

## ***To Raise the Flexible Child: Lessons of Commitment and Betrayal in Post-industrial Insecurity***

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### **Abstract**

In post-industrial societies, the prevalence of both layoffs at work and divorce/breakups at home herald what we might consider a new “Age of Insecurity,” with ascendant values of flexibility, adaptability and resilience, all hinging on the questions of what is worth staying for, what we can expect from each other, and how we handle change. Based on in-depth interviews with 63 mothers (and 17 fathers) of teenagers, I present data showing that parents varied in their own approach to commitment, with many undertaking a variety of strategies to curtail their own obligations, including discursive innovations, emotional labour, and the use of what I term “abandonment entrepreneurs” to minimise what they owe their children. Despite this variation, however, parents were nearly unanimous in one dimension: they were raising “flexible” children. Low-income and affluent parents encouraged children to move on from difficult friends, prioritised their development over their relationships with others, or warned them of the likelihood of betrayal in future relationships or jobs. I consider the implications of these findings for the contemporary experience of childhood, for continued cultural space for dependency and care, and for policy.

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## **Introduction**

Fiona Parker has fully embraced the new ethos of flexibility, in the new age of insecurity. A white technical worker with some college in her background and a new husband and baby, she has had at least four serious, long-term relationships since her teenaged child Jimmy was born, and at last count, something like 11 jobs. Jimmy has attended five different schools, and they have moved multiple times, at times doubling up with family to save money, then setting up new households alone or with new romantic partners. She and Jimmy have always moved on together, Fiona said, and Jimmy grew up learning how to adapt to change. She recalled one relationship with a co-worker, a man who earned a decent salary, had a son by a previous marriage and lived in a nice house – all points in his favour, Fiona said. But things went sour two months after having moved in with him. Fiona marvelled at Jimmy's resilience:

“I found an email, like, to another girl that he was planning to go somewhere with. We were supposed to be going to this party and I was looking up a recipe and I saw the email. And I was, like, “I’m out of here. See you later.” Get Jimmy, get in the car. And he’s like, you know, probably yelling for me not to leave and we need to talk about it or something. And I’m like, “whatever.” So we get in the car, Jimmy’s with me, and we start driving away. And it’s June, but you know that Rudolf song? [Sings.] “Put one foot in front of the other, and soon you’ll be walking out...” He just started singing that in the back of the car. He’s like four years old. I mean how perfect is that? [Laughs.]”

How do we raise our kids to deal with change? Just what counts as “perfect” for them to witness and learn and do and think about flexibility and commitment?

The insecurity of contemporary times is a common feature of both work and intimacy in the developed world. The “precarity” of modern work, and the instability of modern families, reflect (and generate) a cultural collision between new emphases on flexibility, adaptability and transience, and traditional notions of commitment, loyalty and obligation (Beck 1992, 2000; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995; Bauman 2000; Kalleberg 2009). Scholars have shown that how teenagers

perceive these changes has implications not just for their commitment to work, but a host of other concerns: e.g., their grades, health, self-efficacy, trust and participation (Stewart and Barling 1996; Barling, Zacharatos & Hepburn 1999; Lim and Leng Loo 2003).

Existing work documents that social inequality plays a vital role in whether the new age of insecurity represents newfound freedoms or the loss of stability and connection (Kossek 2000; Benner et al. 2007; Cooper 2008; Ho 2009). Evidence suggests that adults make uneasy cultural accommodations to the demands of late industrial capitalism, adjustments that produce “cold intimacies” at home and at work, and that vary by class and gender (Hochschild 1997; Illouz 2007). Parents seeking to prepare their children for the new flexibility must somehow help them to be nimble enough to adjust to the shifting demands of work and family, while also encouraging them to be trustworthy and reliable, able to withstand adversity and follow through on goals. How do parents resolve the tension among these traits, which involve different approaches to change?

Furthermore, existing work tends to treat the trends in each sphere – home and work – separately. Yet surely what people experience about commitment and flexibility in one sphere might influence how they feel in the other, since the same people travel from one domain to the other every day. How are parents’ perspectives on flexibility and commitment informed by their varying experiences of work in the post-industrial era?

I conducted in-depth interviews with 80 parents of teenagers in Virginia, who varied in social class as well as in their relationship to the new ways of working, with some laid off, some stably employed in lifetime jobs, and others relocated by their employers. I found that while adults converged in their desire to raise “flexible” children, their experience in the workforce shaped whether they viewed that flexibility as a road to opportunity or as a sort of armour against coming disaster. Furthermore, even as their working history shaped parents’ approaches to flexibility, social class shaped the way parents talked about some very particular forms of youth commitment. All parents talked about getting their kids to stand by

their word, but only middle-class informants aimed their exhortations at college applications, while the stable working class forced their children to pay serious consequences for unreliability.

## **Background to the Study**

We are in a new age of insecurity, one characterised by job uncertainty and family instability (Kalleberg 2009; Cherlin 2009). In post-industrial societies, new modes of production have brought about a new model of career, one that involves the breakdown of the old social contract of loyalty and reward, and the rise of employees who change companies frequently and are promised little in return (Arthur and Rousseau 1996; Osterman 1999). In the United States, the trends started with blue-collar workers in the 1970s and 80s, but it spread to white-collar workers in the 90s and the 2000s (Blinder 2007). Still, the new ways of work have created a two-tiered system – those workers who take advantage of the expanded market of potential employers to jump from company to company, and whose continued loyalty is predicated on an individual career calculus of what makes sense for them now, and on the other end, those workers who by education, age, or other factors are rendered expendable, whose talents and skills are not in demand and deemed unsalvageable, who are left behind by the new ways of work (Kossek 2000; Ho 2009). Wrote Bauman (2000: 58): “Some of the world’s residents are on the move, for the rest it is the world itself that refuses to stand still.”

In developed countries, corresponding trends have taken place in families, where the predominance of married couples with children has given way to a more fluid and diverse array of family forms; we might consider these “postindustrial families” (Stacey 1997). Americans today experience a high rate of relationship collapse, with almost a quarter of marriages and a little over half of cohabiting unions dissolving within five years, in what Cherlin (2009) called the “marriage-go-round.” A churning market in love has developed based on increased individual choice, instability, and “bounded intimacy” (Giddens 1992; Bernstein 2007).

