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Title:
Youth underemployment: A review of research on young people and the problems of less(er) employment in an era of mass education

Date:
2021

Citation:
Churchill, B. & Khan, C. (2021). Youth underemployment: A review of research on young people and the problems of less(er) employment in an era of mass education. Sociology Compass, 15 (10), https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12921.

Persistent Link:
https://hdl.handle.net/11343/280156

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Brendan Churchill (Orcid ID: 0000-0003-3625-4574)

TITLE

Youth underemployment: a review of research on young people and the problems of inadequate employment in an era of mass education.

AUTHORS

Dr Brendan Churchill
Melbourne Graduate School of Education
The University of Melbourne
Brendan.Churchill@unimelb.edu.au

Chabel Khan
School of Social and Political Sciences
The University of Melbourne
chabelcharleskhan@gmail.com

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR

AUTHORS

Dr Brendan Churchill
Melbourne Graduate School of Education
The University of Melbourne
Brendan.Churchill@unimelb.edu.au

ABSTRACT

In this article, we examine the problem of youth underemployment and how youth underemployment is conceptualised, operationalised and understood within wider sociology, but in particular the sociology of youth and youth studies literature. We outline the contours of this body of work, showing how in most cases underemployment is undefined, used as a general term used to describe the challenges and inadequacies of the contemporary labour market for young people. Further, we show how despite a lack of clarity, most researchers in this field

This is the author manuscript accepted for publication and has undergone full peer review but has not been through the copyediting, typesetting, pagination and proofreading process, which may lead to differences between this version and the Version of Record. Please cite this article as doi: 10.1111/soc4.12921.

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contend that underemployment is increasing for young people, becoming a normative experience, cutting across class, ethnicity and identities. For some, however, underemployment is a 'choice', but as the literature shows, how different groups of young people respond to underemployment varies. Finally, we show how overeducation, another form of underemployment, is being understood by both researchers and young people as a 'new normal' rather than being challenged as yet another flank in the on-going neo-liberalisation and massification of education. We conclude with a call to think through the ideas presented and to develop new understandings of youth underemployment that can facilitate change.

KEYWORDS

Underemployment, youth, overeducation, credential inflation, mass education

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we examine the problem of youth underemployment and how it is conceptualised, operationalised and understood within wider sociology, with particular focus on the sociology of youth and youth studies literature. We outline the contours of this body of work, showing how in most cases underemployment is undefined and used as a general term to describe the challenges and inadequacies of the contemporary labour market for young people. Further, we show how despite a lack of clarity, most researchers in this field contend that underemployment is increasing for young people, becoming a normative experience, cutting across class, ethnicity and gender. For some, however, underemployment is a 'choice', but as the literature shows, how different groups of young people respond to underemployment varies. In addition, we show how overeducation, another form of underemployment, is being understood by both researchers and young people as a 'new normal' rather than being challenged as another flank in the on-going neo-liberalisation and massification of education. We conclude with a call to think through the ideas presented and to develop new understandings of youth underemployment that can facilitate change. The sensitising concept of *less(er)* employment is proposed as best placed to facilitate this reanimation.

1. INTRODUCTION

Underemployment in its broadest definition is "working in a job that is below the employee's full working capacity" (McKee-Ryan and Harvey, 2011: 963). However, underemployment has been conceptualised and operationalised in several ways and should be understood as a multi-dimensional concept that involves both subjective and objective elements, most of which are characterised as conditions that are less or lesser than what one would or could enjoy in full-time employment. Drawing on management scholars McKee-Ryan and Harvey's (2011)'s detailed typology, underemployment involves working less than one's full capacity in a number of ways: (1) employed in a job where one earns less or is stationed in a lower status job than in their previous job; (2) working less than full-time hours but wanting to work more hours (i.e., part-time for economic reasons); (3) mis-match between one's preferences and actual working hours, schedule and shifts; (4) using less of one's education skills, training, education or experience or working in a job outside of one's education and training; (5) subjective feelings of working in a job that uses less skills or that the job one is employed in is somehow lesser or lower quality. The wide-ranging scope of underemployment means that it can impact and affect anyone at any life stage, but particularly those who are on the margins of the labour market.

