

## Is Any Job Better Than No Job? Utilising Jahoda's Latent Deprivation Theory to Reconceptualise Underemployment

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### Abstract

Underemployment is a widely discussed but complex concept. This article progresses discussions and provides a new sociological conceptualisation. It builds on a classic theory of unemployment, Jahoda et al.'s 'latent deprivation theory' (LDT), that identified five 'latent functions' provided by jobs, besides a wage: time structure, social relations, sense of purpose/achievement, personal identity and regular activity. LDT was ground-breaking in illuminating previously hidden injuries of joblessness. This article proposes that LDT can be similarly ground-breaking for reconceptualising underemployment: it demonstrates conceptually the multiple ways in which the mere existence of a job is insufficient in protecting individuals from socially and psychologically negative impacts associated with unemployment. A sociology of underemployment can help better understand complex, shifting and precarious work and expose inherent forms of suffering and injustice.

### Keywords

Jahoda, job quality, latent deprivation, precarious work, skills, sociology of work and employment, time, underemployment, unemployment, wages

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## Introduction

Underemployment is a widely discussed but complex phenomenon. This article aims to progress knowledge and provide a new sociological approach. It revisits Jahoda's (1982) 'latent deprivation theory' (LDT) that focused on unemployment and reviews its applicability for the contemporary study of underemployment.

The contemporary backdrop to our consideration of underemployment is the importance commonly attached to being in any type of employment. It is an often-repeated policy mantra in the UK that 'any job is better than no job' (Layard, 2004: 1). Firmly underpinning this mantra is the assumption that labour market inclusion equals social inclusion (Lindsay and McQuaid, 2004). Layard's (2004) main proposition was that: 'Human happiness is more affected by whether or not one has a job than by what kind of job it is' (p. 1). It was therefore perceived as positive that unemployment levels in the UK were less affected by the 2008–2009 financial crisis than by previous recessions and, prior to the pandemic, remained low (3.9% between November 2019 and January 2020; ONS, 2020). In turn, the government advocated the strength of the employment rate, which, at 76.5% at the close of 2019, became the highest figure on record (ONS, 2020). It stood at 75.8% from September to November 2023, when the unemployment rate was 4.2% (ONS, 2024). The flip side of this seeming success story has been the rapid rise in underemployment and its highly unequal distribution across the labour force (Bell and Blanchflower, 2013, 2021; Heyes et al., 2016). Attention to underemployment is timely as it can shine a valuable light on contemporary worlds of work and their theorisation (Findlay and Thompson, 2017). Over a decade of economic turmoil and the proliferation of precarious forms of work, along with the economic uncertainties created by Brexit, Covid-19 and the cost-of-living crisis, are leading to higher rates of UK underemployment (Torres et al., 2024). The problem that this article addresses is that this significant group of workers are considered as employed but the hidden injuries of their underemployment (e.g. the implications of insufficient income on mental health and well-being) are largely unrecognised. Using a new sociological framework of underemployment that is based on revisiting, contextualising and extending LDT, this article challenges the narrative, prevalent in policy circles, that 'any job is better than no job'.

Underemployment is a complex concept, open to varying interpretations. For this article, workers are underemployed if they are employed below their potential in terms of hours, skills and/or qualifications and wages, drawing upon Feldman's (1996) influential conceptualisation. Feldman argued that underemployment was largely being ignored in the academic literature and, predicting that it would expand substantially in society, called for more research into its nature, antecedents and consequences. Decades later, underemployment is still being treated in a comparatively superficial way. The literature that does exist first highlighted general factors and relationships underpinning underemployment (Dooley, 2003; Feldman, 1996) and then, later, the specific context of underemployment in austerity and post-recession Britain and Europe (Heyes and Tomlinson, 2021; Heyes et al., 2016). There has been little theoretical development of underemployment as a concept, nor have insights into the experience of unemployment (see *inter alia* Cole, 2007, 2008; Eckhard, 2022; Gerrard and Watson, 2023; Kamārade et al., 2019; Patrick, 2017; Shildrick, 2018; Shildrick et al., 2012) been incorporated into

analysis of the experiences of the underemployed. In the section on ‘Underemployment: definition and dimensions’, we draw on previous literature on underemployment to show how it tends to rely on one indicator of underemployment and present instead a revised approach that combines all three dimensions: time, wage and skill underemployment.

