volunteers were informed of the purpose and nature of the study (including voluntary participation and the issue of confidentiality), what participation would involve, how data would be collected and analyzed, and what would become of the results. This information was provided during an initial screening phone call, reiterated in an explanatory letter sent to those who met selection criteria and agreed to participate, and restated on the consent form. Once the study was initiated, participants were kept informed of its progress. Obtaining their approval of results at various stages was both courteous and vital to the success of the research. Informants were sent thank-you letters to notify them when the investigation had concluded. If they had any post-study concerns, they were invited to contact the researcher. Confidentiality was maintained throughout the study. A list of informants' phone numbers and addresses was filed separately from all other data. Letter codes, rather than names, were used to identify respondents as all were quoted verbatim in the results. All identifying information (such as places of employment or obscure or idiosyncratic data) was deleted from the results and published or unpublished material to preserve anonymity. At the end of the project, all raw and sensitive data (viz., signed consent forms, phone numbers and addresses, audio-tapes, transcripts, and any related notes) were destroyed.

**Reliability, Validity, and Limitations of the Study**

By imposing high standards of reliability and validity, measures were taken to ensure results are trustworthy and credible (McMillan & Schumacher, 1989).

**Reliability of Results**

Reliability issues were handled by the researcher throughout the investigative process,
from design planning to the analysis stage. In qualitative research, reliability refers to the consistency of the researcher's data collection, data recording, interactive style, data analysis, and interpretation of participants' meanings. All data were collected in precisely the same manner: Each interview was conducted by the researcher. Every participant was interviewed twice and given the same framework from which to describe her experience. All sessions were audio-taped and a nondirective style (as outlined in Chapter 3, Data Collection) was used throughout. First interviews were personally transcribed by the researcher; computer programs were not used. The same analysis procedure was used for each transcript. The researcher re-checked her steps to ensure consistency of extractions from each woman's description: After systematically interrogating each meaning unit and its central theme in terms of the specific purpose of the study, the researcher cross-checked these transformations against the original, naive protocol.

In qualitative investigations, internal reliability addresses whether multiple observers agree on the description or composition of events within a single study. To establish "interobserver reliability," the results were subjected to peer examination (McMillan & Schumacher, 1989, p. 190). During the analysis stage, the thesis supervisor reviewed the list of common themes of experience. Both a confederate (an external colleague) and the thesis supervisor corroborated the general structural description. Except for a few minor changes, they agreed with the results. Publishing the study will allow for further peer review.

"External reliability [in qualitative studies] is the extent to which independent researchers could discover the same phenomenon in the same or similar situations" (McMillan & Schumacher, 1989, p. 189). With respect to future research, it is recognized that the unique experiences described herein cannot be replicated. According to McMillan and Schumacher, human behaviour is never static, so no study can be repeated exactly, regardless of the methods and designs chosen. However, all
methodological aspects (viz., the researcher's role, informant selection, data collection, and analysis strategies) were explicitly described in Chapter 3, Methodology, should others wish to conduct similar investigations.

**Validity of Results**

Validity refers to the notion that findings are well-grounded and supported and that readers can have confidence in them (Polkinghorne, 1989). Confidence is enhanced by seeking an understanding of the phenomenon that is rigorous, systematic, and accurate.

In qualitative research, internal validity refers to the extent the researcher observed what she thinks she observed. The researcher adopted many strategies to ensure she described what she purported to. First, during the selection process, candidates were prescreened to address extraneous variables that could have threatened internal validity by distorting the results. For example, one volunteer claimed that underemployment was making her severely depressed. When probed further, she stated that she was also mourning the recent loss of her grandmother. Was her emotional state affected by underemployment or this intervening variable? Together, the researcher and candidate decided that it would not be an appropriate time to conduct such an interview. Another threat to internal validity is attrition, the loss of participants during the course of the study. To minimize mortality, the commitment involved was fully explained beforehand, so everyone was forewarned of the researcher's expectations. One candidate could not guarantee that she would be available for the second interview. As a result, she was not used as an informant. Attrition was not a problem: None of the participants dropped out of this study.

Second, before collecting data, the researcher "tested" the interview format to determine if it fit the nature of the study and whether it actually elicited the information that was sought. After all, how could she purport to describe a phenomenon if the interviewing process failed to provide the necessary raw data? After conducting a pilot interview (which was not included in the results), minor modifications were made to
enhance the framework.

Third, every effort was made to ensure that detailed accounts were collected so that results reflected participants' realities in an accurate and thorough manner. Each respondent was given adequate time to express herself during both interview sessions. The researcher encouraged experientially based descriptions. As noted in Chapter 3, in the subsection First Interview, when necessary, the researcher referred to a prepared list of questions (see Appendix E) to elicit additional information or to encourage a participant who had "run out of steam" (Osborne, 1990, p. 84). These questions were only used if the topic had already been raised by the informant. Before using such probes, silence was employed as much as possible to allow the participant full expression of what seemed relevant to her (Gordon, 1975). If the woman found certain questions unclear, time was taken to fully explain what was being asked. The reverse was also true: when the researcher was confused, clarity was ascertained.

Fourth, since internal validity relates to the degree to which generalizations and conceptual categories have mutual meanings between participants and the researcher, time was taken to cross-reference extracted information with raw data: During the second interview, each woman was given an opportunity to review her transcript, biographical synopsis, and data extracted from her particular account. This process ensured that the researcher did not exclude what should have been derived or include unwarranted data. Participants (and the thesis supervisor) checked the list of common themes of experience and necessary changes were made. Although these steps lengthened the data collection period, they ensured a match between research-based categories and co-researchers' realities.

Fifth, the use of participants' language enhanced internal validity. When composing labels for each theme of experience and constructing the general structural description, the researcher used the respondents' language as much as possible. The description of each theme of experience was supported by actual quotes, and in some cases, entire
meaning units from the women's accounts.

Finally, an external colleague reviewed the general structural description to determine if each theme of experience was actually supported by the researcher's description and participants' accounts. He confirmed that explications were representative of the women's comments. The final version was examined by the thesis supervisor who provided further verification. All of these safeguards ensured that the general structural description presented an accurate portrait of the common features and structural connections that were manifest in the examples collected (Polkinghorne, 1989).

External validity refers to the degree to which findings can be generalized to the population from which participants were drawn (Borg & Gall, 1989, p. 404). Carefully articulated inclusion criteria alerted the reader to the characteristics of individuals to which extracted themes apply. However, due to the small sample size, population validity cannot be established. The researcher does not suggest that results hold true for the entire population of underemployed female university graduates. As this study was exploratory in nature, an extension of understanding was the goal. Generalization, as defined in quantitative studies, does not apply in phenomenological research (Heppner, Kivilghan, & Wampold, 1992). Rather, "empathic generalization" is achieved to the extent that the formulated structure "resonates with the experiences of other people, not in the study, who have experienced the phenomenon" (Osborne, 1990, p. 88). As such, the researcher's concern was that readers recognize (and identify with) the reality of participants' responses. A final check of the external validity of results would be the extent to which they actually reflect the experiences of other underemployed female university graduates who did not participate in the study (Kreftig, 1991). While desirable, this step was beyond the resources of this study.

One threat to external validity is "experimenter effect," the degree to which biases or expectations of the observer have led to distortions of data (Borg & Gall, 1989, p. 404). To prevent experimenter effect, before initiating the study, the researcher openly stated
her own perspective and personal assumptions regarding the topic (already described in Chapter 3's Researcher's Perspective and Personal Assumptions subsection and Appendix A). This bracketing technique allowed for a detached viewpoint from which to explore the data and prevented the imposition of preconceived notions. Participants' descriptions were read without prejudice and protocols were thematized from each respondent's viewpoint to ensure that the general structural description truly reflected the women's actual experiences. Self-monitoring throughout the study minimized experimenter effect and close supervision by the research supervisor further ensured that the investigator's influence was accounted for.

Other threats to external validity for a qualitative study include "those effects which limit its usefulness" (McMillan & Schumacher, 1989, p. 194). A study is considered useful when its comparability and translatability are maximized. To enhance comparability, the researcher described and defined all research components so that the study may be used to extend understanding to other investigations focusing on similar topics. Translatability, the degree to which the investigator used theoretical frameworks and research strategies that are understood by other researchers in the same or related disciplines, also ensured its relevance for future inquiry (McMillan & Schumacher).

**Limitations of the Study**

The most obvious limitation of this study was, indeed, its greatest impetus. That is, the results are deliberately based on an exclusively female sample. As noted in the first chapter, some researchers have completely ignored women's experiences or applied the results of exclusively male-based studies to both sexes, instead of isolating the female viewpoint. That stated, the value of this investigation is obvious, however, mixed-sex studies that compare and contrast the male and female experience of underemployment would also add to the literature.

Practical limitations such as time and financial constraints also restricted the study's scope. The researcher could interview only a small number of women because a more
extensive study was beyond her time and resources. Although extracted results are based on a limited sample, in-depth interviews provided a rich source of data and have contributed to underemployment research, on a smaller scale.