Accompanying these social transformations has been powerful cultural change, as people seek cultural codes that enable them to make sense of, and to navigate successfully, the new world of privatised risk and attenuated connections (Illouz 2008; Beck 1992). These changes bring questions of commitment and flexibility to the cultural fore. Commitment, of course, can be defined emphasising many different dimensions: intensity, duration, breadth, commitment to other people, to places, to principles, to the self. Commitment can be joyfully or meanly given, it can be reciprocated or dismissed, it can be humiliating or stultifying, comforting or prideful. In my research, I am agnostic about its definition, open to however my informants couch it. Nonetheless, I retain a research focus on how ideas about commitment affect the staying power of our connections to other people: in other words, how do we decide when to remain in a relationship or job, and when to leave? I juxtapose this form of commitment with flexibility, by which I mean the capacity to withstand and even to look forward to change, cultivating new relationships and handling new situations. In this sense, flexibility and commitment are near opposites, although both words are meant to have a positive connotation, as opposed to, say, unreliability and intransigence. My focus is on the cultural realm of these changes – how parents construct the meanings of commitment under these circumstances, and how they work out what it means to be an honourable person when conventional expectations of character have been upended.

Parents undertake this cultural work in the face of considerable evidence that instability has negative effects on children. Prior work documents that job insecurity, typically defined as “perceived powerlessness to maintain desired continuity in a threatened job situation” (Greenhalgh and Rosenblatt 1984: 438), has important, and deleterious effects that extend beyond the insecure worker. Scholars have found that parental job insecurity also affects their teenaged children, and is associated with the youth’s lower self-efficacy (Lim and Leng Loo 2003), poorer grades (Barling, Zacharatos and Hepburn 1999), higher risk of illness (Margolis and Farran 1984), more cynicism and less trust (Barling and Sorensen 1997), social problems (Stewart and Barling 1996; Flanagan and Eccles 1993), and lower work motivation (Barling, Dupre and Hepburn 1998). With regard to family

instability, extensive research has found negative outcomes – including propensity to dropout, teenaged childbearing, or emotional and behavioural problems – for youth experiencing family disruptions like divorce (although the majority of children from divorced families seem well-adjusted), even controlling for pre-existing characteristics of the youth or the family (Amato 2001; Painter and Levine 2000; Fomby and Cherlin 2007).

Parents and scholars agree, then, that youth do and will experience multiple transitions within and outside the family, and that instability poses serious challenges. How are parents preparing children to meet this instability? What are the tools they consider it necessary to have as they face an insecure future? How are these shaped by parents' own background, including their social class and their experience with the new ways of work?

## **Methodology**

I investigated these questions through the use of in-depth interviewing and close, interpretive analysis. Through reflective talk, the informant can reveal the framings that shape his or her thinking about commitment, which can speak to the cultural schemas that are available, and how such schemas relate to action (Bellah et al. 1985; Swidler 2001). Using what Luker (2008) calls the “logic of discovery,” I relied upon wide variation in my sample to explore the ways in which women and men of various social locations, and with different commitment histories, experience and interpret post-industrial culture, constructing different roadmaps for traversing the challenges of contemporary cultural trends.

In this study, a graduate student researcher and I interviewed 80 mothers and fathers in the four areas: Washington DC and environs, two large cities and a smaller city in Virginia.<sup>2</sup> These parents form three groups: those who have experienced layoffs, those who have moved for the job, and those who are employed in putatively stable positions, such as police, fire fighting or public school teaching. Thus I use this

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<sup>2</sup> I interviewed the majority of the respondents; interviewers are identified in the text where need be by initials, mine as AP, and the graduate student researcher, Roscoe Scarborough, as RS.

purposive sampling to vary the experience my informants have had in the labour market – whether as people with firsthand knowledge of the newly precarious position of many workers, those whose lifetime employment meant their work lives still resemble that of their parents’ generation, and those whose employers thought them so valuable that they paid to relocate them. Relocators were also people who, in moving for the job, have largely chosen to prioritise their job commitments over other kinds of commitment, such as to communities, families or friends. All informants were parents of teenagers, and all received \$30 for their participation. Although most of the interviews were with white women with some college attendance (selected to capture the social location of the majority of employed women [U.S. Census 2004]), I included other informants who varied from this profile by race, class and gender, to be able to generate some theoretical ideas about how the processes and meanings of commitment and flexibility differed depending on social category and circumstances.

Interviews lasted from 1-3 hours, averaging about 2.5 hours, and took place in cafés, offices, homes, and libraries. Interviews involved the taking of what we might call a “commitment history”, including their narratives of change and stability at home and at work. I explored how informants interpret change, what counts as betrayal at work or in intimate relationships, how their experiences align with or confound their expectations, what sort of cultural work they do to resolve any contradictions, and how and when they make reference to consumer culture.

Qualitative research also refers to more than just the way in which the data are collected; in addition, a crucial component is the interpretive analysis to which it is subjected. In keeping with this process, I turned to my informants’ words again and again, coding them for persistent ideas, gleaning relevant themes from this data, repeatedly returning to the texts to check and recheck themes, linking codes and themes into analytic memos, and coaxing out the resultant emergence of a larger argument that both summarises the processes at work in the data and links these findings to debates in the literature (see Emerson, Fretz and Shaw 1995 for further explication).

## **Findings**

Parents varied in how they talked about uncertainty and risk at work and at home. For most, commitment at work was a one-way street, redefined to mean an intense personal work ethic juxtaposed with few expectations from employers. In contrast, at home, most parents conceived of commitment as including a small core circle, finite obligations, and a relatively quick trigger for detachment, and many keenly felt the betrayal of others who had not met their expectations. Against this backdrop, however, some acted as “commitment heroes”, going above and beyond expectations in response to situations of devastating need.

Despite this variation, parents demonstrated remarkable similarities in how they strove to prepare their children for the uncertain future. Parents who had starkly different experiences of the new ways of working – from those relocated for the job, to those laid-off by their employers, to those who worked in steady jobs with lifetime horizons – shared overarching ideals about loyalty and change that they hoped to impress upon their teenagers. Similarly, across gender, class and race, most parents aimed for “flexibility”.

Anita relocated for her husband’s career as a military contractor in Europe and throughout the United States, bringing up their four children around the world.

“And we wanted ... for them to grow up with the flexibility of being able to go somewhere, take a look around and say, “This is what I need to do to fit in here.” With society changing to be a mobile society, we thought that would be useful to them, as opposed to the growing up with roots and living in the same town forever like our generation did.”

