

## Parenting in an Insecure Age: Class, Gender and the Flexible Child

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### Abstract

Existing work on job insecurity focuses upon its effects upon workers at work, but a growing field attends to its broader impacts beyond the workplace. Based on in-depth interviews with 80 parents with varying experience of job precariousness, this article seeks to investigate how class and gender shape the impact of job insecurity on childrearing, specifically how parents seek to prepare their children for the future they anticipate. Results document that most parents encourage their children to be “flexible,” but the youth’s class and gender shape the meanings and intended uses of this flexibility: advantaged parents want their teenagers to be able to take advantage of opportunities in work and love while the less-advantaged hope their children’s flexibility will be able to protect them from certain disaster in these realms.

**Keywords:** Job insecurity; parenting; inequality; gender; youth.

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## 1 Introduction

Existing scholarship has documented the powerful impact that insecurity at work has upon workers, in productivity, morale and health (Sverke, Hellgren & Naswall, 2002; De Witte, 1999). The broader impacts of job insecurity, however — how it affects people’s intimate relationships, how it constrains their civic lives — have been less well studied. We are just beginning to understand how job precariousness disrupts people’s intimate lives, how it shapes their romantic relationships, their capacity to care for others, and their ability to participate in their communities (Burchell, 2005). These impacts vary dramatically by class, so that what feels like job “insecurity” at the bottom feels like job “flexibility” at the top, with attendant differences in its impact on private lives: job insecurity disrupts intimate partnerships particularly for less advantaged people (Schneider & Reich, 2014; Pugh, 2015).

At the same time that rising job insecurity has contributed to fragmenting intimate relationships between romantic partners, however, the cultural dictates of motherhood have grown more demanding, not less so (Hays, 1996; Nelson, 2010). While feminists writing in the 1970s documented maternal ambivalence, scholars have since described the spread of “intensive motherhood,” in which “appropriate child-rearing [is] child-centered, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labor-intensive and financially expensive.” (Hays, 1996, p. 8). The bulk of this research has been in the United States, although scholars have shown that in many advanced industrialized countries more educated parents spend more time with children than their less educated counterparts (Lareau, 2011; Sayer, Gauthier, & Furstenberg, 2004). As this literature suggests, intensive parenting is largely a middle-class phenomenon, but there is some evidence that less advantaged parents also feel pressure from this cultural trend (Hays, 1996 & 2003; Allison, 1991). The intensification of parenting standards has coincided with the massive increase in women’s participation in the paid labor force and the withdrawal of the neoliberal state (Hays, 1996 & 2003; Blair-Loy, 2003). This paradox leads to counter-intuitive findings such as that reported by Bianchi, Robinson and Milkie (2006): employed mothers in 2000 spent more time with their children than non-working mothers in 1975. Thus motherhood has required ever more commitment from mothers, even as intimate relationships have grown more insecure, especially for less advantaged women (Edin & Kefalas, 2011).

Given that job insecurity correlates with relationship insecurity, particularly for less advantaged people, and at the same time “family devotion” is a pervasive cultural schema required of working mothers (Blair-Loy, 2003), how do parents parent their children to prepare them for the world to come, and how does this vary by social background? What kind of cultural messages do they seek to pass down to their children to make them prepared for the demands they think they will face? How do children’s gender and class shape how parents talk to youth about insecurity?

## 2 Research Design and Analysis

I investigated these questions as part of a larger book project on the broader impacts of job insecurity, which led to the publication of *The Tumbleweed Society* (Pugh, 2015). In that research, using what Luker (2008) calls the “logic of discovery,” I relied upon in-depth interviewing with a sample of wide variation to explore how experiences of varying job security shaped how women and men interpreted commitment and flexibility at work and at home, with specific attention to how they conducted their intimate lives and how they cared for others.<sup>1</sup>

In this study, a graduate student researcher and I interviewed 80 mothers and fathers in four areas of the eastern United States: Washington DC and environs, two large coastal cities and a smaller central city in Virginia; the majority of interviewees lived in the areas surrounding Richmond, Virginia’s capital city. These parents formed three groups: 31 lower-middle-class people who experienced layoffs, with prior jobs ranging from retail to low-level technical job; 28 who were employed in putatively stable positions, such as police, firefighting or public school teaching; and 20 fairly affluent people or their spouses, whose employers had relocated them for the job. In addition, we interviewed 13 informants who moved to get work they did not have already, who were thus on the more desperate end of economic security.