Since statistical generalization was not the goal, referrals, personal contacts, networking, and active recruitment were used to gather an opportunistic sample and participants were chosen according to the criteria of appropriateness and adequacy (as outlined in the subsection Selection Procedures, Chapter 3). Within selection criteria, a range of women was purposefully chosen to guard against obtaining restricted, idiosyncratic data from a marginalized group. Despite these precautions, random selection (although unrequired) could have resulted in a better representation of the target population. The researcher chose participants who were both objectively and subjectively underemployed. Whether or not they were satisfied by their work was not a selection criterion. By chance (and not surprisingly), all of the women interviewed experienced high levels of workplace dissatisfaction. However, some individuals may express workplace satisfaction despite objective and subjective underemployment. The opportunity to interview such women did not present itself in the sample selected. In addition, ethnic minority groups were under-represented. One Philippine woman was interviewed, but she did not emphasize multi-cultural issues. All other participants were of Caucasian ancestry as the study was limited to those who volunteered for research conducted in English. Most informants were unmarried, childless women, making the examination of links between underemployment and marriage, pregnancy, and/or motherhood limited. As well, Bachelors' and Masters' degrees were represented, but none of the participants held Doctorates, which could have added another dimension to the study. A related point, the investigation was confined to university graduates, however, underemployment is a problem at all levels of the post-secondary educational system. Furthermore, most of the respondents had obtained humanities or social science degrees, but women from other disciplines (such as health sciences, engineering,
commerce, or fine arts, etc.) may have reported different experiences. Within the humanities and social science arenas, participants represented a variety of educational programs. However, it might have been beneficial to focus on one academic specialization at one particular level. Finally, the study was bound by geographical limitations as the researcher was unable to interview women outside of the lower-mainland. An inter-provincial sample may have produced other data given the varying job-markets across Canada. Also noteworthy, six respondents received at least one degree from UBC, which may have skewed the results. Perhaps, graduates of other universities hold alternative views.

Throughout the study, the researcher anticipated methodological limitations and closely monitored them. For example, informant-interviewer interactions can create biases, the exact influence of which is difficult to determine (Phillips, 1971). However, the investigator employed a non-directive approach to avoid swaying the course of the dialogue. Advanced empathy, leading questions or comments, or summaries that directed conversation were never used.

Since the study was based on self-reports, the credibility of results was limited to what people remembered, what they were capable of articulating, and what they chose to report. Participants were free to exercise discretion as to what they revealed, possibly omitting information or overemphasizing certain details. For example, individuals may have felt shy about disclosing personal information to a stranger. Low reporting of data that was perceived as damaging may have interfered with the validity of findings. Were their accounts truthful or were participants distorting their responses (e.g., to avoid embarrassment or imagined reprisals from employers)? Issues of social desirability and the sensitive nature of the topic may have influenced their descriptions. Conversely, they may have been naturally open to discussing their experiences. The benefits of this are obvious, but it may have presented a biased sample of talkative women. To guard against skewed responses, the researcher took many steps, already discussed in
Chapter 3's Data Collection section. Confidentiality of information was assured, which encouraged them to relay everything in a free and open manner. Optimal interviewing conditions were established, so informants felt comfortable and safe as they were talking. Trust, rapport, and alignment were achieved before proceeding. The authenticity of informants' descriptions was affected by the researcher's ability to observe non-verbal cues and project a position of "respectful concern" (Osborne, 1990, p.82). Her training as a counsellor ensured the necessary qualifications for this method of data gathering. Second interviews were used to challenge participants' data, ensuring that they had not biased their responses to please the researcher or ensure the success of the study. While considerable care was taken to avoid blatant forms of contamination, the possibility of such occurring must be acknowledged.

**Theoretical Implications: Comparisons to Existing Literature**

After completing the analysis process, the researcher identified the following common themes and subthemes of experience which had emerged across the women's accounts:

1. Feeling Stuck in Underemployment.
2. Feeling Unfulfilled at Work.
4. The Experience of Self-Doubt and Self-Blame.
6. The Experience of Regret and Loss.
7. The Experience of Depression.
10. The Experience of Altered Career Expectations.

   Subtheme: The Experience of Pessimism and Hopelessness.

   Subtheme: The Experience of Optimism and Motivation.

The results of this study are well supported by the literature. Minor differences have
been reported to highlight discrepancies between these findings and previous research. Various psychological theories and models have been applied, where appropriate. All the common themes and subthemes of experience have been summarized and related to existing literature in terms of the six subquestions presented in Chapter 1. First, what did they describe as the psychological experience of underemployment? Second, what did they describe as the impact of the experience of underemployment on their career identities as working women? Third, what impact, if any, did the experience of underemployment have on their interpersonal relationships with significant others (e.g., married, common-law, or other partners, parents, friends, etc.)? Fourth, if applicable, what was the relationship between the experience of underemployment and pregnancy and/or motherhood? Fifth, what did they do about the situation? Finally, what were their expectations about their vocational futures and how had their views been affected by the experience of underemployment?

**The Psychological Experience**

What did they describe as the psychological experience of underemployment? The literature has shown that there are negative emotional consequences for university graduates who are unable to find jobs commensurate with their educational levels (B. Burris, 1983; V. Burris, 1983; Redpath, 1993, 1994; Rumberger, 1984). As Donatimarciano (1987) noted, the psychological aspects of this phenomenon are, indeed, multidimensional.

**Theme: Feeling stuck in underemployment.** Feeling Stuck in Underemployment was a common emotional experience marked by an overwhelming sense of stagnation. All participants felt forced to accept and remain in jobs for which they were overeducated. Various reasons were cited, including a weak employment market, financial pressure, and having to combine child care duties with work outside the home. Whatever the reason, frustration with workplace hierarchies was evident. This finding is consistent with earlier studies that linked underemployment to increases in levels of
frustration and discontent (B. Burris, 1983; Jones-Johnson & Johnson, 1992; Richards, 1984a). Powerless against the strength of management, participants felt insulted that their academic achievements had been ignored as they were relegated to low-level positions. Their need to feel noticed and appreciated relates to the concept of mattering outlined by Rosenberg and McCullough (1981). Denied equal consideration when applying for jobs within their companies, participants felt boxed in and stunted at work. "Blocked growth" was how B. Burris' participants described this experience. Borgen et al.'s (1988) respondents were also annoyed at the lack of vertical movement. In this study, the experience was especially salient for unionized staff members, who were barred from seeking managerial or professional positions within their organizations.

Unable to advance internally, all of the women searched for external opportunities but felt type-cast because of their underemployed work histories. Consequently, they felt trapped in a never-ending cycle of underemployment, a concern also voiced by Borgen et al.'s informants. Living with self-imposed ultimatums was common: Older informants placed age related deadlines on how much longer they would tolerate underemployment. Fear of complacency was another concern: Participants worried about losing the motivation to change their situations. Their fears were not without justification. According to Richards (1984b), inappropriate beginning jobs can have a negative impact on a person's long-term vocational outcome. The career patterns of women represented in this study validate her claim: Chronic underemployment has been a problem. Since they last graduated from university, seven women had never obtained jobs which complemented their degrees. Only three had actually held suitable jobs since that time, but these were temporary positions and eventually replaced by underemployment. Five had been underemployed before they had even graduated and returned to the same jobs (temporarily or permanently) after they completed their studies. Three women had consistently held their low-level positions since they last graduated from university; the others jumped from one underemployed job to another.
**Theme: Feeling unfulfilled at work.** Feeling Unfulfilled at Work was another common theme of experience. All participants held jobs that required the repetition of mundane tasks. Frustrated by the lack of variety at work, they complained of being bored, a feeling that affected interpersonal relationships at home as they pressured significant others for stimulation. Borgen et al's (1988) co-researchers also found their work unfulfilling. The following quote from one of B. Burris' (1983) underemployed university educated participants closely mimicked comments made by the women in this study:

I've memorized everything already. I wouldn't say I'm using my full potential. To sort out mail, you don't have to be a genius. I'd like to move up where I'd have more responsibility . . . they taught me this and that's fine but, what else can you teach me? I like a challenge in what I do. (p. 99)

A lack of learning opportunities at work made some women in this study question their mental abilities. A few were actually concerned that they would lose brain cells if they continued to repeat unchallenging tasks. Jones-Johnson and Johnson (1992) referred to this situation as qualitative work underload: when work does not fully utilize the skills or potential of the worker. Confined to low-level positions, the women were bitter that their knowledge and talents were being wasted. B. Burris' university graduates also "felt they were wasting skills gained at school" (p. 100). Many women in this study claimed employers had deliberately targeted them for dull work. This sense of restriction was highlighted by informants who had held supervisory positions in the past. Corroborating these sentiments, Redpath (1994) argued that modern employers are not making adequate use of university graduates. New entrants with previously marketable credentials find themselves unable to obtain suitable jobs because an oversupply of educated workers has devalued their skills.

Completely dissatisfied at work, a lack of motivation and productivity emerged among the women. For many, this dearth of enthusiasm pervaded their leisure time as
they became lazy at home. The same gradual inspirational decline was documented by Rumberger (1984) who argued that overeducated workers are likely to exhibit poor work performance. In an examination of the effects of underemployment on 32 low-level clerical workers, B. Burris (1983) compared their educational backgrounds with work attitudes and behaviours. She found that higher education led to reduced job involvement and lower productivity levels, which had negative consequences for both employees and employers.

A few women felt their discontent was partially compensated by high wages, flexible shifts, vacation time, or excellent benefits. However, even if they were paid well, most felt their work had no redeeming qualities which made the experience unbearable. The latter is supported by Richards (1984a) who discovered that high income does not add to job satisfaction unless job fit is also high. As a remedy, Khan and Morrow (1991) suggested providing employees with opportunities to expand their skills (e.g., continuing education courses). Conventional enrichment strategies, such as job-rotation, can minimize the tedium of low-level positions and enhance fulfillment.

**Theme: Feeling disrespected at work.** Feeling Disrespected at Work was a dehumanizing theme of experience mentioned in all accounts. Stigmatized by their job titles, the women felt stereotyped and mistreated by the general public. In addition, several complained about their supervisors' biased attitudes: Many sensed their abilities were underestimated and devalued by managers whose behaviour was frequently described as inappropriate. When they felt threatened by participants' university educations, supervisors would often react with hostility. Examples of paternalism were abundant, degrading ordeals which were ill tolerated by the women. B. Burris (1983) investigated the nature of workplace control. Like the women in this study, many of her participants complained of a reduced sense of autonomy when overly stringent supervisors treated them "like children" (p. 100). According to new working-class theorists (e.g., Bahro, 1979; Denitch, 1973; Gorz, 1968, 1972; Mallet, 1975), higher
education involves norms of autonomy and creativity which inevitably clash with capitalism's need for hierarchical control of its workforce.

