

## **Underemployment: Social Fact or Socially Constructed Reality?\***

***Curtis W. Stofferahn***

*Department of Sociology, University of North Dakota*

**ABSTRACT** This paper contrasts rural underemployment as a social fact with rural underemployment as a socially constructed reality. Using both survey data and in-depth interviews with persistently underemployed rural residents, we were able to determine whether we were imposing our definition of reality on the interviewees. The data from the interviews largely demonstrated a correspondence between our objective definition of reality as defined by measures of underemployment and the informants' subjective interpretation of their employment situation. This procedure demonstrated that the underemployed had created their own subjective reality, which had become an objective reality: a socially created fact. A few cases, however, raised concerns about the extent to which that reality was widely shared because the interviewees' definitions did not correspond to our objective definitions or did not make sense in their own situations. Other interviewees' comments raised significant questions about the applicability of formal labor market concepts and measures, which tend to overlook the unique characteristics of rural labor markets such as uncompensated labor, self-employment, and multiple job holding. Thus the in-depth interviews provided conceptual checks on the extent to which we can impose our definitions of the situation on respondents' subjective reality.

Underemployment is a chronic condition in rural America (Briggs 1981; Carter 1982; Kayitsinga and Bokemeier 1995; Lichter 1987; Lichter and Costanzo 1986), but aside from aggregate measures of underemployment based on survey data, we know comparatively little about the subjective experiences of the underemployed. Since 1987 we have studied rural underemployment through a series of survey questions that provided objective data for constructing various measures of underemployment. We were troubled by whether our classification of respondents as underemployed, based on the survey responses, bore any resemblance to their subjective experience. We never once asked respondents whether our objective indicator corresponded to their subjective perceptions of their employment status; we assumed this to be the case.

The research presented here provided us with the opportunity to conduct a reality check through in-depth interviews. In this paper we compare the objective measures of underemployment as constructed by sociologists with the subjective experience of underemployment as defined by those we identified as underemployed.

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### Literature Review

This review focuses on ethnographic or anthropological case studies that describe rural people and their subjective experiences with underemployment. Our review is not intended to be either comprehensive or exhaustive; our goal was to find literature that could reveal the subjective understandings of the rural underemployed. Work by Fitchen (1981) and Harvey (1993) provided us with a description of the subjective experience of the working poor in rural communities; the work of Pappas (1989) and Nelson and Smith (1999) furnished a complementary account of the subjective experiences of recently downsized workers in small towns in the industrial heartland. Here we focus only on those aspects of the literature which deal with the meaning of work, self-esteem, and individualism and collective action.

### The Meaning of Work

Among the underemployed, the meaning of work varies according to whether they have "good" or "bad" jobs, their job security, whether their jobs provide a living wage, and their gender. Those in "good" jobs believe that they should put full effort into their work (Nelson and Smith 1999). They expect that their loyalty to the firm should be rewarded by job security, a living wage, opportunities for advancement, encouragement of personal growth, and a reasonable amount of work. Workers with "bad" jobs, however, believe they owe their employers nothing beyond showing up and doing their job. In return, they require only appreciation and respect from their employers in addition to benefits that are associated with decent work.

Workers' commitment to work can be shaken severely by the job loss resulting from a plant closure (Pappas 1989). Most of the former workers share a basic belief in the value of work, but the closure threatens that value. Although their motivation to work continues, their commitment to a particular job or place is weakened. The motivational system that supports work changes with the plant closing: that system includes secure, high-paying union jobs. The necessity of work remains, but it acquires different meaning under conditions of high unemployment and job insecurity.

Although the rural working poor are strongly committed to work, their employment often does not keep them out of poverty (Fitchen 1981). Even so, work is a central component of their self-concept: they believe that work is the respectable way to support oneself or one's family. They judge a man harshly who can work but does not. Being a good worker is a matter of pride and recognition. Their commitment to work, however, is insufficient to raise them out of poverty, while the social rewards are as low as the financial compensation.

Rural women derive less meaning from their role as wage earners than from their role as mothers, homemakers, or wives (Fitchen 1981). Money is their major reason for working; it supplements their husbands' low or insecure wages. It also enables them to determine how their wages will be spent; they gain satisfaction from social interaction with others on the job; and they enjoy getting away from the home.