One such group is young people. Young people are significantly disadvantaged in the labour market (Churchill 2020; Denny and Churchill 2016; Churchill, Denny and Jackson 2014) and thus might be prone to bouts of underemployment, particularly at the beginning of their careers and during their early labour market experiences. This view is reinforced by growing evidence that young people themselves experience underemployment as multifactorial and erratic rather than one-dimensional and linear (Churchill 2020). By young people, we mean those aged between 16 and 34, which is an extended age range because life course transitions for young people are increasingly delayed, well past normative ideas of youth and young

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adulthood ending by age 25 (Wyn and Woodman, 2006). This is best exemplified by young people's transition from school to the labour market having become extended (Cuervo and Wyn, 2011; Buchmann and Kriesi, 2011) or in some cases delayed (Walther, 2006). Other transitions, such as the leaving the family home, entering marriage and parenthood, are also becoming less likely to occur by the age of 25 (Furstenberg *et al*., 2004). As such young adulthood itself has become an extended phase of the life course because the timing at which these transitions are made have become slower and less predictable to navigate (Bell, Burtless, Gornick, and Smeeding, 2007; Cobb-Clark, 2008; Furstenberg *et al*., 2004; Mandic, 2008; Raley *et al*., 2007; Tanner and Arnett, 2009). Some transitions may even be 'incomplete' or disordered, for example, young people returning to the parental home after graduation (Ainsley and Allen, 2010). This slowing down or disordering of these transitions is because the youth labour market has all but disappeared in recent times (Cuervo and Wyn, 2011). Young people have either had to stay in education and/or training to 'ready' themselves for an increasingly uncertain and precarious labour market (Churchill 2020; Craig, Churchill and van Tienoven, 2020) or live with some form of underemployment – a low-paid, poor-quality job that does not match their skills (Churchill, 2020). This problem has only increased since the Great Recession and Global Financial Crisis where the opportunities for young people in the labour market have worsened. Youth unemployment has become even more of a problem for advanced economies (Churchill 2020, Craig, Churchill and Wong 2019; Denny and Churchill, 2016; ILO and OECD, 2014), with nascent evidence that the COVID-19 pandemic will continue to negatively influence young people's opportunities for labour force participation (Churchill 2020) and hence increase their exposure to on-going forms of inadequate employment as part of extended, delayed or disordered life transitions.

Despite this growth in both sociological and policy interest in young people and inadequate employment, youth underemployment remains largely under-researched and under-theorised, which provides the impetus for this paper. Reviewing key literature in sociology, in particular the sociology of youth and youth studies literature, this paper identifies how youth underemployment is largely undefined in the literature, relying on the readers' prior knowledge of the concept or a more narrow, temporal definition. It also finds that youth underemployment is a cross-class and highly gendered experience, but how young people from different backgrounds respond to this varies and indeed for some young people, underemployment is thought of as a 'choice' away from the increasingly precarious labour market. Finally, the review examines overeducation as both a particular form of underemployment but a strategy to mitigate under- and un-employment. The review concludes with a discussion of how to think through these conceptualisations and issues surrounding youth unemployment to guide policy development with a call made for the development of a new typology of youth underemployment that centres the concept of *less(er)*.

2. HOW UNDEREMPLOYMENT IS DEFINED AND UNDERSTOOD IN THE WIDER LITERATURE

There is no consistent definition much less a standard conceptualisation of youth underemployment. The overwhelming majority of youth studies literature does not define youth underemployment, much less specify which type of underemployment they are referring to like those suggested by McKee-Ryan and Harvey (2011) described earlier. In this way, youth underemployment is a discursive lens but not a defined term. Nor is it a concretely operationalised term in these literatures. As such, the reader is assumed to have knowledge of underemployment to propel their understanding of the research. This lacuna in conceptual clarity within youth studies and sociology of youth literature is leveraged to engage in broad-ranging youth-centred discussions of 'precarity'– a term that has both conterminous and

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divergent conceptual issues as those identified in this contribution (Choonara, 2011, 2020; Standing, 2011). In so doing, this large portion of the literature draws upon youth underemployment as a discursive device to signify a general or diffusive 'site of struggle' (Venugopal, 2015) or a series of complexly variegated and overwhelmingly negative situations facing young people since the late-twentieth and now into the twenty-first century.

However, there is a small pocket of research that does provide some definitional parameters regarding youth underemployment. Some of these definitions are in broad alignment with the typology forward by McKee-Ryan and Harvey (2011) and Scurry and Blenkinsopp (2011) who have done much of the conceptualisation of underemployment without a specific focus on young people. The most common of conceptualisations of youth underemployment refers to temporal underemployment where there exists a young person's desire to work more hours (Montgomery *et al*., 2017) but are unable to secure these hours in their current employment arrangement(s) (MacDonald and Giazitzoglu, 2019). As further identified in this body of literature, often the desire for more hours by young people is either exclusively or predominantly associated with part-time employment (Aronson *et al*., 2015). In so doing, this portion of the literature designates underemployment as a problem of part-time employment arrangements. Hence, and as further nuanced below, this conceptualisation of youth underemployment defines itself in relation to a full-time temporality that is positioned as the either the default or preferential employment arrangement for young people.

