Unsettled Employment, Reshuffled Priorities? Career Prioritization among College-Educated Workers Facing Employment Instability during COVID-19

Erin A. Cech and Sofia Hiltner

Abstract

Millions of workers experienced job instability during the COVID-19 (coronavirus disease 2019) pandemic. A prevailing assumption is that such experiences of instability intensify economic rationality in workers’ career decision making as a matter of course. In contrast, the authors argue that pandemic-related employment instability may have “unsettled” workers’ lives in ways that elevated nonfinancial priorities such as meaningful work. Using proportionally representative survey data \( n = 1,628 \), the authors compare the priorities of U.S. college-educated workers who were laid off or furloughed during the pandemic with those of workers whose jobs remained stable. Counter to expectations of heightened economic rationality, job-unstable workers were not more likely than job-stable workers to emphasize job security or salary in beliefs about good work. But they were more likely to prioritize passion for work. These findings challenge common assumptions about job prioritization in the wake of crisis-related job instability and have implications for how scholars and policy makers interpret labor force trends.

Keywords

COVID-19 pandemic, cultural beliefs about work, passion principle, unsettled lives, work and occupations

The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic and accompanying mitigation measures wreaked havoc on the U.S. labor force and the workers therein (BLS 2021a). At the height of the pandemic’s economic impact, more than 22 million Americans had been furloughed or permanently lost their jobs, reaching a peak unemployment rate in April 2020 of 14.8 percent (Congressional Research Service 2021). Although many workers returned to jobs in subsequent months, unemployment remained above prepandemic levels more than a year later (BLS 2021a). The impact of this pandemic-related employment fallout reverberated through all levels of the labor force. Although service-sector workers were hardest hit, even white-collar and college-educated workers who were most advantageously situated to weather the pandemic-induced economic crisis battled employment uncertainty and insecurity (Congressional Research Service 2021; Parker, Igielnik, Ruth, and Kochhar 2021).

Social scientists have begun to document the aftermath of this pandemic-related employment instability and its short- and long-term effects on the financial status of workers across sectors and education levels (Blustein et al. 2020; Rao 2020; USC Dornsife 2020). Lagging behind this economic analysis, however, is a nuanced understanding of how cultural sense-making about work and employment may have shifted in the context of pandemic-induced employment crisis. Understanding the cultural frames workers use to make sense of their employment circumstances and to think about their future career directions in the context of crises are important alongside the crises’ impacts on material resources (Pugh 2015; Rao 2021; Silva 2013; Sharone 2013), as such frames may be especially salient for how workers organize and orient their priorities in the midst of complex decision-making circumstances (cf. Lamont 1992). In this article we ask, What orients college-educated workers’ job priorities and career-related strategies of action in the context of pandemic-related employment instability? We focus on college-educated workers because, compared with other workers, they have access to resources and safety nets that may allow...
them greater financial freedom to consider a wider array of employment priorities and the flexibility for those priorities to shift over time (Kalleberg 2012).

Much scholarly and public dialog presumes that workers who face employment uncertainty in any context, but especially workers who are directly affected by employment instability in an economic crisis, will prioritize economic security and advancement above all other considerations (Ersoy 2020; Liu, Sun, and Winters 2019). The financial constraints imposed by employment instability during a crisis are undeniable and require many unemployed workers to scramble to secure whatever work they can find. Yet job security and salary are not necessarily the only or even the most salient priorities in how college-educated workers affected by an economic crisis think about career decision making in general or their own careers specifically. The financial and existential uncertainty wrought by the COVID-19 pandemic may have led to an “unsettling” of the lives of those who directly experienced employment instability (Molteni et al. 2021; Shepherd, MacKendrick, and Mora 2020; Swidler 1986). Such unsettling, we argue, may not only have disrupted day-to-day routines of life and work but also encouraged reprioritization that draws on cultural narratives of good jobs and good lives that may be tangential to, or even directly in conflict with, the maximization of economic opportunities. As a result of this unsettling, college-educated workers who faced pandemic-related job loss or furloughs may be more likely than similarly educated workers who enjoyed stable employment over the pandemic to embrace more expansive cultural notions of the role of work in their lives.

Using proportionally representative survey data of 1,628 U.S. college-educated workers collected eight months into the COVID-19 pandemic, we investigate whether college-educated workers who personally experienced a pandemic-related job loss or furlough were more likely to prioritize financial factors (e.g., job security, salary) in their conceptions of good career decisions, compared with those who maintained the same jobs through the pandemic, or whether job-unstable workers were more likely than job-stable workers to prioritize culturally venerated noneconomic considerations in their notions of good work and good career decision making.