Other aspects of this theme included sexism and the knowledge that they were being used by supervisors to perform particularly demeaning chores. Many participants were expected to perform tasks beyond the call of duty, without appropriate rewards or recognition. Being treated disrespectfully by incompetent supervisors was especially defeating. Incompetent supervision was also mentioned by B. Burris' (1983) informants who felt deflated as a result.

Resentful of such abuse, a lack of trust and cooperation emerged among the women in this study. Contempt for managers was common; anger was a typical reaction. The same results were documented by Jones-Johnson and Johnson (1992) who found high levels of hostility among their subjectively underemployed co-researchers. Almost half (47%) of Borgen et al's (1988) participants reported anger, frustration, and sadness when problems with supervisors arose.

Several women in this study regretted the energy wasted resenting instead of venting their emotions. Caught in a negative emotional cycle, they were constantly bitter and tired, instead of happy and motivated. These findings mesh with the results of Jones-Johnson and Johnson's (1992) investigation of subjective underemployment, psychosocial stress, and perceived supervisor support. They found that the greater the supervisor support, the less psychosocial stress the workers felt. Following their logic, employees who feel disrespected and, therefore, unsupported by their managers will likely experience greater psychosocial stress.

**Theme: The experience of self-doubt and self-blame.** The Experience of Self-Doubt and Self-Blame was a common thread in women's stories and already documented in the literature. For example, V. Burris (1983) stated that the most probable consequence of overeducation is the continued privatization of discontent, leading to low self-esteem and self-blame. For the women interviewed, career was a vital component of
their self-images. Forced to accept degrading jobs, they felt poorly about themselves and their self-esteem plummeted. When they graduated from university, they felt self-assured, but constant rejections from potential employers promoted insecurity as their confidence dwindled. Increasing insecurity and an eroding sense of confidence was also common among Borgen et al.'s (1988) and Jones-Johnson and Johnson's (1992) co-researchers. Women in this study began to devalue their potential, describing themselves in derogatory terms. Lacking self-esteem and confidence, self-doubt was inevitable.

Based on their performance in underemployed jobs, some wondered if they would be able to secure appropriate employment, others questioned their worth as future employees, and some felt uncertain about their general competence and abilities. Congruent with these findings, doubts about past and future decisions were reported by 80% of Borgen et al.'s sample: Positive changes were difficult to initiate as they became increasingly afraid to make choices.

Eventually, self-doubt led to self-blame. Some women blamed themselves, feeling angry that they had allowed themselves to become underemployed. Self-deprecation was evident as they searched for personal flaws to explain their situations. "What's wrong with me?" was a common question. According to Herr (1992), those overwhelmed by underemployment tend to blame themselves for circumstances beyond their control rather than considering external obstacles. These findings differ somewhat from those presented by B. Burris (1983). She found that university graduates were more self-confident, had more self-worth, and were less inclined towards self-blame than their less educated co-workers. Apparently, educational achievements can yield self-confidence which offsets a lack of occupational success and mitigates tendencies toward self-blame. This notion is not entirely without support. Rather than blaming themselves, a few women in this study held external factors accountable, such as the poor employment market, stiff competition, inflated or highly specific job requirements, and government funded university programs that offer little hope of vocational success. Some portrayed
themselves as victims of society, although not to the extreme that Herr described: When discussing the feelings of overeducated university graduates, he identified a sense of victimization as intense as those who have endured a criminal attack or major disease. A few of Borgen et al.'s (1988) participants (20%) also felt disadvantaged by government policies and the floundering economy. B. Burris' sample also held the overeducated society and contemporary job market responsible for their underemployment. To explain their occupational status, a few of her participants portrayed their jobs as "stepping stones" to managerial ranks. Apparently, rationalization is a commonly used defense mechanism. Some of the women in this study rationalized their sense of failure by claiming their career goals were unrealistic in today's job market. By rationalizing their occupational status, 40% of Borgen et al.'s participants convinced themselves that their degrees had not been wasted.

**Theme: The experience of regret and loss.** As participants reflected on past choices and actions that had affected their vocational status, The Experience of Regret and Loss emerged as a common theme. In terms of regret, many lamented their lack of career planning. Some held themselves accountable for their lack of foresight, while others blamed the university system for failing to provide proper career and educational guidance as they entered and left their programs. The latter is validated by Schlossberg, Lynch, and Chickering (1989) who criticized the lack of attention paid to exiting university students. Because the shift from school to work can be difficult, they advocated the use of special culminating programs to assist in the assimilation process. Vickio (1990) would agree: When campus counsellors used his "Good-bye Brochure," potential university graduates acknowledged the impending transition and identified their concerns. Their feelings were normalized and coping strategies were developed. In contrast, most participants in this study had not defined their career goals, were unsure of how to use their degrees, and felt disillusioned about their vocational futures, which, they admitted, increased the likelihood of underemployment. Confusion and indecision were
also mentioned by 20% of Borgen et al.'s (1988) respondents, but disillusionment was reported by 93% of their sample, the most prevalent critical incident cited. Although they failed to define their career goals, other women in this study assumed suitable employment would be available once they finished university. A few anticipated more specific careers, but failed to research job possibilities and necessary requirements. Most women regretted their lack of relevant work experience since they last graduated from university, wishing they had secured suitable employment immediately following the completion of their programs.

With respect to loss, the psychological reactions associated with overeducation have been compared to those identified in Kubler-Ross's (1969) grief and loss paradigm: Denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance are evident stages (Marris, 1974). The loss of goal attainment, personal identity, relationships, and sense of meaning in life prompted a range of feelings in Borgen et al.'s (1988) sample, from initial disillusionment, to a high feeling after obtaining a job, to despair and resignation, followed by renewed hope for the future. These findings mesh nicely with Feather and O'Brien's (1986) study of underemployment, which depicted a similar emotional roller coaster. Two issues are pertinent when applying the grief and loss model to the experience of women in this study. First, graduating from university was a "turning point" that involved two "role changes": a "role deficit" (in which the previously held student role was lost) and a "role increment" (in which the repertoire of roles was added to by becoming an underemployed worker) (Schlossberg, 1984; Schlossberg, Troll, & Leibowitz, 1978). Second, limited to menial duties at work, many lost their sense of competence. Chickering (1969) claimed that the continued development of competence is one of the most important life tasks of adulthood, the loss of which can have devastating effects on self-esteem. As Adams and Spencer (1988) noted, some university students expend a great deal of effort establishing their competence in the scholastic realm. Indeed, most of the women in this study emphasized their academic achievements
which had no real meaning at work. According to A. Astin's (1984) theory of involvement, because they were highly invested in the educational process, they felt a stronger sense of loss when moving on, as compared to those less dedicated to formal education.

Several losses were identified by the women in this study, including unmet career expectations. Schlossberg et al. (1989) noted that "stress can accompany the nonoccurrence of an expected or 'normal' event and can be as upsetting as a traumatic event" (p. 102). Although most enjoyed their university experiences, the inability to secure adequate employment after graduating generated feelings of disappointment. This is consistent with Borgen et al.'s (1988) results: 87% of their sample had fond memories of university, but 60% were categorized as "disappointed after graduation" (p. 152). In both studies, those who had been underemployed before obtaining their degrees were especially disheartened to realize their academic efforts had not broken the cycle of overeducation. B. Burris (1983), V. Burris (1983), Redpath (1993), and Rumberger (1984) suggested that advanced education can result in increased disappointment when expectations of occupational status are not fulfilled. This is true even for university graduates who have never been adequately employed. Since they last graduated from university, seven women in this investigation had never worked in jobs that complemented their educational levels. Therefore, they were "comparing their... situations to an untested ideal, which [made] the contrast between what [was] and what [was expected] even more intense" (Harder, 1986, p. 62).

Related to the last point, although most had never held gratifying jobs, all of the women suffered the loss of expected job satisfaction. According to various researchers, university graduates have a sense of entitlement, naturally anticipating satisfying jobs when they finish school (B. Burris, 1983; V. Burris, 1983; Redpath, 1993; Rumberger, 1984). Common sense indicates that overeducated workers are likely to experience more job dissatisfaction than other workers (Berg, 1970; Borgen et al., 1988; B. Burris; V.
Adams' (1963, 1965) equity theory validates this notion: Overeducated workers who are assigned the same tasks and status as their less educated colleagues will naturally feel a sense of inequity and job dissatisfaction. But, does it decrease over time? Although the women in this study last graduated from university several years ago (in or between 1987 and 1992), work role dissatisfaction had not dissipated with time. This finding contradicts previous research: Job dissatisfaction of overeducated workers has generally been reported to decrease with age and number of years in the labour force (Berg; Kalleberg, 1977; Khan & Morrow, 1991; Kornhauser, 1975; Quinn & Staines, 1979; Robinson, Athanasiou, & Head, 1969). This dynamic has been attributed to various psychological factors such as changing work values, a reduction in cognitive dissonance, and reconcilement (Richards, 1984a).

According to Khan and Morrow, job dissatisfaction of overeducated workers decreases with time because their formal educations have been secured in the past and have lost relevance. They also postulated that a lack of alternative employment opportunities could be another modifying factor in the underemployment-job satisfaction linkage. The women in this study indicated otherwise: Their discomfort was not minimized by the realization that suitable employment was scarce.