Other conceptualisations found in this literature move beyond this simplified temporal model of underemployment and adopt a broader definitional purview. In this way youth underemployment is defined across both subjective and objective factors (Cunningham, 2015). For example, Baldry (2016: 798) broadly defines youth underemployment as: "…an employment situation that is insufficient in some important way for the employee". Similarly, MacDonald and Giazitzoglu (2019) draws upon this idea of insufficiency, describing youth underemployment as young people that are working less than they might subjectively desire and as currently within an employment arrangement for which they are ostensibly objectively over-qualified for. Here, content underemployment or horizonal mismatch is drawn upon to define youth underemployment as a young person employed outside their field of education. Fogg and Harrington (2011) describe this as '*mal*-employment', a form of underemployment, where the education level of the work exceeds the education and skill required to undertake the job, which is particular to the 'college labour market'.

Petreski, Tumanoska, Vchkov and Kochovska (2019) infuse further conceptual complexity into this full-time temporality and objective-subjective dichotomy, proposing a conceptualisation of underemployment across the following domains: (1) working less than 35 hours per week but wanting to work more; (2) feeling overqualified in current job; (3) feeling insecure; (4) earning below 'reservation wage'; and (4) temporarily employed without a contract. Here, they generate a concept of youth underemployment in relation to a surrogate measure of 'typical' full-time temporality, i.e., 35 hours of work a week (Aronson *et al*., 2015; Verbruggen, Emmerik, van, Gils, Meng and de Grip, 2015) but also centres the subjective impressions of young people to their employment. In so doing, this conceptualisation gives credence to the use of multiple measures when thinking through the complex nexus of subjective and objective characteristics of youth underemployment.

3. YOUTH UNDEREMPLOYMENT IS INCREASINGLY THE 'NEW NORMAL', FOR YOUTH ACROSS ALL CLASSES BUT REAMINS GENDERED

In contrast to the differing conceptualisations of youth underemployment, there is consensus within the literature that underemployment is becoming a universal experience for young people. Underemployment for young people has become a transitionary state just like the

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transition from school to work (MacDonald, 2011; Suleman and Figueiredo, 2019). From this perspective, underemployment has become a normative feature of young people's lives–one more additional step they must take when moving into the labour market following completion of their education (Allen, 2016; Mendoza, Ortiz and Oliveras, 2019; Recksiedler, *et al*. 2019). However, this transition is seen as a kind of a 'trap' or a 'vicious cycle of unemployment – underemployment' following education (Cuervo and Chesters, 2019: 423). To avoid this trap or cycle, more young people are increasingly pursuing further education and training, taking what MacDonald (2011) calls the 'slow-track transition' from education to work in contrast the 'fast-track' where young people transition directly into work following the completion of education and training. There are very few young people who take 'fast-track' transitions and those who do face the threat of underemployment (MacDonald, 2011). But there is an ever-increasing risk that the slower track may also lead to underemployment. As MacDonald (2011: 433) observes, 'slow-track' transitions can be 'grindingly slow' because in contemporary labour markets, graduate employment is no longer guaranteed despite the exceedingly high expectations of graduates and signalling from the (massified) higher education sector (see also Mok and Qian, 2018). Indeed, the faltering nature of 'slow-track' transitions is because of what MacDonald (2011: 433) calls 'limited opportunity structures'. Here, underemployment becomes a universal 'shadow' cast over both 'fast' and 'slow' youth transitions (MacDonald, 2011) in many contemporary labour markets as both graduate and non-graduates experience underemployment at similar levels. This spectre over the possibility for young people to gainfully enter the labour market is known as the 'crisis of youth transitions' (MacDonald, 2011).

Youth underemployment is not only becoming increasingly normative, but it is also becoming a cross-class experience. The classed and identity dimensions of youth underemployment was emphasised in several studies of this review. Generally, young people from diverse cultural or working-class backgrounds were reported to be more likely to be underemployed (Chung and Lam, 2009; Prause and Dooley, 2011). However, since the Great Recession, both middle-class graduates and working-class youth find themselves in the same predicament of underemployment (Allen, 2016). What distinguishes classes from one another is how they respond to underemployment. As Tevington (2017: 205) observes in interviews with working-class young people, the Great Recession had created underemployment and lower salaries, yet these young people understood these conditions to be 'momentarily troublesome' rather than 'cumulatively problematic'. In contrast, young middle-class graduates were 'confused' that graduate degrees did not deliver returns as promised by the higher education sector whereas upper-class young people were identified as keenly aware of the dire post-recession labour market situation (Tevington, 2017.). Some of these upper-middle class young people sought 'tactical employment', which involved taking a job or temporary internship that may be lesser than what they had hoped for but was a means to getting a 'foot in the door' (Tevington, 2017: 223). This contrasted with the experiences of a young Black working class woman in Allen's (2016) study that went from higher education into unpaid work experience then onto precarious employment. Others re-enrolled in education hoping to 'wait out' the recession (Tevington, 2017: 223). Indeed, it was easier for upper- and middle-class young people to do this because of resources – primarily parental resources – which helped them strategise and contextualise the difficulties of the labour market. This finding coincides with Steffy's (2017) insight that young people who identified their underemployment as voluntary were more likely to come from middle-class backgrounds whereas graduates who were from working-class backgrounds were more likely to experience overqualification as involuntary. Indeed, as contended in Tevington's (2017) study, working-class young people have limited access to social networks with knowledge of the structural determinants of the