They made the conscious choice to encourage their children to adapt well to change, even after considering the cost: their relationship to extended family:

“The kids are heading toward teen years and they didn’t know their cousins. We deliberately chose a mobile lifestyle to teach them how to fit in on a local situation in the world. But at the same time we sacrificed the fact that they

couldn't name their cousins if their life depended on it—or their aunts and uncles or grandparents.”

Anita thinks it was worth it to pay the price of greater family connection for the benefit of having her kids grow up flexible: “Ask anybody for their resume these days. They are going to say, ‘Yeah, I lived here, I grew up here, but I work here.’ And people don't stay in one place anymore.” The alternative was for them to be unable to adapt to new situations, and she considered that a significant problem, one she witnessed when her sister came to visit. “And I saw first hand, when my sister came to visit us in Brussels. She has lived three miles from where we grew up and she's in her mid-sixties. And she was like a fish out of water, really. And I didn't want – I see that as a disadvantage.”

Like Anita, most other parents emphasised their children's adaptability and flexibility. They counselled teenagers to “cool” their relationships with friends and love interests, they advocated independence, and they tried to steer youth away from troubled peers. When they talked about commitment, most parents focused on their children's commitment to schoolwork, activities or principles – to swim practice, soccer or baseball teams, volunteering at church, to trying their best in math, or to staying firm in their chastity pledge. Only a very few talked about commitment to other people.

These broad brushstrokes paint a fairly monochromatic picture of parental agreement about cooling friendships and the need for flexibility. Yet while parents of all backgrounds converged on the ideals, they differed dramatically in how they got there, to wit, their justifications or explanations of these ideals. Some considered flexibility as opportunity, the almost gleeful capacity to take advantage of prospects at work and in private life, while others considered flexibility as armour, the embittered, necessary and pre-emptive response to expected betrayal. Relocators made up most of the first kind, while people who had been laid-off comprised the second; while the stably employed mostly talked about flexibility-as-opportunity, they also emphasised and enforced commitment more than other parents. These

frameworks organised how parents talked about work, friendships and love relationships.

## **Flexibility**

### **The Road to Opportunity**

Anita, the relocator cited above, preferred her children to be truly “flexible” than, for example, deeply connected to their cousins. The point of flexibility, she maintained, was that it was the best preparation for them to be able to take advantage of opportunities in the future.

“You can go anywhere you want, do anything you want. I wanted to give them opportunities to open their minds to not just, “I’m from this town and here I’ll stay forever.” Not that that is such a bad thing, but I just wanted them to be able to have the opportunity to do what they wanted to do it. And I knew that if they saw that they could make friends anywhere or they could learn a different language or learn local customs, or learn to eat local foods that that would be a benefit to them in their own little grown up life.”

Anita’s views are typical of parents who considered flexibility as the road to opportunity. Most parents who talked this way were those who had been relocated for the job, although it also included some of the stably employed.

From the point of view of flexibility-as-opportunity, the alternative is close-mindedness, which could serve to close off new avenues in life. Tara worried that her youngest daughter, who had grown up mostly after the family had returned from their stints overseas, would not have the benefit of a flexible mind. Instead, the daughter went to a private school with the same people since kindergarten, children whose families all knew each other and vacationed in the same place. “Very American and not even that much travelling. So I’m a little worried about her”, she lamented:

“[I worry] that she's going to end up being really close-minded. That she's not going to be adventurous. That she's going to - she's going to miss opportunities to meet some great people or to have some great experiences because her friends aren't going to do it, so she's not going to do it, kind of thing.”

Flexibility enabled children to grab at “great experiences”. Said Dorothy, another relocater:

“And so it's good for kids to move. As devastating as it is, there is a big wide world out there and you are going to make friends. And different is not bad, it's just different.”

Dorothy considered it important that kids get a sample of the “big wide world out there”, rather than experience the same thing day after day. Similarly, Tara observed approvingly that her son Lon had refused to go to his father's alma mater in Virginia:

“He just felt like it was just too close to home, he just felt like he wanted to do something different and I think part of that is from the overseas experience that he knew there's a big world out there and this would be another opportunity to see that.”

Parents did not just advocate flexibility for its own good, however, but also as a useful approach in work and play.

### ***Flexible work***

Vicky thought her son had developed skills that might be someday useful for work, from the family's six moves in nine years. She did not really regret the moves, she said, even though she was refusing to do so during his high school career:

“I think he's trying to get roots but I also think he's very adaptable. I don't think a lot shakes him, he's very calm and he doesn't get flustered but I think maybe internally it kind of bothers him. If he's a little stressed inside he doesn't show it, which is actually a pretty good management technique. I think he is eventually going to be able to use that someday.”

Rochelle thought moving enabled her son to get over his inherent shyness, which ultimately helped him get a job and “manage on his own”.

“I think they are much more adaptable. When you have been forced to move and making new friends and going to new schools you quickly kind of lose that inadaptable piece. They are very social, very unafraid to – I think moving has definitely helped in that category of just making them very outgoing. My son Bobby went with my husband to Tokyo and travelled before he graduated. Chuck does a lot of work over there and so he went with him and worked with him. Chuck did not hold his hand, he put him at a table with people who did not speak very good English. I mean he did not hold his hand at all. And he loved it.”

Being “adaptable” thus made Bobby able to perform well on a business trip with his father.

Flexibility also enabled you not to get stuck at one workplace, opening up a world of different options, some parents argued. Abby had lived overseas as a military contractor before coming back to the U.S., where she was laid off and having trouble finding another job. Looking back over her varied career, which had ranged from airline work to building a postal service to managing an office, she relished her diverse work experiences.

“[My daughter] does have a concern that she brings up a lot is that “I’m not good at one thing. I’m not really good at one thing.” She’s pretty good at a lot of things but she doesn’t have one thing. I said, “Hannah, if you were let’s say at 5 years old you were able to play concertos on the violin or whatever, that’s all you would do. I mean, people who are given that kind of gift, that’s what their life revolves around. You wouldn’t be able to do this and that and the other, which you really enjoy to do. You really enjoy doing that.” So, it’s a give and take. I said, “You can have a little bit of a lot of things or you can have 1 thing.””

Abby's path was clear: "I've had a little bit of a lot of things. That's what my life's been. If I print out my resume with everything I've done for ten years it's going to be like eight pages long. I've just done lots of stuff. And I've enjoyed that variety, and it's had its drawbacks, obviously", she said, noting how they struggled in the downturn. But in the meantime, flexibility meant opportunity.

