



Hipatia Press
www.hipatiapress.com



Instructions for authors, subscriptions and further details:

<http://qre.hipatiapress.com>

Genres of Underemployment: A Dialogical Analysis of College Graduate Underemployment

Joseph Cunningham¹

1) Learning Assistance Center, University of Cincinnati, United States.

Date of publication: February 28th, 2016

Edition period: October 2015 - February 2016

To cite this article: Cunningham, J. (2016). Genres of Underemployment: A Dialogical Analysis of College Graduate Underemployment. *Qualitative Research in Education*, 5(1), 1-24. doi:10.17583/qre.2016.1393

To link this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.17583/qre.2016.1393>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

The terms and conditions of use are related to the Open Journal System and to [Creative Commons Attribution License](#) (CC-BY).

Genres of Underemployment: A Dialogical Analysis of College Graduate Underemployment

Joseph Cunningham
University of Cincinnati

(Received: 21 January 2015; Accepted: 28 September 2015; Published: 28 February 2016)

Abstract

With more individuals obtaining undergraduate and graduate degrees and the job market still recovering from the 2008 recession, the instances of college graduate underemployment (CGU) have increased throughout the United States. College graduate underemployment is an employment condition that is characterized by subjective and objective factors, most prominent of which is an incongruence between one's education and one's current job. The intriguing nature of CGU is how both employment and education merge together to influence the individual's perception of their employment prospects, their educational experiences, and their identity. This study employs a dialogical qualitative analysis to examine CGU in order to ascertain how underemployed college graduates construct narratives of their experiences and define the value of their education. Twenty in-depth interviews of underemployed college graduates from different academic disciplines are analyzed with a dialogical genre analysis developed by Paul Sullivan. Two genre pairs—epic/romance and tragedy/black comedy—are employed to illustrate the correlating modes of experience for these participants, creating new narratives that problematize the dominant education-to-employment progression.

Keywords: dialogical analysis; higher education; underemployment

Géneros de Subempleo: un Análisis Dialógico del Subempleo de Graduados Universitarios

Joseph Cunningham
University of Cincinnati

*(Recibido: 21 de enero de 2015; Aceptado: 28 de septiembre de 2015;
Publicado: 28 de febrero de 2016)*

Resumen

Con más personas que obtienen el pregrado y posgrado, y el mercado de trabajo que todavía se está recuperando de la recesión de 2008, los casos de subempleo de graduados universitarios (CGU) han aumentado en todo Estados Unidos. El subempleo de graduados universitarios, es una condición de empleo que se caracteriza por factores subjetivos y objetivos, lo más destacado de los cuales es una incongruencia entre la propia educación y el trabajo actual. La naturaleza intrigante del CGU es cómo, el empleo y la educación, se funden juntos para influir en la percepción del individuo sobre sus perspectivas de empleo, sus experiencias educativas, y sobre su identidad. Este estudio emplea un análisis dialógico cualitativo para examinar el CGU, a fin de determinar cómo subempleados graduados universitarios construyen narrativas de sus experiencias y definir el valor de su educación. Se analizan veinte entrevistas en profundidad de los graduados universitarios subempleados de diferentes disciplinas académicas con un análisis de género dialógico desarrollado por Paul Sullivan. Dos pares de géneros, épico/romance y tragedia/comedia negra, son empleados para ilustrar los modos de correlación de las experiencias de estos participantes, la creación de nuevas narrativas que problematizan la progresión dominante-educación-empleo.

Palabras clave: análisis dialógico, educación superior, subempleo

The problem of college graduate underemployment (CGU) begins not with the post-graduation job search, but before college. CGU represents the inversion of numerous expectations, most notably that the college degree is a sound gateway to gainful employment in whatever field of study captivates an individual's interests and passions. This expectation motivates the majority of the 1.8 million students in the United States who will earn a bachelor's degree, not to mention the 778,000 who will earn Master's degrees and the 177,000 who will earn doctoral degrees (National Center of Education Statistics, 2013). The American Freshmen Survey reports that 88% of participating freshmen stated that getting a better job was a reason they attended college, up nearly 20% since 2006 ("Money Lures," 2013). With quality employment opportunities scarce, the anticipatory search for employment creates a prevailing ideological imperative that compels many to go to college (Yee, 2012). However, with increasing frequency, many college graduates are finding that their expectations are not being realized, and at least initially, college graduates, across most academic disciplines, are experiencing underemployment—a condition that can persist for months, if not years, after graduation (Schmitt & Boushey, 2011).

With the job market constrained as a result of the 2008 economic crisis and the changing landscape of manual and intellectual work, underemployment remains a legitimate possibility for many college graduates. When faced with this possibility, many people shake their heads and point to the problematic nature of the job market as the primary culprit, but this, itself, is problematic because it prevents many from asking difficult questions regarding the relationship between higher education and employment. The most striking of these questions is why perceive higher education as a gateway to a career in the first place. This study will endeavor to examine the complicated nuances of this question, analyzing the ideological relationship between education and employment framed in the larger context of college graduate underemployment. By employing a dialogical analysis, the narratives of underemployed college graduates will come together to form genres of underemployment, thus unveiling crucial features of the underemployed college graduate experience and its relation to education.