### **Underemployment and Self-Esteem**

The amount of self-esteem that the underemployed derive from their work also varies according to whether they have "good" or "bad" jobs, their job security, and their gender. For workers with "good" jobs, self-esteem is easy to maintain. This is much more difficult, however, for those with "bad" jobs (Nelson and Smith 1999). Most workers in "bad" jobs find little chance to develop a positive self-image. All they can do to maintain their self-esteem is to refuse to accept bad treatment and to seek different jobs when conditions become intolerable. Even "good" jobs, however, do not always provide self-esteem. Sometimes workers must resort to entrepreneurial moonlighting and self-provisioning to achieve some self-worth and individual pride (Nelson and Smith 1999).

A series of "bad" jobs can result in diminished self-esteem, especially for men (Fitchen 1981). Most expect the same for themselves as they have seen happen to others. Most of these "bad" jobs offer little opportunity for initiative or development; they do not provide workers with adequate income to support their families. This exposure to continual failure leads to further loss of self-esteem and to diminished expectations, which become self-reinforcing.

Rural male workers in marginal, stigmatizing jobs that provide little self-esteem find their self-worth outside their jobs (Harvey 1993). Through car cult activities and agrarian leisure rituals they construct alternative ego-enhancing conceptions of self-worth that neutralize the stigma of their employment. Despite these stigmatizing jobs, however, these male workers associate work with self-esteem. Their masculinity is tied up with the idea that they are steady workers and the primary source of support for their families.

The general situation of low-level jobs with limited returns exists for the rural women as well as the men, but the negative effects of work are less pernicious for women (Fitchen 1981). Fewer women work outside the home, they work fewer years, and they experience less work-related and personal failure. They have less ego involvement in their role as wage earners than as spouses, mothers, and homemakers.

The loss of employment leads to a loss of self-esteem for both men and women (Pappas 1999). After a plant closing, most of the former workers cannot find work that provides them with the same

degree of identity and satisfaction as their former jobs. When these former workers lose their usual ways of realizing an acceptable way of life through work, their economic stability and home ownership are disrupted; they lose self-respect and a sense of well-being (Nelson and Smith 1999).

### **Underemployment, Individualism, and Collective Action**

Two explanations are offered for the lack of a collective response by the unemployed (Nelson and Smith 1999). According to one explanation, a strong streak of individualism prohibits them from responding collectively and leads them to blame themselves rather than those who caused their predicament (Thurow 1996). The other explanation is that American workers are willing to trade meaningful work, good wages, and job security for increased leisure (Rifkin 1996; Shor 1996).

Pappas (1989) supports the first explanation: the unemployed tend to personalize their predicaments. They deal with and understand their situation in personal rather than public terms (Brittan 1977). They do not consider their problems to be social or political, and they tend to withdraw from public affairs (Scholzman and Verba 1979). The utilitarianism associated with individualism is based on economic understandings of one's place in the world (Pappas 1989). The conditions created by unemployment lead to hyper-individualism and to a cynical view of the world.

Nelson and Smith (1999), however, suggest that the causes are much more complex. Workers in both "good" and "bad" jobs exonerate their employers from any responsibility for their employment situation. Combined with that exoneration is the "good"-job worker's disappointment resulting from the fact that the historical Fordist contract has been shattered. Men are especially disappointed when their careers are not what they had expected: they see their privileges declining. Some of the more optimistic workers view their relationship with their employers in highly individualistic terms, believing that improvements in their condition will result from their own efforts. Therefore they position themselves to make the most of what they have. Many resort to entrepreneurial moonlighting or self-provisioning as a way to increase household income, to gain access to discretionary income, to evade household responsibilities, or in response to workplace disappointment. By doing so, they create an alternative source of satisfaction and meaning. Thus they adopt restricted and diminished expectations and reduce demands on their employers.

### **Theoretical Perspectives**

In this study we test the assumptions of the objectivists, exemplified by functionalism, and of the subjectivists, exemplified by eth-

nomethodology, as these relate to underemployment. The assumptions of these two orientations are demonstrated most clearly by their methods of conducting research: functionalism tends to be primarily quantitative, whereas ethnomethodology emphasizes a qualitative approach.

Sociologists remain divided between those who emphasize that social facts are objective—external and independent of individuals—and those who reject the idea of a social fact because what is considered to be a fact is actually a social construction that depends on the conceptual lens applied to a situation.

Functionalists tend to argue for a single objective reality that exists as a social fact. Durkheim made the most explicit argument for such a position by defining a social fact as that “which is general over the whole of a given society whilst having an existence of its own, independent of its individual manifestations” (1964:13). He defines social facts as “a category of facts” with unique properties, “consisting of ways of acting, thinking and feeling, external to the individual and endowed with a power of coercion by means of which they control him” (1964:3). His purpose was to demonstrate that social facts were largely external to individuals, and therefore could be studied objectively as external “social currents.”

