

Life in the graduate graveyards: exploring graduates' experiences of underemployment and evaluations of career success

Outline of Research

Background

Graduate underemployment has become a growing concern in recent years with doubts being expressed about the ability of the economy to absorb the increased supply of highly qualified individuals from 'mass higher education systems'. Given societal and individual investment in higher education, and the subsequent expectations that develop, it is surprising how little is known about graduates' experience of underemployment and the implications for individuals' future careers. This dearth of empirical work is perhaps the consequence of a prevailing assumption that graduate underemployment is a temporary transition for individuals – a form of 'bridge employment' (Feldman, 1994) during which individuals gain experience which provide a stepping stone into a 'graduate career'. Research indicates that graduates continue to expect their degree to lead to enhanced career success, defined as 'obtaining a graduate job' (King, 2003). However, the ways in which individuals who fail to achieve this success frame and cope with their situation has not been explored in depth and the present study seeks to address this gap in our knowledge.

Theoretical Approach

Relative deprivation theory has been used to understand the subjective experience of underemployment. Within this perspective, individuals desire and feel entitled to 'better jobs', comparing their personal employment situation to a referent standard (Crosby, 1979; McKee-Ryan et al, 2009). This standard is neither objective nor temporally static (Feldman et al., 2002). Whilst this is strength in trying to explain the reaction of a specific individual to situation of underemployment, the lack of a standard referent is problematic both theoretically and methodologically in terms of developing more nomothetic explanations (McKee-Ryan and Harvey, 2011). However, it is potentially less problematic when exploring the experiences of underemployed graduates, as there are prevailing expectations as to the type of employment outcomes expected as a result of their individual and societal investment in education, and there are distinct cohorts against which 'progress' or 'success' can be measured. Since they tend to have limited work experience, the group is largely defined in terms of their graduate status, which means they are a group for whom there can be some generally accepted, although potentially multiple, referent points e.g. a generic referent linked to prevailing perceptions of graduate employment or a more specific referent linked to the relative progress of graduating cohorts.

Previous work has called for the application of theoretical frameworks from the field of career research (Scurry and Blenkinsopp, 2011), specifically those on the objective-subjective

duality of career and career success. Such frameworks have received little application in the field of underemployment, despite alignment with existing theoretical approaches. As with relative deprivation theory, the career success perspective (e.g. Heslin, 2005) emphasises that individuals evaluate their employment situation by comparison with a referent standard. We apply these theoretical frameworks to explore the ways in which individual graduates frame their underemployment and the implication that this has for their reactions.

Methodology

Debates exist as to the definition of graduate employment (Scurry and Blenkinsopp, 2011). To 'side-step' these debates we gathered data from graduates in 'McGrad Jobs' (Purcell et al., 1999) – call centre operatives with little discretion, low levels of skill variety and little control. Adopting a qualitative approach, we gathered data from 17 individuals over a period of 24 months using semi-structured research interviews, informal conversations and observations.

Preliminary Findings

The graduates acknowledged they were in a situation of underemployment. They referred to themselves as 'phone monkeys' (because they said that a trained monkey could do their job) and had no illusions about the extent to which their jobs might be considered graduate employment. However, the ways in which they framed their underemployment and their reactions to it changed over time and in different ways.

Central to how they framed their experience was the notion of a 'referent other'. The graduates were highly selective in terms both of the choice of referents and the features of the referent's situation to which they attended. These strategies of selecting useful referents could however be challenged by the perceptions of significant others, both real (e.g. parents) and imagined (e.g. future employers). As time passed it was progressively more difficult for the graduates to identify referents whose situation enabled them to minimise their sense of relative deprivation and consequently their perceptions of underemployment. In addition, their situation no longer conformed to the expected patterns for a graduate, or fit with others (in particular parents) expectations of bridge employment. This heightened their sense of underemployment, and provoked two distinct patterns of behavioural response, which we term taking control and losing control.

Taking control

This group began to make and pursue specific career plans, aware of the time that they had been in their situation and how they thought others, particularly future employers, would view this. This group also tried to physically distance themselves from others, feeling that the close knit social grouping was preventing them from 'moving on' and 'breaking the cycle'.

Losing control

This group did not engage in job search or other career related activities. This group displayed negative response to their underemployment, becoming withdrawn from work, and

engaging in negative behaviours both inside and outside of work, most notably heavy drinking. They surrounded themselves with individual's in similar situations, willing to validate their account of their jobs as a 'temporary stop gap'.

Conclusions and Implications

This research challenges the sanguine view that graduates in situations of underemployment are merely in a temporary situation of transitional or 'bridge' employment which is part of the course of early career exploration or 'floundering' (Mortimer et al, 2009). Our findings have highlighted that when individuals fail to frame their experience in temporary, bridge employment terms they fail to engage with the career behaviours (career planning, job search) which will help them to exit the situation of underemployment. This is further exacerbated by the perceived, and actual, lack of 'graduate' employment opportunities and a growing sense of having 'missed the boat' in reference to others who graduated at the same time. This has significant implications for individuals, organisations and society.