Literature Review

There has been incredible rise in the number of underemployed people, college educated and not college educated, as a result of the 2008 recession. A pool of research has placed underemployment as high as fifty percent between 2010 and 2012 (Lee, 2010; Roksa & Arum, 2012) while others have it at less foreboding, but still problematic twenty-five percent during the same period (Hobijn, Gardiner, & Wiles, 2011). Additionally, the effects of CGU can linger long past graduation with 66% of underemployed graduates remaining so for at least a year (Clark, Joubert, & Maurel 2014). In “The Class of 2014: The Weak Economy is Idling too Many Young Graduates,” Shierholz, Davis, and Kimball (2014) extend this troubling outlook even further: “entering the labor market in a severe downturn can lead to reduced earnings, greater earnings instability, and more spells of unemployment over the next 10 to 15 years” (p. 23). When analyzing CGU, one must consider numerous factors, including the role higher education possesses in constructing CGU, but this role, while important, is largely secondary if the number of jobs remains limited. CGU is an as much an employment issue as it is an issue of education, and while some may argue that education is the way out of this situation, if there are not enough jobs to meet graduates after graduation, CGU is inevitable (Marsh, 2011).

Unemployment is essentially an all-or-nothing condition. Either a person has a job or that person does not. Underemployment is more complicated in this regard, for while one can point to objective criteria such as pay, hours worked, and education-job congruence, there is also an array of subjective factors that are important in defining underemployment (Scurry & Blenkinsopp, 2011). Before examining these distinctions, a general definition of underemployment is required. Glyde, Davis, and King (1977) provide one of the first and most widely utilized research-based definitions of underemployment: “an involuntary employment condition where workers are in jobs, either part-time or full-time, in which their skills, including formal and work experience training are technically underutilized and thus undervalued relative to those of other individuals who have made equivalent investments in skill development” (p. 246). In this definition, there are objective and subjective features of underemployment. The objective features are easier to grasp as they revolve around things like the number of hours worked (full-time vs. part-time), a worker’s salary, and

even a basic congruence between a worker's skills and his or her actual job. However, while one can somewhat objectively look at this congruence and argue that an engineer working at Burger King is underemployed, when introducing the concept of skill utilization, the subjective territory becomes more complicated.

Indeed, underemployment proves to be an inexact science, largely subjective in nature. David Livingstone (2004) defines subjective underemployment with the following criteria: "perception of overqualification for current job; unfilled desire to use work skills that are unrecognized in present job; and a sense of entitlement to a better job" (p.220). Within each of these criteria, there is linkage to the worker's identity or sense of self, so that subjective underemployment is more of an ontological construct, one through which the worker employs a set of comparisons in order to ascertain correspondence between his or her skills and the actual position. Education is often the primary factor through which these comparisons are made.

In what is considered a pivotal article in underemployment studies, Daniel Feldman's (1996) "The Nature, Antecedents, and Consequences of Underemployment," the definitions of underemployment are created via comparison to an ideal state of employment, a state that often reflects educational experience: "underemployment is defined relative to some standard. In some cases, underemployment is defined relative to the employment experiences of others with the same education or work history; in other cases, underemployment is defined relative to the person's own past education or work history" (p. 387). Due to the vast number of jobs a worker can have and the number of facets of each job that could potentially measure underemployment, understanding underemployment requires more investigations in nuanced territory (Jensen & Slack, 2003). There have been a series of qualitative studies that analyze features of the underemployed experience, particularly relating to the negative effects underemployment yields for the individual; these effects include depression and a general discouragement in regard to obtaining a better job (Stofferahn, 2000; Van Ham, Mulder, & Hooimeijer, 2001; Wilkins, 2007). However, despite education's substantial role in determining one's underemployed status, a gap within the literature demonstrates a need for understanding the nuanced relationship between education and underemployment, and the following study represents one contribution towards answering this need. College

graduate underemployment is more than an employment status. Through dialogical qualitative analysis, CGU becomes something more complex as it intertwines with the positionality of underemployed graduates and informs how they perceive the value of their educational experiences. This relation thus adds new ways to understand the education-to-employment progression where the ideologically-constructed relationship between these two experiences is problematized, yet the belief in education's value, outside of work, remains intact.