Another loss relayed by the women in this study concerned the ability to use their degrees. Reflecting on their education, several women wished they had secured more practical training. Like 20% of Borgen et al.'s (1988) participants, some felt completing their degrees had been a waste of time. Frustrated, they consistently asked: "Why did I bother?" Three described themselves as ripped off, tricked, and cheated, claiming they were misled in to believing a university degree would enhance their careers. They felt angry at the government for funding educational programs that do not lead to occupational success. These sentiments were expressed in an earlier, Canada-wide survey of post-secondary students published in the *Occupational Outlook* (1995). Their
results indicated that 93% of university students agree that post-secondary courses and curricula should be more closely linked to the job market. Furthermore, 37% of respondents claimed their job preparation experiences failed to meet their expectations. In contrast, however, the 1992 British Columbia Colleges and Institutes Student Outcomes Report (1993) showed that 73% of Arts and Science graduates were "definitely satisfied" with the educations they received. However, it should be noted that the majority of those surveyed continued studying at other universities, colleges, and technical institutes. If they were so satisfied, why was it necessary to further their educations? The report did not address this question.

The fact that their degrees were losing significance also concerned the women in this study. Most worried that their university credentials were becoming irrelevant, dated, and unmarketable the longer they remained underemployed. Corroborated by the literature, their concerns were not without merit: Chronic underemployment is a modern problem. In a study of long-term employment patterns, Richards (1984b) discovered that a university graduate's beginning occupation affects later employment outcomes. Expanding her results, Tipps and Gordon (1985) found that inadequate employment can affect a person throughout his or her entire working life. Pressured by time, a few women in this investigation realized that they had worse labour market opportunities as they aged, a finding supported by both Lichter and Landry (1991) and Rosen (1987). Apparently, the passage of time may cure unemployment, but may actually increase the likelihood of overeducation. As veterans of underemployment, the vocational histories of these women verify this notion.

**Theme: The experience of depression.** The notion that underemployment may result in poor mental health has been well documented (e.g., V. Burris, 1983; Erickson, 1963; Gardell, 1982; Ickovics, 1990; Jones-Johnson & Johnson, 1992; Rumberger, 1984; Stack, 1982). According to Rumberger, overeducated workers are more likely than their appropriately employed peers to exhibit and suffer from poor mental health. Jones-
Johnson and Johnson studied subjective underemployment and psychosocial stress, linking qualitative work underload to a deterioration in mental health. Their data indicated a significant positive relationship between perceived underemployment and psychosomatic stress and depression (frustration, hostility, and insecurity were also noted). Furthermore, they concluded that the more overeducated a person felt, the greater the manifestation of these symptoms.

As a theme, The Experience of Depression has been frequently noted in the literature. For example, 67% of Borgen et al.'s (1988) sample described incidents of depression severe enough to interfere with daily living. One instance of near suicide was reported, a concern Stack (1982) voiced when he linked underemployment to identity problems, depression, and suicide ideation. Feeling stuck, unfulfilled, and disrespected at work, all the women in this study experienced moderate to severe depression. Self-doubt and self-blame, a lack of career identity, and feelings of regret and loss may have exacerbated negative emotions. Working in hostile environments was another aspect of this theme. Unable to influence the direction of their careers, several lacked a sense of control over their vocational futures. Some claimed office politics heightened this helpless feeling. For example, although they often disagreed with managers' requests, they felt obligated to carry out demands. These results are supported by Borgen et al.: As they entered the stage of "Despair and Resignation" (p. 156), some of their informants also felt out of control and powerless.

Whatever the source, depression manifested itself in various ways. Indeed, research has shown that each person experiences underemployment differently because of sociogenic and eugenic (within the individual) factors (Berg & Hughes, 1979; Herr, 1992). In this study, a range of psychological and physical reactions was evident which validates Ickovics' (1990) contention that women's mental and physical health are negatively affected by involuntary underemployment. Emotional turmoil was common. The women described themselves as miserable, unhappy, devastated, and confused.
Jones-Johnson and Johnson's (1992) co-researchers were similarly affected by qualitative work underload. The same outcomes were documented by B. Burris (1983) who also revealed links between underemployment and stunted emotional growth. The women in this study complained of physical symptoms including lethargy, sleep disturbances (oversleeping or insomnia), medical illnesses (such as headaches, stomach aches, the flu, and nausea), weight gain or loss (the latter attributed to nervousness, anxiety, and panic attacks), and a disinterest in maintaining a regular exercise routine.

To cope, several women consulted their family doctors; some were prescribed antidepressant medications. Stress-reduction groups were recommended but not joined. A few sought career and educational counselling, to no avail. Only one engaged in personal counselling. Largely, they relied on their social networks (such as family and friends) for strength. Herr (1992) identified social support as a mediating factor in emotional reactions to underemployment. However, all of the women in this study experienced depression, regardless of whether or not they felt emotionally supported.

**Career Identity**

What did they describe as the impact of the experience of underemployment on their career identities as working women?

**Theme: The experience of a lack of career identity.** Clearly, the theme that addresses this question is The Experience of a Lack of Career Identity. Already noted in Chapter 4, all of the participants claimed they had jobs, but lacked careers. According to Homan (1986), the quality of meaning attached to one's work is relative to the individual. All of these women emphasized the relationship between career and a sense of purpose in life. Because a major source of their identities was missing, they described themselves as incomplete, undefined, and fragmented. "Who am I?" was a pertinent question. This finding is supported by Savickas (1991) who defined vocation as a quest for authentic existence which involves the question of "who am I and who am I to become?"

Although they had achieved great success in other areas of life, participants in this
study felt inadequate because of their occupational status. In comparison to vocationally accomplished peers, this inferiority complex was especially relevant. Socializing with friends who had promising careers was difficult, so they often stayed home alone. This experience was shared by Borgen et al.'s (1988) respondents who avoided successful friends because of embarrassment surrounding underemployment. Loneliness and isolation surfaced as a consequence.

Unable to identify with their less educated co-workers, the women in this study found it difficult to socialize at work. Because they had little in common, conversations were unstimulating. As a result, they felt unanchored, ungrounded, and distinctly out of place. Seven of Borgen et al.'s informants also reported problems with their less educated co-workers who were portrayed as having "a different mind set, different expressions, different interests, and different outlooks on life," (p. 155). In both studies, participants avoided such colleagues and failed to attend work related social functions. As a result, their sense of isolation increased. These findings are corroborated by B. Burris (1983) who illustrated that among low-level clerical workers, higher education produced impaired co-worker relations. In her sample of both university and non-university graduates, she found that the former were likely to have negative feelings regarding the latter. In an aloof and "snobby" manner, the university graduates socialized with immediate supervisors, rather than mingling with less educated co-workers. A few women in this study shared this elitist attitude and behaviour: For example, one woman spent breaks with a manager from another department, fearing she would be "brought down" by her "uneducated" colleagues. According to Zeller and Mosier's (1993) "culture shock" model, as they moved from one culture (university) to another (underemployment), participants in all three studies experienced a form of culture shock. Conflicts between their values and the behaviour and norms of the host culture resulted in resistance to adaptation.

Besides isolating themselves from successful friends and less educated co-workers,
participants attempted to divorce their personal identities from their job titles. They refused to be associated with their jobs and loathed being defined in terms of their work. Many feared stigmatization if they revealed their job titles. Embarrassed, some gave false impressions of their positions by glorifying their work. To avoid being stereotyped by labels, others highlighted work duties, rather than providing specific job titles. A few emphasized extra-vocational achievements, such as volunteer experience or educational qualifications. With reference to the latter, B. Burris’ (1983) underemployed university graduates compartmentalized their educations, severing scholastic achievements from their work status. Any comparison, they felt, would undermine the significance associated with their schooling. In this manner, they were able to preserve at least the academic portions of their identities. By focusing on their hobbies, some women in this study were able to redirect work oriented conversations. Just as Borgen et al.’s (1988) co-researchers avoided the topic, others refused to discuss their jobs because work was such a sore topic. Participants in both studies alienated themselves from others by withdrawing from work related conversations. The women who did disclose their job titles felt pressured to justify their occupational status. Compelled to explain why they were in such low-level jobs, some made excuses, portrayed their work as temporary, and focused on future goals to defend their situations.

**Interpersonal Relationships**

What impact, if any, did the experience of underemployment have on their interpersonal relationships with significant others (e.g., married, common-law, or other partners, parents, friends, etc.)?

**Negative effects.** According to Borgen et al. (1988), "the impact of underemployment on personal relationships [can be] far reaching" (p. 155). The second most prevalent category in their study, 87% of their all-male sample reported its negative effects on relationships with wives and girlfriends. Congruent with their findings, several informants in this study noted how underemployment had negatively affected their
relationships with partners. As workplace dissatisfaction increased, stress at home seemed to equally advance. For example, one woman pressured her partner for attention because her job was so dull. Three women felt jealous of their partners' vocational achievements, which contributed to existing tension. Some claimed these dynamics contributed to the break-up of their relationships with partners as conflicts over underemployment issues increased. One woman believed the stress associated with overeducation made her otherwise salvageable marriage collapse. Lacking self-esteem because of her work status, another participant realized it was difficult for her common-law husband to remain with someone so unhappy. When reflecting on her relationship's demise, one woman examined the issue from her boyfriend's perspective: He witnessed her change from a happy, energized, goal oriented person to a miserable, unmotivated "slob." This data verifies Borgen et al.'s results in which the men mentioned conflicts, separation, and divorce. Some women in this study established strict boundaries between work and home to prevent the stress of underemployment from interfering with their personal lives.

Relationships with parents were also negatively affected by the underemployment experience, which is consistent with Borgen et al.'s (1988) report of increased tension between family members. This data was verified by Herr (1992) who commented on the relationship between underemployment and family discord. In this study, some participants' parents misunderstood the modern employment market and pressured their daughters to apply to large organizations where advancement, they believed, would occur. Offering little sympathy, they felt disappointed with their children's lack of vocational success. In turn, informants felt guilty that they had not met their parents' expectations. Consequently, communication between the two parties was often strained, especially when job related issues were discussed. This dynamic is common, according to B. Burris (1983): When a university graduate fails to advance vocationally, he or she is often deemed to have irrationally wasted resources and educational opportunities,
especially when others have paid the tuition.