This is a conceptual article that draws on the UK context. It revisits LDT, a highly influential approach to unemployment, and applies it instead to underemployment. LDT was developed in the 1930s by social psychologists Jahoda et al. (1972). They investigated the experience of unemployment by a whole community in Marienthal, Austria on closure of the town’s only local factory. In current language, this was a multi-method (statistical data, records, diaries, interviews and surveys) and interdisciplinary study (considering living conditions, social life and psychological well-being). It has been widely utilised across disciplines, including psychology (Vander Elst et al., 2016), gerontology (Yang, 2020), social policy (Sage, 2018), economics (Kunze and Suppa, 2017) and sociology (Cole, 2007; Eckhard, 2022; Heyes et al., 2016; Wang et al., 2021), to explore the impact of unemployment on individuals and their communities. LDT is perhaps best known for proposing that there are five ‘latent functions’ of employment. These identify what people gain from work, and the latent deprivations thus faced by the unemployed, aside from the ‘manifest function’ of income. The five latent functions are: a habitual *time structure* for the waking day; that work gives a person *purpose*; enables *social contacts*; brings *status and identity*; and provides *regular activity* (Jahoda, 1982). We revisit these five latent functions of employment to contextualise their characteristics and consider their relevance to the contemporary world of work. As we will discuss, heightened risks of multiple latent deprivations can be identified among those *in* jobs but who are underemployed, linked to the growth in involuntary part-time work, more jobs with irregular and/or unpredictable schedules, de-skilling and the rise in so-called ‘low-dignity, low-benefit, no future’ jobs (Lindsay and McQuaid, 2004: 298). The article will show how these forms of underemployment can result in latent deprivation in a similar way to the effect that unemployment has. The mere existence of a job is insufficient in protecting individuals from socially and psychologically harmful outcomes of underemployment.

The article is structured as follows. An initial section begins with conceptual challenges, and our definition of underemployment in terms of its three component forms (hours, skills, wages) and their interrelationships. We begin to signpost how each type of underemployment might link to LDT. The following five sections then take our analysis of these linkages forward: they revisit each of the component dimensions of LDT and interrogate what they can say about underemployment. Each section considers relevant critiques of the LDT approach overall and contextualises the discussion within such post-Jahodian developments as changed industrial landscapes, global interconnectedness and norms, and technological developments, as well as recent events such as the recession, an austerity policy-scape, the pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis. A discussion section then brings together key conceptual and contemporary issues to extend LDT in a sociological framework of underemployment. The framework is presented as a means to investigate this complex and shifting type of work and its inherent forms of suffering and injustice. The article concludes that LDT helps make clear the interrelated latent deprivations that confront the underemployed.

## Underemployment: Definition and dimensions

This section addresses conceptual challenges when discussing underemployment. It provides our definition of underemployment, explores its component dimensions and considers their potential links to LDT.

In conceptualising underemployment, it is important to stress first that we aim for a more nuanced approach than seeing underemployment in relation to, and an inferior form of, employment (McKee-Ryan and Harvey, 2011). We question the view that employment is always positive or the main life-aim for all, drawing on key literatures on the purpose, problems and possibilities of paid work, in addition to well-established debates over what 'work' actually entails (Gerrard and Watson, 2023; Pettinger, 2019; Weeks, 2010). In fact, as we will discuss, LDT itself has been critiqued for its explicit focus on, and alleged glorification of, (any) paid work (Peterie et al., 2019): the assumption that it is central to human experience and that without paid work humans experience pointlessness and lack of fulfilment (Cole, 2007). Glorifying standard employment fails to consider that social norms regarding paid employment might themselves contribute to stigmatising the underemployed. We assert that the sociological and policy gaze should not be on whether people have *any* paid work, but instead to what extent and how work can be good, decent or fulfilling. The framework we develop aims to facilitate investigations into poor quality employment and also highlight what good quality employment might look like for different groups of people. In arguing for the importance of quality paid work, our approach does not negate the value of other human activities, both non-work (Mullens and Glorieux, 2024) and other forms of essential work that are undertaken outside of paid employment (Glucksmann, 2009), but these activities fall outside of the focus of this article. As it stands, underemployment is a complex concept that has been interpreted in diverse ways. We build upon Feldman's (1996) multi-dimensional conceptualisation that workers are underemployed if they are employed below their potential in terms of hours, skills and/or qualifications and wages and, we add here, the interrelationships between the three dimensions. We next discuss each dimension in turn and identify its links to the latent functions.

The first and most well-known dimension of underemployment is time-underemployment. The ONS (2022) defines as underemployed any worker who desires more hours than they currently work. These time-underemployed workers include part-timers wanting either full-time or longer part-time hours, as well as full-timers wanting to lengthen their working weeks. Involuntary part-timers have gained attention in the UK context where part-time employment is extensive and the quality of part-time jobs can be low (Warren and Lyonette, 2018, 2020). Before Covid-19, nearly a million (2.7%) UK workers were involuntarily in part-time jobs, with 5.2% of part-timers preferring more hours (Bell and Blanchflower, 2021). Over the course of the pandemic there was a decrease in the number of part-time jobs, especially low-paying ones (ONS, 2022). This could be read as a positive development in reducing underemployment if these jobs were being replaced by better quality (part-time or full-time) employment. However, Wadsworth (2021) suggests that this was not the case – despite losses across occupations, manual part-time jobs in the accommodation and food service sectors were most affected. This dimension of underemployment links to latent function one: a time structure for the day.