Methods

For this study, 20 participants were interviewed. Of these participants, the age was between 23 and 55. The primary reason for this large age range was due to interviewing a large number of individuals with advanced degrees as well as a few non-traditional students. Due to the in-depth nature of the interviews and the desire to allow these interviews to determine the shape and construction of the dialogical genre analysis that would follow, sampling concluded at twenty participants. The participants were separated into four disciplinary groups (five participants per group) reflecting the degrees held by the participants: English/Humanities, Education/Social Sciences, Business/Computers, and Math/Science. Table 1 further breaks down the sample by degree and position:

Table 1.
Description of Participants

	English/Humanities Cohort	Social Sciences/Education Cohort	Business/Computer Field Cohort	Math/Science Cohort
Most Advanced Degrees	B.A. in English	B.S. in education	B.S. in information systems	B.A. in math
	B.A. in theatre studies	B.A. in education	M.S. in information systems	B.A. in math
	M.A. in philosophy	B.A. in anthropology	M.S. in computer science	B.A. in environmental science
	Ph.D. in English	M.A. in women’s studies	M.B.A.	B.S. in biology
	Ph.D. in poetry	Ph.D. in education	M.B.A.	M.S. in biochemistry
Positions	Part-time librarian	Call center employee	Part-time temp. worker	Tutor
	Part-time tutor	Daycare worker	Part-time educator	Entry-level computer programmer
	Part-time educator	Part-time tutor	Part-time educator	Barista
	Part-time educator	Testing center employee	Part-time educator	Daycare worker
	Part-time educator	Part-time educator	Part-time educator	Tutor

All participants interviewed for the study identified themselves as underemployed college graduates. As the table summarizes, 13 of the participants, at the time of the interview, were part-time employees and

therefore, due to both time and salary, could be identified as objectively underemployed. The remainder of the participants could be categorized as subjectively underemployed, demonstrating one or more of the following characteristics: a mismatch between the degree held and their position, a lower wage compared to other individuals with the same degree, and a lack of skill utilization/education utilization compared to other individuals with the same degree. The nature of underemployment as a condition possessing one or more of these features was described to the participants in the consent document, which was signed prior to the interviews taking place.

Interviews for this study occurred between June and October of 2013. The primary mode of obtaining participants was through snowball sampling as well as emailing part-time educators directly. After recruiting a participant and obtaining their consent, I utilized a modified interview protocol developed in Irving Seidman's (2006) *Interviewing as Qualitative Research: A Guide for Researchers in Education and the Social Sciences*. Seidman employs a three-stage interview process consisting of a life history, an intense investigation of the experience being studied (in this case, the underemployed experience), and a reflection on the process. This three-stage interview provided a detailed narrative of each participant's educational and employment experience, enabling the participants to weave complex narratives of context, history, description of specific events, and reflection. Each narrative was recorded and transcribed in its entirety before analyzing the interviews via a dialogical analysis.

Dialogical analysis was developed by Paul Sullivan and described in his 2012 work, *Qualitative Data Analysis: Using a Dialogical Approach*. Sullivan's data analysis model emphasizes tropes of qualitative research such as dialogue and subjectivity with tropes of literary theory—the common linkage of discourse uniting the two. For Sullivan, the crucial distinction between his model and other qualitative analysis approaches is his utilization of genre as a means of approaching the subjectivity of his interviewees.

In attempting to draw collective threads from these narratives and link them to something concrete, the notion of genre representation became attractive. As the materialization of cultural narratives that we are familiar with and find similarities to our own lives, genre representation functions as a means of understanding the underemployed experience and how it influences one's perception of higher education. In this way, two primary

genre pairs emerged from the interviews: epic and romance and tragedy and black comedy. The subsequent analysis will demonstrate how these genres materialized from the interviews and what these genres have to tell us about the underemployed college graduate experience.

Discussion

Genre Pair 1: Epic and Romance

Genre represents a crucial device that provides shape to our narratives, a cultural touchstone that appropriates modes of storytelling established in traditional narrative arcs for our own storytelling processes. This process often occurs unconsciously. The participants did not consciously consult modes of epic, romance, or tragedy to craft their own life stories represented in the interviews. However, in analyzing the nature of these life stories, the positionality of the interviewee in relation to his or her own underemployed experience recreates pivotal features of these genres to assist in understanding the situation at hand.

The first genre pair, epic and romance, stem from a common point of intersection: the position of the self in their transmission of their narrative. At key moments within the interview experience, the participants often manipulated these two genres to represent themselves in their narratives. The epic genre is largely typified by a broad dramatization of crucial experiences in which the participant is at the center of the events. In analyzing these moments, molded in an epic genre, the participant perceives facets of the underemployed experience as moments in life resonating with intense activity, often of a frustrated sort. As the ensuing analysis will illustrate, the epic genre intertwines the self with a whirlwind of activity that often resembles a journey, another key motif of epic literature.

I have decided to present the genre analysis in pairs to demonstrate how the participants perceive similar content in a different fashion. This binary relation does not imply that there are only two ways to craft a story, but these genre pairs do function as the dominant genre forms present in the interviews. The romance genre is concerned with similar aspects of the life stories, but functions as a dramatically different representation. Once more, the participant is centralized in the life story, but instead of activity and trial dominating the mode of storytelling, reflection and idealism serve as the

dominant themes. Harkening back to the original Romanticism of Keats, Wordsworth, and Shelley, the romance genre is more representative of the internal self. In linking this genre to the underemployment narratives of the study's college graduates, the romance genre communicates the internal world of the participants, periods of intense reflection that brings light to the participants' feelings regarding their higher educational experience in light of their current work status.