Ethnomethodologists, by contrast, argue that the alleged objective reality of social facts is a human creation. Garfinkel, the founder of ethnomethodology, disagrees with Durkheim’s view. Instead, he says, the objective reality of social facts is an “ongoing accomplishment of the concerned activities of everyday life” (Garfinkel 1967:viii). According to Garfinkel, individuals refer to, or identify, social facts, such as taken-for-granted norms or values, which they use to define the meaning of the situation for them. By making sense of the situation through applying understood social norms, they create social reality; they order their experiences to be congruent with their everyday social world.

Ethnomethodology denies the functionalist idea that social facts exhibit an external reality and that social order is an objective force created by society independent of individuals’ experiences and lives (Garfinkel 1967). Instead ethnomethodologists regard social reality as the consequence of rational actors’ imputation of meaning to situations. In contrast to the functionalists, who do not examine individuals’ ability to create meanings, ethnomethodologists focus on the methods and the implied understandings that people use to create social reality.

This debate concerns not only the relationship between individuals and the nature of social reality, but also how sociologists come to perceive that reality. Objectivists argue that sociologists can legitimately discern objective reality from data obtained from mailed or telephone interviews, and thereby can develop indicators of that

objective reality. In contrast, according to subjectivists, sociologists cannot assume that their objective notions of reality are the same as those of their subjects. They believe that sociologists must divorce themselves from their assumptions about reality and instead must discover how their subjects construct social reality. Cicourel (1964:212) argues that quantitative measures focus on the "outer horizon," or distributions such as occupational scales or social class rankings. He believes that instead we should focus on the inner horizon, which includes "idiomatic expressions, course of action motives, and institutional and innovational language" (p. 223).

To arrive at the inner horizon, Cicourel advocates the use of ethnomethodology. Ethnomethodologists search for conditions in which they can investigate actors "making sense" of a situation. In these situations, they examine how actors employ understood and unstated rules about behavior to give meaning to an interaction situation, and they look at the methods used by actors to construct social reality. Among the most successful methods used by ethnomethodologists to gather data about the inner horizon are open-ended or in-depth interviews.

### **Methodology**

#### **Selection of Interviewees**

The Social Science Research Institute (SSRI) at the University of North Dakota, through annual rural life polls, has monitored rural underemployment among small-town residents since 1987 and among farm residents since 1988. These surveys involve a longitudinal panel design that receives "human subjects" approval from the institutional review board (IRB) each time the survey is conducted. The IRB requires us, as principal researchers in all of the studies, to maintain the confidentiality of the names and identification numbers of the panel members in the database. In each survey, the panel members are promised that their responses will be confidential.

In 1987 and 1988, we measured underemployment using a modified version of the Labor Force Utilization Framework developed by Lichter and Costanzo (1986). The measures included the official measure of unemployment, the discouraged worker rate, and an involuntary part-time employment rate. In 1990 we added two further measures: employment at low income and occupational mismatch<sup>1</sup>.

We merged underemployment data from the 1987 and 1988 Small Town and Farm Operator Surveys and the 1990 Labor Market Survey into a small town file and a farm file. Because earlier studies had focused on only three measures of underemployment—

<sup>1</sup> See Lichter and Costanzo (1986) for a definition of the components of underemployment.

involuntary part-time employment, discouraged workers, and unemployment—we merged the three surveys using these three measures. In this merged file we counted the number of households in each survey in which underemployment was present, and disaggregated the underemployed by category of underemployment. Comparison across survey years permitted us to identify households with persistent underemployment (defined as two or three times in three surveys). Using the combined data, we determined the numbers of households with distinctive combinations of the components of underemployment. We were able to determine respondents' underemployment status across the three waves of the rural life poll by matching responses by identification number. Then we selected a purposive sample of 33 households with persistent underemployment.

We do not believe it is ethically improper to use data from previous surveys to identify underemployed households. This practice is not uncommon in social science. We did not reveal the identities of those surveyed to outsiders, subject them to potential embarrassment, nor do anything else that would be inappropriate.

### **The Sample**

Among the individuals in the 33 underemployed rural households, we counted 13 individuals who were classified as discouraged workers, 15 individuals who were classified as unemployed, and nine individuals who were involuntary part-time workers. Females outnumbered males by almost 2 to 1 (21 to 12). Because several individuals within each of the 33 identified underemployed households may have been underemployed, the totals may add up to more than 33. The average income was \$23,494, with a range of \$3,200 to \$46,000. Four households had incomes of less than \$10,000; five between \$10,000 and \$20,000; six between \$20,000 and \$30,000; eight between \$30,000 and \$40,000; one above \$40,000, and nine not reporting or had incomplete income data.