### ***Flexible intimacy***

The perspective of flexibility as opportunity also applied to how parents talked about relationships, with friends, intimate partners and even with themselves. These parents downplayed their children's current relationships, they offered tips on how children could make new friends easily, and they considered the costs of holding onto existing relationships – the opportunity cost, one could say, of prospects un-pursued – quite high.

Tara remembered the family dinner conversation where they decided to move to Switzerland:

"We, I mean, both of them were like, "We're not moving. We're not leaving our friends, we're not leaving whatever ..." And then – I'll never forget at the dinner table and we wrote all the positive things about moving and all the negative things about moving. And the list just kept coming up more positive about moving. The big negatives were leaving friends. I mean, that was really – we couldn't think of anything per se here that we wouldn't like – couldn't live without in Virginia. There just wasn't anything keeping us tied down here."

The only negatives were leaving friends, and they couldn't think of a thing they couldn't live without, e.g. friends were not enough ballast to lead them to curtail the opportunities.

Rochelle called her son Brian an "old soul" because when they moved from Atlanta, he did not force them to stay behind one more year so he could finish high school.

"A lot of people said, "Why don't you just stay in Atlanta and let Brian finish school?", and Brian didn't want that. No, he didn't because we talked about it and he didn't want that. He wanted us to be together as a family and wanted

everybody to be together. He was very supportive of it even though he didn't much like it at times. Yeah, he's an old soul and he's very caring and has perspective on that kind of stuff that typically a lot of teenagers don't. I don't think my other two would have. But he did and so he was very supportive of us moving."

Rochelle celebrated her son's cooperative attitude about moving; rather than forcing the family to split so that he could stay for his senior year, he let them move with his absolution, which Rochelle commended as the act of "an old soul", whose "caring" emphasises family relationships more than that with peers.

Parents also believed their children would make new friends, and viewed those friends to some degree interchangeably certainly just as good as the ones they left behind. Bruce, a teacher, said he was not distressed by the conflict his children were having with their friends:

"And in some cases I'm happy those things have come up, because I don't think they're destined for long-term relationships anyway. Those aren't the people they are going to be hanging out with. Those are people that they have sort of bonded with, but it's just not going to last."

These are friends, who are replaceable with other, better friends, who are out there somewhere, Bruce seems to suggest. Parents also gave their children tips on making new friends, to enable them to take advantage of new prospects. Vicky told her son "the five friend rule," that he needed to make not just one good friend, but five:

"I've always told him things like, especially when we were moving, like you need – I always called it the "five friend rule" but it didn't always work out because having five friends [was too hard for him] – you always need more than one friend, don't latch onto one person. You need three people because you can't rely on one person to be able to be available for you so you have to make new friends. You have to force yourself to make at least three friends so you can circulate with them. When you move to a new place and when you're

in your life at that new place. Yeah, because he wanted to have just the one friend and then he would be very disappointed if the person was doing something else – then he would be lonely because he was all by himself as an only child. So I taught him to use that technique.”

Vicky urged her son not to rely so absolutely on one new friend, because then his disappointment in that friend would not be so acute, hence the “five-friend rule”. Anita used a cross-country drive to their new home to teach her daughter, who was a little shy, how to keep a conversation going:

“I read it somewhere in a book once, use an actor’s trick – don’t answer “yes” or “no” always put a “but”. Do you like pizza? No, but I absolutely love tacos. Make a conversation, because you’re going to go into school and they’re going to say, “You just moved here. Do you like it here?” You can say, “Yes, so far, but I love to ride horses and haven’t had a ...” You know, turn it into something. So we practiced this role-playing on the way out here and tried to give them ways to fit in – not necessarily fit in, but to open doors to new relationships.”

The actor’s trick would help her daughter adjust to change in friendships, Anita thought.

People who viewed flexibility as opportunity saw clearly the costs of commitment. For Bruce, sticking with a high school sweetheart was limiting, even though he knew his wife would disagree, given that he, at nine years her senior, was her first boyfriend.

“I’m not saying they should bounce around or be promiscuous or any of that, but I don’t want them to marry their high school sweetheart. I don’t want to see that happen. Well, God, there’s got to be something else out there in the world. I mean I just think that is just so limiting. That is my point of view. You think you’re going to be with this person fine. Then go to Ireland for three years and come back or something. Go do something, but don’t just stay here and settle down. That doesn’t mean you can’t have a really good long-term relationship either.”

Bruce is horrified that someone would stick with a boyfriend from high school. That sort of person is perfectly adequate for having “a really good long-term relationship”, but clearly, one that would end. To do otherwise was just so limiting.

Stella was pleased her daughter chose her high school based on what she wanted to study, not where her middle-school friends were going. “They’re all looking for themselves. Which, you know, that’s what they should be doing”, Stella added. “I mean, I think my friend Betsy went to JMU because I went to JMU.”

Flexible children would prioritise their yen to have “experiences” even over relationships with their own parents – and for some that was a good thing. Said Rochelle, who followed her husband around the eastern seaboard, buying, renovating and selling their homes:

“I don’t think any of my children will feel compelled to have to stay near me. I think they will want a lot of experience. I think they are not going to be content to just hang out near home probably. They are going to want to go, I think, to exciting places. You do get the itch once you start moving. I would predict that my kids will have that itch because we have it.”

Rochelle was pleased to predict that none of their children would settle where she and her husband lived in Richmond.

### **Flexibility as Armour**

Other parents certainly shared the same general understanding of flexibility as good for their children. Stanley, an actor who had been laid off several times from various day jobs, was proud of his daughter’s adaptability:

“I think that basically no matter what life throws at her, it’s going to throw some curve balls, it’s going to throw some things that she doesn’t like, and there are also going to be some things that are great. And no matter what comes that she has the ability to look at it and deal with it. She doesn’t necessarily have to like it but that is life.”

Yet Stanley's words form a sharp contrast to those who framed flexibility as opportunity – a vision of flexibility as an unfortunately necessary piece of a child's protection, helping them weather the storms ahead. Most parents who evinced this approach had been laid off from their jobs. Katherine, for example, had lost her job a few years after the unexpected death of her ex-husband, father to her two daughters:

“I think I would rather they be more adaptable because you never know what's going to happen in life, where it's going to throw you for a loop. Anything can happen. In the past couple of years, a lot has happened, especially with Jessica. And I think if she was more adaptable to change, I think she would've dealt with certain situations differently.”