LDT sees a ‘sense of time’ and the value attached to time disintegrating for unemployed workers (Jahoda, 1982). For underemployed individuals, their sense and value of time tend to be subservient to those of an organisation or employer. Jahoda’s (1982, p. 22) discussion of time as a latent function of employment also emphasised that the ‘experience of time is shaped by public institutions’ and suggested that there are power imbalances in who experiences working time as a problem, as seen in those part-time, low-pay sectors above. In addition to risks to a time-based structure for the day, other pertinent temporal latent functions are whether individuals are occupied the whole time or whether they have nothing to do; whether there is a requirement for punctuality; and whether individuals have things to do at regular intervals (Paul and Batinic, 2010). Individuals who experience alternating periods of time-underemployment and over-working can fare very poorly on this latent function (Smith and McBride, 2021).

The second form that underemployment assumes is in relation to skills (i.e. when a person’s skills or qualifications are not utilised in their job). Skills-underemployment is widespread but also very unequally distributed. According to CIPD (2018) pre-pandemic data, between 30% and 51% of employees were overqualified and 37% over-skilled for their current job, with young people especially affected. On average, almost 50% of recent graduates and 35% of non-recent graduates were working in non-graduate jobs (Hartmann, 2021). Skills-underemployment is a harmful form of underemployment for the individuals concerned and it also means that the economy is under-utilising the workforce’s human capital. Over-skilled workers have been shown to be less satisfied with their jobs than other workers, face worse career prospects and lower earnings, and experience an elevated risk of depression (CIPD, 2018). Skills-underemployment links to latent function four: status and identity from employment. Jahoda distinguishes between status as a ‘social phenomenon anchored in the value system of a society’, as characterised by factors such as career progression and earnings, and identity as a personal evaluation of ‘people’s images of themselves’ (Jahoda, 1982: 26). In terms of identity, workers have been shown to have a stronger purpose and self-image when they contribute to society via their skills and abilities in employment (Jones-Khosla and Gomes, 2023). Skills-underemployment also links to latent function three (social contacts). For Lindsay and McQuaid (2004), many of those working in services are restricted to de-skilled jobs and this is often because they do not have social contacts to allow them to enlarge their horizon and find better employment. The latent functions of purpose, status and social contacts thus come into play when considering skills-based underemployment.

Third, and finally, underemployment can take the form of low and/or insufficient wages. Wage-underemployment has been understood in a number of ways, including as earning below minimum or (real) living wages. The well-recognised notion of in-work poverty (Barbieri et al., 2024; ILO, 2024) testifies to the inadequate wages received by many workers. Thirteen per cent of the pre-pandemic workforce were in poverty (JRF, 2019), and it was the lowest paid workers who were hit hardest by the fallout of Covid-19, facing the increasing risks of precarious work and financial hardship, with problems deepening amid a profound cost-of-living crisis (Beck et al., 2020; Gable and Florisson, 2023; JRF, 2023; Wood and Bennett, 2023). In the JRF report too, 18% of the lowest paid workers wanted more hours of work, signalling that the different dimensions of

underemployment (here time and wages) can be closely linked. Wadsworth (2021: n/a) also shows the strong association between time- and wage-underemployment: 'Around two-thirds of part-time jobs pay wages that put them below the income tax threshold'. We can also link wage-underemployment to LDT's latent function four: status and identity. Jahoda (1982) stressed that insufficient finances are related to shame and self-doubt and these, in turn, can result in reduced opportunities within and outside of the workplace. In linking wage-underemployment to *latent* functions, it is important to note that a prominent critique of LDT concerns the lack of attention to the main manifest function of employment (i.e. money) in the 1982 publication, when it had featured more in the 1930s Marienthal study (Fryer, 1992). The major focus on latent instead of manifest functions in the 1982 study was justified by Jahoda by improvements in the standard of living in the UK context compared with 1930s Austria. Fryer (1992) critiqued this as a marginalisation of poverty that was convenient for UK policymakers of the late 1970s and 1980s. Lindsay and McQuaid's (2004: 301) analysis reinforces his critique: for the low paid, the main benefit of work is 'getting paid *at all*' (emphasis in original) with dignity, skills-use or opportunity development not necessarily options. We argue that the manifest function of providing waged income is essential for the analysis of working lives. A significant body of work highlights poverty, benefits and mounting compulsions experienced by the underemployed who are low paid and in a low pay/no pay cycle (Beatty et al., 2021; Patrick, 2017; Shildrick et al., 2012). The third form of underemployment, related to being underpaid, is an imperative addition to our understanding of underemployment as a whole. Yet it is also important to go beyond the purely economic focus on the wage level, and consider the broader implications of insufficient income – for example in terms of reduced opportunities for socialising and status-enhancing consumption and activities.