Half of the underemployed rural families in this study could be categorized as among the working poor. Although most of the 33 underemployed households contained at least one member who was employed most of the time, the income received from these jobs was insufficient to bring the households above 200 percent of poverty. According to the 1990 poverty guidelines, ten of the families were below 100 percent of poverty, six were between 100 and 200 percent, eleven were at or slightly above 200 percent, and six families did not report poverty figures.

Farm families were represented disproportionately among the underemployed families at or below poverty (six of 10 households), and among households between 100 and 200 percent of poverty (four of six). A majority of the persons living in the underemployed

households were employed in agriculture and agricultural service industries, professional services, construction, and retail. The underemployed worked primarily in agriculture, retail, and professional services. After agriculture, homemakers accounted for the next largest category of the underemployed. More men than women were underemployed in agriculture, whereas more women than men were underemployed in retail and professional services. Among household members who were employed, more men than women worked in agriculture and construction, whereas women outnumbered men in professional services.

To further understand the relationship between unemployment and the nature of industrial employment, we classified industries according to the dual economy typology. Following Tolbert, Horan, and Beck (1980) and Bluestone, Murphy, and Stevenson (1973), we classified industries into core and periphery economies. According to this classification, only 24 percent of the employment (15 jobs) belonged to the core economy, whereas 77 percent (51 jobs) belonged to the peripheral economy. A plurality of those working in the peripheral economy were self-employed in agriculture, except for three farm workers. The remainder of the workers in the periphery were employed by small shop owners (12), schools (9), hospitals or clinics (3), and the city (1).

### **The Interview Process**

Data were gathered by "intensive interviews" (Williamson et al. 1984:166), also known as "in-depth interviews" (Banaka 1971). As a guide, we used a list of general topics to be covered rather than a rigid questionnaire schedule. The interviews were primarily "non-schedule standardized." The non-schedule standardized interviewer "formulates the classes of information s/he is seeking and tries to phrase the questions in such a way that they will have the same meaning for each respondent" (Richardson et al., 1965:45).

Our first contact with the long-term underemployed was a brief telephone conversation in which we discussed the criteria for including them in the study and explained how they came to be selected. We asked them if they would be interested in participating in an in-depth interview; the results would be confidential. If they agreed to be interviewed, we arranged a time for a meeting.

At the scheduled interview time, we again reviewed with these persons how they came to be selected, assured them that their responses would be confidential, and asked them whether they wished to be interviewed. If they agreed, we presented them with a consent form to be signed, which stated that we had reviewed with them the issues of confidentiality and that they agreed to be interviewed. We also asked them whether they minded being tape-recorded. Of the 33 individuals we interviewed, only two refused to be taped. In



these two cases, the interviewer took extensive notes while conducting the interview, and read the notes into the tape recorder after the interview had been completed. These data were supplemented by interviewers' observations, which were used to confirm, clarify, or question what the respondent had said in the interview.

We began the interview by explaining the concept of underemployment. We asked the respondents whether they agreed with the classification and whether they considered themselves to be underemployed, on the basis of the definition provided. Our purpose was to allow those whom we had classified as underemployed to confirm or deny our assumptions about their objective employment status, which we had derived from survey data. We also asked respondents whether we should be concerned about them. In asking this question, we were interested in determining whether they viewed their underemployment status as a personal or a public problem (Mills 1959).

In a related question, we examined whether we were learning about the underemployed or whether we were contributing to the creation of "underemployed" persons through the application of our definition. Because the interviewees had been surveyed for three waves of the rural life poll, we believed they may already have been familiar with the questions designed to explore the various dimensions of rural underemployment. Furthermore, because of the news coverage of the rural labor market survey, many also may have read the news releases on the subject. Therefore we felt that our respondents may have been relatively familiar with the concept from these previous exposures, and may already have internalized and objectified it as a reality.

It may be that we were not really asking interviewees for their own subjective definitions of underemployment as much as we were asking them whether our definition was "correct"—whether it had any congruence with their subjective reality as being underemployed. Thus the interview situation involved a comparison between our "objective" reality of underemployment based on survey data and their subjective experience of underemployment. During the remainder of the interview, we explored how the interviewees experienced their employment situations, what constituted a good job and a good wage, how they made a living, and what could be done to improve their employment situations.<sup>2</sup>

### **The Constant Comparative Method**

We analyzed the data gathered from in-depth interviews using the constant comparative method (Glaser and Strauss 1967). This

<sup>2</sup> For further discussion of these topics, see Stofferahn et al. (1991), and Stofferahn (1997).