1. In what follows, I borrow from material previously published (Pugh, 2013).

Twelve informants overlapped these groups. Thus I used this purposive sampling to vary the experience my subjects had had in the labor market — whether as people with firsthand knowledge of the newly precarious position of many workers, those who have experienced a long-term stable career with the same employer, or those who, in moving for the job, have largely chosen to prioritize their job commitments over other kinds of commitment, such as to communities, families or friends.

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. Of the 80, 63 (79 percent) were women, and 10 (12.5 percent) were non-white, including 8 African-Americans and 2 Latinos.

I solicited study participants mostly through venues for parents of teenagers, such as parent-teacher organizations at area high schools, homeschooling websites, and social networking sites such as “Richmond Moms.” We also posted flyers in orthodontist offices, community recreation centers, public libraries, book stores and local churches.

Interviews lasted from 1–3 hours, averaging about 2.5 hours, and took place in cafés, offices, homes, and libraries. They 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, and what sort of cultural work they do to resolve any contradictions. I asked for specific examples to illustrate their notions of what we owe each other, such as those moments when they had decided it was time to no longer see someone or when someone quit them, or recollections of when they tried to get their child to quit or stay with some person or activity.

Qualitative research also refers to more than just the way in which the data are collected; in addition, a crucial component is the analysis to which it is treated. Data analysis, like other components of qualitative methods, can span radically different versions, from a surface-level gleaning of “answers” to “questions” to a profound excavation of semi-conscious meaning. What I call interpretive analysis (Pugh, 2013) involves strategies to unearth what Kristin Luker called the “mental maps” of “some aspect of social life” (Luker, 2008, p. 167). These mental maps involve how people explain themselves and their worldview. Strategies to excavate these mental maps include using emotional antennae, soliciting the recall of particularly fraught examples, and treating the data to repeated analysis for the two kinds of deeper information. I also stayed attuned to rich language use, such as metaphors, jokes and turns of phrase whose innovation demonstrate when social trends outpace our ability to describe them with our existing words.

The analytic process involves several steps, in which the researcher turns to the 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, and linking codes and themes into analytic memos. The resultant patterns then lead to the emergence of a larger argument that both summarizes the processes at work in the data and links these findings to debates in the literature (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011).

These methods enabled me to investigate the impact of job insecurity upon people’s beliefs and practices around commitment, both at work and at home, and how this impact varied by gender and class inequality (Pugh, 2015). In what follows, however, I delve into the gendered dimensions of parenting insecurity, or how class and gender shape the kind of messages parents offer their youth about the precarious future.

### 3 Promises I Will Keep

In this research, I found that while mothers viewed their romantic relationships as potentially insecure, caring for children felt like a commitment they could maintain: as Edin and Kefalas (2011) put it, one of the “promises I can keep.” Mothers’ (and involved fathers’) sense of the precariousness of modern work and love imbued childrearing with a sense of profound importance as commitment’s final frontier. Many mothers also derived moral purpose from an intensive brand of childrearing, even as it also

ensnared them in often-difficult choices. Yet while they viewed their own roles as imbued with unshakable duty, I found that mothers and involved fathers raised children with an eye towards preparing them for insecurity. How they performed that task varied by their own relative advantage, as well as the gender of the child they were raising. In particular, mothers did not want to raise girls to depend on anybody.

Marin and Justin Grumman<sup>2</sup> have been married for 12 years, a second marriage for both of them.<sup>3</sup> Sometimes, when they have a disagreement, she jokes with her step-children about divorce. Pragmatic about her marriage, detached about obligations at work, Marin is typical of many advantaged people immersed in work flexibility. When she talks about her daughter Hester, however, her language takes on all the fervor of duty.

“So she’s, you know, my universe. She’s kind of the center,” Marin said. “You know, if something happens with my husband, yes I’m still going to go on and — and I’ll take care of the kids and all that kind of good stuff. If something happens to her, I’m going to throw myself off the roof. I could not handle that.”