We examine the salience of one such extrafinancial, culturally venerated perspective on good work: the passion principle. The passion principle is a popular cultural schema that encourages the prioritization of self-expressive and fulfilling work in career decision making, even at the expense of financial stability (Cech 2021). It is a perspective that seeks to retool labor force participation from a means to make a living into a vehicle for fulfillment and self-realization. The passion principle is a highly valued guiding principle among college-educated career aspirants and workers, even as the privilege of being able to prioritize passion in one’s career decisions is not equitably distributed (Cech 2021; DePalma 2020; Tokumitsu 2015; Wilson 2019).

In our analysis, we compare the career priorities of college-educated workers who were laid off or furloughed as a result of the pandemic and subsequently reemployed (i.e., job-unstable workers) with the priorities of those whose jobs were stable over the pandemic (i.e., job-stable workers). We examine these priorities across three dimensions of respondents’ beliefs about work: what respondents believe is important in good career decision making in the abstract, what respondents report they would prioritize in their own job decisions in the future, and how they believe their perspectives on good work have shifted since the onset of the pandemic.

Contrary to assumptions about intensified economic rationality among those directly affected by employment instability, we find that college-educated workers who experienced job loss or furlough during the pandemic were not any more likely than those whose employment was stable to emphasize job security and salary in their conceptualizations of good career decision making in the abstract, or in what they would personally prioritize in a new job in the future. We also find no significant differences between job-stable and job-unstable respondents’ assessments of how the importance of job security and salary shifted in their minds over the course of the pandemic.

In contrast, workers who experienced pandemic-related job loss or furlough were more likely than job-stable respondents to emphasize the importance of having work one is passionate about: they placed a higher value on finding fulfillment and meaning at work in their beliefs about good career decision making in the abstract and were more likely to prioritize passion when considering their own future jobs. Compared with job-stable respondents, those who experienced a job loss or furlough were also more likely to report that passion for work had become more important in their minds over the course of the pandemic. These patterns hold net of variation by industry and education level, and employment instability has broadly similar relationships to career prioritization among college-educated workers across gender, parenthood status, race/ethnicity, and class background.

These results have several theoretical and policy implications. First, they challenge a common assumption in sociology, economics, and business literatures that economic crises automatically intensify economically rational work prioritization, especially for those whose employment was directly affected. Work plays a much more expansive role in the lives and minds of workers than just a source of income, particularly for the college educated (Cech 2021; Ocejo 2017; Silva 2013; Wilson 2019). Employment instability resulting from tumultuous circumstances such as the pandemic may induce broader reflection among workers about the role of work in their lives. Furthermore, scholars, policy makers, and public commentators who discount extrafinancial, culturally informed prioritization, especially among workers who
experienced employment instability, may promote misinterpretations or ill-informed predictions about labor force trends during and after economic crises.

**Theoretical Background**

The COVID-19 pandemic is arguably the most severe and far-reaching health crisis to hit the United States in a century. On top of unprecedented loss of life with a disparate impact, millions of Americans experienced economic turmoil (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities 2021; Kidman et al. 2021; Verdery et al. 2020). In an attempt to curtail the spread of the virus, state and local governments instituted sweeping regulations that closed or drastically limited the operation of businesses and rapidly shifted how work was accomplished (Mervosh, Lu, and Swales 2020). By the spring of 2020, the United States was experiencing its highest rate of unemployment since data collection began in 1948 (Congressional Research Service 2021). Approximately three quarters of these employment disruptions were temporary, as employers reacted to pandemic-related restrictions and closures (BLS 2021a; Kochhar 2020). More than a year into the pandemic, unemployment had fallen to 4.6 percent as furloughed workers returned to work and jobs reopened, yet unemployment remained above prepandemic rates and is not expected to return to prepandemic levels until 2030 (BLS 2020a, 2021a; Congressional Budget Office 2021). Unemployment among college-educated workers similarly peaked in spring of 2020 (at 8.4 percent) and remained higher 18 months later than it was the year before the pandemic (BLS 2020a, 2021a; Parker et al. 2021). This employment uncertainty was deeply felt among workers: a 2021 Pew survey, for example, showed that across education levels, half of unemployed persons looking for work were pessimistic about finding a new job in the near future, and 55 percent were not confident that they would find jobs with the same income and benefits as their previous jobs (Parker et al. 2021).