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market and thus are more susceptible to replicating a meritocratic model of understanding their educational and job-seeking choices and their (oftentimes negative) outcomes.

While underemployment is becoming a more common experience for young people that increasingly cuts across class boundaries, it has been and remains heavily gendered. However, much of the reviewed literature does not focus on the gendered dimensions of underemployment even though women are more likely than men to encounter it at every stage of the life course, including youth (Churchill 2020). This oversight is most likely because women are still positioned as primary caregivers (even during their younger years) which means they are more likely to experience temporal underemployment e.g., work part-time hours or require flexibility to manage work and asymmetrical care responsibilities (Charlesworth *et al.* 2011) and as such it is not seen as a problem it would otherwise be for 'male breadwinners'. This characterisation of the gendered nexuses of care and underemployment is further supported by studies that find young women anticipate some form of underemployment in their future. Indeed, in contrast to men, young women expect that future reproductive labour and family responsibilities will not only influence their educational attainment (Mahaffy and Ward, 2002) but also their careers (Hill *et al*., 2019).

As a result of this, women encounter other forms of underemployment as well, including overeducation. They are less likely to be employed in jobs that use their skills and qualifications (Risse, 2018) and there is growing evidence globally that women do not receive the same economic returns to education as their male counterparts (Churchill, Ravn and Craig 2019; Ravn and Churchill, 2019; Kupfer, 2014; Stier and Yaish 2014; Leuze and Strauß, 2016). This is despite the emergence of new female subjectivities in recent decades, such as 'can-do girls' (Harris, 2004), 'successful girls' (Ringrose, 2007) or the 'top girl' (McRobbie, 2007) who are not only primed but are expected to capitalise on decades of feminist progress, in particular women's increasing dominance in education (Allen, 2016). Young women in Wyn and colleagues' (2017: 503) study exemplified this, for example, one woman felt that "women can do anything with education" but this was in stark contrast to the 'glass ceilings' of the workplace leaving the authors to conclude that for women: education and work were sometimes hostile towards each other because education 'creates a space' for women to succeed whereas the workplace does not. Young women in Aronson's (2008) study expressed uncertainty about their careers and post-education lives, seemingly also cognisant of the hostilities that women face, e.g., discrimination, lack of support for women combing work and family. Echoing this, a young, working-class Black woman in Allen's (2016) study questioned the costs and benefits of her university degree against the reality of her low-paid unskilled job.

4. UNDEREMPLOYMENT FOR YOUNG PEOPLE IS SOMETIMES A 'CHOICE'

While youth underemployment is largely described as normative and a part of the transition from school to work, this literature ignores the agency of young people in *choosing* to be underemployed. This erasure of young people's agency is largely because human capital theory – which remains a backbone of neoliberal conceptions of youth (under)employment (Brown, 2013) – assumes that underemployment is 'involuntary' and that if 'not for circumstances beyond their control, such as labour market dynamics and economic fluctuations, they would be more adequately employed' (Steffy, 2017: 469). This brings us to the 'role of volition' in underemployment. Steffy (2017: 469) observes that we need to study volition in underemployment because there may be alternatives: "some workers may place a premium on job characteristics other than pay, full-time status or skill utilization". In the case of young mothers or young mothers-to-be, they 'choose' underemployment (e.g., less hours or a job that perhaps they are overqualified for) because it has a better schedule and hence can accommodate work and family demands. This form of reorganisation between work characteristics and care,

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however, is not often recognised as a form underemployment but is instead represented as the 'cost' of parenthood.

Drawing on their qualitative research with overqualified graduates, Steffy (2017) posits that they are not a homogenous group – for many, overqualification is a 'voluntary' state. Further, these underemployed graduates had distinct underemployment experiences. For example, Steffy (2017: 470) notes that those who viewed overqualification as involuntary "think of their experience as a struggle, as they desire degree-commensurate employment in the present and expected to obtain it upon graduating from college'. In contrast, those who 'choose' to be underemployed felt differently. Here, half of the graduates in Steffy's (2017) study were voluntarily underemployed 'never having sought degree-commensurate employment'. Some felt that overqualification as underemployment is 'temporary'. This subset of individuals wanted 'traditional careers that make use of their degrees and expect to obtain them but are presently focused on such things such as self-exploration and finding their passions' (Steffy 2017: 480) in the long-term. Others in the study that purported to 'choose' to be underemployed admitted that their current underemployment may be more long-term and even 'potentially permanent' (Steffy 2017: 480).