Katherine thought the girl was less adaptable than she needed to be to handle life's adversity, which was certain to come, albeit unpredictably.

***Armour against work disaster.***

Flexibility thus served as a sort of armour, particularly for uncertainty at work. Clark had been laid off from his job in desktop publishing, but was managing to make a living of sorts in part by playing in a local band on weekends. He urged his daughter to master the violin, because he saw giving private lessons as a good fallback in the event of losing one's job:

“That's the most important thing. It's something I've always had with my music. And I don't care what it is, you know, but you have to have some kind of a fall back so that if you do fall on hard times, you've still got something going again.

That's probably the – one of the biggest things I've tried to impart to both my kids. You have to have a fall back of one type or another. And don't put all your cards in one basket.”

Flexibility will be what makes her daughter able to jump nimbly when the ground underneath starts to shake, Clark said. She was not quite listening, he complained:

“I'm trying to prepare [her] for a very – the very difficult world that she's going to live in. Too few jobs and too many people. I see it coming. Okay. I mean, I'm already seeing it coming. You know. There are part time jobs out there, precious few full time jobs. Okay. And I think that's going to be the case as we go on. I think it's going to get worse and worse and worse.

As I've explained to her, there's a good possibility by the time she's forty and she has a full time job, they're going to lay her off and hire somebody much younger for a lot lower salary. And, of course, this doesn't make any sense to her, but it's just – I can see it coming.”

Clark felt like Cassandra, warning the unheeding of a coming disaster; his prescription of “flexibility” means not putting all your eggs “in one basket”.

In contrast to those who viewed flexibility as opportunity, then, those who viewed it as armour considered the stakes high because the potential cost – of not instilling flexibility as part of childrearing – was not insularity, or close-mindedness, but the naïveté, the misguided innocence of children who had been coddled. Felicia, who had been laid off from a sales job, viewed flexibility as a sign that her kids could handle anything:

“It's not something you can just – I kind of have to be realistic with them but reassure them, at the same time, because, I mean, what if something does happen to me? You know what I mean? They're getting to be teenagers. They have to – I don't make them adults. You know what I mean? That's not what I'm setting out to do, but I want them to be prepared.”

Felicia's words suggest she is not quite comfortable with her explanation here, that she is walking a narrow ledge between preparing her kids and scaring them, or taking away their childhoods (witness her “I don't make them adults”). Still, she considers it important for them to be aware of scary eventualities, such as her death.

***Armour against intimate betrayal.***

In the realm of personal relationships, some deployed flexibility as a sort of armour against intimate betrayal. Barbie tried to comfort her son after they moved to a new neighbourhood and he lost some old friends. Most people don't keep all their friends, she told him:

“And so when we moved, he had to move to the 8th grade. One year at this middle school, that was pretty difficult for him. He was pretty resentful to me for a while. But I just kept it positive and kept reiterating that it will be alright and I said, “When you walk away from this and when you get done with high school and you get done with college, if you still have five friends that you can count on one hand, then that’s all you need.” I’m like, if you pick up the phone you can call any of those five friends, and they are there for you for whatever, I was like, “Then that’s all you need, because most people don’t have that.””

Barbie uses flexibility discourse to ready her son for attenuated friendships. Clark was intent upon urging his daughter to use a different measure to evaluate friends, not for how much they like you but rather for whether they would support or betray you:

“I’m trying to explain to her that there are more important things in life than just being liked. And that’s – just being liked is not a good basis for having a long-term relationship. Whether somebody likes you right now. It’s how you both interact. Is this person going to have your back? Or are they going to turn on you?”

Clark argues that being liked – being chosen for who you are, for your true self – is less important for a long-term relationship than being secure, and he tries to convince his daughter of the fleeting nature of the former sort of connection. In doing so, however, he himself invokes a world of betrayal and risk, with the question “are they going to turn on you?”

Some of these moments often had a distinctly gendered feel, as parents, often ex-wives, tried to ready their daughters not to rely on men. Mindy's ex-husband had managed to wrest full custody of their children from her, an act from which she has not fully recovered. Her sense of betrayal is raw:

“And the other thing is you buy into the dream. The dream that girls are told, you live happily ever after when you get married. Well, that's not true. And you got to teach your kids to be self-supporting and to be accountable to themselves and of course not blame other people for your problems.”

Olivia had been told she could never have children, so she was taken by surprise when after seven years with a man, she found herself pregnant. The man left the next week. Fourteen years later when she caught her teenaged daughter in disarrayed clothing with another youth, her disappointment was laced with the expectations of betrayal:

“I was so mad. And I said some things to her, I said you shouldn't do that because he'll be here today and he's gone tomorrow. Just because of my experience I had with her father. I said some things about the boy and I probably shouldn't have said it. But I said, all he wanted to do was kiss you and he was so mean to you all day long. So yeah, I was mad at her, maybe too mad. And I did stop and say which way am I going to go and I did go the other way because I was just shocked.”

The way Olivia handles the situation of catching her daughter with a boy is not, say, to talk about the other opportunities ahead, opportunities that she is forsaking by getting waylaid by boys, but instead to advise her that most boys will leave. Lina, who had felt herself overly reliant on, first, her father, and then, her husband, only to learn how to stand on her own two feet when she became a single mother, wanted above all independence for her daughters:

“I hope that they all are able to support themselves and able to be independent and ... So they cannot have to depend on anyone else ... not like I have had it.

It's nice to know somebody's there if you need them but it's better for yourself in your mind and body if you know you can do it on your own."

Ellie, whose first husband had been abusive, had thought to stay with him for the sake of her children, but said she realised later that she actually needed to leave for the sake of her children:

"And that's when I realised ... and before I'd been staying for them ... I realised right then that I had to leave for them, as well as me, that I was wrong to be staying for them. I needed to get out of there for them so they could be what, how women were supposed to be treated. Now they can do things on their own and feel confident. That was the moment. Yep, remember it!"

Independence – and the flexibility that helped to produce it – was a feminist issue.