The epic genre represented in the interviews

Now that the primary elements of the genre pair have been introduced, one can see how these genres were employed in the life stories of the participants (whose reflections are connected to pseudonyms). In beginning with the epic genre, the centralization of the participant in a world of activity occurs at numerous points in the narrative. Initial struggles with the college experience proved to be a prevalent theme in many of the interviews. This struggle often possesses an epic character as described by Mona in her discussion of navigating her theatre program:

I personally ended up having a hard time with my program because it was a conservatory; the idea is that they are training you rigorously to be in professional theatre in the real world. It was very much...the program was not, "Well, you're kinda of get an idea of what this and then go to grad school." The idea was we would be employed in theatre. I clashed with my advisors a lot and didn't feel very supported by them. I think that was a problem with personality more than anything else.

What is important to notice here is not only what is being told, but *how* it is told, for this primarily constructs the genre. The theme of struggle is pervasive throughout this quotation, but more importantly, the other characteristics of the epic genre are present here. Broadly narrating the events of her higher education experience with her firmly centralized in the action, Mona weaves a complicated narrative in a few sentences. Interestingly enough, this narrative is one that is centered upon the problems of focusing on work preparation at the undergraduate level in a mode of education not necessarily linked to employment. Mona speaks of a

time where learning is somewhat supplanted by work preparation, which led to a series of conflicts that placed a great strain on her college experience. With this narrative crucial to the life story, the epic genre proves to be an adequate means by which she formulates this arc in order to relate herself to the stressful action in her higher education experiences.

Another common plot point in the underemployed experience is the search for work, which is, in some sense, an epic journey within itself. Often traveling long distances, meeting numerous people, and undergoing the stress of the searching and interviewing processes, the search for work is often framed in an epic genre. Marie describes her search for work after graduating with a degree in biology in this fashion:

I think originally I was looking for some things still kinda of in the medical field or administratively since I did some office work. I also worked for a certified financial planner as an office assistant...I was not necessarily trying to be picky because I knew I needed a job. So I still was looking in a medical environment, but also looking for some office generic work.

The quest for a job proves to be one that leads the individual into all sorts of potential options. Unsure how she could translate her degree into employment, Marie sought numerous paths, the pressure to obtain some manner of employment compelling her to seek “grunt work” or “generic work.” Furthermore, the emphasis on “I” here is important because this search is something she feels she has to do. With her higher education experience over (at least for the time being), Marie entered a new phase of her life with considerable uncertainty as she was unsure about what types of jobs she would be qualified for. Marie employs the epic genre to communicate the intensely personal dilemma of realizing that she had to get a job, but struggling with the lack of connections her degree possessed in terms of obtaining employment.

The final example of the epic genre presented here is of the underemployed experience itself, which also possesses characteristics of the epic. Struggles are abound in the underemployment experience, both internally and externally, and many participants characterize that genre with an epic mode of storytelling, focusing on the chaotic journey. Travis

discusses the labor flexibility, instilled by working a part-time job at the library, in an epic fashion with the journey at the center point:

When I was working part-time at the library, it was really weird because I had this madman's schedule where I would always work either Friday or Saturday eight hours, but I was working part-time, so my hours were spread throughout the week, often in four hour blocks, which would really suck because I was working at a branch 25 miles from where I lived, so I would drive 25 miles through congested interstates to work four hours for \$10.38 an hour and drive back through congested interstates for 25 miles, so yeah, bordering on zero-sum off those days, probably in terms of my time.

The journey of underemployment is one with continued trials, both of an internal and external nature. Travis, here, undergoes a journey of great effort in which the material returns are not substantial. In each example, the conflicts that emerged compelling the participant to act often possess a feeling underneath of struggling to understand. Whether it is navigating higher education, the job search, or the career world, these new and difficult spheres leave questions for the individual, and in comparison to the romance genre, these questions populate the narrative with feelings of anxiety as opposed to moments of positive reflection.

The romance genre in the interviews

The romance genre, as presented in the interviews, operates as a tool for reflection. Through the entire interview, activity functions as only one mode of narrative, and the need for reflection on the activity is equally crucial in providing an account of one's experiences. Moreover, due to the structure of the interview process, the emphasis on reflection creates a need for a different genre in recounting the narrative of underemployment. Therefore, the romance proves to be an appropriate environment for this reflection to take place. Expressing the internal self at various points in the narrative, participants employed a mode of romantic storytelling to frame several crucial elements of their life story.

What is also fascinating about this particular genre is that it was, more often than not, utilized throughout the education sections of their narrative

whereas the epic genre was employed more evenly, but primarily focused on the employment aspect of the story. For instance, Carol, who does not utilize her degree in anthropology in her work as a tutor in the hard sciences, employs a romantic lens to reflect on her educational experiences:

I think my anthropology degree has given me a perspective on...especially in relating to a variety of students and realizing that...that diversity is a *thing*. It is not just people being difficult. That people do come from a variety of backgrounds, a variety of cultural differences. And...so...I am happy that I have my anthropology degree, but I don't think it directly relates to my job very often.