Steffy (2017: 481) argues that involuntarily overqualified are "trying to maximise financial and status returns on their degrees" but the voluntarily underemployed, especially those who believe it to be a permanent state are content with "maximising their values and their lives". Those in the voluntary-temporary grouping who are interested in the self- and career-exploration want to maximise "the fit between their perceived uniqueness and their lives". Further, as Steffy (2017: 482) observes, "these graduates describe their experiences as opting out of the pathways typically expected of college graduates and no intentions of settling into a traditional career". It is this idea of 'opting' out or in that is reflected in the qualitative work of Threadgold (2018) who found that many young people in response to growing uncertainty and the disconnection between work and education sought 'DIY careers' in which they "manufacture their own pathways to creating a meaningful life" (Threadgold, 2018: 159). These young people ostensibly chose what he calls 'strategic poverty' which allowed them to opt out of the high pressured, long working hours and oftentimes unreasonable demands of professional fields. In this instance, strategic poverty allowed them to scale back full-time work for greater sense of life satisfaction (Threadgold, 2018: 169).

Conversely, another study of young people in regional areas of Australia found that casual employment is conceptualised as the first step towards either a contract or permanent position (Burrows, 2013). In this instance, study participants positioned their engagement within vocational education and training as both a strategy and pathway to ensure that they picked the 'right choice' to go from having a low-quality job to a gainful career trajectory. Other literature presents a more explicitly critical tone to the so-called voluntary nature of youth underemployment. Indeed, Allan (2019) draws upon interviews with young people partaking in internships as performing 'hope labour'– work that is performed in anticipation of an employment future that is enriched through the experience or skills garnered from minimally or uncompensated work. This is echoed in the views of young people in Burrows' (2013) and working-class young people in Steffy's (2017) study. Thus, we can extend these ideas to think about youth underemployment as a form of 'hope labour' in which young people take on lesser forms of employment in anticipation for work that matches their expectations, desires and preferences.

5. OVER-EDUCATED, OVER-QUALIFIED AND UNDEREMPLOYED

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As described earlier many young people take the slower track transition, choosing education and/or further training, which are seen as strategies to mitigate underemployment, but many encounter (further) underemployment because they are overqualified. In short, (further) education and/or training is not preventative of underemployment. This type of underemployment is becoming more pervasive. Fogg and Harrington (2011) found that the proportion of young people in malemployment or those who are overeducated has increased substantially since the Global Financial Crisis and Great Recession relative to older groups. This is a similar case in Australia (de Fontenay *et al.* 2020). This contrasts with the implicit and explicit message that is often communicated to young people by governments, workplaces and businesses that the solution to both unemployment and underemployment is (further) education and training (Sukarieh and Tannock, 2015). Further training is discursively positioned as the panacea to temporal and skill-based underemployment (Groleau and Smith, 2019). This social messaging is a part of the prevailing discourse in contemporary societies about the so-called intrinsic benefits of higher education in relation to employment outcomes (Bessant, Farthing and Watts, 2017). Students in Aronson's (2017: 236) study recognised that tertiary qualifications were the only way 'to do something better' in the labour market and that "nowadays you…can't do anything without it. It's not like you can just go and get a job. You'd be just stuck in a minimum wage job for the rest of your life". Both educational institutions and employers reinforce these kinds of messages in their focus on traineeships, internships and studentships irrespective of whether they are a bridge to higher-quality employment. Moreover, educators rarely see the challenges and realities of the contemporary labour market young people face as 'structural' issues, preferring to focus on individual issues, e.g., pedagogies of student performance, self-help and self-preparation (Aronson, 2017). This disregard by educational institutions to the realities of the labour market strongly aligns with a neo-classical belief in which firms are 'optimising machines' that index graduate wages to reflect their credentials, skillsets and productivity levels (Figueireido, Biscaia, Rocha and Teixeira, 2015). Here, Brown (2013) goes so far as to state a 'performocracy' is as a foundational ideological belief that besets many advanced liberal policy initiatives to address youth underemployment. Indeed, for Brown (2013: 10), performance and meritocratic reward are treated as a necessary relationship that is self-correcting or acts as a 'state of equilibrium following the laws of supply and demand'.