Some women in this study felt their friendships had been jeopardized by the underemployment experience. For example, consumed by her own worries, one informant was unable to offer emotional support to friends. Two women felt mocked by friends who made fun of overeducation. Frustrated by their work, anger was often displaced on friends. Easily annoyed because of work related frustrations, one woman had a terrible fight with her room-mate. Because participants did not receive stimulation at work, friends were also pressured to provide entertainment. At social gatherings, a few informants realized that their work related complaints were exhausting others. Borgen et al.'s (1988) respondents also admitted that underemployment related discussions were tiresome for others. Consequently, participants in both studies avoided social events, further isolating themselves from friends.

Only two of Borgen et al.'s (1988) participants mentioned the positive effects underemployment had had on personal relationships (such as having more time to spend with significant others or sensing that the family had been drawn closer as a result of this crisis). In contrast, none of the women in this investigation reported such positive outcomes.

**Theme: A need for emotional support.** The negative effects described above were discussed in A Need for Emotional Support, another common theme of experience. All participants in this study wanted to vent their work related frustrations to empathic listeners who would offer genuine concern and emotional support. Whether or not they received it, they expected nonjudgemental understanding, sympathy, and encouragement from significant people in their lives. With respect to emotional support from partners, parents, and friends, dichotomized experiences were reported: Some felt emotionally supported, while others did not. Ten of Borgen et al.'s (1988) participants (67%) reported feeling supported by others, emotionally and financially. A lack of emotional support was not categorized as a critical incident.
A few women in this study felt emotionally supported by their partners whose patience, kindness, uncritical attitudes, and reassurance seemed to ease the stress of underemployment. Talking with partners helped them debrief particularly bothersome incidents at work, enabling an emotional catharsis. This finding is congruent with Borgen et al.'s (1988) results in which several participants mentioned how much they appreciated the support of their wives. In contrast, some respondents in this study felt emotionally unsupported by their partners who seemed to discount the devastating psychological effects of underemployment and grew tired of the women's complaints about work. Emotional support from parents helped to console some participants. This finding was also documented by Borgen et al. whose informants mentioned how their parents had "stuck with them," offered encouragement, and provided financial support (p. 155). However, in this study, four women's parents offered little sympathy. Finally, for many women, emotional support from close friends helped them cope with workplace tension. This finding was congruent with Borgen et al.'s results in which participants mentioned how friends had "rallied around them" (p. 155). In contrast, two women in this study were mocked by their friends who made fun of overeducation.

In general, emotional support from partners, parents, and friends was expected, appreciated when received, and seemed to reduce the stress associated with underemployment. Given this finding, perhaps, the following question should have been asked: What impact, if any, have interpersonal relationships with significant others (e.g., married, common-law, or other partners, parents, friends, etc.) had on the experience of underemployment? Research has indicated that social support may act as a "buffer" against the harmful psychological effects of such stressful life events (Dohrenwend & Dohrenwend, 1974; Lloyd, 1980; Tennant & Andrews, 1978). Based on this fact, Jones-Johnson and Johnson (1992) hypothesized that the effects of subjective underemployment on psychosocial stress will be greater for those perceiving low social support than for those perceiving high social support. According to their stress-buffering
model, the more social support perceived by an underemployed individual, the less psychosocial stress he or she will experience. However, they actually found that social support from partners, relatives, and friends did not significantly reduce the stress associated with underemployment, although the results of Borgen et al.'s (1988) study and this investigation indicated otherwise. Jones-Johnson and Johnson did admit that their methodological approach yielded limited data. Clearly, further exploration is necessary before any final conclusions can be drawn.

**Pregnancy and/or Motherhood**

If applicable, what was the relationship between the experience of underemployment and pregnancy and/or motherhood? Although related to interpersonal relationships, no common theme of experience emerged across the 10 protocols because only four participants had children. However, these mothers made several references to this issue and their comments are worthy of discussion.

According to Read, Elliott, Escobar, and Slaney (1988), the presence or absence of children is one of the most important factors affecting a woman's decisions about employment. Making trade-offs between paid and domestic work has been well documented (e.g., Dabelko & Sheak, 1992; Donati-Marciano, 1987; Hall, 1975; Rosen, 1987). As women continue to shoulder the burden of childrearing, parenthood affects the career patterns of men and women differently. According to Lichter and Landry (1991) differential effects of fertility on men and women exacerbate gender stratification in the work force. After having children, women are more likely to be and stay underemployed than men, less likely to make an upward transition, and more likely to move down in employment status, from adequate to underemployment. With respect to the latter, Gilbert (1984) claimed that the demands of most high-level jobs preclude women from combining family life with a viable career. This finding is supported by Donati-Marciano who studied how female attorneys dealt with work and parenthood pressures. After giving birth, most of her sample reduced their working hours and some quit the
profession altogether. In contrast, A. Astin (1984) argued that active participation in family roles is harmonious with occupational achievement, for both men and women.

A. Astin’s (1984) assumption is highly questionable, as illustrated by three of the four mothers in this study. They accepted long-term underemployment to meet child care demands. Their behaviour was not unusual. According to several researchers (e.g., Donati-Marciano, 1987; Gottfredson & Swatko, 1979; Mutchler, 1988; Rosen, 1987), many educated women use underemployment as a strategy to cope with the conflicts of childrearing and the need or desire to work. Just as Donati-Marciano predicted, by resolving the career-motherhood conflict in favour of the latter, all suffered long-term career penalties. Placing their vocational goals on hold to raise children, they felt trapped in underemployment for an indefinite time period. As the sole provider for a family of six (herself, her partner, and four step-children), C. was burdened with financial responsibilities. She admitted that if she was single, she would quit work to conduct an in-depth job search. Consistent with Hall’s (1975) research, C. saw family issues as barriers to goal attainment. However, she was not comfortable forfeiting her duties as a partner and mother to build her career. When L. became pregnant, she put her vocational goals on hold. After her maternity leave expired, she returned to both of her underemployed positions because they offered benefits, flexibility, and accommodated her parenting role. Clearly, she considered her toddler’s needs for stability, time, and attention as more important than the development of her career. With respect to her eight year old son, M. sacrificed her career goals for his welfare. After he was born, she stayed home for a few years, which drastically affected her career path. As he grew, she settled for underemployed positions because they allowed her more time with her son. Even now, her job choices are restricted as she must always consider how her work will affect his life.

The women who had children also noted how the underemployment experience had affected their role as parents. As a result of underemployment, C. felt unmotivated and
lethargic. Her mothering skills suffered as she was unable to assume an equal share of the parenting. According to Donati Marciano (1987), fatigue and stress are expected responses to the "super-woman syndrome" (p. 94) which includes paid employment, parental duties, and household chores. Hall (1975) also identified "role overload," which reflects the multiple roles working mothers often occupy. Unable to support her teenaged son at the level to which he was accustomed, R. questioned her worth as a caregiver. Plagued by guilt, she felt her child had suffered financially because of her low-paying, underemployed job. In contrast to C. and R., L. maintained that her mothering role had been enhanced by accepting underemployed work which allowed her to spend more time with her child who rarely attended day-care. Working elsewhere would have entailed being on-call, traveling, evening shifts, and emergency substitution. M. made similar comments: Underemployed work allowed her to meet her child's needs as her schedule was compatible with his school routine. According to Donati Marciano, like many women, L. and M. accepted (albeit grudgingly) underemployment as a creative, viable, and satisfactory alternative to accommodate motherhood. As Ickovics noted (1990), more research is needed to determine whether the effects of underemployment differ for women who view it as an acceptable compromise (e.g., during parenting years and beyond) versus those who are involuntarily forced in to it (e.g., because of the economic climate). Because of the small sample size, no conclusions about this issue can be drawn from this study.

**Actions Taken**

What did they do about the situation?

**Theme: Channeling one's energy.** To answer this question, a discussion of Channeling One's Energy, another common theme of experience, is provided. To cope with underemployment, all participants channeled their energy in to vocational pursuits. None of the women in this study felt comfortable remaining underemployed indefinitely. Similarly, B. Burris (1983) asked her sample if they would be content with their
underemployed jobs for the foreseeable future. A unanimous "no" was their response. Unlike Borgen et al.'s (1988) sample, the women in this study tried to advance within their organizations, but attempts at political maneuvering were unsuccessful. While underemployed, participants in all three studies conducted lengthy job searches to find work that would utilize their education. However, looking for alternative employment was a highly frustrating process. Tired of being overeducated, eventually, one woman in this study refused to settle for any more underemployed positions. Another hoped for something that was at least minimally challenging. After fruitless job searches, some evaluated their vocational options and considered changing fields, for example, from human services to working with computers. As they explored employment opportunities, several tried to enhance their jobs by implementing personal ideas, such as organizing social committees, publishing newsletters, or assuming extra responsibilities at work. To escape underemployment, self-employment was considered by many women in this study, a modern and popular trend. Indeed, entrepreneurialism has been a major component of British Columbia's recent economic growth. As noted by The Indicator (May, 1995), in the past few years, 30 to 35% of job growth in this province has occurred through self-employment. Another option considered by several co-researchers was the plan to return to school, although some feared further education might yield little return. Many planned to complete a specific diploma or certificate program. Graduate school was considered by some who held only Bachelors' degrees. Their desire to retrain is congruent with earlier studies (e.g., Borgen et al.; B. Burris). A striking 83% of B. Burris' university graduates had definite plans to return to school. Apparently, they believed that the "cure for overeducation was more education" (B. Burris, p. 104). A few respondents in this study decided to move to increase vocational opportunities and start afresh.