It is already apparent in the discussion of the three forms of underemployment related to time, skills and wages that the individual indicators are interrelated and therefore difficult to disentangle at times. We know little about which factors are dominant in shaping the experience of underemployment and how these interrelationships take effect, making it challenging to establish a clear framework of specific factors neatly influencing underemployment. For example, LDT has consistently highlighted the sociological importance of employment to physical and mental well-being (Irvine and Rose, 2022), which has implications for unemployed and underemployed individuals' ability to actively and effectively search for jobs (Ervasti and Venetoklis, 2010). LDT also draws attention to the implications of the negative effects of financial stress (Ervasti and Venetoklis, 2010) and to inequalities and injustices in the labour market that go beyond purely financial matters. At a broader social and political level, LDT has been utilised to suggest social policy approaches to ameliorate the negative effects of unemployment (Sage, 2018). There is, thus, a considerable body of work that has continued to utilise and develop LDT, albeit without interrogating its potential directly, and which can be used to address the hidden injuries associated with underemployment.

This section has explored the three dimensions of underemployment and has started to suggest ways in which each links to Jahoda et al.'s five latent functions of employment. In the remainder of this article, we interrogate LDT in more depth to consider its value for a new sociological analysis of underemployment. Having established our



definition of underemployment via its three dimensions, we now revisit, contextualise and extend LDT. We contextualise the five latent functions in turn, discussing each in relation to contemporary labour market issues as well as ‘the social context in which they occur’ (Jahoda, 1982: 15) that includes, in the UK, the post-Brexit and post-pandemic environment. This foundation allows us to then extend Jahoda’s LDT and build a sociological framework to empirically and theoretically investigate underemployment as a growing but problematic work phenomenon.

## **Using LDT to understand underemployment**

In this section, we evaluate the contemporary applicability of each LDT function for understanding underemployment.

### *Contemporary time structures and underemployment*

The first latent function regarding a ‘habitual time structure’ imposed by employment is also the one most directly linked to one form of underemployment: time-underemployment or wanting more hours of work. The notion of standard worktime – regular 9–5 working, five days a week and with compensation for unsocial hours – has been outdated in many societies for decades (Irvine and Rose, 2022; Rubery et al., 1998; Veal, 2023). Standard hours are no longer the gold standard within worker campaigns to improve worktime: when trade unions once organised strongly and successfully around the 8-hour day, prominent contemporary campaigns call for more flexible working options to support a better fit between paid work and the rest of life (e.g. the EU Work-life Balance Directive, 2019). The enforcement of home working during the Covid-19 pandemic and the legacy of hybrid working further blurred working time boundaries for some groups of workers, most often those who already had a high degree of autonomy (Chung, 2022; ETUI, 2023; Felstead, 2022; Laß and Wooden, 2023).

In addition to temporal developments that are shaping the overall employment experience, time-underemployed workers are less likely than other workers to have an externally imposed time structure, where paid work and other times are neatly demarcated: a routine working day, clear holidays, weekends and down time. The ‘habitual time structure’ that Jahoda (1982) argued was latent in a job has been further undermined by a growing lack of worker control over their worktime (number of hours, their scheduling, predictability and regularity). The ramifications of temporal unpredictability have spawned a substantial sociological as well as multi-disciplinary literature dedicated to social time (Adam, 1995) and temporal processes in different societal contexts, demonstrating the lived experiences of temporal complexity and disrupted rhythms (Smith and McBride, 2021, 2023; Smithers et al., 2023; Snyder, 2016). Studies of on-call workers show that the pervasiveness of work and the unpredictable nature of shifts can have negative impacts on rhythms of the day, including waking and sleeping patterns (O’Sullivan et al., 2019). Erratic working desynchronises the schedules of workers from those of their family, friends and communities, impacting work-life balance and well-being. Pressures on workers’ habitual time structures are intensified for platform or gig workers who experience (sometimes rapidly) alternating periods of underemployment,

unemployment, overemployment and intensification, unpredictability, fragmented time and unpaid work (Berg, 2016; Datta et al., 2019; Duus et al., 2023; Gregory, 2020; Huws et al., 2018; Lu, 2023; Pulignano et al., 2023; Vieira, 2023). While gigging is widely and actively promoted by work-providers as offering workers the autonomy to match their work hours to their preferences (and hence avoid time-underemployment), the reality for many platform workers is too few hours, unpredictable worktime and a relentless (time-intensive) search for work (James, 2024; Lehdonvirta, 2018; Sun et al., 2023; Sutherland et al., 2020; Wood et al., 2019). Time-underemployment here is firmly linked to wage-underemployment: such gig workers commonly report dissatisfaction with their incomes and financial insecurity (Berg et al., 2018; CIPD, 2017; TUC, 2019; Warren, 2015, 2021). A high wage, as opposed to being underpaid, can also impact the number of hours worked and is linked to autonomy over worktime as higher paid employees are likely to have more bargaining power (Grund and Tilkes, 2023).

We thus argue that the issue of time structure, as highlighted by LDT's first latent function of employment, usefully draws attention to the experiences of individuals who are time-underemployed. Employment only sometimes entails habitual time structures and, in some cases, does not entail guaranteed work (e.g. zero-hours contracts). This demonstrates that, in current labour markets, underemployed workers are likely to experience poor time structures, with implications for their health and ability to participate fully in their family lives and communities. That a lack of certainty is sold to workers as positive flexibility, which can be self-determined, further suggests time-underemployed workers who lack autonomy (Lindsay and McQuaid, 2004) may experience even worse health and well-being, and status and self-esteem issues. Exploring latent function one, habitual time structures, reveals that time-underemployment needs to be considered not only in terms of the number of hours worked but also in terms of the amount of flexibility or habituation an individual requires or can tolerate in their working life. To achieve a healthy and sustainable balance, individual autonomy over working hours needs to at least be co-determined, rather than imposed by employers or platforms (Sun et al., 2023).