Joan, too, in a similar reflection discusses the profound transformative effect that obtaining a degree in women's studies had on her: "I can't even imagine what kind of person I turned out to be if I hadn't ended up in the classrooms that I did. Mostly, that is women's studies. The women's studies classroom changed who I am in this really fundamental way. I would have been a totally different person if I hadn't had those experiences." In both reflections, the romantic genre serves as both an avenue of contemplation as well as an expression of recognizing the value of education outside of employment. These portions of the life story hold little action, but operate as a means to make sense of the activity surrounding the participants. Neither Carol nor Joan is actively utilizing their degrees in their current occupations, but both reflect positively on the value of their education in other, more personal ways. Elyse also reflects on education in a similar manner:

I would say the most valuable part of college is not necessarily the job preparation or technical training, but it's the process of becoming a citizen or becoming an engaged citizen and that was one of the most useful aspects of college. Becoming an engaged citizen and learning how to think, learning how to analyze, learning how to understand yourself in relation to the rest of society and the rest of the world is what I would say is really valuable to take away from college.

This particular reflection distinctly separates education from work, bringing a powerful collection of benefits to the forefront. The romantic/idealistic outcomes of education are included here, not only focusing on critical thinking, but the Jeffersonian outcomes of education of becoming part of an engaged citizenry. This reflection implicitly considers the increasingly popular notions revolving around the value of education and serves as a powerful refutation for what education could potentially be for the individual as a part of society.

Genre Pair 2: Tragedy and Black Comedy

The next genre pair analyzes two perspectives on the negativity regarding the underemployed experience itself. Although some participants did not depict underemployment as an overly problematic situation, none of the participants perceived their working status as ideal. Moreover, the majority of participants regarded their underemployed experience negatively and sought to obtain full employment in the immediate future if such a situation presented itself. What is of interest here is how this negativity is depicted by the participants, and the following two genres, tragedy and black comedy, function as two ways to categorize the difficult features of the underemployed experience.

Although considering underemployment a tragedy is, in some sense, overly dramatic, when considers it from the perspective of genre, it is more befitting. This is due to tragedy, similar to epic, being a genre of overwhelming conflict, but unlike the epic, the climax of a tragedy is typified by personal loss. In this way, underemployment is something of a tragedy for underemployed college graduates where the long narrative of the college experience ends in a negative manner.

However, this is but one way to characterize the negativity surrounding the underemployed experience. Other participants instilled a different emotional modality to this negativity, instilling almost surreal bewilderment and even humor into these portions of their narratives. Therefore, the other half of the genre pair, black comedy, becomes a useful tool in analyzing these experiences. The black comedy (or dark comedy or tragicomedy) can be represented as either a darkly humorously tale or a humorously dark tale depending on one's perspective. Regardless, the dramatic action holds similar content to the tragedy; intense conflicts take place, and personal

losses occur. The crucial difference is that throughout this action there is a surreal sense of absurdity or comedy resonating throughout the story. Underemployment carries certain facets of tragedy, but for certain individuals, these unfortunate circumstances possess a similar absurd quality, often typified by a surreal subversions of expectations.

The tragedy genre in the interviews

In the interviews, the tragedy genre captured a collection of feelings revolving around the difficulties of the underemployed experience. This collection of feelings largely stem from a single root; it is not the underemployed experience itself that generates this negative emotion, but rather the belief that by virtue of having a degree, the participants believed they should be in a better situation in terms of their occupation. The inability to use their degrees coupled with the intense desire to do something more fulfilling (as well as more profitable) is the true tragedy for the participants, leading to feelings of low self-efficacy. Janice exemplifies this tragedy when discussing her initial confidence about obtaining a job after earning her doctoral degree only to have that confidence shattered: “Oh, initially I was very confident. But that was in 2010, and now that we’re in 2013, my self-esteem has plummeted. (Laughs) I...I mean, really a great sense of worthlessness right now...I am not using my doctorate at all.”

The tragedy genre frequently consists of these feelings revolving around the degree, exacerbated by the underemployed status. This combination often generates a feeling of “limbo” for the participants as described by Stephanie:

And now, I feel like I’m just stuck...stuck in an old situation when I should be out doing something with my career or education. It’s harder to find value in what I do here when I know I should be doing something else. Yeah. It’s harder to care because you know theoretically and in the immediate future you will be something really awesome that you really want to do.

In the world of labor, the ability to obtain a job and work is seemingly filled with a great deal of autonomy and action, but oftentimes this ability is

heavily influenced by factors we cannot control (e.g., economic crisis, competition for jobs, etc.). Individuals who obtain higher education credentials seek to garner greater autonomy in choosing a career, but when they become underemployed, this autonomy inverts to feelings of paralysis. Heather also communicates this notion in her reflection:

That is a difficult question because I have been without [full-time] work for two years because I am sitting on a master's degree. Again, the demographics in the area that I'm from, I can't go to work at McDonalds because I am overqualified. I could not even work at McDonalds with an Associate's, probably. The degree that you have plays a huge role in the area that you work in. So it's a struggle; it's a constant struggle.