**The “Unsettling” Effect of Pandemic-Induced Employment Precarity**

For college-educated workers who encountered pandemic-related employment instability, how did they make sense of the workforce and their place within it? A prevailing assumption about white-collar workers’ employment priorities generally, and in the context of economic crises specifically, is that exogenously produced economic strain heightens economically rational decision making as a matter of course (e.g., Ersoy 2020; Kalleberg 2012; Liu et al. 2019). This perspective is common in the economics and sociological social mobility literatures, which often assume that workers prioritize the most financially advantageous (i.e., well-paid, stable) jobs available to them (e.g., Gemici and Wiswall 2014; Schoon 2008; Turner and Bowen 1999; Wright 2002). Indeed research on workers’ reactions to the Great Recession, which showed that economic stability concerns were common among college-educated workers. At the midpoint of the Great Recession, for example, nearly half of workers (46 percent) believed that they were at least somewhat likely to encounter employment difficulties (e.g., experiencing a layoff, having their benefits reduced), compared with just 28 percent a year before the recession (Pew Research Center 2009).

The balance of work and labor force scholarship would suggest a clear expectation about workers’ priorities during the COVID-19 pandemic: those most affected by pandemic-induced economic turmoil would also most unambiguously prioritize financial security and economic stability, while deprioritizing noneconomic considerations in their characterization of good career decisions. From this perspective, we would expect that college-educated workers who lost jobs or were furloughed during the pandemic would be more likely than those who enjoyed job stability to prioritize a high salary and job security in their abstract understandings of good work and in their decision-making priorities about their own careers.

Yet cultural sociologists have long argued that financial stability and economic advancement are not always the central drivers of individuals’ decision-making priorities, even in the face of acute monetary strain (Hacker 2019; Hochschild 2016; Zelizer 2017). Extrafinancial ideological and moral commitments may take precedent in times of uncertainty, even when such commitments are at odds with financial stability. Periods of economic and existential uncertainty, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, can produce what Swidler (1986) called “unsettled” times in the lives of individuals (Molteni et al. 2021; Shepherd et al. 2020). Unsettled times are periods defined by social instability and transformation that unmoor those who experience them from the routines and social institutions that provided a predictable rhythm and set of expectations within which their daily lives unfolded (Rao 2017; Swidler 1986). The COVID-19 pandemic left individuals and families scrambling to manage the upending of businesses, schools, daycare centers, and community gathering places alongside deep uncertainties about their health and well-being. These uncertainties may have been especially intense for those who directly experienced employment instability (Shepherd et al. 2020). The

---

1The sharp increase in unemployment at the beginning of the pandemic, followed by a similarly rapid decrease, distinguishes unemployment trends during the COVID-19 pandemic from those in previous recessions, especially the Great Recession of 2007 to 2009 (Kochhar 2020).

2The Bureau of Labor Statistics defines people experiencing “temporary layoffs” as those who have been given dates to return to work or expect to be recalled to their jobs within six months. Additionally, Williams (2020) suggested that because of measurement limitations, official U.S. unemployment rates are likely underestimates of joblessness.
economic and existential crises accompanying the pandemic are thus particularly likely to have unsettled the lives of workers who personally experienced job loss or furlough, compared with those who remained steadily employed in the same job.

In such unsettled periods, widely shared cultural beliefs often take on a more prominent role in organizing priorities and suggesting courses of action than they do in settled times (Shepherd et al. 2020; Swidler 1986). Given the existential uncertainty wrought by the spread of illness itself, alongside the economic consequences of the pandemic response, the unsettling experienced by college-educated workers who lost jobs or were furloughed may have led them to look beyond economic advancement to other salient cultural models in how they think about good work.

**Extrafinancial Narrative of Good Work: The Passion Principle**

One cultural schema about work that may have become particularly salient in unsettled lives is the passion principle. The passion principle is a cultural schema (or shared cultural model) that promotes the prioritization of finding meaningful and fulfilling work, even if it requires financial sacrifice (Cech 2021). Being “passionate” about work entails an intellectual, emotional, and/or biographical connection to an occupational field (e.g., sociology) or a substantive task realm (e.g., computer programming) and can hypothetically be felt for any type of work, even if the substance of that work does not explicitly draw upon self-expressive content. To passion principle adherents, having work they are passionate about is not only central to a good job, it is key to a good life; adherents presume that passion seeking will reduce the chances that they will be “stuck” in work they find draining or unfulfilling (Cech 2021; Ocejo 2017).