method involves developing and conditionally suggesting many categories, properties, and hypotheses about general problems. Some of these properties may be causes; others are conditions, consequences, dimensions, types, processes, and the like. Four stages are involved in this method (Glaser and Strauss 1967:105): (1) comparing incidents applicable to each category by coding each incident into as many categories as possible and comparing the incident with previous incidents in the category; (2) integrating concepts and their properties by comparing incidents with one another, and moving incidents found to be comparable to the same category which allows properties of the category to become integrated; (3) delimiting the theory by reducing categories through uncovering similarities in the original set of categories or their properties and then developing the theory with fewer concepts; and (4) writing the theory on the basis of the analysis of the coded data, memos describing the data, and the preliminary theory.

The constant comparative method can produce either discus-sional or propositional theory: a researcher can either discuss the properties of a category or write formal propositions about a category. The discus-sional presentation is useful at the exploratory stage of theory development, and can be translated into propositions later. The present analysis is discus-sional.

### **Analysis**

In this analysis, to determine the degree of congruence, we compare our objective definition of the interviewees as underemployed with their subjective definition of their own situation. We discovered that the three components of underemployment we used to identify them—unemployed, discouraged, and involuntary part-time employed—were easily understood in terms of their own experience because a majority were either discouraged workers or sub-employed. Although these definitions were not part of their own indexical expressions, they were clear within their common-sense understandings. When we asked whether they had ever considered themselves underemployed, 20 of the 33 interviewees said that they considered themselves as such, five did not, and three were ambivalent. For various reasons, we did not ask this question of the remaining five interviewees.

Later in the interview we asked the respondents whether “we”—meaning academics or government officials—should be concerned about them. We wished to learn whether they perceived their situation in personal or public terms. Fourteen of the interviewees provided analyzable answers; the remainder provided brief responses, did not answer, or were not asked the question. Those who provided brief responses such as “Yes” or “Of course” with no elaboration indicated to us that they thought the answer to the question

was so self-evident that it hardly required explanation. Their responses reminded us of the “sanctioned properties of discourse” (Garfinkel 1967).

### Recognizing Underemployment

*“The way things are; you just get used to it.”* Six interviewees indicated that underemployment was a common, pervasive, and natural condition in rural North Dakota. Thus, when presented with the concept, they said they were not surprised. They found that our objective measures of underemployment corresponded to their subjective experiences. By recognizing underemployment as common, pervasive, and natural, they were ordering their own and others’ experiences to be congruent with their everyday world. Their shared experience of living in a rural area where jobs are scarce and workers abundant provided them with data to interpret the situation as one of underemployment. By recognizing underemployment as a natural phenomenon, they were also imputing meaning to the situation.

Three respondents indicated that the condition was so pervasive that “you just get used to being underemployed.” Another stated that underemployment is so “common” a condition of rural life that “you think of it all the time. Anytime you’re looking for a job or anytime your kids are looking for a job. Or anybody you know. I mean it’s just about impossible to get full time (work). . . . You know it [the problem] is there [all the time].” Another respondent echoed this theme: “[I] definitely [consider myself to be underemployed]. I’ve got a lot of friends that are looking for work and can’t find any. Not in this area anyway.”

*“A natural condition.”* Similar to those who considered themselves to be underemployed and thought it was a pervasive condition were those who said there were so many underemployed persons that it had become a “natural” condition and therefore not problematic. These respondents had effectively redefined the situation to be consistent with their experiences. One person’s comment indicated the discouragement that he felt from this “natural” condition: “You bet [I think of myself as underemployed]. Underemployed. Probably a little discouraged. This year I’m a pile discouraged.” Another recognized that underemployment was “just the way things are around here”: “It’s not my fault. At least I don’t think it’s my fault because I’m qualified to do a lot of jobs. But heck, jobs just don’t exist, or they are filled by other people. There just aren’t that many jobs around.”

Not only did respondents recognize underemployment as a common and pervasive condition; some even came to accept it as a natural occurrence in rural areas, and thus not a reason for undue concern. One said she did not feel depressed, upset, or angry that

she could not find full-time work. She just accepted it as "the way things are." She said she and her husband made a deliberate choice to live in rural North Dakota because of the lifestyle. Before they moved there, she didn't understand the reality of the lack of employment. Gradually, however, she came to accept it, although she preferred being employed.

*"Good jobs just aren't out there."* Many interviewees had experienced the reality of underemployment through their own unsuccessful search for full-time work. The inability to find full-time employment at decent wages was a common theme of those who considered themselves underemployed. Many indicated that they would like to find full-time employment because part-time employment did not justify the expense involved in working, especially if the job paid minimum wage.