As the women attempted to change their situations, channeling their energy into extra-vocational activities alleviated the stress associated with underemployment: Entertainment, hobbies, sports, volunteering, reading at home, traveling, and an active
social life (with friends and family) were common relaxation strategies. To utilize university training that was wasted at work, five of Borgen et al.'s (1988) respondents volunteered, taught night school courses, played music for the elderly, or engaged in various hobbies. A related point, B. Burris' (1983) respondents emphasized creativity in their "meta-work" pursuits which seemed to compensate for a lack of creativity on the job. For university graduates, these activities were considered to be the more "authentic portion of their lives" (B. Burris, p. 104). The results of all three studies are consistent with V. Burris' (1983) contention that some overeducated individuals adapt to underemployment by elevating the importance of family, leisure, and non-work activities.

**Vocational Expectations**

In this study, participants focused on their vocational futures, which verifies B. Burris' (1983) assertion that higher education produces an increased emphasis on future aspirations. What were their expectations about their vocational futures and how had their views been affected by the experience of underemployment?

**Theme: The experience of altered career expectations.** All participants claimed that the underemployment experience had altered their career expectations. The Experience of Altered Career Expectations emerged as a common theme, but was composed of two opposing subthemes: The Experience of Pessimism and Hopelessness and The Experience of Optimism and Motivation.

Feeling pessimistic about their vocational futures, six participants said it reduced their drive to succeed (hence, the subtheme, The Experience of Pessimism and Hopelessness). A few noted their vocational perspectives had been drastically altered by the experience of underemployment. For example, after graduating from university, one woman planned to secure an entry-level position and hoped to advance to a management job within the same company. Long-term underemployment taught her a lesson about the modern job market: Some goals are unrealistic and outdated. After confronting a competitive job market, receiving numerous rejections from potential employers, and realizing that
advancement in their current organizations was a fantasy, these women felt hopeless about their chances of vocational progress. Still, two vowed to continue their search for better work, although they felt that their chances of vocational success were slim. Exactly the same percentage of Borgen et al.'s (1988) sample (60%) reported feeling negative about the future and believed that things would never get any better. As noted earlier on page 144, one of Borgen et al.'s participants became so discouraged about his future prospects that he actually contemplated suicide! Realizing they may never achieve career satisfaction, a sense of resignation dominated these six women's attitudes. Although they felt uncomfortable with the idea, they eventually accepted the grim possibility of permanent underemployment. This dynamic was also reported in Borgen et al.'s study in which 53% of their respondents were categorized as "resigned to their fates" (p. 152). They saw no point in continuing to pursue their initial career goals and justified their lack of effort with comments such as, "What the hell! At least I've got a job!" (Borgen et al., p. 156). These men were described as lethargic and somewhat comforted by the fact that they had finally "given up." Borgen et al. appropriately labeled this phase of the experience as "Despair and Resignation" (p. 156).

Realizing how elusive career satisfaction can be, some of the pessimistic women in this study realigned their priorities. For example, several tried to de-emphasize the importance of their careers which helped them cope with negative feelings. One contemplated minimizing the role it played in her self-image, claiming it had consumed too much of her identity. Another experienced a change in her value system as she decided to highlight other aspects of her life, instead of focusing on her job. She convinced herself that her job was a source of income that enabled her to support her family and pursue extra-vocational goals: "It seems I'll have to work to live, not live to work." B. Burris (1983) made a strikingly similar discovery when one of her male participants claimed: "You're doing it so you can earn the money to do things for your own life, your personal life" (p. 104). Borgen et al.'s (1988) respondents also reminded
themselves that their educations could be utilized in extra-vocational arenas. Consistent with the results of these three studies, V. Burris (1983) revealed identical data: By emphasizing non-work activities, her informants were able to adapt to underemployment through the redefinition of status.

Although they initially reacted negatively to underemployment, the four remaining women in this study eventually felt optimistic about their vocational futures and motivated to change (hence, the subtheme, The Experience of Optimism and Motivation). Once again, a similar percentage (47%) of Borgen et al.'s (1988) sample also felt positive. Rather than stagnating in underemployment, these four women became proactive instead of reactive. Despite battles with depression, loss of hope, and pessimism, they felt they could deal with their emotions, take control, and escape underemployment. This data corresponds with Borgen et al.'s findings in which 70% of their sample described themselves as survivors who could handle their situations. The experience of underemployment made the four women in this study realize the importance of career satisfaction. The thought of permanent underemployment was so repulsive that they were inspired to set new vocational goals. Like 33% of Borgen et al.'s participants, they discovered personal strengths and inner resources that would help them change their occupational status. This renewal stage was labeled "New Determination to Create Change" (p. 156) by Borgen et al. Richards' (1984a) respondents also adapted to the problem of underemployment. Most were taking steps, albeit small, toward their vocational goals or at least modifying their plans in terms of the realistic possibilities that were available. As Herr (1992) noted, "Careers are created as persons sort among and convert potentialities into realities" (p. 260). In the modern economy, jobs are never guaranteed for life. To deal with the increasingly uncertain employment future, individuals will have to be positive, confident, and flexible. In that vein, Gelatt (1989) promoted "positive uncertainty" (p. 255), an attitude that involves feeling uncertain about the future and feeling positive about that uncertainty. Indeed, developing a healthy
response to change is vital in this inconsistent job market.

In summary, all of the women in this study compared earlier dreams with present reality, what Schlossberg et al. (1978) referred to as stock-taking. This process involved a juxtaposing of former goals with new ideas, shifting gears if necessary. The outcome of this assessment was a decision either to settle for what they had or to initiate change. Indeed, the six women who felt pessimistic and hopeless about their vocational opportunities were resigned to their fates. The remaining four women in the sample felt optimistic and motivated to revise their lives. Apparently, for each woman, the crisis of underemployment had impacted in one of two ways: as a threat (which involved despair, hopelessness, resignation, reconciliation, and acceptance) or as an opportunity for change (which included choice, motivation, enthusiasm, and a sense of purpose). There appeared to be no overlap in these subthemes, which sharply contrasted. Recall that in Borgen et al.'s (1988) study, 60% felt negative and 47% felt positive. As indicated by the seven percent overlap, a few men felt both negative and positive about their futures. In contrast, the women in this study felt either pessimistic or optimistic, although a range of negativity was reported by the pessimists and a range of optimism was revealed by the optimists. The fact that opposite subthemes emerged does not discount what was shared among all of the protocols: All of the women experienced a change in their vocational expectations, regardless of whether it was negative or positive.

Additionally, they made no distinction between their personal and vocational futures. Perhaps, career was such a salient issue for them that the contemplation of occupational failure or success modified their views of life as a whole. This finding conflicts with Borgen et al.'s (1988) results:

Most participants were quite positive about their personal futures, feeling that they would always be able to get along, but were quite negative about their career futures. Others were negative about their personal futures, feeling that they had messed up this aspect of their lives, but were positive about their careers, feeling that they could
eventually be turned around. (p. 156)

**Graphic Illustrations**

Figure 1 on page 161 highlights how some themes, although common to all the protocols, were experienced in a dichotomous manner: whether or not participants felt emotionally supported by significant others (within the theme A Need for Emotional Support), how they coped with underemployment by directing energy toward vocational and extra-vocational pursuits (within the theme Channeling One's Energy), and how their career expectations (viz., the subthemes The Experience of Pessimism and Hopelessness and The Experience of Optimism and Motivation) have been affected by overeducation (within the theme The Experience of Altered Career Expectations).

The researcher searched for but did not find any direct connections between The Experience of Pessimism and Hopelessness, not feeling emotionally supported, and the pursuit of extra-vocational activities. Some pessimistic women felt emotionally supported, while others did not. All six pursued both vocational and extra-vocational activities. For example, besides emphasizing non-work activities, some continued the search for suitable jobs despite their sense of hopelessness. Possible links between The Experience of Optimism and Motivation, feeling emotionally supported, and vocational pursuits were explored, but the researcher found that one experience did not necessarily lead to another. Some optimistic participants felt emotionally supported, but others reported the opposite. All four of the optimistic women engaged in vocational and extra-vocational tasks. Common sense might lead to the belief that these aspects are positively linked (as outlined), but based on her results, the researcher could not make such a conclusion.

Note the range of optimism and pessimism depicted by the space between the two subthemes. The six women who felt pessimistic about their vocational futures eventually resigned themselves to their fates. However, as indicated by the upward curve of the lower line, their level of pessimism decreased as they accepted their situations.
Motivated to change their lives, the optimists seemed even more positive about their vocational futures than they ever had. This finding is illustrated by the upward curve of the upper line which is at a higher level than its starting point.
Figure 1. The dichotomous aspects of the experience of underemployment for female university graduates.
Figure 2 on page 163 offers a visual overview of the experience as a whole. As noted in Chapter 4, on page 79 and 80, although identified individually, the themes of experience are interlaced, making little sense out of context with the others; they actually overlap in occurrence and duration, interacting as an ongoing process (Claspell, 1984). This dynamic is illustrated by the lines and arrows shown in Figure 1. This figure also demonstrates how the women's descriptions of the underemployment experience flowed from a general level to more specific aspects. For example, the overall psychological experience was related to more specific themes such as career issues, interpersonal relationships, and coping strategies. The discussion of career issues led to a focused account of vocational expectations. For the mothers, interpersonal relationships, in general, were related to the more narrow topic of pregnancy, motherhood, and children.
Figure 2. Interconnections between the general and specific aspects of the experience of underemployment for female university graduates.
Implications for Future Research

Giorgi (1975a) noted that "all good research generates more research" (p. 98). An exploratory study, this investigation examined a topic in which there has been little previous research. Although it addressed gaps in methodology, focus, gender, and location of study, its results indicate that further exploration of the experience of underemployment for female university graduates is warranted.

Obviously, the experience of underemployment is not limited to either sex. However, the results of exclusively male-based studies cannot be applied to females, and vice versa. As noted in the previous subsection, Limitations of the Study, mixed-sex studies that compare and contrast the male versus female experience of underemployment must be conducted. In addition, this study used a phenomenological approach, but alternative qualitative methods could provide further insight. For example, use of the critical incident method or narrative technique might offer a different perspective. A methodologically similar yet larger study that includes more participants would provide a broader description of the phenomenon as a more diverse sample could be interviewed.

