



Construction and validation of the Subjective Underemployment Scales (SUS)

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ABSTRACT

Underemployment refers to work that is inferior to certain standards, such as sufficient pay or adequate use of people's abilities. Current measurement of underemployment has a number of problems, including categorization of continuous variables, lack of conceptual clarity, and over-reliance on objective and single-item scales. To address these issues, the goal of the current research was to develop and refine scales assessing the six major domains underemployment identified by Feldman (1996): pay, status, field, hours, involuntary temporary work, and poverty wage employment. In two studies with different samples of diverse, working adults, we provide evidence for the internal consistency, factor structure, and the validity of the Subjective Underemployment Scales (SUS). The SUS demonstrated convergent validity by relating to similar constructs, work-related outcomes, and job attitudes. In addition, we tested different factor structures and incremental validity for the six dimensions, along with overqualification, and we found evidence for the use of a total SUS score and subscale SUS scores. The current research represents improvements in underemployment measurement and continued conceptual clarification in this area. Limitations, implications, and directions for future research are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Due to recent recessions, the rapid growth of technology, and rising income inequality, stable employment has become more difficult to find (ILO, 2015). Organizations such as the International Labor Organization (ILO, 2015) have argued that work will become increasingly unstable, leading to increases in underemployment. Given this environment, vocational psychologists can play a key role in identifying the psychological consequences of underemployment (e.g., Allan, Duffy, & Blustein, 2016). However, underemployment is a broad and multifaceted construct that vocational scholars have understudied given its global impact. While other fields have shown increasing concern about underemployment (e.g., ILO, 2015), the lack of research from vocational scholars has not served to resolve key measurement problems, including categorization of continuous variables, labeling of different constructs as underemployment, overuse of single-item scales, and confusion between subjective and objective variables (Maynard, Joseph, & Maynard, 2006; Jensen & Slack, 2003; McKee-Ryan & Harvey, 2011). In particular, the widespread use of categorical, objective measures of underemployment may obscure its psychological impact, especially because subjective measures are often better predictors of psychological outcomes than their objective counterparts (Maynard & Feldman, 2011). Moreover, underemployment often requires an evaluation by the worker of their needs, qualifications, and abilities. Given this context,

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the goal of the present study was to develop and validate subjective and continuous scales capturing six major domains of underemployment described by [Feldman \(1996\)](#): pay, status, hours, temporary work, field, and poverty wage employment. Establishing the validity of such a measure will also bring about greater conceptual clarity on the subjective components of underemployment.

1.1. Theoretical framework

Underemployment is a multidimensional construct that has been operationalized in various ways ([Jensen & Slack, 2003](#); [McKee-Ryan & Harvey, 2011](#)), but it is generally defined as paid employment that is lesser or inferior for a worker compared to some standard ([Feldman, 1996](#)). In a seminal article, [Feldman \(1996\)](#) synthesized conceptualizations, predictors, and consequences of underemployment from different fields. [Feldman \(1996\)](#) argued that underemployment consists several dimensions: possessing more education than a job requires, being involuntary employed outside one's field, having higher skills and experience than is required, being involuntarily engaged in part-time, temporary, or intermittent employment, or earning less wages than his or her last job or compared to one's peers.

In essence, [Feldman \(1996\)](#) argued that the dimensions of underemployment cluster together and share common antecedents (i.e., economic factors, job characteristics, career history, job search strategies, and demographic characteristics) and outcomes (i.e., job attitudes, psychological well-being, career attitudes, job behaviors, and social relationships). He went on to detail specific antecedents that lead to underemployment and specific consequences that follow from underemployment. For example, he argued that being female, older, and less educated would positively relate to underemployment and that underemployment would lead to a decline in quality of interpersonal relationships. In a review and critique of findings since [Feldman's \(1996\)](#) article, [McKee-Ryan and Harvey \(2011\)](#) found broad support for [Feldman's](#) hypotheses about the antecedents and outcomes of underemployment. [McKee-Ryan and Harvey \(2011\)](#) went on to propose confirmatory factor analysis to create improved measures of underemployment. They argued that the lack of continuous and subjective measures of underemployment has precluded CFA and the testing of [Feldman's \(1996\)](#) central hypothesis that his dimensions of underemployment cluster together. Therefore, this study aimed to address this concern by developing measures of underemployment that correspond to [Feldman's \(1996\)](#) initial underemployment dimensions.

Scholars have applied multiple theories to underemployment, such as person-environment fit, human capital theory, latent deprivation theory, and relative deprivation theory (see [Luksyte & Spitzmueller, 2011](#)). Rather than being models of underemployment themselves, such as [Feldman's \(1996\)](#) model, these theories attempt to explain what leads to, and results from, underemployment. For example, while person-environment fit theory argues that underemployment results from a lack of congruence between people's characteristics and their work environments, human capital theory asserts that underemployment result from a mismatch between people's human capital and their job requirements ([Luksyte & Spitzmueller, 2011](#)). Latent deprivation is unique in explaining why underemployment might lead to poorer well-being ([Jahoda, 1981](#)). According to [Jahoda \(1981\)](#), employment affects well-being via its latent consequences. Work's "manifest" consequence is income, which provides access to necessities, such as food, shelter, and clothing. However, work has benefits beyond income, which represent its "latent" consequences, including time structure, social contacts, collective purpose, personal status, and regular activity. Underemployment deprives people of some or all of the latent benefits, leading to poorer well-being, an assertion which is supported by prior research showing that economic downturns lower job and life satisfaction ([Tay & Harter, 2013](#)).

Although researchers have used different theories for multiple conceptualizations of underemployment, relative deprivation theory is especially relevant to a subjective model of underemployment. Relative deprivation describes how people compare their current work situation to ideal work situations, which can change from person to person ([Luksyte & Spitzmueller, 2011](#)). A mismatch in a person's comparison of real and ideal work situation can result in an experience of underemployment. In this way the theory reflects the subjective aspect of underemployment, people's individual desires, and different standards of comparison people use. Therefore, we drew on relative deprivation theory when constructing an integrative measure of underemployment dimensions.

1.2. Domains of underemployment

As noted above, [Feldman \(1996\)](#) outlined the dimensions of underemployment and called for its subjective and continuous measurement. However, scholars have only developed such measures for overqualification, which encompasses a person having more education, experience, and skills required for a job ([Maynard et al., 2006](#)). This leaves five dimensions that do not have rigorously developed scales: pay, status, hours, temporary work, and field-based underemployment. We also argue that poverty wage employment is an important additional dimension to include in underemployment. Historically, these dimensions have had several problems with their measurement.

1.2.1. Pay

Definitions of underpayment involve workers' perceptions that they are underpaid compared to a previous job or to people with similar knowledge, skills, abilities, and other characteristics (KSAOs; [Feldman, 1996](#)). For example, [Feldman \(1996\)](#) originally classified underpayment as those who earn 20% less than their previous job(s) or 20% less than the average earnings of their graduating cohort. Measurement of underpayment has also consisted of asking employees to respond to single items indicating how much they make in their current job versus a past job and how they feel they were being paid in relation to people in similar positions ([Maynard et al., 2006](#)). Therefore, the existing measurement of underpayment has been categorical ([Feldman, 1996](#))

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