The passion principle has been a popular touchpoint for good career decision making among U.S. college-educated workers since at least the late 1980s, and by 2018, more than three quarters of college-educated workers agreed that meaning and fulfillment from work is an important factor in career decisions (Cech 2021; Rao and Tobias Neely 2019). Although workers without college degrees are more likely to prioritize job security and salary over passion-related factors (in large part because of their limited access to stable work with a livable wage), they, like college-educated workers, also highly value finding fulfillment in paid work (Cech 2021).

Beyond serving as a guiding principle for individual career decision making, the passion principle is a moralized, prescriptive narrative about how to live a good life. It is, for its adherents, a vector along which to live out their “self-reflexive projects” (Giddens 1991): the senses of self they seek to develop and refine over the course of their lives. For passion seekers, the prioritization of fulfilling, self-expressive work is a way to align their employment with these broader meaning-making projects (Cech 2021).

In contrast to the expectation that pandemic-induced employment instability would minimize workers’ prioritization of extrafinancial factors, the unsettling that such instability produces may actually amplify the salience of culturally venerated considerations such as the passion principle. Results from recent surveys hint that pandemic-related job instability may indeed spark broader reflection on the role of work in workers’ lives. Many middle- and upper-income workers who were unemployed during the pandemic reported that they felt that they had lost a piece of their identity as a result of their unemployment (Parker et al. 2021). Many unemployed workers also reported that unemployment provided an opportunity to reassess their career priorities, and two thirds reported seriously considering changing their occupations or fields of work (Parker et al. 2021). Furthermore, popular and journalistic accounts of the “Great Resignation” highlight the millions of U.S. workers who left decent-paying, stable jobs in search of other career priorities (Cook 2021).3 These resignations may be driven by a number of factors, such as pandemic burnout, disrupted childcare arrangements, and fear of contagion as workplaces open up (Corbett 2021). Others have suggested that “the experience of the pandemic may have led many workers to explore opportunities they wouldn’t have looked at previously” (Krugman 2021), including opportunities for more fulfilling work. The unsettling caused by employment instability may thus lead those who experienced it to be more likely than those who were stably employed over the pandemic to value work that is meaningful and fulfilling over the maximization of salary or job security.4

In this article, we examine the comparative salience of job security, salary, and passion-related considerations among job-stable and job-unstable college-educated workers along three dimensions: (1) their abstract sense of good career decision making, (2) their relative prioritization of these factors in their own jobs in the future, and (3) their reflection on how the importance of these factors shifted in their minds over the course of the pandemic. These three dimensions usefully span respondents’ broad conceptualization of good career decisions generally and their thinking about their own career paths in particular, as well as whether they sensed a change over the pandemic in how they personally thought about good work.

---

3As one indication of the Great Resignation, the Bureau of Labor Statistics reported a quit rate of 2.9 percent in August 2021, the highest rate of quits since data collection began in 2000 (BLS 2020b, 2021b).

4Of course, this prioritization is really available only to college-educated workers, who are more likely than less educated workers to have access to working conditions that even hold the option for self-expressive fulfillment or flexibility in negotiating when, where, and how to work (Kalleberg 2009).
Data and Methods

The analyses below use data from an October 2020 survey of 1,628 U.S. college-educated workers. We conducted the survey through the online survey platform Qualtrics, which fielded the survey to a quota sample that was proportionally representative of the college-educated, employed U.S. population by age cohort, race/ethnicity, gender, and industry. Qualtrics’ sampling procedures produce samples that are generally reflective of the U.S. population along various attitudinal and demographic factors. Even absent quota sampling procedures such as that used here, previous assessments found that Qualtrics produced samples that averaged within 7 percent of corresponding values in the U.S. population along a variety of factors (e.g., marital status, household income) (Heen, Lieberman, and Miethe 2014). To increase the reliability and quality of the data, the survey included five attention filters (Oppenheimer, Meyvis, and Davidenko 2009). Although this survey is not strictly representative, the data are especially useful for our purposes. First, the survey was conducted in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic in October 2020, during the upswing of the third wave of infections in the United States. Although job loss had slowed and unemployment was starting to fall, vaccinations were not yet available, and the full economic consequences of the pandemic were not yet clear. Second, compared with recent surveys of unemployed workers during the pandemic that ask only about employment status (e.g., Parker et al. 2021), our survey explicitly asked whether respondents had experienced job loss or furlough that was directly or indirectly linked to the pandemic. Third, the survey included more than two dozen questions that tapped respondents’ priorities regarding career decision making generally and their thinking about their own career paths specifically.

