

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.