### *Contemporary purpose in underemployment*

The second latent function is gaining purpose from employment. The idea that workers may experience purposelessness also needs to be considered in light of post-Jahodian industrial change, as well as the developments in how employment is organised and perceived. While this latent function does not link directly to one particular form of underemployment, it does interrelate closely with both wage- and skills-underemployment.

Beginning with wages, in the contemporary UK, earning a wage has been utilised as both an aspect of social integration and for the benefit of the state: individual workers contribute to the economy, directly via using their wage to purchase goods and indirectly via tax contributions, while also not being 'a burden' on the state by being reliant on benefits or pensions (Morrison, 2019; Shildrick et al., 2012). We see here the dominant economic discourse that perpetuates the argument that any job is better than no job. Wage-underemployment, when it means not earning enough to make a living, undermines the understanding that paid work provides a purpose. The links between



wage-underemployment and the purpose of employment are seen too in the variation that exists around whether there is the social stigma of being ‘a burden’ or ‘scrounger’. For example, purposelessness in Marienthal, a community almost entirely without paid work, was felt less keenly than in Bakke’s (1933) study of unemployed workers in Greenwich, a community that was predominantly employed. Social norms and contexts, including whether full-time, standard employment is the norm and to what extent forms of underemployment are socially valued (Stam et al., 2016; Stovell and Besamusca, 2022), shape experiences of purpose/lessness. It is important to note, however, that purpose is not solely based on paid work. Finding purpose in the form of economic and/or social contributions can be irrespective of employment status, with strong evidence that, for example, informal carers or volunteers gain a strong sense of purpose from these unpaid roles (Bottero, 2023; Kameråde and Bennett, 2018; Stewart et al., 2022).

Moving on to skills, purpose and purposelessness can also be established via the content of the paid work undertaken. The skills and qualifications under-/used in employment can serve as a proxy for purpose here. Even where employment requires skills/qualifications and is set up to deliver a purpose, for example (public) services (Usman et al., 2021, and see the WES special issue on meaningful work, e.g. Laaser, 2022), underemployment is common (Lindsay and McQuaid, 2004), and a sense of purposelessness can be experienced if inappropriate or disruptive policies are applied. Differences in values, be they in relation to service provision or feelings of being an interchangeable cog in a bigger machine, can also produce a sense of purposelessness among workers (Bottero, 2023).

The potential for purpose to be gained from paid work may thus be undermined for the underemployed if they are spending time in jobs with poor pay and/or poor use of skills/qualifications. Individuals may have a sense of purpose via their job but the mere existence of a job does not guarantee purpose (Orton, 2011). Purpose not only depends on the economic contribution made but, as Jahoda (1982) pointed out, on the balance between individual and social needs. Perceptions of purpose, therefore, are inherently tied to individual and social roles and structures, as well as to the extent of attachment, value and satisfaction experienced within a job (e.g. by using your skills and experiences). As Jahoda (1982) argued, individual purpose is important, but it is made viable and is potentially superseded by collective purpose. Analyses of contemporary underemployment therefore need to recognise individual and social level perceptions of purpose. Approaching underemployment from this perspective facilitates an investigation of the individual injury to well-being that can be caused by a sense of purposelessness (Usman et al., 2021), as well as the social – as opposed to economic – value of certain types of employment.

### *Contemporary social experiences and contacts within underemployment*

The third latent function of employment, providing social experiences and contacts, links to both time- and wage-underemployment. Shared working hours are required to enable some social connections with colleagues, and an adequate wage is often necessary to participate in social activities.

Time-underemployed workers with too few working hours may have reduced opportunities for social contacts and social experience inside and outside of work. Reduced contact with colleagues is a particular risk for multi-jobbers (who require multiple jobs due to being underpaid and/or working too few hours), given their often short and rushed hours within each individual job, while potentially extended working hours overall can impact social experiences outside the workplace (Smith and McBride, 2021; Tassinari and Maccarrone, 2020). Increased home-working has drawn renewed attention to the important role of social experiences and contacts at work. Before the pandemic, there had already been a growing focus by employers on home/remote working. It was being sold as a ‘win-win’ for both employers and employees (Felstead, 2022; The Work Foundation, 2016), but many employees were still reluctant to work from home. One of the main reasons for this reluctance was a lack of social interaction (Lewis et al., 2017; Lyonette et al., 2017) and a desire for social contact with co-workers. The widespread requirement for many employees to work from home during the pandemic (McPhail et al., 2024) showed that, in a crisis context, though working from home made personal relationships stronger and easier to manage, it reduced the amount of personal interaction and collaboration among colleagues. Many workers felt isolated and craved physical and personal interaction (de Klerk et al., 2021). Low or insufficient wages can reinforce such isolation if individuals cannot afford to engage in social activities outside of work. The cost-of-living crisis has seen more workers unable to pay for food, heating or clothing, let alone so-called non-essential activities such as leisure and socialising (Beatty et al., 2021; Patrick, 2017; Shildrick, 2018). It is thus important to pay attention to the quality of social experiences and contacts within employment: experiences of loneliness are at an all-time high (Groarke et al., 2020; Irvine and Rose, 2022), reinforced by lockdowns and restrictions during the Covid-19 pandemic,<sup>1</sup> signalling an intriguing contrast between technologically enhanced social contact possibilities (that flourished in the pandemic context) and the spread of reported loneliness (Rouxel and Chandola, 2024).