The survey was advertised as a “2020 Survey of US Workers.” It asked respondents a variety of questions about their attitudes about career decision making, work, and the labor force, as well as their experiences with pandemic-related job instability. Detailed operationalization of variables is discussed in the Supplementary Materials. All regression models include controls for gender, race/ethnicity, class background, parenthood status, highest degree, married/partnered status, field of highest degree, and a 14-category industry indicator. Missing data were handled using multiple imputation with Stata 16’s chained technique (20 imputations); we did not impute data for the focal independent measure, job stability.

Analytic Approach

Table 1 presents means for key measures and controls. We use ordinary least squares regression models to test the importance of salary, job security, and passion-related factors in respondents’ abstract sense of good career decision making (Table 2) and the extent to which they believe these factors increased or decreased in importance in their assessment of good jobs over the course of the pandemic (Table 4). We use logistic regression models to predict respondents’ likelihood of ranking salary, job security, and passion as their top priorities in new jobs in the future (Table 3). We discuss robustness checks and supplemental analyses at the end of the “Results” section.

Results

Table 1 presents univariate and bivariate statistics on the focal measures for all respondents and separately for job-stable and job-unstable respondents. The rightmost column indicates the significance of two-tailed difference-of-means tests (t tests) between job-stable and job-unstable respondents. More than a quarter (26 percent) of the sample reported experiencing a pandemic-related job loss or furlough. Consistent with unemployment patterns among the college-educated workforce (Congressional Research Service 2021), we find that women and parents are more likely than men and respondents without children to have experienced job instability. Black workers are more likely and Asian workers less likely than white workers to experience instability. Respondents with advanced degrees and those from wealthier families are less likely to have experienced instability, but those working in social services, management, social sciences, and arts and entertainment industries were more likely than college-educated respondents working in other industries to have experienced job loss or furlough. We control for variation in the likelihood of experiencing job instability along these factors in the proceeding models.

---

5The 14 industry categories were education, health care, office support, business and finance, social sciences, computers and information technology, management, arts and entertainment, engineering and architecture, sales and service, social services, legal, physical and life sciences and mathematics, and other. Qualtrics maintains a professionally curated pool of respondents with hundreds of thousands of potential respondents in the United States. It is commonly used for both academic research and commercial applications.

6Heen et al. (2014) compared Qualtrics’ online sampling approach with that of SurveyMonkey and Amazon’s Mechanical Turk. Qualtrics was superior in generating national samples in both quota and nonquota sampling approaches, with the most accurate representation of respondents by age, race, gender, and education level.

7The attention filters asked respondents to select a specific answer (e.g., “This is an attention filter. Please select ‘strongly disagree’”). It also included a filter that asked for a logically appropriate response (i.e., “Which of these is a color?” with response options “blue, sad, happy, excited”). Respondents who failed one or more of the attention filters were excluded from the quota sample and the data set. Such attention filters increase online survey data responses by removing respondents who answer too quickly or without reading the question (e.g., those who select only one column of a matrix of Likert-type items) (Oppenheimer et al. 2009).
The means in Table 1 indicate that across the sample overall, college-educated workers rated passion-related considerations of higher importance on average than they rated job security and salary in their abstract considerations of good career decision making: the mean of the importance of passion was 4.46, compared with 4.33 and 3.81 for job security and salary considerations, respectively. This prioritization of passion is consistent with Cech’s (2021) survey of college-educated workers in 2018, in which three quarters of college-educated workers rated passion for work as at least somewhat important in their beliefs about good career decision making in the abstract.

Passion was most often rated as respondents’ top priority in their thoughts about their own career plans in the future (46 percent rated it as their top priority), compared with job security and salary (13 percent and 20 percent, respectively), and most respondents reported that passion concerns became more important than their minds over the course of the pandemic. The analyses that follow assess whether these patterns vary systematically by employment stability, net of controls.

