

Academic Underemployment in Jammu and Kashmir: Analyzing the Intersections of Job Insecurity, Mental Health, and Career Satisfaction

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Abstract

This study explores the impact of underemployment on the satisfaction and well-being of scholars in Jammu and Kashmir, focusing on early-career academics, adjunct faculty, and graduate students. Despite holding advanced degrees, these scholars often find themselves in temporary, low-paying positions that do not utilize their full qualifications, leading to significant financial strain, mental health challenges, and professional isolation. Through qualitative methods, including interviews, focus group discussions, and participant narratives, the research identifies key themes such as the impermanent nature of employment, the psychological toll of underemployment, social and professional isolation, long-term dissatisfaction with life, and coping mechanisms. The findings reveal that scholars in the region face a stark misalignment between their academic achievements and the available job opportunities, which leads to feelings of frustration, diminished self-worth, and reduced life satisfaction. Furthermore, scholars exhibit resilience through personal coping strategies, such as pursuing hobbies or further education, to alleviate the stress caused by underemployment. The study emphasizes the need for policy reforms, including the creation of permanent academic positions, improved financial support, and enhanced mental health services within academic institutions. By addressing the systemic challenges of underemployment, this research highlights the importance of fostering a more supportive and sustainable academic environment for scholars in Jammu and Kashmir.

Keywords: *Underemployment, Academic Well-Being, Mental Health, Job Insecurity, Life Satisfaction.*

Introduction

Underemployment is a pervasive issue that affects individuals across various sectors, with academia being no exception. In the academic context, underemployment refers to situations where individuals with advanced degrees, such as master's and doctoral qualifications, or specialized training, find themselves in positions that fail to fully utilize their academic qualifications, skills, or experience (Feldman, 1996). This misalignment between an

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individual's education level and the role they occupy can take many forms, including part-time or adjunct positions, low-paying jobs, limited hours of work, or positions that offer little room for career advancement or professional development (Feldman & Turnley, 1995).

Underemployment in academia is especially concerning for early-career academics, adjunct professors, and graduate students who, despite their advanced training and research potential, struggle to secure permanent or full-time positions that reflect their qualifications. The mismatch between the qualifications of these scholars and the nature of the work available to them often leads to a range of negative consequences, both professionally and personally (Feldman, 1996; Kaur et al., 2020). Many scholars in such positions report feelings of frustration, diminished professional identity, and a sense of disillusionment with the academic field. This lack of professional fulfillment is often accompanied by significant psychological distress, including anxiety, stress, depression, and burnout (Nicholls et al., 2022; Salimzadeh et al., 2017). The stress associated with underemployment can also affect scholars' job satisfaction, sense of self-worth, and motivation, further exacerbating feelings of frustration and despair (Feldman & Turnley, 1995).

The impact of underemployment in academia extends beyond personal struggles, as it can also have long-term implications for the academic system itself. The growing number of scholars in underemployed positions threatens the sustainability of the academic workforce, potentially leading to a decrease in the quality of education and academic research (Sharma, 2012; Qadri & Shafi, 2017). With a significant portion of the academic workforce in precarious, low-paid, and insecure roles, the overall productivity and health of the academic ecosystem are jeopardized (Heyes et al., 2020). This issue is particularly acute in regions like Jammu and Kashmir, where institutional and economic pressures, compounded by socio-political instability, further exacerbate the challenges faced by academics. Despite high educational attainment in the region, the local economy and academic institutions are often unable to provide sufficient opportunities to accommodate qualified individuals. As a result, many scholars find themselves either unemployed or underemployed, struggling to make ends meet while simultaneously battling the professional and personal toll of underemployment (Khan, 2022; Shah & Ali, 2019).

In such regions, the challenges of underemployment are compounded by the limited support systems available. Scholars in underemployed positions are often left without adequate mentorship, career guidance, or institutional resources, which makes it difficult to navigate

the difficult terrain of an academic career (Shah & Ali, 2019; Gulzar & Bhat, 2018). Moreover, the pressures of financial instability, coupled with the emotional and mental toll of job insecurity, can contribute to a decline in academic productivity and an erosion of personal well-being (Bhat & Khan, 2020; Pratap et al., 2021). In regions like Jammu and Kashmir, these issues are further amplified by a fragile socio-political climate, where uncertainty about the future exacerbates the already significant challenges of underemployment (Khan, 2022).

Given the growing prevalence of underemployment in academia and its detrimental effects on the well-being and professional identity of scholars, this study seeks to examine the impact of underemployment on scholars in Jammu and Kashmir. Specifically, the study will focus on how underemployment affects the satisfaction, mental health, and overall well-being of these scholars. By exploring the personal and professional experiences of scholars in underemployed positions, the study aims to shed light on the psychological and emotional toll of underemployment and provide insights into the broader systemic issues that perpetuate this problem. Through this investigation, the study seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by underemployed academics and offer potential solutions to address these issues, both within Jammu and Kashmir and in broader academic contexts.