Amid overall changes to working practices and locations, the latent function of social experiences and contact has also changed, both in ways that are welcomed and in ways of organising employment that are negative for employees, for the time-underemployed especially. Among the underemployed, related wage-underemployment can mean inaccessibility to appreciated and/or beneficial social activities. A revised conceptualisation of underemployment must therefore build in the interaction between how much social contact is possible in a job and the extent to which an individual underemployed worker might find such contact desirable or not, as well as their capacity to afford social activities.

### *Contemporary status and identity in underemployment*

The fourth latent function is employment-based status and identity. While underemployed workers gain the official status of being a ‘paid worker’, purely by virtue of not being categorised as ‘out of work’, jobless or unemployed, having a job does not necessarily equate to a high status or strong and stable source of identity formation. We can link latent function four to each dimension of underemployment. The extent of skills use and the wage paid can both be strong indicators of the status associated with a job.

Beck's (2009) Brazilianisation of work, for example, outlines a political economy of insecurity where jobs viewed as 'poor' and/or 'inappropriate' and unskilled are stigmatised. Standing's (2016) precariat class is engaged in unstable, insecure and low-paying jobs that offer few routes to stable (paid) work-based identities. Entailing intersecting and unequal distributions of risk (Kalleberg, 2018; Stead, 2021), the precariat encompasses women, youths, migrants, older and disabled workers. Nixon (2018) and McDowell (2020) both evidence the stigma experienced by working-class men employed in poorly paid 'women's work' that is deemed inappropriate for them, offering little dignity often because it is part-time, low-waged and viewed as low-skilled (Lindsay and McQuaid, 2004) – that is, underemployed on all three indicators. Time, in the number of hours worked, can also impact on status in time-greedy organisations (Schor, 1991) where being busy, especially excessively so, can come with its own 'badge of honour' (Gershuny, 2005; Sullivan, 2008).

Our approach here is not to ignore the potentially derogatory classification of certain types of job as 'poor', and even pointless or 'bullshit' (Graeber, 2019; Walo, 2023). Workers in many so-called low-quality and stigmatised jobs, aspects of which may be deemed dirty, degrading or disgusting by others, nevertheless can appreciate the value of their work and express satisfaction and pride in it (Deery et al., 2019; Simpson and Simpson, 2018), with pandemic-led narratives of 'heroic' and key workers re-igniting debate on what work and which workers are valued (ILO, 2023). From this literature, it is clear that the status and identity of underemployed workers is often compromised, although workers can resist the downgrading of their value. In the precarious world of work that is typical of deindustrialised regions, social value systems and individuals' self-image are at odds for an increasing range of workers.

Being underemployed, irrespective of the indicator used, does not automatically imply low status or weak identity, but, as the above examples suggest, poor jobs that are underpaid, with low use of skills and too few hours, often have low potential for any status or identity to be derived.

### *Contemporary regular activity*

The fifth latent function of employment is regular activity. This can be directly linked to time-underemployment and the regularity (or otherwise) of the work undertaken by an underemployed worker. Psychologists Paul and Batinic's (2010: 46) analysis of LDT interprets this as being active, no matter the reason: 'Being active, even being active due to external forces such as the need to earning a living, is better for a person's psychological well-being than being passive'. In his critique of Jahoda, however, sociologist Cole (2007) argues that this fifth function implies 'required' regular activity, and that Jahoda believed that only the provision of paid work could provide such regularity. There are two factors to consider here: regularity of activity (i.e. structure of working hours), and the content of the activity that can be linked to skill use.

Starting with regularity, the delineation between paid and unpaid work activities had already blurred for many well before the pandemic (Weeks, 2010). Many more home-based workers experienced this blurring during lockdowns, where any regularity of the job might have been disrupted by anything from home-schooling to parcels being

delivered (Leroy et al., 2021). The regular activity of physically travelling to work was also abandoned for those workers who could or were told to work from home. The use of videoconferencing, by contrast, is a very physically passive form of engagement. Conversely, those who continued to work in often dangerous environments (e.g. the health sector) had additional regular activities to get into PPE to keep themselves protected (ILO, 2023). In sharp contrast to the traditional physicality of a 9–5 job, many occupations now have less or no regular activity as part of the working day, and reductions in the regularity of work activities stretch beyond underemployed workers. However, the content of the activity also plays a role for Jahoda. If the ‘activity’ itself (the tasks, job or jobs) is demanding, tiring, unskilled and/or boring, then undertaking such work regularly can have negative effects for physical and mental health. An infamous example here is the regular activity demanded of Amazon warehouse order pickers, whose jobs involve walking at speed distances of 10 to 15 miles per day. Briken and Taylor (2018) describe this work as not only low paid (wage-underemployed) but also arduous, damaging to health, pressurised and humiliating, meaning that regular activity can become excessive and stressful. Such stress can be made worse if the content of the work is of no interest or repetitive and/or does not use a person’s skills.