### **The Challenge of Dependence**

Dependence, with all of its conflicting meanings of care and need and vulnerability, juxtaposed with the proud steeliness of independence, captured a significant struggle for parents, even those that were not wrestling with their own gendered dependence. On the one hand, they wanted to pledge themselves to "be there" for their children, to dedicate themselves as 100 percent committed to their children's well-being. The idea of imposing limits on how much they would help their children ran counter to contemporary notions of honourable parenting, such as the full-bodied sacrifice embedded in the ideology of intensive motherhood (Hays 1996). At the same time, particularly as children passed through adolescence, the day of their fledging, when they were supposed to emerge as independent selves, drew nigh. Two conflicting notions of the honourable came to collide here: the honourable parent whose commitment to aiding their children knew no limits, and the honourable adult, who no longer needed that aid. How does one produce the other? Many parents were not sure, and their convoluted logic and language reflected their confusion. Barry, a teacher, was a primary caregiver for his daughter, and wrestled with the issue of dependence:

“I want her to have initiative to be able to tackle some of the big things that are going to come up in her new role of being an adult. I don’t want her to think as though I’m always going to be there for her to bail her out of her messes.

Although, I’m always going to be there to bail her out of her messes but I want her to be able to at least deal with her own messes. Or create smaller messes so that they’re not that big to bail out.”

Barry did not want his daughter to assume he would always be there to rescue her, even as he pledged that he would always be there to rescue her. He also worried that his daughter would not be ready to “launch”, partly because she had not shown much initiative around getting her driver’s license, and other markers of adulthood:

“Preparing her to launch, getting her ready to become a responsible citizen of the world is an area I’m not very happy with. I don’t think that in a lot of cases she’s really, overall, not just emotionally or whatever. Overall I don’t think she’s prepared for life. I think she’s lived a lot of shelter in her life; she has been sort of not been exposed to the difficulties of transitioning to become an adult. And so I’m concerned that there’ll be some kind of cruel joke that life is going to play on this kid when she gets out there.”

In this discussion, Barry evinces the flexibility-as-armour approach: his worry is not that the daughter will be able to take advantage of opportunities, but whether she’ll be able to withstand the coming troubles.

Flexibility, for some parents, meant the ability and inclination to handle change – of both a voluntary and involuntary nature. For the flexibility-as-opportunity paradigm, it signified a certain choosiness, as if someone would not settle for second best in order to stay in a relationship or job, but rather was open to moving on, often in search of better choices elsewhere. For the flexibility-as-armour paradigm, it signified a certain buoyancy, as if even after getting hit by unasked-for change, someone would bounce back, ready for anything.

## **Stable Resignation**

A few adults, however, counselled a different kind of approach, in which they tried to model how youth could stay in a job or a relationship, principally by suppressing their own desires in favour of the imperfect status quo. Most of these were the stably employed, but they included a few laid-off parents as well. Claudia was a born-again Christian who worked for a small family firm; she and her son had disagreements about his preparation for the work world:

“When he gets angry, he’s really angry and he’ll slam doors and he’ll, you know, mutter stuff under his breath and stuff that I just – drives me crazy. And I’ll tell him, you know, “That’s not how – you want to be treated like an adult, then you act like an adult.” I said, “Can you see me doing that at my office if somebody didn’t do what I wanted them to do? I wouldn’t have a job. You can’t act like that.””

Claudia tried to prepare her son for the emotional control that is coded “professionalism” – part of the “cold intimacy” Illouz outlines. Sylvia, a social worker, was trying the same thing with her special needs child:

“I’ve hired him to do lawn work for me and I said “I’m going to come” – because his quality is not always great and so I said, “I’m going to come and I’m going to check the quality before I pay you.” And of course I went out there and the quality was not great so I said “You need to re-do this.” And he started mumbling to me and I said “Leo remember we had an understanding that I’m you’re employer and I will pay you if you do the job.” And so I said, “This mumbling to me is not acceptable. So you didn’t do a job that was up to par and either you re-do it or I don’t pay you but if you mumble to me I will fire you.” He kept on mumbling [and] I said, “You’re fired now you don’t get paid for anything.””

By modelling “real world” work behaviour, parents tried to ready their youths to suppress their own frustration, and instead for the self-control and muted emotional standards of professional work behaviour.

Stephanie complained about her brother-in-law, who refused to lower his standards to get a job in a recession. Laid off herself, she showed her son how to go to work every day regardless, she said:

“But this guy is too good to do anything. And see, Sam and I, I think we share the same philosophy about a lot of things. My situation, if I’ve got to work an \$8.00 or \$9.00 an hour job just to have some money coming in, then that’s what the hell I’m going to do. And I’m going to show my son, that you have got to have some kind of work ethic. Rather than sit on my butt and play on a laptop all day. I mean he sees me get dressed, I go drop him off and I’m working somewhere.”

Stephanie suppressed her own desires for the perfect job, in order that she might show her son the value of getting up and going to work anyway. Stably employed respondents also adopted the same self-abnegating approach to their intimate relationships; in this they were joined by others, who remained committed to long marriages, particularly among the relocators, who deployed “flexibility” to all but their marriage relationships. What made the stably employed unique was their wider “commitment circles”, extending beyond the marital dyad to include extended family, neighbours, even old co-workers and friends. To sustain commitment to these groups, informants frequently talked about ignoring or downplaying their own desires and those of their children. Jayne was furious when her brother let his daughter stay home on Christmas night because of a fight with a boyfriend, rather than requiring that she join the extended family, who had travelled to be there:

“I said, “You know what? If my kid tried to pull that stuff,” I said, [whispers] “I don’t give a shit about you and boyfriend, you do this for your family. This isn’t about you and your boyfriend. This is about your grandmother and your aunt,” and you know. And we have kind of a running joke in our family because my grandmother used to say, “This could be my last Christmas.” And, of course, one year it was. So we always joke about how, you know, “This could be their last Christmas. You got to go, you got to show, you got to be there.” So I was really annoyed that she was allowed to not go.”

Stable employment appeared to embed informants in their wider communities, including their relatives, extending their ties beyond the marital dyad. These community connections also changed the dynamics of gender, so that women gained some solidarity and strength from these relationships external to their marriage. These links elicited some suppression of the self to sustain them, however, as they expanded the circle of commitment and obligation to include more people, in varying circumstances. While they expanded their own commitments, however, stably employed people had an ambivalent approach to flexibility. They fell short of using betrayal language, but at times deployed itinerant discourse, at other times disparaged the disloyal. For example, Theresa was unusually stable, fully immersed in Richmond's closed social world; she talked about how much she liked it that her kids went to school with the children of people she had known all her life, and said she did not really know anybody who switched jobs very often. She said she worried about her daughter's slightly obsessional approach to friendship, and joked about how her best friend was not the same way:

"I don't know about Roberta. She's a sweet girl and I love Roberta to death, but I think she would definitely throw Gillian under the bus. [Q: "Laughs."] [Voices overlap.] Very much so. Gillian is probably loyal to a fault. She would never do that to Roberta."