Both these credentialist and self-optimisation discourses are particularly salient in countries like Australia or the United States where qualifications are oftentimes assumed to be a sign of higher performance or productive capacity (Cunningham, 2016; Chesters and Wyn, 2019). Hence, employers both chase after and reward (with higher remuneration) those with higher-level qualifications at the expense of skills-based appraisals of candidates without or with lower qualifications (Chesters and Wyn, 2019). Similarly, again employers and business interest groups are aided by governments to incentivise young people to pursue further education to improve their 'employability' or to align themselves with 'needs and interests of businesses' (Sukarieh and Tannock, 2015). Here, employability is elastically defined as a set of skills attributes, attitudes, knowledges and experiences that increase the chances of finding and maintaining employment (MacDonald and Giazitzoglu, 2019). As recognised in the work of Livingstone (2019), employability seems to strongly coincide with the reconstructions of human capital discourse in advanced capitalist societies increasingly contending with highly qualified but underemployed labour relations.

Instead of being a cure-all, some of the literature identifies mass numbers of young people pursuing further education as an 'opportunity trap' whereby an oversupply of graduates crowds out the labour market, making it harder to find high-quality, graduate jobs (Brown 2013). This asymmetry between lower- and higher-quality opportunities engenders another type of

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underemployment (Brown *et al*., 2011) in which young people find themselves overeducated in terms of the possible applications of their education in the vacancies of the labour market. This qualification-vacancy problem becomes cyclical as entry into the labour market becomes increasingly difficult because of the premium put on higher-level qualifications by the market. Indeed, the valorisation of qualifications by the market itself reinforces the discourse that reinvestment in human capital (e.g., higher education) are necessary to gainfully entering the competitive labour market (Chesters and Wyn 2019). As emphasised above, however, this is not borne out in the literature comparing fast- or slow- track to the market outcomes (MacDonald, 2011). Instead, the net result of this competitive feedback cycle is 'credential inflation' where the level of educational qualifications required for a particular job increases despite there being no increase in the actual level of skill required (Brown, Lauder and Ashton, 2011; Chesters and Wyn, 2019).

Credential inflation has a cascading effect whereby jobs that had in past eras been taken up by those without high school-level qualifications are now taken up by those with tertiary qualifications who have been forced out of their types of jobs they would normally take up by those with postgraduate degrees (Chesters and Wyn, 2019). This, however, appears to mask the basic functioning of advanced capitalism in which an oversupply qualified worker helps maintain exploitative social reproduction (Groleau and Smith, 2019). Indeed, Lewis and Heyes (2020) suggest that the supply of educated workers outstrips the numbers of 'good' jobs that require a high level of education despite the shift towards a skill-intensive, knowledge economy.

Overeducation as a form of underemployment becomes even more of a problem for young people if they also find themselves in a job in which their skills and knowledge are not utilised. This underutilisation presents another form of underemployment – vertical underemployment (Lewis and Heyes, 2020). Vertical underemployment can have an impact on individuals in terms of well-being. Evidence has found that overeducation leads to higher dissatisfaction with both jobs and life compared with those who are not overeducated (Sellami, Verhaest, Nonneman and Trier, 2019). Vertical underemployment also has an impact upon earnings: individuals who were overeducated in fields that were not related to their studies were subjected to three times the penalty to those whose degrees were related to their field (Li, Malvin and Simonson, 2014). Vertical underemployment also represents a wider impact upon society through a loss of productivity and (over)investment into education and training opportunities that are not activated by present or forecasted market demand (Lewis and Heyes, 2020). Indeed, the long-term impacts of vertical underemployment are evidenced in data from the United Kingdom, Germany and Italy where young people who were over-qualified had less chances of moving into better jobs (Lewis and Heyes, 2020).

Young people can feel a sense of being overqualified for a job which is a form of subjective underemployment or what Livingstone (2004: 206) observes as the "perception of overqualification for current job; [an] unfilled desire to use work skills that are unrecognized in present job; and a sense of entitlement to a better job". Cunningham (2015: 227) expands upon this idea: 'in many cases, it is an individual's education that dictates whether the individual is underemployed, with the critical question being whether the skills obtained in college find realization in one's occupation'. Here, Cunningham (2015) is suggesting that underemployment is not only subjective but operates on a case-by-case basis in which the individual decides whether they are underemployed depending on the match between their skills and their occupation. Indeed, Mehta and colleagues (2011) suggests that overeducation only matters when individuals begin to question their investment in education as opposed to other pathways, which can often be the case for young people who churn between cycles of unemployment and underemployment (Allen, 2016).