The interesting character of this reflection is not only the immaterial displacement that Heather struggles with, that of not being able to utilize her degree, but also the physical dislocation enforced by where she currently lives. Ultimately, the tragedy is a combination of three negative outcomes indicative of the underemployed experience. The first is the inability to utilize one's degree. The second is the complex array of feelings that this inability generates, including feelings of aimlessness, low self-confidence, and frustration. Lastly, these feelings pervade other experiences in the participant's social realms including one's family and social life. Moreover, despite the possibility that many of the participants will in time overcome these obstacles, there is a sense in each of these reflections that this tragedy has some degree of permanence as if the participants will never break out of this limbo. The frustration and low self-confidence instill this sense, creating the tragic narrative strands in these life stories where a positive resolution does not seem to be on the horizon.

The black comedy genre in the interviews

Although it also functions as a tool to understand the negativity revolving around the underemployed experience, the black comedy genre, as employed in the interviews, operates as a foil to tragedy in two crucial ways. The first is the actual content of the life story, which instead of resonating with feelings of deep disappointment, has a somewhat lighter

character, typically of either actual humor or general bewilderment. Once more, the content of black comedy can be as dark as a tragedy, but the tonality of this content is presented in a different manner. In her reflection regarding the problems of working in a testing center, Joan employs the black comedy to communicate the contradictions between her degree and her current occupation: “If anything I would say they are quite a bit at odds with each other. (Laughs) I would say most women studies folks would call standardization testing culturally biased and part of the problem of education. Yeah, there’s that (Laughs).” This quotation demonstrates some of the key ideas of the black comedy genre. Most important, this reflection is expressing negativity and dissatisfaction regarding the incongruity between Joan’s degree and her job, one of the primary generators of the tragedy genre in the interviews. However, the form of this negativity assumes a different shape. Punctuated by laughter and not dominated by the frustration of this incongruity, Joan’s reflection carries a lighter tone as she expresses the problems of subjective underemployment where it is indeed not a perfect world, but thankfully is also not as bleak.

The second crucial dimension of many of the black comedy responses is that while the tragedy carries a largely reflective content, the black comedy typically is centered upon forms of action. This harkens back to the epic/romance genre pair where the epic genre serves as a genre of action guiding activity while the romantic genre proves to be more reflective in nature. In describing his initial work experiences following graduating from college with a degree in mathematics, Wallace’s narrative moves into the territory of a black comedy:

Um...I was more confident immediately after graduation than I was a little bit later. Not too confident really. I think my plan was to sub for a while, like a year, and apply to grad school... Well no, it was a strange, strange time. All right, well I was sorta fired, not from subbing entirely, just hired paid subbing. So, then, I had not applied to grad school the second year, I think that’s right, so then, I moved to Cincinnati on a whim and lived on credit until I found a job, which was probably another bad decision, probably.

Wallace’s journey, in some sense, is similar to the stories described in the epic genre. However, a different tone resonates with this activity. Once

more, although this situation indeed proved to be quite dire for Wallace as he struggled with part-time jobs that he may have not been suited for and the financial problems that occurred as a result, there was not a sense of extreme negativity in Wallace's discussion, but rather an oddly humorous character. This character, as will soon be discussed, probably relates more to one's personality and identity rather than external factors since different individuals would tell this story in a more epic manner.

Humor alone does not construct the tone of the black comedy genre. In telling the story of the underemployed experience and the negativity surrounding it, participants sometimes regard their underemployed jobs as ironic inversions of the jobs they desire. Heidi describes here the sense of job security she possesses working at a daycare: "The only job security that I have is that very little staffing because our owner is...doesn't really want to have more people brought in because people to be bored and doesn't want people walking around, but...so, you know, there is job security in that they aren't going to get rid of me unless I do something horrible because they need me as a body." The underemployed experience possesses several facets of an ideal job: tasks, hours, pay, coworkers, etc. However, these characteristics appear, to many participants, as possessing a parodic function, poorly imitating nuances of full-time labor. In this reflection, job security, often an expression of how much employers value their employees, is rendered in the opposite capacity. Heidi's degree, in this situation, is of little value in regard to her work; instead, she is needed only as a body.

Results

By cataloguing the interviews into genres, one can collectively analyze pertinent features of the underemployed college graduate experience. Moreover, not only do the genre pairs hold a binary relationship to one another in terms of content, but new genre pairs can be formulated when considering the form of the responses presented. In this way, Figure 1 acts as a useful model for mapping dominant characteristics of CGU as experienced by the participants, charting the positionality, active/reflexive modality, and problematic features of CGU.