Insecurity is a powerful force, for some eroding the capacity to commit, for others shoring it up; the experience of precariousness shapes what obligations people can even see, and what honorable paths seem available to meet them. People differ — by their exposure to insecurity and by their relative advantage — in their notions of what they owe each other as adults. Yet for many, particularly mothers, when it comes to children, those differences seem to fall away, as newly insignificant as yesterday’s argument. Children deserve only duty.

Lola Mason’s jokes, like Marin’s, are braided with hilarity and sorrow. A teacher without a college degree, she had just survived a rare but shocking layoff, and talked more like an insecure than a stably employed worker, saying a good employee should be grateful even just to have a job. A Catholic and Latina who had moved from New York City to Richmond in high school, she never intended to get divorced, trying everything to stop her first husband’s infidelity to no avail: “There was no amount of fishnet hose, I tried that, it was just embarrassing.”

Lola was acutely aware of insecurity, as if it were a roiling sea tossing her little boat, and her embrace of duty in all its fervor — taking care of her mother and mother-in-law at some sacrifice — was in part a response to the deck pitching and rolling all around her. Yet so much of Lola’s life had not worked out as she anticipated, that planning for the future, making decisions that felt “permanent,” seemed very risky. Lola appears to be almost lecturing herself to adopt a more independent stance, convincing herself that she is newly savvy in contrast to her past naïveté. Her children, however, were another issue altogether. She could not envision pulling back from them under any circumstances, she said. “I love them regardless.”

Like Marin, she tells jokes about marriage, seeming to mock herself and the high expectations she used to hold for romantic partners. Yet what she *is* sure about are the ties between parents and children. She complains about having to take care of her mother, a controlling and difficult person, but she does not feel free to walk away. “My mother, at least, did raise me so I do feel in debt,” Lola said. “I do feel that I owe her. I do.” As for her own children, she calls her kids her “four favorite people in the world.” She feels especially beholden to the older three, as children of her divorce. “I want them to have better than I did. I think I always wanted it to be a lot better,” she said. “I felt that, especially the boys, I owed the boys more, because I never knew, I never even thought that my children would be caught up in some divorce and all this. And so I owed them.”

For some mothers, jobs might be unpredictable and spouses temporary, but children are forever. Phyllis, an African-American single mother laid off several times, thought out loud about what she would owe her kids versus a partner. “I think for my kids, unconditional love would be for them. For a partner, unconditional love to a degree. I don’t know,” she laughed at the irony of limiting the limitless, then grew serious. “But definitely, kids, unconditional love, that I owe them.”

Lola and others immersed in insecurity tamp down their hopes for job and marriage, even if they are happy and hopeful in both domains; insecurity shapes their low expectations of others at work and at home. Yet children are cordoned off from this phenomenon, enclosed by a moral wall that forms a

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2. All names, and some identifying details, have been changed to protect confidentiality.

3. Some of this material is derived from *The Tumbleweed Society* (Pugh, 2015).

tight little circle. For these women, the tie between mothers and children is fundamental, even though, especially for adult children of complex mothers, it can be a grievously unhappy one. As Lola intones: “A daughter is a daughter, all of her life.”

#### 4 Rearing Children for Insecurity

Yet even as these women attest to their incontrovertible duty, they offer a different message to their children. Childrearing is deeply cultural, a collection of beliefs and practices that we might interpret for meaning as we might a poem or a painting; we can read it not only to understand how people conceive of their obligations to children, but also, what kind of world they are raising their children to face. The paradoxes of parenting in a culture of insecurity, however, mean that even though they themselves withhold nothing, they seek to teach their children to be a bit more withholding. At the same time as children seem to deserve only duty, drawing devotion, even self-abnegation, from many — including from people who might be more stinting in their obligation to the adults in their lives — the children themselves are not supposed to grow up to obey its strict dictates. As Marin emphasized: “I want her to be resilient and I want all of them to be resilient.”