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In the instance of one study of second-generation Ghanaian Canadians living in Greater Toronto, adaptive preferences based on perceived bias against minorities in the local labour market existed (Agyekum, 2016). In this study, there was evidence of young people accepting that their qualifications would not be recognised by their local labour markets. Similarly, an Australian study echoed this theme of young people's acceptance of overqualification– "a normal condition of life, preferable to unemployment" (Burrows, 2013: 394). Hence, in these studies, overeducation is not invariably perceived as a barrier to another pathway by young people (Mehta *et al*., 2011), but is instead something that is to be accepted out of necessity or as a survival technique. Such an accepting disposition coincides with what Brown (2013: 393) emphasises as the core logic of neoliberal capitalist societies that "accepts the injustices of market competition as a necessary evil in an increasingly competitive world".

6. DISCUSION, TRAJECTORIES AND CONCLUSION

Youth underemployment is conceptualised, operationalised and deployed in the literature identified here in various ways. Most of the research does not define youth underemployment. In so doing, youth underemployment becomes a discursive device used to propel a generalised discussion of the challenges facing young people as they broadly relate to making the transition from school to work and the increasingly precarious labour market. Despite this salient conceptual deficit within the literature, this review was able to not only locate but differentiate the common definitional framings researchers employed to infuse greater conceptual clarity into their arguments and the attendant and intersecting struggles faced by young people. Within this body of literature, underemployment amongst young people was not univocally articulated but tended towards the integration of both subjective and objective measures in which to observe or take stock of youth underemployment as a social problem in need of political, social and even conceptual investment.

Amongst the literature that provides an identifiable conceptualisation of youth underemployment, the most frequent and interrelated factors discussed are education and overeducation. Interestingly, despite the interrelationship between education and skills, there is less of a focus on vertical underemployment, skill-related or occupational mis-match types of underemployment. These forms of underemployment appear to be largely invisible in the wider sociology of youth or youth studies literature. This finding indicates that youth underemployment is not being defined by researchers as a shortage of skills or even a social problem predominantly characterised by a lack of skills- or occupational-relevant mobilities and opportunities. Instead, the literature overwhelmingly illuminates neoliberal ideology solidifying a belief in a credential-commensurate labour market that does not recognise – or even actively obfuscates – the 'trap' of the inner logics of 'performocracy' and for-profit and massified education systems (Brown, 2013). That is, educational signifiers of performance capacity do not themselves reflect a need within the labour market. Instead, brokerage and supply-side interventions and innovations are necessary to create more qualification- and skills-commensurate opportunities for young people.

Similarly, the massification and drive to further, often higher forms of educational qualifications was identified as having a cascading effect that means non-graduate and so-called low-quality and unskilled jobs are now over-credentialed to reflect the oversupply of graduate candidates (Chesters and Wyn, 2019). As such, overeducation is overwhelmingly conceptualised as the normative condition operative in graduate and non-graduate young people's lives by both researchers and the young people themselves. Crucially, this normative condition is regularly located by researchers as reflective of a lack of political will to go beyond the depoliticising rhetoric of meritocratic marketplaces and the political expediencies of 'employability' education and training policies. These findings reflect broader critical

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discussions of the neoliberalisation of education and labour market policies both in Australia and internationally (Bessant, Farthing and Watts, 2017).

Further, overeducation is oftentimes positioned by underemployed young people as involving affective and embodied adaptations that can be characterised as coping or survival strategies in the face of destabilising and overwhelmingly negative transitions into the labour market. In some instances, this strategic coping involves the acceptance of overeducation (Steffy, 2017; Tevington, 2017) and an investment in the 'right choice' that will hopefully pay future dividends towards gainful employment – something that can be called 'hope labour' (Allan, 2019). Despite this belief by young people, there is a subtext throughout the sociological and youth studies literature that these strategic zones of acceptance and hope operate to maintain a self-image of productivity or to instil purposiveness to their education and training or job-seeking experiences – to attach stable meaning to the 'crisis of youth transitions' (MacDonald, 2011) – rather than anchored in any realities of labour markets themselves. In this sense, many articles reviewed operate from a subtext of a 'cruel optimism' (Berlant, 2011) as a part of a neoliberal belief structure that inheres in the well-ventilated promissory policy statements about education's possibilities despite living in an age of austerity and more frequent financial crises (Dardot and Laval, 2019). In particular, the disproportionate impact underemployment has on young women, culturally diverse and working-class young people are to be highlighted and require further investigation (Allen , 2016; Chung and Lam, 2009; Prause and Dooley, 2011; Steffy, 2017; Tevington, 2017; Wyn *et al*., 2017).