Background

Underemployment in academia has emerged as a significant issue, attracting increasing attention due to its wide-ranging consequences. Scholars in underemployed positions, such as adjunct faculty, graduate students, or early-career academics, often find themselves in roles that fail to fully utilize their advanced qualifications or expertise. These positions are typically characterized by job insecurity, low wages, and limited opportunities for career advancement. The mismatch between academic qualifications and job roles creates not only financial strain but also profound psychological and emotional repercussions. Individuals in underemployed positions frequently experience feelings of inadequacy, diminished self-esteem, and general dissatisfaction with their professional lives (Feldman, 1996). Additionally, the stress of working in positions that do not align with one's capabilities can lead to mental health challenges such as anxiety, depression, and burnout (Salimzadeh et al., 2017).

In regions like Jammu and Kashmir, these challenges are further exacerbated by unique socio-economic and institutional factors. Despite high levels of educational attainment, the

local economy struggles to absorb a large number of graduates, leaving many individuals in a state of underemployment or unemployment (Qadri & Shafi, 2017). The mismatch between qualifications and available job opportunities is particularly evident in the academic sector, where the supply of qualified scholars exceeds the demand for full-time, stable academic positions. This leads to a situation where educated youth, including highly skilled scholars, find themselves in precarious employment situations that contribute to financial hardship, social discontent, and heightened mental health risks (Khan, 2022).

In academia, underemployment is compounded by systemic pressures that increase job demands while offering little institutional support. Scholars in underemployed positions often face job insecurity, lack of career progression, and limited professional resources, all of which exacerbate stress and contribute to a diminished sense of professional identity (Nicholls et al., 2022). The academic environment in Jammu and Kashmir, where political instability and economic challenges further affect the functioning of institutions, makes these struggles even more pronounced. The region's educational institutions are often unable to provide sufficient support, leaving scholars with few opportunities for career advancement or professional development (Shah & Ali, 2019).

Beyond the individual implications, underemployment in academia has broader consequences for the academic ecosystem itself. The persistence of underemployment can reduce the overall quality of education and academic research, as institutions may struggle to retain qualified and motivated faculty members. In addition, the dissatisfaction and disillusionment caused by underemployment contribute to unrest among the educated population, affecting societal stability (Shah & Ali, 2019). Therefore, addressing the issue of underemployment in academia is critical not only for improving the well-being of scholars but also for enhancing the effectiveness and productivity of academic institutions, especially in regions facing socio-economic challenges such as Jammu and Kashmir.

This paper seeks to explore these issues by examining the impact of underemployment on the satisfaction and well-being of scholars in Jammu and Kashmir. Specifically, it aims to investigate the psychological, emotional, and financial consequences of underemployment, explore how it affects scholars' professional identity and career progression, and identify the role of institutional and systemic pressures in exacerbating these challenges. Additionally, the study aims to understand the coping strategies employed by scholars to manage these difficulties and their overall life satisfaction. Through this exploration, the paper aims to

contribute to the discourse on the well-being of academic workers in underemployed positions and highlight the need for policy reforms to address the challenges faced by scholars in the region.

Method:

This study employs a qualitative research design to explore the experiences of scholars working in underemployed academic positions in Jammu and Kashmir. The research aimed to uncover the psychological, emotional, and professional impacts of underemployment, as well as the coping mechanisms employed by these scholars. To collect data, a range of methods were used, including interviews, focus group discussions, personal narratives, checklists, and observations. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with scholars from various colleges, allowing for detailed conversations about their job satisfaction, career progression, and mental health. Focus group discussions provided an opportunity for scholars to share their experiences collectively, uncovering common themes and challenges. Personal narratives offered insight into individual lived experiences, while checklists helped gather specific information about institutional support and career development opportunities. Observational data added context by examining the academic work environment, interactions, and available resources. All data collected were analyzed thematically, drawing on relevant literature to interpret the findings and identify key patterns. A grounded theory approach was used to ensure that the analysis remained grounded in the participants' experiences, allowing for an in-depth understanding of how underemployment affects their professional and personal lives. The analysis highlighted the complex interplay between institutional pressures, job insecurity, and mental health, while also shedding light on the coping strategies scholars employ to navigate these challenges. The findings contribute to the broader conversation on underemployment in academia, providing insights into its impact on scholars' well-being and professional development.

Major Findings:

The findings of this study shed light on the multifaceted impact of underemployment on scholars working in the academic sector in Jammu and Kashmir. Based on the interviews, focus group discussions, and personal narratives, several key themes emerged, each highlighting the psychological, emotional, and social consequences of precarious academic employment. These themes are explored in detail below, drawing connections to the broader

literature on underemployment and its impact on mental health, job satisfaction, and overall well-being.