Table 2 presents regression models predicting the importance respondents attributed to job security, salary, and passion-related factors in their beliefs about good career decision making in the abstract. Contrary to perspectives that presume increased economic rationality among those who faced economic uncertainty, respondents who experienced job instability during the pandemic were not any more likely than job-stable respondents to emphasize employment security and salary in their notions of good career decision making, net of variation by demographic characteristics, industry, and highest degree. In contrast, those who experienced job loss or furlough over the course of the pandemic rated passion-related considerations as more important on average than did respondents whose jobs remained stable.

We further assessed whether respondents rated the importance of passion-related factors more highly than they had rated the importance of job security and salary in their abstract understanding of good career decision making. Specifically, we ran supplemental logistic regression models predicting the likelihood that each respondent rated passion-related considerations with a greater level of importance than they rated job security and salary considerations (i.e., 1 = respondent rated passion-related considerations with a higher average level of importance than they rated salary and job security considerations, 0 = respondent rated salary and

Table 1. Univariate and Bivariate Statistics for Demographics and Employment Measures, among All Respondents and Separately by Job-Stable and Job-Unstable Respondents.

|                                | All (n = 1,628) | Job-Stable (n = 1,203) | Job-Unstable (n = 425) | Significance |
|--------------------------------|-----------------|------------------------|------------------------|--------------|
| Experienced job loss or furlough during pandemic | 26.1%           | —                      | —                      | **           |
| Women                          | 51.6%           | 46.1%                  | 53.5%                  | **           |
| Married/partnered              | 67.4%           | 66.3%                  | 70.8%                  | **           |
| Children <18 years old         | 44.6%           | 41.8%                  | 52.3%                  | **           |
| Age (years)                    | 44.99           | 45.31                  | 44.09                  |              |
| Class background               | 3.76            | 3.87                   | 3.72                   | *            |
| Black                          | 8.4%            | 7.3%                   | 11.8%                  | **           |
| Hispanic                       | 7.8%            | 7.9%                   | 7.5%                   | *            |
| Asian                          | 9.8%            | 11.4%                  | 5.4%                   | **           |
| NAAPI                          | 2.7%            | 2.4%                   | 3.5%                   |              |
| White                          | 75.6%           | 74.5%                  | 77.2%                  |              |
| BS highest degree              | 57.4%           | 57.5%                  | 56.9%                  |              |
| MS highest degree              | 34.8%           | 33.9%                  | 37.4%                  |              |
| Advanced degree                | 7.8%            | 8.6%                   | 5.6%                   | *            |
| Good career decisions: job security | 4.329         | 4.390                  | 4.301                  |              |
| Good career decisions: salary  | 3.805           | 3.809                  | 3.773                  |              |
| Good career decisions: passion | 4.455           | 4.433                  | 4.515                  | *            |
| Top priority in new job: job security | 13.1%        | 13.1%                  | 13.4%                  |              |
| Top priority in new job: salary | 20.3%          | 21.1%                  | 18.2%                  |              |
| Top priority in new job: passion | 46.3%         | 44.9%                  | 50.4%                  | *            |
| Change in importance over the pandemic: job security | 2.935          | 2.903                  | 3.029                  |              |
| Change in importance over the pandemic: salary | 1.798          | 1.715                  | 2.014                  |              |
| Change in importance over the pandemic: passion | 2.180          | 2.063                  | 2.513                  | ***          |

Note: Respondents could indicate more than one racial/ethnic category. Gender categories for women and men include both cisgender and transgender persons who identify as women and men, respectively. Men and gender-non-binary individuals are not presented as separate categories in the table to protect confidentiality. NAAPI = Native American and Asian Pacific Islander. *p < .05, **p < .01, and ***p < .001, two-tailed test, comparing job-stable and job-unstable respondents using t tests.
job security with an equal or higher level of importance than they rated passion-related considerations). As before, job-unstable workers were significantly more likely than job-stable workers to assess passion-related factors of higher importance than they assessed job security and salary in their beliefs about good career decisions in the abstract (job instability coefficient in supplemental logistic regression model: $B = .264$, $p = .044$, net of controls).

This first set of outcomes tapped respondents’ abstract sense of good career decision making. But are job-unstable respondents more likely to prioritize financial considerations when it comes to considering their own career paths?