In recognition of the above considerations, we contend it is necessary that research agendas embracing a concept of youth underemployment better conceptualise the differential and intersectional impacts of low-quality employment on young people's lives. This entails adopting a conceptualisation of youth underemployment that is not just partitioned across measures of subjective and objective factors but also endeavours to explore the complex variegation and reticulations of these dimensions. We put forward a new conceptualisation of youth underemployment, reframing it as *less employment*, rather than *under*employment or *mal*employment (Fogg and Harrington 2011) which acknowledges from the outset there is *less* employment and *less* work for young people and as a result fewer opportunities and ultimately little social mobility arising from employment for young people than in previous eras (Churchill 2020; Kalleberg, 2018; Bauman, 2016; Standing, 2011). By framing it in this way, we acknowledge the political realities of work and employment for young people in an increasingly uncertain and precarious contemporary era, rather than comparing young people's work hours or preferences to the standard full-time working week which is often the case when discussing underemployment. It also brings us back to McKee-Ryan and Harvey's (2011) broader idea of underemployment as "working in a job that is below the employee's full working capacity". However, as identified in this article, 'full capacity' is contingent on several factors, including whether there are the jobs and opportunities for young people.

Further, in reframing and retooling concepts like youth underemployment or malemployment as *less employment*, subjective dimensions of underemployment – for example, young people 'choosing' to be less employed – can be given more emphasis particularly for this demographic who are trying to navigate post-school transitions. We can extend this idea of *less employment* to think about *lesser employment*, which better captures young people young people using *less* of their educational qualifications and training in their job due to overqualification. It also includes those who do not feel like they are using their education (overeducation) or experience or those who are employed in a *lesser* job that should be better or providing them with more (McKee-Ryan and Harvey, 2011). The idea of *less* or *lesser* employment can also help us think through emerging issues like work from the platform or gig economy, which people increasingly turning to because more 'standard' forms of

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employment are becoming inadequate (Churchill and Craig 2019). In combination, the sensitising concept of *less(er)* can be conceived emphasising both the diminishing *quantitative* opportunities of the labour market and the *qualitative* differences of forms of employment that disrupt, delay or disorientate the life course of young people.

This shift might necessitate the adaptation of methodological positions and the methods deployed 'on the ground' by researchers, namely a movement beyond a combination of statistical or objective measures and interview-based ethnographic research, the latter of which is often deployed to assess underemployment beyond the temporal kind. In this instance, when research intends to contribute to transformative agendas, it may necessitate the use of a hybridity of theories that locate policy problems like youth underemployment as operating across dynamic nexuses of actors, identities, institutions and governance structures (Lamont and Molnàr, 2002; Latour, 2005; Whittington, 2011; Bjerregaard and Jonasson 2014; Denis, Lamothe and Langley, 2001). Further, exploring what affective and embodied practice-based and routinised landscapes coextend with and are problematic for young people experiencing underemployment in neoliberal times is also needed (Berlant, 2011). This is particularly needed given the post-pandemic world young people will inhabit.

By forwarding less(er) emphases, agenda-setting sociological and policy-driven research will be able to more granularly articulate and conceptualise the role of neoliberal political and discursive structures driving poor outcomes for young people. Indeed, as found throughout this review, literature is oftentimes left with palpable discontinuities between the emphasis upon neoliberalisation and specifying *how* neoliberal ideological beliefs or discursive formations materialised or subjectivised themselves into their examinations of youth underemployment. For example, how do performance and productivity discourses inhere in conversations with young people, youth underemployment and education policies or even operate as a presuppositional logic of 'objective' data collection instruments used by governments, universities or research organisations. From this perspective, the reviewed literature could further demonstrate both the quantitative and qualitative meso-level linkages and drivers between ideological or governmental analyses of 'performocracy' (Brown, 2013) and young people's experiences or individual outcomes. Despite its technical challenges, such creative linking-up will further shrink any doubt of the ideological operations that suffuse the intermediatory spaces between political power and its negative impacts on young people experiencing less(er) employment.

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Dr Brendan Churchill is a Research Fellow in the Melbourne Graduate School of Education at The University of Melbourne and is the Project Manager of Life Patterns, a longitudinal study following the pathways of Australian youth. His research program focuses on work and employment, including the gig economy and the future of work, and the impact of precarious work on young people, women and families. He is on the editorial boards of *Work, Employment & Society* and *Gender, Work & Organization* and is an associate editor of *Health Sociology Review*.

Chabel Khan is a PhD candidate in Social Theory and Social Policy at the University of Melbourne. His current research is located at the intersections of biopolitical theory, critical social policy, governance theory, and risk studies. His doctoral research draws upon critical and corpus-based traditions to reconceptualise the (bio)politics of risk and stigma in media and policy representations of single-parent families. Before commencing his doctoral studies, Chabel worked as a researcher and evaluator at the Brotherhood of St. Laurence's Research and Policy Centre, Melbourne, and the Centre for Program Evaluation housed at the Melbourne Graduate School of Education.

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