## **Discussion: A sociological framework of underemployment**

Studying underemployment is especially timely. Current employment opportunities are shaped by the UK government’s stringent austerity measures following the 2008–2009 recession, the current and likely long-term implications of the Covid-19 pandemic, threats to businesses and to livelihoods with the UK’s exit from the EU, as well as the cost-of-living crisis. These developments have already resulted in increased unemployment, underemployment and precarity, with implications for individuals’ and familial financial, social and psychological situations and well-being. This article offers a sociological re-evaluation of underemployment, drawing upon the five functions of employment that were detailed in Jahoda et al.’s LDT. We argue that LDT has specific resonance for a comprehensive investigation of our contemporary and shifting world of work.

Questions about the adequacy or quality of employment, and the extent and structure of underemployment, are raised by all five latent functions of employment. Based on our re-evaluation of the LDT approach, and its extension in this article, we argue that a sociologically informed assessment of underemployment needs to incorporate each latent function to determine how good (and close to good/full employment) or bad (and close to or worse than unemployment) particular forms of underemployment are. Table 1, our proposed sociological framework of underemployment, summarises each latent function and its key components. Recapping on each:

1. *Time*: The structure of their worktime is central for time-underemployed workers to whom flexibility is often sold as an advantage of the job but who may end up with no habitual time structure. A degree of habituation, routine and, with that, control, are important to individuals’ mental and physical well-being. We also emphasise the importance of having some autonomy over when and how work is

**Table 1.** A sociological framework of the latent dimensions of underemployment.

1. Habitual time structure	2. Purpose	3. Social contacts	4. Status and identity	5. Regular activity
Strong/habitual time structure vs no/weak time structure	Strong purpose vs purposelessness or weak purpose	High degree of social contacts vs low number of social contacts	High status vs low status	High degree/stressful level of activity vs no/low activity
High worker autonomy/co-determination vs low autonomy/ employer determination	Individual purpose/ aims vs social purpose/aims	High desirability of social contacts vs low desirability	Strong source of identity vs weak source identity	High interest in activity undertaken vs low interest

arranged, given that both are often imposed by an employer or a platform, rather than co-determined.

2. *Purpose*: Having a purpose from paid work is at risk in all three forms of underemployment, as signified by the injury to well-being that can result from feelings of futility in a job. Purpose and value are subjective but can include both individual and social contributions and benefits, rather than the purely economic contributions emphasised by the UK government in the ‘any job’ discourse.
3. *Social contact*: If too little time is spent at work (i.e. time-underemployment), it can be difficult to make many/good contacts there, though the desirability of making such contacts may vary depending on individual preferences and values. Moreover, a wage is usually required to be able to participate in social activities, which may be especially compromised in the context of the cost-of-living crisis.
4. *Status and identity*: The more skills and qualifications that are required in a job, the more it pays, and the more workers’ time is valued, the more potential there is for the job to be associated with high status and identity. All forms of underemployment compromise the potential for the acquisition of status and/or a work-based identity.
5. *Activity*: The amount of working time spent on activities that are highly strenuous (as opposed to, for example, inactive video calls), in particular where the activity is of low interest or boring, influences the extent to which a job causes mental and physical injury or is experienced as positive and stimulating. Time-based underemployment, linked to wage-underemployment, influences the extent of time that a worker might be exposed to strenuous or stressful working conditions, whereas skills or qualification-based underemployment plays a role in how interesting, stimulating or boring a job may be.

This is a conceptual article. It brings together and collates in a new way the various features that form the complex, contemporary working lives of underemployed workers. We argue that, rather than considering hours, wages and skills alone, any attempts at improving the quality of work, let alone creating beneficial employment that is