**Table 2.** Ordinary Least Squares Regression Models Predicting Importance of Job Security, Salary, and Passion-Related Considerations in Respondents’ Assessments of Good Career Decisions.

|                      | Job Security Scale | Salary Scale | Passion Scale |
|----------------------|-------------------|-------------|--------------|
|                      | Coefficient       | SE          | Significance | Coefficient       | SE          | Significance | Coefficient       | SE          | Significance |
| Experienced job loss or furlough | -.066            | .041        | .069         | -.044        | .044        | .073         | .036        | * |
| Women                | .030              | .039        | -.187        | .044        | ***         | .086         | .036        | * |
| Married/partnered    | .030              | .043        | .079         | .046        | -.007        | .039         |            |    |
| Children <18 years old | .108             | .045        | .150         | .049        | **          | .091         | .041        | * |
| Age                  | -.002             | .002        | -.006        | .001        | ***         | .007         | .001        |    |
| Class background     | .069              | .017        | .097         | .018        | ***         | .042         | .015        | ** |
| Black                | -.065             | .067        | .032         | .069        | -.194        | .059        | **          |    |
| Hispanic             | .077              | .069        | .089         | .071        | .024         | .062        |            |    |
| Asian                | -.083             | .062        | .033         | .065        | -.132        | .056        | *          |    |
| NAAPI                | .129              | .111        | .134         | .116        | .080         | .100        |            |    |
| MS degree            | -.006             | .041        | -.042        | .042        | .011         | .037        |            |    |
| Advanced degree      | -.105             | .070        | -.059        | .073        | .070         | .063        |            |    |
| Constant             | 4.123             | .111        | 3.624        | .115        | ***         | 4.141        | .099        | ***|

Note: White is the comparison category for race/ethnicity; men and gender-non-binary respondents are the comparison category for women. BS degree is the comparison category for highest degree. Models also include controls for industry and field of highest degree. NAAPI = Native American and Asian Pacific Islander.

*p < .05, **p < .01, and ***p < .001, two-tailed test.

**Table 3.** Logistic Regression Models Predicting Whether Respondents Ranked Job Security, Salary, or Passion-Related Considerations as Their Top Concern When Considering Whether They Would Take a New Job in the Future.

|                      | Job Security Is Top Priority | Salary Is Top Priority | Passion Is Top Priority |
|----------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------|-------------------------|
|                      | Coefficient       | SE          | Significance | Coefficient       | SE          | Significance | Coefficient       | SE          | Significance |
| Experienced job loss or furlough | -.135            | .176        | -.141        | .149        |            | .270         | .118        | * |
| Women                | -.289             | .171        | -.280        | .138        | *          | -.074        | .113        |    |
| Married/partnered    | .019              | .193        | -.067        | .138        |            | -.251        | .123        | * |
| Children <18 years old | .499             | .191        | -.189        | .157        |            | -.262        | .130        | * |
| Age                  | -.019             | .009        | -.008        | .005        |            | .009         | .004        | * |
| Class background     | -.060             | .069        | .037         | .058        |            | -.020        | .047        |    |
| Black                | .526              | .251        | -.008        | .237        |            | -.037        | .190        |    |
| Hispanic             | .306              | .261        | .233         | .228        |            | -.002        | .119        |    |
| Asian                | .675              | .246        | .380         | .202        |            | -.319        | .179        |    |
| NAAPI                | .639              | .405        | -.063        | .404        |            | -.175        | .329        |    |
| MS degree            | -.134             | .173        | -.374        | .148        | **          | .466         | .117        | ***|
| Advanced degree      | -.924             | .391        | -.296        | .250        |            | .746         | .202        | ***|
| Constant             | -.107             | .470        | -.719        | .308        |            | -.410        | .316        |    |

Note: White is the comparison category for race/ethnicity; men and gender-non-binary respondents are the comparison category for women. BS degree is the comparison category for highest degree. Models also include controls for industry and field of highest degree. NAAPI = Native American and Asian Pacific Islander.

*p < .05, **p < .01, and ***p < .001, two-tailed test.
second set of survey items asked respondents to imagine that they were looking for a new job and to rank, in order of importance, several factors in whether they would take a new job. As with their abstract understandings of good career decision making, college-educated workers who had experienced employment instability over the course of the pandemic were not any more likely to rank salary or job security as their top priority in a new job (see Table 3). However, as before, respondents who had experienced employment instability were significantly more likely than those whose employment was stable to rank passion for work as their top priority in their careers. Specifically, more than half (50.4 percent) of those who experienced employment instability rated passion-related considerations as their top priority in a new job, compared with 44.9 percent of those whose employment was stable.