In these quotes, interviewees referred to their experiences in searching for jobs at good wages and to their knowledge of the prevailing wages for the few available jobs as justification for not accepting jobs that would not cover expenses. Their actions were the consequence of rationally imputing meaning to situations by drawing on their common stock of knowledge about the labor market and on their own particular experiences.

Yeah, [I consider myself to be underemployed], 'cause it just doesn't pay. I've got one in school, they start now the end of August. And I've got one that'll start in November. And I have a baby. And the sitter costs anywhere from \$14 to \$22 a day. So . . . I say, unless you get a good-paying job, it just doesn't pay to get out there. And I've looked, and to work just doesn't pay. . . . it's just discouraging.

A soon-to-retire farmer also expressed his dissatisfaction with the minimum-wage, part-time jobs available to him. Although employed full-time on the farm, he considered himself underemployed because of his discouragement in finding an off-farm job. His problem was that the farm could not support two families: him and his wife, and his son's family. Thus he needed either to find part-time employment to supplement his farm income or to find a full-time off-farm job to allow him to retire from farming.

Well, I haven't been out there, gonna take every minimum wage job, just because it's . . . to have something to do. I mean, I was looking, I have been looking for something that's to either supplement my income or else get in full time. . . . I'm looking for a position where I'm not just taking a job away from somebody else, but to make use of my time so I can supplement my income or else get into a line of work where I can turn my farm over to a younger member of the family.

Although this respondent was employed full-time, and thus technically not underemployed by our definition, he considered himself underemployed because he could not find suitable employment off the farm. He ignored the objective definitions on the survey and redefined them to fit his own situation. His response demonstrates a problem with the definitions of underemployment and formal labor force participation; in these definitions, it is assumed that everyone is employed by someone else. The definitions exclude those who are self-employed, such as farmers, or otherwise not in the labor force, such as homemakers, who nevertheless engage in unpaid domestic labor. Another respondent spoke of the sadness and futility she had experienced:

I think it's really sad . . . that you've been put in this position. (What put you in this position? What creates this position?) There are so many factors. Like where would you even start to solve the problem? And I don't think it's going to be solved in ten years, fifteen years. Going to be long-range.

Two were employed in seasonal farm work but wanted off-season employment. Another worked as an on-call relief postmaster whose hours varied considerably. Mothers frequently mentioned that they had worked on and off since they had been married, but they found it difficult to take full-time jobs when they had family responsibilities. A city employee cut back on her hours under doctor's orders, but when the doctor approved her to go back to work full-time, the city council decided that the workload did not merit full-time employment.

### **Not Underemployed**

Some respondents did not consider themselves underemployed for several reasons: the definitions of underemployment did not correspond to their situation, or their employment situation had changed since the survey. These explanations indicate the problematic nature of using the formal labor force definitions discussed above. Such explanations, however, did not contradict our classification of these respondents as underemployed.

*"Cheap labor."* The reply that the definition of underemployment did not fit their situation was characteristic of full-time homemakers as well as farmers who wanted an outside job. These interviewees were employed full-time without compensation (in the case of homemakers), or their labor typically was discounted (as among farmers and farm wives).

Homemakers usually are not considered part of the labor force, although they are employed without pay in the home. The homemakers in our sample mentioned that they were employed full-time at

home, but that they needed a job to help support their family or the farm. One mentioned that she felt like "cheap labor." She had worked outside the home when she was first married, but quit to raise a family. Although she wished to go back to work and had looked for employment, she realized that part-time work at minimum wages would not pay for mileage and baby-sitting; yet her work as a full-time homemaker and farmwife was not compensated.

Farmers also pointed out that the definition of underemployment did not fit their situation. Their problem was that full-time farm work did not provide a full-time income; they needed an outside income to support their family.

### **Expressing Ambivalence or Acceptance**

Those who were ambivalent about describing themselves as underemployed had already come to terms with their situation and had redefined it such that they no longer considered it problematic. For the most part, they had concluded that they could not be underemployed when there were no opportunities for employment. In this case, their definitions were similar to those who defined underemployment as a natural phenomenon.

One respondent said she was not sure she would consider herself underemployed, although she thought she had the potential to do something more than she was doing. She had come to accept the fact, however, that the "jobs just weren't out there." Another respondent said she "never really gave it a thought," probably because she realized that so few jobs were available.