The researcher imposed selection criteria to fix the boundaries of the investigation, but within these limitations, purposefully selected a range of women who represented an array of ages, educational backgrounds, jobs, lifestyles, and personal situations. Despite these efforts, certain groups lacked representation. For example, women who were objectively and subjectively underemployed, but still satisfied by their work did not participate in this study. It would be interesting to hear their unique stories. Except for one Philippine woman, all participants in this investigation were of Caucasian ancestry. Interviewing more women from ethnic minority groups is warranted as cross-cultural differences may affect their responses. As well, most were unmarried and childless. Exploring similarities and differences between the experiences of married mothers and unmarried, childless women would contribute to the literature. The opportunity to interview women who held Doctorates did not present itself. Such women may have
offered a different view of the phenomenon, as would community or junior-college and technical institute graduates. This study was restricted to university graduates, but an investigation of the experiences of underemployment at all levels of the post-secondary educational system would broaden our understanding. As indicated by the list of majors, most of the respondents had obtained humanities or social science degrees. Women from other disciplines (such as health sciences, engineering, commerce, or fine arts, etc.) should be interviewed as their experiences may be different. Within the humanities and social sciences, the women interviewed represented a variety of educational fields including psychology, English, political science, law, economics, French, anthropology, educational psychology and special education, international relations, geography, and business administration. By talking with women of varying educational backgrounds, the researcher hoped to widen the perspective. However, a more specific study that focuses on one academic specialization at one educational level might be more meaningful to particular graduates. For example, underemployed women holding Masters' degrees in business administration may better relate to the experiences of their cohorts than they would to graduates of other programs. Additionally, employment expectations may vary depending on the particular field a person has graduated from which may influence their interpretations. Finally, an inter-provincial study would provide a national perspective and address the gap in location. As noted, six participants had received at least one degree from UBC which may have affected the results.

This study illustrated how underemployment had impacted interpersonal relationships. A more detailed investigation of its effects on marriage, family, parenting, children, and friendships needs to be provided.

Research that examines the longterm psychological and physical consequences of underemployment would be worthwhile. For example, the results of this study indicate that self-concept was negatively affected by the experience of underemployment. Depression (and its various physical symptoms) was also common. A longitudinal study
that investigates the outcomes of associated frustration and discontent would contribute to the literature concerning career related health issues. In particular, the adequacy of employment should be examined as an intervening variable when work has been an important predictor of women's emotional well-being and medical status (Ickovics, 1990). Specifically, more studies are needed to determine whether the impact of underemployment differs for women who view it as an acceptable compromise (for whatever reason) versus those who are involuntarily forced into it (e.g., because of economic circumstances) (Ickovics).

"Longitudinal data are [also] critical to understanding how and why some graduates become underemployed, while others do not" (Redpath, 1994, p. 94). Redpath, who studied transitions from school to work, argued that university graduates' employment patterns should be continuously monitored so that the changing structure of labour market opportunities can be tracked. As noted in Chapter 2, in the subsection Labour Market Changes, although unemployment is well documented, growths in underemployment are neglected. Statistics Canada and related bureaus must gather and publish more comprehensive and accurate data regarding this phenomenon. Failing to document this problem is tantamount to denying its existence!

University counselling centres should also be examined. Some participants complained of a lack of career and educational counselling while they were students and after they graduated from university. It would be wise to conduct a survey of both the individual and group services offered, interviewing clients to assess the assistance provided.

**Implications for Counselling Practice**

A research problem is significant when it has practical implications (Bailey, 1980; McMillan & Schumacher, 1989). Having enhanced the understanding of female university graduates' experience of underemployment, this research has led to several recommendations for the practice of counselling:
1. "Quite simply, a knowledge of what can be expected in this type of experience may be a valuable tool when used by a skilled counsellor" (Borgen et al., 1988, p. 158). By anticipating the emotions, concerns, and needs of underemployed individuals, counsellors will offer a genuine, empathic approach. A deeper awareness of its consequences will help such professionals be more sensitive and responsive to their clients. By familiarizing themselves with this study, employment counsellors will appreciate how longterm underemployment can influence job search strategies and career goals. For women, there are particular events and emotional ramifications that have been sparsely addressed in the literature. This "female friendly" model (which examined the relationship between the underemployment experience and pregnancy and motherhood) will help counsellors assist underemployed women without relying on male-based data.

2. The general structural description and any articles extending from this research will help other underemployed female university graduates come to terms with this problem. Through empathic generalization (Osborne, 1990), they will realize their experiences are both legitimate and normal.

3. Simply by participating in this study, participants had an opportunity to reflect on their experiences and vent stifled thoughts and feelings. "I have nobody to talk to about this," was a common complaint. Talking with an unbiased, confidential, third party enabled a cathartic release of emotions. Indeed, Fischer (1979) and Wertz (1984) have attested to the beneficial effects of the interviewing process. That stated, as an intervention, counselling could include (a) helping clients express their thoughts and feelings, (b) building healthy self-images (by reducing self-deprecation and self-blame), (c) identifying and assessing personal supports, and (d) initiating positive changes. This encouraging, informative, skill building approach could reduce feelings of social isolation and unworthiness, while stimulating a sense of hope (Herr, 1992). Furthermore, an informal, open, revolving support group would also validate and normalize their experiences.
4. For women suffering from depressive symptoms (e.g., lethargy, sleeping problems, headaches, nausea, weight fluctuations, and stress-related disorders) which often accompany underemployment, counsellors could work in conjunction with health care professionals to offer more comprehensive, "global" assistance. For example, along with medical treatment, stress-management and relaxation programs could be implemented to help clients cope with the negative emotional and physical consequences of underemployment.

5. Some participants complained that underemployment had placed stress on their relationships with partners, children, parents, and friends. For example, a few women claimed that the tension of job dissatisfaction invaded their personal lives and played a role in the break-up of their marriages (common-law or otherwise). Given its negative effects on interpersonal relationships, marriage/couples and family counsellors could help reduce the strain associated with this experience.

6. Student development professionals need to be involved in prevention rather than remediation (Schlossberg et al., 1989). Proactive (versus reactive) educational and career planning needs to occur before individuals enter university. First, potential higher education students should be warned that university degrees never guarantee adequate employment. In this study, for example, all participants assumed their university educations would enhance vocational opportunities. However, as Harder (1986) urged, "It may be time to return to an Aristotelian view of education . . ." (p. 79). People should be encouraged to pursue post-secondary education for the sake of learning, not simply to find jobs. Second, since many employers complain of skill shortages, they should take the initiative and specify what skills they require. Educational counsellors could then provide detailed information about the qualifications necessary to secure available jobs. In turn, first-year university students could make more informed decisions when selecting courses and programs of study (Redpath, 1994). That stated, employers also have a responsibility to consider the transferability of knowledge and skills among various
academic disciplines (Redpath). For example, they "may be underestimating the importance of social science backgrounds in preparing people for management roles" (Redpath, p. 105).

7. As students prepare to leave university, support programs and professional attention often diminish (Schlossberg et al., 1989). However, the transition from university into the "real world" can be a stressful life event. Various role changes simultaneously occur, causing confusion, self-doubt, and general anxiety. Campus counsellors can help make the exiting process less traumatic. Following suggestions presented in "The Good-bye Brochure" (Vickio, 1990), a "school to work" transition group could (a) ensure students' vocational expectations are realistic (by offering current information about the modern employment market), (b) prepare them for the possibility of underemployment, and (c) provide a list of community services that are available to help overeducated workers (Herr, 1992). Structured career exploration groups could provide psychoeducational services such as decision making techniques, vocational testing, short and longterm career planning, and the introduction of new and alternative job searching strategies (e.g., networking within a job-club setting). Given Richards' (1984b) discovery that jobs taken in the first year after graduation are crucial determinants of future occupational directions, this type of help may have a positive effect on longterm vocational outcomes. It should be noted that some universities offer adequate career and placement services, but communication about this assistance is often lacking (Schlossberg et al., 1989). Better advertising could increase awareness of the beneficial effects of planning one's career well before university graduation.

8. Based on the literature, personal fulfillment through work is more mythical than real for many university graduates. Why then, are they still encouraged to make work the central focus of their lives? For some women in this study, work has already become a financial resource to do other, more satisfying things. Since job satisfaction is becoming ever more elusive, a new counselling framework that highlights the importance of meta-
work activities (such as recreational interests, leisure time, hobbies, or volunteering) is needed. Helping university graduates discover alternative means for gaining personal power, developing competence, and expressing their individuality necessarily entails moving beyond the "you are what you do" syndrome.

9. The results of this study illustrate that amendments to social action and public policy are necessary in responding to this crisis. University graduates often feel alienated by their institutions: Once they are no longer registered as students, they are denied free counselling services. Instead, expensive workshops and seminars are offered. The government offers free job-related counselling services to social assistance and employment insurance recipients. The Ministry of Education, Skills, and Training could fund free (or, at the very least, subsidized) group employment counselling for underemployed university graduates. The economic benefits of such assistance would outweigh its costs: Underemployment is often synonymous with low pay. University graduates who are employed at levels that complement their educations may make larger contributions to the tax base.