In Theresa's story, what is funny is Roberta's inability to commit, but she also describes Gillian as having the problem, as being "loyal to a fault". Similarly, Patrick was a police officer who contrasted his own deliberate, cautious lifestyle with that of his risk-taking, itinerant brother, who made choices he would not have made. "And I think to myself, 'I wouldn't do that'," Patrick said. Yet when talking about his three daughters and their future, he straddled the line between risk-taking and "traditional" values:

"I see them all three being very, what I would say, very traditional. But I see them all three individually being successful in getting to where they want to be. But I don't think that any of them will ever just settle for something like I did. I think they will constantly be looking for new opportunities. And whether

they make a big change every time or not, I don't think they will. But I think they'll be pretty smart about aging and productively moving on in life."

His daughters will be "traditional", but that will not inhibit them from reaching for new opportunities. They'll make change, but not every time. Patrick assures us that they will be flexible, but only just enough to be productive and successful. Their own lives marked by expanding commitment, stably employed parents often used language that valued flexibility, but only partially, lacing it with words that expressed their ambivalence.

### **The Influence of Class: Commitment at Work**

Many differences among my informants aligned with their varied experiences with the new ways of working; relocators, laid-off people, and those who were stably employed adopted different approaches to flexibility in work and intimacy. These differences were often maintained across class, with some exceptions. Nonetheless, in one particular area – how parents interpreted commitment to extracurricular activities – social class background appeared just as important as work trajectory.

#### ***Paying the piper.***

The stably employed informants were the most likely to voice work commitment as a form of self-suppression, and among these, the stable working class were the most likely to force this model upon their youth as well. They did this through the imposition of sometimes extreme consequences on their child during what I came to think of as "commitment crises" – moments in which teenagers tried to step away from academic or extracurricular obligations or redraw smaller boundaries around their commitment circles. One perhaps unusual example is Emily, a teacher married to a fire-fighter. Her son was an uneven achiever at school, but when he did poorly on a crucial diagnostic test, she decided to let the result stand, even though the test would shape his trajectory through high school in a favourite subject, and even as her position as a teacher in the school would have made it possible for her to "fix it" for him:

“A case in point would be in middle school where they gave him some test that he blew off one day, to see whether he should be put in algebra or geometry while he was in middle school. The teacher said he belongs in geometry, but he got a 36 on this test. “He blew this test off; if you’ll just sign the paper, we’ll put him in geometry”, and I said no. He blew off the test; put him where the test says he has to be. Don’t put him so far back that he’s going to be the troublemaker in somebody’s class, put him in algebra. She was so upset, she got the guidance counsellor to call. I told her the same thing. She got the principal to call; I told him the same thing.

Because if you’re going to blow off something, and you know what the consequences are, this test is to decide if you go into algebra/geometry. Math is something he loves; he absolutely adores math. If you blow it off, you had a reason for blowing it off, so you need to pay the piper.”

Similarly, Jake, a fire-fighter, recalled forcing his son to stay in a class he thought he was going to drop, and thus having to scramble out of a failing grade:

“At one point he thought he was going to drop it and didn't realise we weren't going to let him. So, when he decided he was going to drop it he just stopped doing the work. His grade plummeted and then he found out that he wasn't going to drop it – we weren't going to let him drop it, so he had to struggle to get his grade back up. He managed to pass the class. I don't think he got high enough to get the high school credit but he passed the class. That was all we cared. He was looking for the easy way out and we wouldn't give it to him.”

Ed, a fire-fighter, told another story of forcing his daughter to live up to her commitments:

“If they make a commitment we want them to see it through. Again, they kind of make their own choices. For instance, like yesterday, the oldest daughter had promised to do puppets at church. She got up yesterday morning and realised she didn’t really want to go to church. So she had made a commitment

so we packed her up and we went to church, she and I. So, of course, she felt better because she did it at the end. So it's kind of like that."

While almost every parent in my sample talked about requiring children to live up to their word, the stable working class had the most specific examples of following through on this idea during these "magnified moments" when commitment came to the fore.

"We're looking for people who do something and stick with it." In contrast, other parents, the more affluent of the sample, cited commitment as a trait students had to prove to colleges on their applications. Ellie recalled why her daughter felt like she had to stay on a volleyball team with a bad coach:

"On the college resume ... a lot of the kids are on the team for that reason. Yeah. It's so tough getting into college now. [They] really need to be so well rounded and also the commitment factor, you can't play something one year and another sport another year. You really do need to show that you're doing it for a certain amount of time whether you're winning or ... whatever you're doing, you do it for longer."

Jayne, a lawyer, observed how ideas about "what colleges were looking for" shaped her daughter's decision to join Girl Scouts:

"Plus it, you know, when we went to the college tour down at UVA like a year or so ago now, I guess, you know, they talked to her and they said, "You know, it looks good to have a lot of activities but, you know, don't be fooled. We know if you, you know, if we suddenly see a burst of activity starting in your junior year, we know what you're doing. We're not stupid – when you suddenly – when you did nothing your first or second year, and when you got to be a junior, you signed up for every club that you were eligible for, I mean we're looking for people who do something and stick with it. You know, and who have shown an interest in something over a long period of time." So I think she took from that, you know, I like Girl Scouts, it's going to be a benefit to me for

that kind of reason because she figured they'd all be looking for that kind of stuff. So I think that's part of it."

Theresa thought her daughter was showing insufficient commitment to swimming in 8th grade, and that it was threatening her prospects:

"She's an amazing swimmer, she's an amazing student, but I don't feel like she's really giving it 110 percent. I think she thinks it's cooler to ride in the middle. I think she thinks it's cooler to do that, so I've really just been on her. I'm like, "You want to go to UVA one day. You want to be on their swim team, you want to do this, you want to do that but you're not ... You've got to give 110 per cent now. And I know it seems silly in 8th grade, but this is where it starts.""