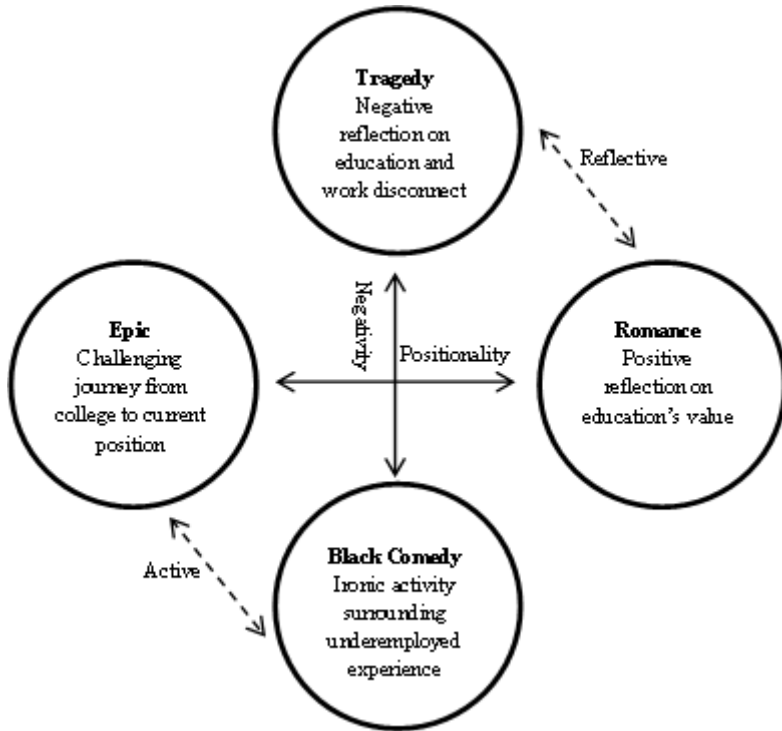


Figure 1. Relations among genres

The genres, as represented in the interviews, focus on what modes of content formulate an underemployed college graduate’s narrative of the experience and how these narratives are constructed. Regarding the former, each genre pair unveils complex nuances regarding the experience. The first genre pair, epic and romance, is an expression of positionality that pulse through many of the interviews. The romantic idealism that surrounds both education and potential employment is often contradicted, in a dialectical way, by the epic genre that dominates the participants’ experiences. The conflicts that are dense within these stories illustrate how an ideal construction of the self—as conceptualized in one’s educational and work experiences—becomes subverted by the conflict at the heart of epic genre. Additionally, the second genre pair, tragedy and black comedy, further illustrate the dual nature of the conflict, which at times can be full of

genuine discouragement and despair and at other times becomes ironic and even humorous. Therefore, the negativity surrounding the underemployed experience has a dual character, one often expressed in the interviews as a feeling of limbo or stasis, which is further aggravated by the further subversion of expectations.

Moreover, these genres also offer glimpses into how these narratives of underemployment are constructed with active and reflective genres. The epic and black comedy genre are largely active nature, typically employed to narrate a particular event, usually of a conflictual nature. The romance and tragedy genres possess a more reflective nature, offering glimpses of the underemployed experience that is more emotional in content and abstracted. This is worth noting because it illustrates the degree to which the underemployed experience becomes integrated in the individual's life. Underemployment is not just a mode of action characterized by a series of events. It does not stop at the workplace, but rather extends from it, influencing the individual's perception of the past and future. Additionally, the underemployed experiences possesses a powerful reflective modality, one that weighs heavily on the thoughts of the participants, compelling them to question how they became underemployed and the uncertainty surrounding how to escape this experience.

These genres further represent how the traditional narrative that motivates students to enroll in college—the direct progression from college to employment in which graduates capitalize on the college premium—can be disrupted, both in terms of the content and form of the narratives. The epic and black comedy genres show illustrate how this direct progression can become a twisting pathway, rife with conflicts of both large and small proportions. The tragedy and romance genres subvert the larger ideological impulse that education is primarily a pathway to a career. The romance genre reflections place education outside of labor and the tragedy genre reflections consist of regretting the disconnect that underemployment enforces between higher education and employment. Therefore, these genres are perhaps most useful as a way of illustrating the potential narratives outside of the dominant narrative. With the problematic features of the labor market persisting, these outside narratives are occurring with greater frequency, forcing us to consider the role of education in these genres.

The analysis also illustrates that the relationship between the individual's identity and education is of profound significance to the participants. Indeed, for many of the participants, it is not necessarily the material problems surrounding underemployment that warrant the most lamentation, but rather the inability to put one's education to use. We invest a great deal of ourselves when obtaining a college degree, time and money are obviously highlighted, but there is also a personal commitment towards shaping our identity to a particular field of study as that field study initially corresponds with some facet of our identity in the first place. When these investments (as college is now typically portrayed as) do not yield returns, the question of education's value becomes a driving force in the narratives. This is not to contend that underemployment compelled the participants to devalue their educational experiences. To the contrary, as the romance genre particularly illustrates, the participants usually regarded their educational experiences quite highly. Instead, these genres highlight the tensions within the question of education's value, marked by contradicting ideological imperatives that continually reinforce the importance of education as a means of obtaining employment while simultaneously not reflecting the material reality of labor, which does not necessarily value higher education as substantially as we are led to believe. This tension plays out at an individual level with each genre illustrating how the participant struggles reconciling his or her own definition of education's value in relation to this larger ideology. Devoid of clear resolution, the underemployed college graduate narrative functions as something of an unfinished draft, the conflict lingering onward past the yet unwritten pages.