There is considerable evidence that instability has negative effects on children. In addition to the impact of family transitions, research suggests that job insecurity has important, and deleterious effects that extend beyond the insecure worker (Barling, Zacharatos, & Hepburn, 1999). Parental job insecurity touches teenaged children, and is associated with youth lower self-efficacy, poorer grades, higher risk of illness, more cynicism and less trust, social problems, and lower work motivation (Barling & Sorensen, 1997; Barling, Dupre, Hepburn, 1998; Flanagan & Eccles, 1993; Lim & Len Loo, 2003; Stewart & Barling, 1996). How teenagers perceive these job changes have implications not just for their commitment to work, but a host of other concerns fanning out to their health and wellbeing.

While they may not know this research, parents are concerned about the impact of job insecurity on children. But for many, avoiding it is not within their power; few would choose to get laid-off, of course. As a result, most parents are instead working on making children able to handle the insecurity they think is inevitable; they try to raise “flexible” children, children exposed to change, ready for change, able to change. Most of the time, this flexibility involves a certain detachment from current relationships stemming from an independent stance.

Marin’s dedication to her daughter is total, she says, and in this regard she is similar to many women, either inspired by the profound experience of motherhood or constrained by the steely dictates mandating maternal devotion, or both. But while she herself is ardent, she is careful to raise her daughter to be more “flexible,” saying she is concerned about Hester’s inability to “handle change.” She recounts her husband’s jests that “some people see the glass as half full; some people see it as half empty. Hester sees the glass as on fire,” she laughed. “You know, and, ‘Every silver lining has a cloud.’”

It’s the way she looks at life so, you know, we try to — you know, I want her — so flexibility is something she really needs to learn. She doesn’t like to give up anything. I’ll show you her closet. I mean, the child — we had — at 10, she was bawling because we had gotten rid of her rug. Cats had given *birth* on this rug. It had to go!

Marin jokes, but her jokes say that Hester’s problem is that she is too attached, that she needs to learn flexibility to be able to give up what needs to be relinquished, to be able to handle change appropriately, to become more independent.

Insecurity feels differently to people at the top and bottom of the class ladder, and to men and women; the different expectations and opportunities they glean from insecurity shape the way they see their obligations. In other work (Pugh, 2015), for example, I find that when men and women experience betrayals at work and at home, both adopt a certain resignation about what kind of commitment they might expect from others at work; conversely, men’s anger at home stems from the disappointment of their felt entitlements there while women’s triumphalism stems from their escape from their felt obligations. Yet despite all this gendered variety, they converge on the kind of children they were trying to raise, for the kind of world they expected them to face. Most of these parents predicted an insecure world, and

sought their children to adopt a certain independence, in order to master the need for flexibility. All this unanimity begs the question: if we rear children for insecurity, are we protecting them, or are we just lowering their expectations?

Fiona Parker, a white technical worker and single mother to her son Jimmy, told a story of how she left one man with whom she had had a serious relationship, after discovering an incriminating email to him from another woman.

I was, like, “I’m out of here. See you later.” Get Jimmy, get in the car. And [the boyfriend’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.]

Her question raises another for us here: when it comes to raising children in an insecure age, for parents, what counts as “perfect”?

## 5 The Imperative of Flexibility

Anita is a white, married woman who relocated for her husband’s career as a military contractor in Europe and throughout the United States, bringing up four children in different places 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 to change, even after considering the cost: their almost nonexistent 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 sacrifice meaningful connections to extended family 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 firsthand, 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.”

We might expect such language from an independent soul like Fiona, for whom the prospect of moving along is ever alive. (“If your spouse is being really horrible? That’s easy. You just [...] I’m committed as long as it’s good. I’m not committed to anything bad.”) But Anita has been married for 30 years, and she herself offers particularly elaborate justifications for staying put; she made statements about her marriage like “sometimes if you act and force it, then you can convince yourself that maybe this isn’t so bad after all.” While Anita’s intimate practices are acutely pragmatic, though, her childrearing emphasizes developing kids’ mobility, flexibility and change.

Like Anita, most other parents emphasized their children’s adaptability and flexibility. They counseled teenagers to maintain light 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 few talked about commitment to other people.

These broad brush strokes paint a fairly monochromatic picture of parental agreement about cooling friendships and the need for flexibility. While most parents living within insecurity converged on the goal of flexibility, however, they diverged dramatically in what that flexibility was for. 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 armor*, the necessary, preemptive and sometimes embittered response to expected betrayal. Furthermore, these expected betrayals were sometimes of a particularly gendered kind, as mothers sought to prepare their daughters for independence instead of encouraging any sense that they might be reliably rescued from impending disaster by men.