The Impermanent Nature of Work and Financial Strain

One of the most significant findings in this study is the pervasive sense of job insecurity among scholars in Jammu and Kashmir. Many participants described their academic positions as temporary, often based on annual contracts with no guarantee of renewal. This job instability leads to significant financial strain. *“I am very confused whether to continue this job or leave it. The nature of the job is impermanent, and I want to have a secure future,”* one participant shared. This uncertainty about job continuation creates an atmosphere of stress, particularly when scholars rely on this income to support their families.

Participants also shared concerns about their financial vulnerability. *“Every year this contract terminates after 8 or 9 months. We have to make our ends meet on the salary of these months only for an entire year,”* one participant revealed. These positions offer low wages, which are often insufficient to meet the basic needs of the scholars and their families. Many participants reported difficulties obtaining loans from banks due to the temporary nature of their employment, leading to further financial dependence on relatives and friends. *“We aren’t provided loans by banks due to the non-permanence nature of work and often we have to take loans from friends and relatives who belittle us in one way or another.”* This situation resonates with findings from Qadri and Shafi (2017), who highlighted the economic struggles of educated youth in Jammu and Kashmir, where despite high educational attainment, many face unemployment or underemployment due to the economic limitations of the region.

Mental Health Struggles and Stress

The study also revealed significant mental health struggles among scholars, stemming from both the nature of their employment and their personal lives. Many participants expressed heightened stress, anxiety, and frustration due to their precarious work situation. *“This job is very stressing. I have to perform multiple roles. I feel at a loss,”* one participant noted. The constant pressure to juggle multiple responsibilities without the security of a permanent position exacerbates mental health challenges, leading to feelings of inadequacy and burnout. This finding aligns with the work of Salimzadeh et al. (2017), who demonstrated that job

stress, especially in academia, significantly impacts the psychological well-being of employees, leading to burnout and reduced productivity.

Another striking aspect was the effect of underemployment on personal relationships. Several participants mentioned difficulties in their social lives, particularly regarding marriage. *“We are facing problems in getting marriage proposals. Nobody wants to marry a contractual. We aren’t paid on time, and the salary is very less. The market rates are very high,”* one participant shared. The stigma associated with being a contractual employee not only impacts their self-esteem but also isolates them socially, contributing to a sense of exclusion. This mirrors the findings of Shah and Ali (2019), who discussed how unemployment and underemployment in Jammu and Kashmir exacerbate social discontent, leading to emotional and mental distress.

Social and Professional Isolation

A theme of social and professional isolation emerged strongly from the interviews. Scholars in underemployed academic positions often feel excluded from important academic decisions and professional activities. *“We are not involved in decisions related to professional activities. Our presence doesn’t matter to them. But we share the maximum load of class work,”* one participant noted. This sense of exclusion, coupled with the heavy workload, leads to frustration and a diminished sense of professional identity. As noted by Nicholls et al. (2022), underemployment in academia often results in a lack of recognition and support, further contributing to negative psychological outcomes such as anxiety and burnout.

Participants also reported feeling distanced from their friends and relatives, who often questioned the stability of their jobs. *“I don’t want to meet my friends and relatives. They often question the permanence of my work, leaving me frustrated,”* one participant shared. This social isolation is compounded by the stigma associated with temporary academic roles, reinforcing feelings of inadequacy and distress. The social and professional isolation experienced by these scholars highlights the need for greater institutional support and a more inclusive academic environment, as suggested by Heyes et al. (2020), who emphasize the importance of recognizing the skills and contributions of all employees, regardless of their employment status.

Long-Term Effects on Life Satisfaction

The long-term impact of underemployment on life satisfaction was another key theme in this study. Many participants expressed dissatisfaction with their jobs and a sense of hopelessness about their future. *"I don't feel this with this job I can make big in life,"* one participant remarked. This sentiment was echoed by others who felt that their educational qualifications and career aspirations were being undermined by the lack of stable employment opportunities. *"I was a topper in my class. I have achieved so many degrees, but those degrees couldn't fetch me a reliable job,"* another participant lamented. This aligns with the findings of Feldman (1996), who argued that underemployment often leads to lower life satisfaction and a diminished sense of professional identity. Scholars in Jammu and Kashmir, despite their high educational qualifications, struggle to find meaningful and sustainable employment, leading to a pervasive sense of unfulfillment and frustration.

Moreover, underemployment negatively affects the personal lives of scholars, with many reporting difficulties in meeting their family's needs. *"I am unable to cater towards my family and their needs and have to listen to their taunts every day,"* one participant shared. This financial strain, coupled with the emotional toll of not meeting familial expectations, adds to the sense of dissatisfaction and distress.