**Conclusion**

Participants in this study have been "ghettoized" in underemployment. After years of overeducation, it cannot be assumed their situations will change anytime soon. Like the men in Borgen et al.'s (1988) investigation, most held jobs that would have offered advancement in the past. However, university graduates are finding it increasingly difficult to make the same vertical movements as their predecessors. An oversupply of educated labour coupled with labour market changes have turned traditional, entry-level positions into lifelong, dead-end "careers." Over the years, researchers have examined this issue in various ways and from several angles. First, quantitative questionnaires and surveys have reported aggregate statistical data at the macro-level. Only a relatively small number of studies have explored its impact on individual lives by using a qualitative, interviewing approach. Second, underemployment has been defined and
examined as low income, lack of employment (scarce hours), overqualification in terms of expertise acquired through vocational experience, and overeducation, or a combination thereof. Investigations that focus exclusively on the overeducation aspect are few in number. Furthermore, when examining the educational mismatch phenomenon, several researchers have used purely objective definitions, failing to measure underemployment in terms of how one feels about work. Third, some researchers have excluded women from their studies rather than broadening their theories by incorporating the female experience (Rosen, 1987). Cross-gender perspectives have been offered, instead of isolating women's experiences to offer an exclusively female viewpoint. In limited cases, women, in general, have been studied, rather than focusing on the experiences of overeducated women. Finally, most research has been conducted in the United States. The Canadian perspective has been minimally documented. Based on these gaps in methodology, focus, gender, and location, the purpose of this study was to conduct an in-depth examination of the lived experience of underemployment for Canadian female university graduates. Although low income, scarce hours, and wasted vocational experience may have been subsumed issues, the focus of this investigation was overeducation.

A phenomenological approach was used to derive the characteristics and core meanings of this experience. Specifically, the study aimed to uncover and describe common themes of experience as expressed by participants through an examination of their accounts. Participants were considered underemployed if they possessed more formal education than required to perform the duties of jobs held at the time of the study (as determined by the 1993 NOC skill levels) and if they felt overeducated for their work. Based on selection criteria, 10 underemployed female university graduates were chosen and interviewed twice. All first interview sessions were transcribed and referred to as protocols. Using Giorgi's (1975a, 1975b, 1985) phenomenological method, three basic stages of analysis were followed: (a) Each protocol was divided into meaning units, (b)
these units were transformed by the researcher into meanings that were expressed in psychological and phenomenological concepts, and (c) these aggregate transformations were tied together into 10 themes of experience (and two subthemes) which had emerged across the women's accounts. These themes and subthemes of experience were then explicated and presented as a general structural description. The final report represents the essential features of the experience of underemployment as relayed by the 10 women interviewed. These results do not generalize to the entire population of underemployed female university graduates. Rather, empathic generalization was the goal: The researcher hopes her findings resonate with the experiences of other underemployed female university graduates who did not partake in the study (Osborne, 1990). This data does not represent a singular, definitive understanding and interpretation of the women's experiences; other perspectives could have been taken.

Because this was an exploratory study, the only conclusion the researcher can draw is that the common themes (and subthemes) of experience and the general structural description were reasonably obtained. Throughout the study, measures were taken to ensure reliability and validity of results. By revealing new information at the individual, microsocial level, this research has enhanced understanding of this phenomenon. Several theoretical, research, and practical implications were outlined. Following Harder's (1986) investigation of underemployment as experienced by male university graduates, this report has extended knowledge by offering a female perspective. For women, there are certain emotions, concerns, and needs associated with the experience of underemployment, particularly in relation to pregnancy and motherhood. This study may promote an appreciation of gender differences, however, when male and female experiences were compared, more similarities than differences were found. The researcher presents this study as a base for further inquiry into this complex topic.

**Epilogue**

Although this was a complicated study which required great concentration and
attention to detail, the researcher enjoyed every phase of it. Having experienced underemployment as a female university graduate, participants' descriptions were particularly meaningful. Highly invested in the study, for both personal and academic reasons, she ensured that every stage of the investigation was conducted with the greatest of care. The researcher is proud to present a thorough, theoretically sound, well-documented study. Intellectually stimulating yet accessible, this report will appeal to a variety of readers including other underemployed female university graduates, career and educational counsellors, and researchers who are examining related issues. As a result of conducting this study, the researcher plans to (a) write an article for publication based on this thesis (with permission of and in conjunction with the thesis supervisor, Dr. Bill Borgen); (b) form a free, bi-weekly support group for underemployed university graduates who would like to share their experiences with similar others in an open, safe, validating environment; and (c) in future, complete a Doctorate in counselling psychology, specializing in higher education.
References


Appendix A

Personal Assumptions

To guard against unwittingly imposing her own personal meanings on to study participants, the researcher engaged in a self-reflection process. Based on her own experience with underemployment, the following is a list of personal assumptions the researcher brought to the study. Most of these expectations meshed with the themes of experience that actually emerged across participants' accounts. Only a few were modified:

1. That participants would make reference to unclear vocational goals. Upon university graduation, the researcher felt unsure about her vocational path. Refusing to be a full-time teacher for the rest of her life, she had no alternative plans and was vague about how she could use her educational qualifications elsewhere.

2. That participants would reveal feelings of resignation, defeat, and exhaustion. The researcher conducted a comprehensive job-search, but could find nothing that complemented her education. Eventually, she accepted underemployment as an inevitable solution for unemployment.

3. That participants would highlight monetary desperation as a key factor in accepting underemployment. As a substitute teacher, the researcher received very few shifts per month. Burdened with debts, she quit to work for the local transit company where she received full-time work and a decent salary.

4. That participants would discuss how they had, initially, considered underemployment to be a temporary solution for unemployment. The researcher accepted an entry-level position with the erroneous belief that it would be a short-term precursor to advancement. However, she was never eligible for senior positions because the setting was unionized and she had little seniority.

5. That participants would describe unsuccessful attempts to escape underemployment (such as renewed job searches or applications for advancement) and
how they felt trapped. Realizing she would never advance within the company, the researcher decided to find another job. Once again, she conducted a lengthy job-search which only lead to other underemployed positions. Frustrated, she felt stuck in a never ending cycle of underemployment.

6. That participants would discuss the issue of blame, fluctuating between taking personal responsibility for their plights to holding external circumstances accountable. Feeling sorry for herself, the researcher asked, "What's wrong with me? Why can't I find a good job?" At times, she would justify her vocational situation by blaming politicians, the economy, or attributing it to "bad luck."

7. That participants would reveal experiences of stagnation and describe themselves as living for the future. While underemployed, the researcher felt as if her life was "on hold" until she could secure better employment.

8. That participants would reveal feelings of jealousy towards others who have been given unfair "breaks." The researcher resented a woman who had been advanced into a lucrative position because of workplace nepotism.

9. That participants would discuss their efforts at socializing with co-workers. The researcher "downplayed" her educational qualifications in order to "fit in" with colleagues. At the same time, however, she felt angry that the company did not recognize her education and utilize her talents in a more constructive manner.

10. That participants would describe themselves as lacking career identities, but would be proud of their educational achievements. While underemployed, the researcher retained a sense of dignity by reminding herself of her educational accomplishments. However, it was a humbling experience to perform the same tasks as someone who had not even graduated from high-school.

11. That participants would complain about disrespectful treatment by their workplace superiors. Numerous times, the researcher was enraged by her bosses' paternalistic treatment of employees. Treated like a child every day, her resentment built
over time.

12. That participants would describe themselves as bored, limited, and stunted at work. After a training period that lasted for six weeks, the researcher had learned all that was required to perform her duties. She felt "boxed in" with no room to develop. A lack of variety contributed to the experience of boredom.

13. That participants would express concern about the absence of intellectual stimulation. The researcher felt as if her brain was wasting away because it was never being challenged at work.

14. That participants would highlight feelings of embarrassment. When asked what she did for a living, the researcher emphasized the temporary nature of her position and directed the conversation toward future goals.

15. That participants would admit to feeling inferior to others and would portray themselves as suffering from low self-esteem. Accomplishing nothing, the researcher felt as if she was a "nobody." Feeling poorly about herself in comparison to more successful peers, eventually, she withdrew from her social network.

16. That participants would reveal experiences of depression. Overwhelmed by a sense of despair and hopelessness, the researcher suffered from weight gain, a general lack of motivation (at work and home), lethargy, and physical illness. In fact, she was sick with a cold at least once a month.

17. That participants would discuss their plans to return to school. After one year with the company and a fruitless job search, the researcher applied to the local university, in part, to escape underemployment.
Appendix E

Interview Questions

General Research Question
What is the experience of underemployment for female university graduates?

General Interview Question
As a female university graduate, what has been your experience of underemployment?

Additional Interview Questions
1. What has been your psychological experience of underemployment?
2. What impact has your experience of underemployment had on your career identity as a working woman?
3. What impact, if any, has your experience of underemployment had on your interpersonal relationships with significant others (e.g., married, common-law, or other partners, parents, friends, etc.)?
4. If applicable, what has been the relationship between your experience of underemployment and pregnancy and/or motherhood?
5. What have you done about the situation?
6. What are your expectations about your vocational future and how has this view been affected by your experience of underemployment?
Instructions

Transcript. As noted previously, our initial meeting was audio-taped and transcribed verbatim. Please review your transcript to verify its accuracy. Add, delete, or modify information if you feel it has not been accurately transcribed. Note changes directly on the transcript.

Biographical Synopsis. Please review your biographical synopsis to determine if it is a fitting representation of your account. Add, delete, or modify information to make it more accurate. Note any changes directly on the form.

Extracted Data. After transcribing your interview, I broke it into chunks of information. Each chunk is referred to as a meaning unit. For each meaning unit, I composed a central theme (the first column) and a transformation (the second column). The central themes are meant to reflect your particular experience of underemployment and are specific to your meaning units. The transformations were formed by examining each meaning unit and its accompanying central theme and asking: "What does this tell me about the experience of underemployment for female university graduates?" Thus, the transformations reflect the experience of underemployment for female university graduates in more general terms.

Read over each meaning unit and its accompanying central theme and transformation. For example, the first meaning unit corresponds with the first central theme and the first transformation. Make any necessary changes so that the central themes and transformations reflect your experience of underemployment. I have left space between each set so you can add, delete, or modify information. If something does not "fit" your experience, please revise it accordingly. Conversely, if extractions seem accurate, leave them as they are. Please remember, all information reflects your perspective at the time of our initial interview session. Please read them from that viewpoint, even if your situation has since changed.