## 6 When Potential Opportunities Beckon

Anita preferred her children to be truly “flexible” rather 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. 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.

The alternative was close-mindedness, which itself could serve to block off new avenues in life. 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 Gavin 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,” Tara said.

Parents did not just advocate flexibility for its own good, however, but also as a useful set of habits preparing youth for good outcomes, both at work and in their relationships with others:

### 6.1 Preparing for the Future of Work.

Vicky had moved with her family six times in nine years, and she thought her son had developed skills from their peripatetic lifestyle that might someday be useful for his work. Even though she was finally refusing to relocate for her husband’s job during her son’s high school career, she did not regret the moves they had made, she said:

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 Bobby to get over his inherent shyness, which ultimately helped him get a job and “manage on his own.”

I think the kids 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 inadaptability 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

traveled 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 [Bobby] loved it.

Flexibility prepares you to take advantage of the future world of work, where the challenges, and opportunities, are not always predictable.

## 6.2 “Don’t Just Stay Here and Settle Down”: The Future of Love.

Viewing flexibility as opportunity applied not just to work, but also to personal relationships, with friends, intimate partners and even with parents themselves. Parents 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. These parents downplayed their children’s current relationships, they offered tips on how children could make new friends easily, and they viewed the costs of holding onto existing relationships — the opportunity cost, one could say, of prospects un-pursued — as quite high.

Vicky taught her son “the three-friend rule,” in which he needed to make not just one new friend, but three:

I’ve always told him things like, especially when we were moving, like you always need more than one friend, don’t latch onto one person. 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.

Parents tried to equip their children to spread out their affections, to minimize their attachment to one, in case that one should prove fallible.

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 — “Well, *God*, there’s got to be something else out there” — that someone would stick with a girlfriend from high school. That sort of girlfriend is perfectly adequate for having “a really good long-term relationship,” but clearly, one that would end. To do otherwise was “just so limiting.”

Rochelle, who followed her husband around the eastern seaboard, buying, renovating, and selling their homes, was pleased to predict that none of their children would settle where she and her husband lived now, in Richmond.

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 experiences. 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.

Flexible children would prioritize their yen to have “experiences” even over relationships with their own parents — and for some, that was a good thing.



## 7 When Potential Disaster Looms

Less advantaged parents with precarious work 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: his vision of flexibility was as an unfortunately necessary piece of a child's protection, helping them weather the storms ahead. People who talked this way wanted their children to prepare themselves against the future, rather than letting the future take them by surprise.

### 7.1 Fortified Against the Future of Work

Flexibility served as a sort of armor that was particularly apt for handling uncertainty at work. Laid off from his job in desktop publishing, Clark managed 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 fallback of one type or another. And don't put all your [eggs] 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, however, 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. 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, when "they're going to lay her off and hire somebody much younger for a lot lower salary"; his prescription of "flexibility" means not putting all your eggs "in one basket."

### 7.2 Fortified Against Intimate Betrayal

In the realm of personal relationships, some parents deployed flexibility as a sort of armor against intimate betrayal or other calamitous event. Barbie tried to comfort her son after they moved to a new neighborhood and he lost some old friends. Most people don't keep all their friends, she told him. "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 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.

Others sought to encourage their children to do the attenuating. Sarah, who had been laid off from a small family firm, said that her daughter was great at moving on.

I think as grown-ups we tend to hold onto things [...] It's like oh, we fret and we carry on and we feel bad and we lose sleep over it. And as we move into opportunities it's kind of like you take responsibility for something and then you move on. And, I've noticed with Sonya in particular and maybe it's because I realize she's leaving but she does a great job with that. I wish I could encourage as she gets older to continue with that. It's like she doesn't dwell on things. She doesn't go back over it. She's doesn't beat herself up. She doesn't beat somebody else up.

Within this vision, “beating herself up” was the same as “taking responsibility for something” and “holding on to things”; Sarah respects her daughter for instead pulling back from particular situations and relationships.