Only Regina, who came from a working-class background but who had experienced some class mobility, seemed to notice the difference between commitment to one's sport or activity, and commitment to other people. Her own daughter was an excellent swimmer, Regina said, but rather than focus on the dedication she showed, Regina instead was critical of what she perceived as her selfishness and entitlement:

"Yeah, she swims year round and she has swam at meets with, you know, Olympians and breaking club records. And so, yeah, she's a disciplined athlete. Gets up at 3:50 and swims for two hours in the morning, and goes to high school, and goes back in the afternoons, and swims for two hours, but she's still a brat. [Laughs.] She's still a self-centred little brat, but, you know, she has a direction."

Most middle-class parents were not like Regina, and viewed admirable commitment to activities and hobbies as the gauntlets through which good character was proven. But Regina viewed commitment as the sort one shows other people – helping at home, visiting with sick relatives, or even coaching others in your sport – as opposed to the everlasting pursuit of your own perfection. Her daughter demonstrated discipline, even direction, Regina acknowledged, but only of a self-centred nature.

Some middle-class parents also wanted their children to maintain their commitment to extracurricular activities for the useful traits they would develop. Like most parents, Dorothy, a relocater, said she made her son continue on in a sport that he disliked. But unlike other parents, Dorothy was not merely doing so to “develop his character”, or to teach him to “keep his word”. Rather, Dorothy said the skills he learned would be useful later on:

“So finally after years of, he still had to do soccer, and he fought and he complained, and I won’t try it, and I won’t – but we made him stick with it. And I guess it was high school and he said, “How much longer do I have to do this?” And I said, “As soon as you learn to be a part of a team.” Well, then his attitude changed. And then I said fine, now you don’t have to do it anymore. But you have to be able to operate with other people.”

This was an instrumental commitment, one to the self-learning and skills one would derive from the experience. Dorothy urged her son not to build friendships with his teammates, but rather warned him that he had “to be able to operate with” a de-contextualised, interchangeable set of “other people”.

Scholars have found that class differences in childrearing are particularly acute when it comes to extracurricular activities. Existing work documents that middle-class parents prioritise them in their efforts to cultivate their children’s unique talents, while working class parents see their role as teaching kids right v. wrong as the children accomplish their own growing up (Lareau 2003). My work corroborates these findings with regard to extracurricular activities, as middle-class parents saw them as crucial for college applications as some sort of external proof of their children’s commitment. But my findings elaborate upon the story of working class childrearing, in that working class parents who were stably employed were not just satisfied with the “accomplishment of natural growth”, but in their pursuit of moral teachings, were particularly likely to enforce strict interpretations of their children’s commitment.

Stable working class informants were parents who had essentially won the lottery, in that most stable, lifetime employment for people with high school degrees bled out in the industrial haemorrhaging of the last half century. These informants, then, are the rare examples of those for whom the world worked as it was “supposed to”, where they worked hard and received just rewards; they did not have to go through the gauntlet of betrayal on the job evinced by those who had been laid-off, for example. At the same time, they were not ignorant of the massive economic changes facing their children. They were thus the ones who enforced a strict interpretation of commitment, even as they talked about (manageable) change.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

In an age of insecurity, parents adopt different paths to navigate the unstable realms of work and family, but even among those who vary in their work and class backgrounds, they converge in their desire to raise flexible children. Nonetheless, the meanings of flexibility – and the reasons why they counsel their children to develop it – differ dramatically depending on their experiences in the new ways of work. Relocators mostly advocate flexibility as opportunity, as the best way for their children to be able to take advantage of new prospects, while those who had been laid off from their jobs approached flexibility as a kind of armour, and urged it upon their children as the best preparation for the imminent betrayals at work and in their intimate lives. Yet while their work experience shaped how they talked about flexibility, parents’ social class background influenced how they viewed some forms of commitment. I found that middle-class parents view children’s extracurricular activities as the crucible for their commitment, and they work to cultivate children’s individual talents so that they will thrive in the post-industrial workplace, prioritising their child’s future trajectory over particular relationships, teams or groups. This finding fits in well with existing work suggesting that middle-class families prioritise extracurricular activities, games or performances over relationships with extended families (Lareau 2003). In contrast, in my research stable working class parents were unusual for their strict reaction to commitment crises, those moments in which teenagers sought to minimise their obligations to

others. These parents allowed their children to suffer in school, forced them to honour their word, or otherwise calibrated their response for maximum impact on the children. At the same time, these parents joined the relocators in their approach to flexibility as opportunity, mentioning the future prospects their children would need to be nimble enough to exploit. While the groups take different paths to get there, then, with one seeming to reach for change, another to seek shelter from it, and a third to straddle these views with ambivalence, I found that most parents simultaneously rely on and cultivate the resiliency of children in the face of expected transitions.

But as most parents work to prepare their youth for the new ways of working and loving by emphasising flexibility, adaptability and change, they are assuming two important facts that scholars have yet to confirm. First, we do not know whether youth settings outside the family are echoing or countering the parental message. Second, we do not know what youth themselves are getting out of these cultural environments. Future research, then, needs to focus on high school culture, defined as “the unwritten rules and assumptions, the combination of rituals and traditions, the array of symbols and artefacts, the special language and phrasing that staff and students use, and the expectations about change” (Peterson and Deal 2009: 9). In addition, researchers need to collect data on the perspectives of youth embedded in these cultures, gleaning their understandings of insecurity and change.

This research suggests that parents’ work experience shapes how they approach flexibility. Given that this is not a longitudinal study, we cannot say how respondents felt before they experienced the work event, and thus cannot infer a causal direction with certainty – the possibilities remain that relocators were already inclined to shed friends and extended family in favour of work and their marital dyad, the stably employed were already more disposed to suppress their own desires in favour of staying with relationships and jobs, and the laid off already apt to expect betrayal, and their childrearing practices already likely to reflect these orientations. Yet the linkages between work trajectory and commitment discourse and practices were strong, among informants that were broadly similar in other

dimensions, implying that experiences at work can have a profound effect on how people approach commitment across the spheres of their lives.

Furthermore, with regard to parenting practices, perhaps the most important finding is not how they vary, but how similar they are. If all children are being readied for flexibility, will it matter if they approach it joyfully or warily? Put another way, does it matter why they shrink their existing commitments, if they all retain the lesson that they must do so? This work bears ramifications for our reckoning of the post-industrial age, as the costs of the new insecurity may extend beyond the workforce to our intimate relationships and our childrearing.

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