Three interviewees said that their employment situations, and thus their perceptions of being underemployed, had changed since they had completed the survey. A young man who had considered himself underemployed while he was working on his parents' farm had recently left the farm for full-time employment in a major city. A woman reported that she had picked up another part-time job since completing the survey. She said she was working three days a week at two jobs that she liked, and was not willing to take a full-time job because she had to help out on the farm. This woman described herself as "overemployed at low income"; this term did not fit our classification scheme, but nevertheless made perfect sense in her situation. A recently retired man had said he was involuntarily part-time employed when he filled out the survey. Since then, however, then he had come to accept his part-time status; he now had redefined his status as voluntarily part-time employed in keeping with his situation.

### **A Matter for Concern**

The 14 interviewees who provided us with analyzable answers indicated the major reasons for being concerned about them: under-

employment was a waste of human capital, a barrier to personal development, a loss of revenue, and a cost to the state. They had concluded that underemployment was a social problem worthy of interest to politicians or researchers: this fact indicated that we, the researchers, were not involved in creating underemployment. It was already part of the respondents' reality, based on their common stock of knowledge. It also indicated that they viewed underemployment as a public issue rather than a personal problem. They did not blame themselves for their predicament, and understood underemployment as a structural problem that they could not solve through their own efforts. Some respondents, however, were rather cynical about the possibility that anything would be done to remedy the situation.

*"A waste of talent."* Two of the interviewees had made their own mental survey of the number of people they knew whose skills were underutilized. They viewed underemployment as a loss of valuable human capital to the community. These individuals could draw on numerous examples to create their reality of an overqualified, underutilized pool of talent in their communities. This objective reality had subjective meaning for a few of the interviewees. They had already concluded that they were overqualified for the few jobs that might be available. As a result, they had little intention of applying for those jobs, especially because they knew there would be many applicants.

One homemaker made the connection between underemployment, underutilization of skills, and lost taxes:

Yes, definitely [they should be concerned], because that's a lot of taxes that aren't paid. A lot of talents wasted. A lot of money paid out . . . by the government. So, . . . it's kind of a loss all the way around. A loss of independence for me. I could be a lot more independent if I had more income. You're kinda restricted when you're low income.

Another respondent, who had conducted her own survey of overeducated, underutilized talent in her town, noted the tremendous loss of human capital and talent:

Yes, I do [think people should be concerned] because I think there's a lot of underemployed persons in the state that aren't being utilized. In [this town] alone there are eighty that have fulfilled their BS degrees alone. I counted down the street here. There are fifteen that have graduated or have advanced degrees from other universities. I'd say that a large portion of them are [not using their credentials].

Another respondent with firsthand information about the extent of competition among well-qualified applicants for the few available

jobs also observed the waste of human capital and talent in her community:

There are a lot of women here who would like to work. I have a friend who's working temporarily for Soil Conservation Service. And she has tried for a full-time job—a very qualified person—but every time, like I say, if something opens up, there's so many applications. . . . there's so many to choose from.

She did not think that politicians would become too concerned about the overeducated, rural underemployed, and she viewed herself as overqualified for the few jobs that were available. Although she bemoaned the lack of utilization of well-educated persons in her community, she still believed that North Dakotans should continue to pursue education because it “made you a better person—a more open and well-rounded person.”

“*A drain on society; a cost to the state.*” In addition to the indirect costs due to loss of talent and human capital, five respondents stated that underemployment had direct costs for society and the state in terms of social services. Three pointed out that being underemployed required them to make use of food stamps, rent assistance, fuel assistance, and other government programs. If they were employed, however, they would not be a drain on the state's resources. For them, underemployment was objectively factual: through their shared experiences they had created a reality of underemployment that involved increased use of social services and nonpayment of income taxes.

This reality was also subjectively meaningful for some interviewees in that they defined themselves as a burden on society or the state. One man characterized himself as a drain on society:

You bet [the people should be concerned]. . . . I'm not the only one struggling along, not even making ends meet. Not paying no tax either, and a drain on society. So, if something could happen here where I could go full-time work and start paying taxes, I wouldn't be a drain on society . . . a drain on food stamps and that stuff.

Another respondent observed that it was difficult for poor underemployed persons to compete for the few available jobs in a small town; as a result, they depended on various social services.

I think they should be [concerned], yes, because we are taxpayers, whether you're underemployed or not or not employed at all. But there isn't a whole lot (officials) can do. . . . Maybe you guys can prove me wrong. I don't know. I think they should be worried about us because this is where the money is coming from, from us. . . . And I'm not



just saying the rural areas, but I mean even town people. They say . . . well, in a small town like [this one] there's either the grocery store, the café, the bar, or [the hardware store] to work. . . . that's just the main ones I know of. And it's a terrible thing to say, but people . . . whom I think don't need the jobs are the first ones that get the jobs. And then there's people on welfare which should get the job, but they don't get a chance at the job, so they can't make a living, so they constantly live off the state. . . . I don't think it's . . . their fault, but it's just people that wouldn't need the jobs take up the jobs.