Coping Mechanisms and Resilience

Despite the significant challenges associated with underemployment, many participants employed various coping mechanisms to manage the stress and strain of their academic roles. Engaging in personal hobbies and pursuing further education were common strategies for maintaining a sense of purpose and well-being. *"In order to relieve myself of the burden, I pursue my hobby. It keeps me engaged and for a while takes me away from the reality,"* one participant explained. This highlights the importance of maintaining personal interests outside of work as a way to manage stress and build resilience. Similarly, another participant shared, *"I enrolled myself in a skill course. I want to do something productive which gives a sense of achievement and purpose."* This aligns with the work of Nika et al. (2023), who found that factors like autonomy and self-acceptance are key in enhancing employee well-being and productivity. By engaging in activities that promote personal growth and development, these scholars are able to build resilience in the face of adversity.

Concluding Discussion

The findings of this study present a compelling picture of the underemployment experienced by scholars in Jammu and Kashmir, shedding light on the challenges they face in their professional and personal lives. The themes that emerged from the narratives—impermanent work, financial strain, mental health struggles, social and professional isolation, long-term dissatisfaction with life, and resilience—demonstrate the deep and pervasive effects of precarious academic employment on scholars' overall well-being.

The impermanent nature of their employment, coupled with financial instability, creates a constant source of stress. Scholars are forced to navigate a job market that offers little security, leaving them with an uncertain future and making it difficult to plan for long-term goals. The meager wages they receive are insufficient to meet basic needs, further compounding their financial insecurity. As a result, many scholars experience a loss of hope for upward mobility, feeling that their qualifications and achievements are not reflected in the jobs available to them. This instability not only impacts scholars financially but also leads to significant mental health challenges. The multiple roles and responsibilities they must juggle in an underpaid, unstable job cause considerable stress and emotional strain. The stigma attached to temporary work further exacerbates the psychological toll, with many scholars experiencing isolation from their families and peers due to their uncertain employment status. Moreover, these mental health struggles are often compounded by the social stigma surrounding their positions, as highlighted by participants who shared experiences of social exclusion and strained personal relationships, especially regarding marriage prospects.

Professionally, these scholars feel sidelined and undervalued within their academic institutions. The lack of involvement in decision-making processes and the unequal distribution of work—where they bear the heaviest workload without the corresponding recognition or rewards—contributes to their sense of professional isolation. This sense of marginalization within their academic environments further erodes their job satisfaction and sense of purpose in their careers.

In terms of long-term effects, the impact of underemployment on life satisfaction cannot be overstated. Scholars, despite their academic qualifications, report feeling stagnant in their careers, unable to fulfill their potential. This discrepancy between their educational achievements and the underwhelming opportunities available to them leads to a deep sense of

frustration and a lack of fulfillment. The persistent cycle of temporary employment not only limits their career growth but also affects their broader life satisfaction, as they struggle to balance personal aspirations with the harsh reality of their professional lives.

However, despite these significant challenges, the scholars in this study exhibited remarkable resilience. Many engaged in personal coping strategies, such as pursuing hobbies and further education, to alleviate stress and maintain a sense of purpose. These coping mechanisms highlight the ability of individuals to adapt and find meaning even in the face of adversity. While these strategies may offer temporary relief, they are not substitutes for the systemic changes needed to address the root causes of underemployment in academia.

The findings of this study contribute to the broader discourse on underemployment in academia, particularly in the context of Jammu and Kashmir, a region facing unique socio-political and economic challenges. While the issues of job insecurity and low wages are common in many parts of India, the specific challenges faced by scholars in Jammu and Kashmir are exacerbated by regional instability, limited job opportunities, and the socio-cultural stigma attached to temporary work. These factors make the underemployment of scholars in the region even more detrimental to their well-being. Addressing these challenges requires a multi-pronged approach. First, there is a need for policy reforms that offer greater job security for scholars, including the creation of permanent academic positions and improved compensation structures. Second, academic institutions must provide greater recognition and support for underemployed scholars, ensuring that their contributions are valued and that they are included in decision-making processes. Finally, mental health support systems should be established within academic institutions to help scholars cope with the emotional and psychological strain of their work. Institutions should prioritize creating environments that foster inclusion, recognition, and mental well-being. Finally, while scholars in Jammu and Kashmir display tremendous resilience in the face of underemployment, systemic changes are crucial to mitigate the negative effects of precarious academic work. While addressing issues of job insecurity, financial instability, professional isolation, and mental health struggles, policymakers and academic institutions can create an environment that allows scholars to thrive. The study underscores the importance of not only understanding the lived experiences of underemployed academics but also taking actionable steps to improve their working conditions and overall quality of life.

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