Limitations, Future Research, and Conclusion

The phenomenon of underemployment does not occur in a vacuum and is subject to the influence of demographics of the participants. This study's geographic scope was limited to the Cincinnati area, so studies from different areas could contribute to our understanding of CGU. As previously stated, the decision to investigate twenty interviews in great detail enabled for those narratives to determine the genres necessary for analysis; however, since CGU is a largely subjective condition, highly influenced by the individual experiencing it, more individuals sharing their stories could yield different results. Lastly, the dialogical analysis

represents an innovative way at understanding a collection of life stories as a whole. The analysis' utilization of genre forms not only provides insight into the thematic content of the interviews, but it also serves as a portal as to how the individuals construct their narratives and how they manipulate genre tropes to share their stories. Nevertheless, Sullivan's analytical approach is still in its relative infancy, so other analytical models of a more conventional nature could uncover different facets of the underemployed experience.

Steven, one of the study's participants, described his experience with CGU in the following manner: "It depends on how you look at it. Nothing is limiting me or holding me back from doing something later. It is continuous story, and because of that, right now I'm still happy with the portion where we at in the movie." For many individuals experiencing CGU, these sentiments are quite appropriate. Ultimately, they see (or hope) that their problematic employment is but a minor conflict in the larger story of their lives, one that will in time end happily with them further pursuing their passions in the form of a career. For some individuals, this will occur, and this underemployed condition will dissipate through continual efforts being realized despite the difficulties in the labor market. For others, underemployment of some fashion will be persist, and difficult choices will be made regarding whether or not these individuals will continue to pursue their interests as a career or if they will separate degree from employment and seek a job in a more welcoming field. The story is ongoing, and while this study focuses on a typically discouraging portion, many of the participants still remain optimistic, finding value in their educational experiences and looking hopefully toward the future.

References

- Clark, B., Joubert, C., & Maurel, A. (2014). The career prospects of overeducated Americans. *The National Bureau of Economic Research*. Retrieved from <http://www.nber.org/papers/w20167>
- Feldman, D. (1996). The nature, antecedents, and consequences of underemployment. *Journal of Management*, 22(3), 385-407. doi:10.1177/014920639602200302
- Glyde, G. P., Davis, F. G., & King, C. T. (1977). Underemployment: Definition and causes. *Journal of Economic Issues (Pre-1986)*, 11(000002), 245-245. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4224588>
- Hobijn, B., Gardiner, C., & Wiles, T. (2011). Recent college graduates and the job market. *FRBSF Economic Letter*, 2011(9), 1.
- Jensen, L., & Slack, T. (2003). Underemployment in America: Measurement and evidence: Underemployment and its social costs: new research directions. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 32(1-2), 21-31. doi:10.1023/A:1025686621578
- Lee, D. (2010). Overwhelming underemployment. *Chicago Tribune*. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/749672983?accountid=2909>
- Livingstone, D.W. (2004). *The education-jobs gap: underemployment or economic democracy*. Aurora, Ontario: Garamond Press.
- Marsh, J. (2011). *Class dismissed: Why we cannot teach or learn our way out inequality*. New York: Monthly Review Press.
- Money lures most new students to college (2013). *Women in Higher Education*, 5.
- National Center of Education Statistics (2013). *Fast facts*. Retrieved from <http://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=372>
- Roksa, J., & Arum, R. (2012). Life after College: The challenging transitions of the academically adrift cohort. *Change*, 44(4), 8-14. doi:10.1080/00091383.2012.691857
- Schmitt, J., & Boushey, H. (2011). *Why don't more young people go to college?*. Armonk: M. E. Sharpe Inc.
- Scurry, T., & Blenkinsopp, J. (2011). Under-employment among recent graduates: A review of the literature. *Personnel Review*, 40(5), 643-659. doi:10.1108/00483481111154487

- Seidman, I. (2006). *Interviewing as qualitative research: A guide for researchers in education and the social sciences*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Shierholz, H., Davis, A., & Kimball, W. (2014). The class of 2014: The weak economy is idling too many young graduates. *Economic Policy Institute Briefing Paper*, 377. Retrieved from <http://www.epi.org/publication/class-of-2014/>
- Stofferahn, C. W. (2000). Underemployment: Social fact or socially constructed reality? *Rural Sociology*, 65(2), 311-330. doi:10.1111/j.1549-0831.2000.tb00031.x
- Sullivan, P. (2012). *Qualitative data analysis: Using a dialogical approach*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Van Ham, M., Mulder, C. H., & Hooimeijer, P. (2001). Local underemployment and the discouraged worker effect. *Urban Studies (Routledge)*, 38(10), 1733-1751. doi:10.1080/00420980120084831
- Wilkins, R. (2007). The consequences of underemployment for the underemployed. *Journal of Industrial Relations*, 49(2), 247-275. doi:10.1177/0022185607074921
- Yee, A. (2012). Degree by default. *Contexts*, 11(4), 46-50. doi:10.1177/1536504212466331

Joseph Cunningham is the instructor of English of the University of Cincinnati and director of the University of Cincinnati Academic Writing Center, United States.

Contact Address: Joseph Cunningham, Langsam Library 401 N, Cincinnati, United States. Email: joseph.cunningham@uc.edu