*"A lot who could be doing something, but not at minimum wage."* Rural women in particular thought we should be concerned with underemployment, especially because they constituted a large pool of potential employees. They pointed out, however, that they could not afford to work at minimum-wage, part-time jobs after considering expenses. The low wage structure, they thought, contributed to underemployment by discouraging people from working. Thus a farm wife indicated that farm wives represented a reservoir of underutilized talent who, if employed, could provide financial assistance to the farm as well as the family.

Should you be concerned with it? Well, yeah. I think that's great that you're concerned with it. Because I'm sure there are a lot of farm wives just like me . . . who are sitting out on the farm, and they could be doing something . . . And it would help . . . help the farm out financially, get the kids more. Yeah, I'm sure there's a lot of people like me sitting on these farms.

Although another farm wife had a job as a baker, which she considered to be a "good" job, she was aware that relatively well-paying jobs were scarce:

Yes, I think so. There's a lot of people looking for jobs. But there just isn't any jobs, any decent jobs. There's always jobs if you want to waitress. If you want to go to town at 5:30 in the morning and bake. . . . And I don't mind it, the pay is pretty good for what I do. . . . but there just isn't decent jobs . . . office jobs, secretary jobs. . . . Decent jobs for people to do, . . . that pay decent—around \$4–\$4.50 an hour.

Others also mentioned that low wages were a disincentive to work, especially after factoring in expenses:

[They should be concerned because] it's the wages. . . . Before that one [child] started school, I went through Job

Service and they found me a job delivering parts in [a large city in North Dakota], but for—what was the wages then? \$3.20–\$3.60, whatever it was? By the time I hire a baby sitter and [pay for] the gas, I wouldn't have no money left.

Other interviewees picked up on the same themes of low wages as a disincentive to farm wives to take an off-farm job, and the frustration that resulted when they could not find a full-time job:

Yeah, I feel frustrated [in not being able to find work] but there wasn't any work. Nothing that will pay the car trip to town and back and make money on the side. With minimum wage you can't pay out driving thirteen miles on a road back and forth. . . . You'd burn up your money on your car expense. I tried that year at the locker in town, and I didn't make any money. And then I had a kid I had to put in play school . . . and pay for that. So I probably lost money on that. But there's nothing here, though . . . and then everything's part-time, so there's no benefits; no insurance. . . . Like all the grocery store help they have, everything's part time. . . . I quit looking.

### Conclusions

In this paper we allowed the underemployed to confirm or deny our assumptions about their employment status as an objective fact, which we had derived through the rural life polls. In doing so, we compared our objective measures of underemployment with the subjective experience of underemployment as defined by the underemployed. In this process we contrasted two approaches to social reality: that social facts are objective—they are external and independent of individuals; and that social facts are subjective—individuals participate in the construction of their own reality.

The use of both survey and in-depth interview data gave us the rare opportunity to examine the epistemological and methodological issues associated with research. We found a high correspondence between our measures of underemployment and our respondents' subjective definitions. This correspondence demonstrated that the underemployed had created their own reality of underemployment, which had become an objective reality and a socially created social fact.

A few cases, however, raised concerns about the extent to which that reality was widely shared. Some of the interviewees' definitions of their situations did not conform to our "objective" definitions or did not make sense in the interviewees' own situations. Their redefinitions of their situations and of the terms convinced us that, before

we conduct more positivistic research, we must explore the meaning of the terms we use in the minds of those whom we interview.

Some comments raised significant questions about the applicability of formal labor market concepts and measures that tend to overlook those who are self-employed, either with or without compensation. We cannot know all the possible ways in which terms we use in "objective" research are understood by interviewees, nor can we know all the ways in which our interviewees experience a situation. By conducting in-depth interviews before pursuing objective research, we may discover alternative definitions and new concepts that could improve our studies.

Finally, through in-depth interviews, we discovered the diversity and depth of the experiences of rural underemployment, which we never could have learned from survey data alone. We found that some of our interview topics, which our reading of the literature led us to believe were relevant, were irrelevant; thus we dropped them from later interviews. Meanwhile we acquired new topics from the interviewees, which we explored in later interviews. We also gained insights from analysis of the interview data, which we had not considered on the basis of our own literature review. In-depth interviews not only served as a conceptual check on our externally imposed reality, but also offered a wealth of data that we would not have acquired otherwise.

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