sustainable and of social as well as economic value, need to incorporate manifest as well as latent functions of employment. The five original latent functions of employment were discussed by Jahoda et al. a half century ago, and so we update and reflect on their adequacy today. Our assessment is each function remains highly pertinent for current analyses of work. However, it is necessary to extend LDT with factors that the original does not specify directly or sufficiently. A key nuance that emerged out of our discussion of the contemporary application of LDT is worker autonomy and self- or co-determination, an important theme in contemporary workplace relations studies. Some degree of control over one's ways of working is linked to greater job satisfaction for workers, more organisational commitment and improved well-being and work-life balance, even in challenging workplace settings (Carr and Mellizo, 2013; Gardell, 1977; Lyness et al., 2012), while recent research also warns that pressurised workers who can self-determine their work might self-exploit (Chung, 2022) and experience strong work-life disruption (Kim et al., 2020). Autonomy and self-determination in employment underpin each of the five factors of time, purpose, social contacts, status/identity and activity, but were not made explicit in LDT. Other factors, such as, for example, worker voice, job security and power relations have not yet been integrated into our framework, but they underpin relationships within the workplace, as elsewhere. For example, there has been a steep decline in collective worker voice in the UK as trade union membership has fallen (after a peak of 13.2 million members in 1979 to 6.25 million in 2022; DBT, 2022), with the lowest unionisation among the most job-insecure. Unions face deepening challenges in the face of spatially dispersed workforces, especially gig workers (Umney et al., 2024). Weakening voice undermines worker input into workplace decisions, and it raises concerns for collective identity formation. Yet there is also clear evidence of effective mobilisation among global and indie/grass roots worker movements (Pero, 2020; Wood et al., 2018; Woodcock and Cant, 2022). Being insecure can weaken but it does not eradicate worker agency nor destroy solidarity (Morgan and Pulignano, 2020). More work is needed to identify the importance of such factors for underemployed versus employed workers' employment experiences.

A central contribution of the article is its highlighting of the positive contribution that Jahoda's LDT, with its focus on unemployment, can make to a reconceptualisation of underemployment. We argue for the strong relevance of LDT to current discussions in the sociology of work and employment. Based on our re-evaluation of LDT, we argue that a sociology of underemployment can usefully incorporate Jahoda's original five latent functions of employment (time, purpose, social contacts, status, activity) to help identify different forms of underemployment and differentiate between them conceptually. We also argue that the five latent functions can provide a framework for action by helping to identify those areas for development in order to create healthy and meaningful employment. The action framework is intended to be read as cumulative in that we recognise that it is unlikely that all aspects can be addressed or implemented at the same time across all occupations. What this means both in theory and in practice is that there is no clear-cut distinction between beneficial and harmful forms of employment, just like there cannot be a clear distinction between employment and unemployment if we consider the various forms of underemployment.



Adding and utilising an innovative sociological discussion of underemployment, we argue that any job (if it brings underemployment) is not better than no job (i.e. unemployment) and this article explores this via the ways in which the underemployed can face latent deprivations. In investigating current day underemployment, we thus unpack and critique the notion that the mere existence of a job is sufficient to protect individuals from the socially and psychologically negative impacts usually associated with unemployment.

A final contribution that this article brings to discussions around underemployment is highlighting the importance of context. We reiterate that the economic and social context in which underemployment in the UK is currently experienced is still characterised by post-recession policies. These include austerity, reductions in welfare support (Jones et al., 2024) and broader social services, insecurity, in particular due to the Covid-19 crisis, as well as an individualisation of responsibilities. Our focus in the article is the UK context but many of these pressures are not unique to the UK and so our analysis is likely to hold for other societies facing similar challenges.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, in this context and with our focus on the latent functions of employment, we do not deny the manifest function of a wage and the potentially ravaging material ramifications of being wage-underemployed. Instead, we build on key literature already highlighting these issues (e.g. Beatty and Fothergill, 2023; Beatty et al., 2021; Patrick, 2017) to establish additional social and psychological impacts for underemployed individuals. Empirical research with underemployed individuals is now needed to explore if and how each latent function is experienced every day and if new functions, not yet encapsulated in the literature, are characteristic of lives being lived almost a century after the Marienthal study. We propose that our framework is a useful approach to underpin such empirical research.

## Conclusion

We began this article with reference to the much-vaunted policy discourse that argues that ‘any job is better than no job’ (Layard, 2004: 1). Yet underemployment is a growing phenomenon, with increasing numbers of those in jobs employed below their potential in terms of hours, skills/qualifications and/or wages. Drawing on LDT’s five latent functions of employment (time structure, sense of purpose/achievement, social contacts, status/personal identity and regular activity), we conclude that an updated LDT provides a valuable approach to explore underemployment. LDT demonstrates from a conceptual stance that any job is NOT better than no job and reveals how the underemployed may face multiple latent deprivations. Having a job that is poor in quality, offers too few hours, is insecure, provides scarce opportunity for growth, does not use an individual’s skills and qualifications and provides little or no protection against poverty, is more likely to produce similar social-psychological outcomes to those who have no job at all than to those with good, full-time and secure employment. Given the continuing changes and added insecurities within the labour market, further research into the latent functions of employment would ensure a better understanding of underemployment, unemployment and working lives as a whole.

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## Notes

1. [www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/articles/mappinglonelinessduringthecoronaviruspandemic/2021-04-07](http://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/articles/mappinglonelinessduringthecoronaviruspandemic/2021-04-07).
2. For developments beyond the UK and the Global North, see <https://web-archiv.oe.cd.org/2014-09-09/316013-OECD-Preventing-unemployment-and-underemployment-from-becoming-structural-G20.pdf>.

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