Sometimes children were to don the armor of flexibility in response to calamity rather than betrayal. Felicia, who had been laid off from a sales job, considered it important that she prepare her children for the possibility of her own death, given they had already lost their father when her ex-husband had died in a car accident. They could develop crucial resilience that way, she thought. “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?” she asked. “They're getting to be teenagers. They have to —” she paused and interrupted herself. “I don't make them adults. That's not what I'm setting out to do, but I want them to be prepared.”

Felicia's words suggest some discomfort here, that she is walking a narrow ledge between preparing her kids and scaring them, or even taking away their childhoods (witness her “I don't make them adults.”) Still, she considers it important for them to contemplate frightening eventualities, even such as her death, in order to encourage their ability to bounce back.

Katherine, another lay-off survivor, was also a widow, 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 [her daughter] Jessica. And I think if she was more adaptable to change, I think she would've dealt with certain situations differently.

Life's adversity was certain to come, albeit unpredictably; her daughter needed to be prepared, with flexibility, to handle it. In contrast to those who viewed flexibility as opportunity, then those who viewed it as armor sometimes considered the stakes high because the potential cost — of failing to instill flexibility as part of childrearing — was not insularity, or close-mindedness, but their children's very survival.

## 8 “The Dream Is Not True”: Anticipating Unreliable Men

Some of these moments often had a distinctly gendered feel, as laid-off parents, often women, tried to ready their daughters not to rely on men. Mothers with dissolved relationships felt particularly burned by their own disappointments in love, in which they perceived conflicts as compounded by their own yearnings. These longings were fed by gendered cultural expectations they thought they could no longer count on: of being supported financially by a husband, of being charged with simply waiting and hoping for his prospects to improve, or of being rescued from dire straits by dashing men. Mothers sought to stamp out those very same longings in their daughters.

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 it permeates the lesson she imparts to her daughter:

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 expectation 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. So yeah, I was mad at her, maybe too mad.

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. Similarly, Lena, 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 then realized that she actually needed to leave for the sake of her children.

And that's when I realized [...] and before I'd been staying for them [...] I realized 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.

Independence was a feminist issue, particularly for less advantaged women immersed in insecurity, and the armor that flexibility helped to produce was valuable for girls in particular to take on in advance of men's betrayal.

## 9 Conclusion: The Imperative of Flexibility

Like Marin and Lola, whom we met at the beginning of the article, most mothers put children in a separate category, at one remove from the tempestuous churn of work and intimacy. This stance reflected a widespread understanding about the duty that parents, particularly women, owe their children, a conventional wisdom encouraged by the hypersymbolization of motherhood in an insecure age (Hochschild, 2003), and generated by the widespread "common sense" that precariousness is inevitable at work and at home.

In an age of insecurity, parents adopt different paths to navigate the unstable realms of work and family, but even those who vary in their socio-economic backgrounds 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. The patterns I report here suggest that powerful cultural ideas — of, for example, flexibility as a good, and a crucial goal for girls — can resonate widely, and yet structural forces, such as the stratified impact of job precarity, can shape how they are expressed and interpreted.

Flexibility means the ability and inclination to handle change — of both a voluntary and involuntary nature. For those who viewed flexibility as an opportunity, it signified a certain choosiness, as if someone should not settle for second best in order to stay in a relationship or job, but rather move on in search of better choices elsewhere. For those who saw flexibility as armor, it signified a certain buoyancy, as if even after getting hit by unasked-for change, someone would bounce back, ready for anything. More advantaged parents who nonetheless labored in the insecure economy advocate flexibility as opportunity, as the best way for their children to be able to take advantage of new prospects, while those

less advantaged workers who had been laid off from their jobs approached flexibility as a kind of armor, and urged it upon their children as the best preparation for imminent betrayals of a gendered kind, at work and in their intimate lives.

While the insecure take different paths to get there, with one seeming to reach for change, another to seek shelter from it, perhaps the most important conclusion is not how they vary, but how similar are their approaches to parenting. Their parenting reflects the same sense of the inevitability of insecurity, the notion that since insecurity is here to stay, the best we can do is adapt to it. Under this widespread parenting paradigm, children may approach flexibility joyfully or warily. Ultimately, however, as most parents saw it, approach it they must.

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