Although our data cannot directly trace how workers’ priorities evolved over the course of the pandemic, respondents’ own reflections on the shifts in their priorities provide important insight into how their views may have changed. Respondents were asked to indicate whether a set of factors became more important in their minds in a good job over the pandemic, less important in their minds, or whether the importance had stayed the same. Consistent with the foregoing results, college-educated workers who experienced employment instability were significantly more likely than job-stable respondents to report that “interest or passion” for work increased in importance in their minds over the course of the pandemic (see Table 4). In contrast, there were no significant differences by employment stability in whether job security and salary became more important in respondents’ assessments of a good job.

Robustness Tests and Supplemental Analysis

We conducted several supplemental analyses to assess the robustness of these findings. First, to ensure that these patterns were not driven by job-unstable respondents’ being less passionate about the jobs they had at the time of the survey, we reran all models with a control for the extent to which respondents agreed that “I am passionate about my work.” Respondents who had experienced pandemic-related job instability were not any less likely to say they were passionate about their current work than job-stable respondents, and controlling for this did not change the patterns reported above. Second, even though job-unstable respondents were more likely to prioritize passion in their considerations of future jobs (see Table 3), we wondered whether economic factors played a more influential role in their decisions to take their current jobs during the pandemic than when job-stable respondents decided to take their jobs before the pandemic. We found that job-stable and job-unstable respondents

---

**Table 4.** Ordinary Least Squares Regression Models Predicting How Respondents Believed the Importance of Job Security, Salary, and Passion-Related Factors Had Shifted in Their Understanding of a Good Job over the Course of the COVID-2019 Pandemic.

| Job Security | Salary | Passion |
|--------------|--------|---------|
| Coefficient  | SE     | Significance | Coefficient  | SE     | Significance | Coefficient  | SE     | Significance |
| Experienced job loss or furlough | .046 | .109 | .031 | .114 | .267 | .122 | * |
| Women | .099 | .104 | –.309 | .109 | .345 | .116 | ** |
| Married/partnered | –.116 | .113 | –.093 | .118 | –.066 | .127 |
| Children <18 years old | .311 | .119 | .493 | .125 | .695 | .135 | *** |
| Age | –.024 | .004 | –.032 | .004 | .007 | .004 |
| Class background | .073 | .044 | .143 | .046 | .160 | .048 | ** |
| Hispanic | .067 | .183 | .422 | .191 | .229 | .204 |
| Asian | –.019 | .164 | .175 | .173 | –.291 | .184 |
| NAAPI | .293 | .292 | .287 | .307 | .305 | .328 |
| MS degree | .018 | .018 | .178 | .113 | .300 | .121 | * |
| Advanced degree | –0.38 | .184 | .101 | .192 | .203 | .206 |
| Constant | 3.591 | .293 | 2.407 | .307 | .902 | .238 | * |

Note: White is the comparison category for race/ethnicity; men and gender non-binary respondents are the comparison category for women. BS degree is the comparison category for highest degree. Models also include controls for industry and field of highest degree. NAAPI = Native American and Asian Pacific Islander.

*p < .05, **p < .01, and ***p < .001, two-tailed test.
did not significantly differ in the importance of salary and job stability in their “decision to take [their] current job.” Yet consistent with the patterns reported earlier, job unstable respondents rated “passion for the work” as significantly more important in their decision to take their current jobs than job-stable respondents rated it, net of controls ($B = .117, p = .024$). This hints that not only might passion-related considerations be more central to job-unstable respondents’ attitudes about good work and good career decision making but might even shape their actual decision making about the jobs they take after encountering instability.

Furthermore, a possible alternative explanation of these results is that job-unstable respondents may happen to have access to better resources in their jobs at the time of the survey and thus felt freer than job-stable respondents to prioritize passion-related considerations. In contrast, we find that respondents who experienced job instability tend to have less access to job resources than job-stable respondents: at the time of the survey, respondents who had previously experienced job instability were less likely than job-stable respondents to have health insurance ($B = -.831, p < .001$), less likely to have retirement benefits ($B = -.952, p < .001$), and had significantly lower average salaries ($B = -14,728, p < .001$), net of controls for demographics, education, and sector. In other words, job-unstable respondents were more likely to prioritize passion-related considerations even though they had fewer resources and lower salaries in their jobs at the time of the survey than did job-stable respondents.

Third, we tested an alternative way of measuring respondents’ prioritization of considerations in a new job. Specifically, we used a measure of the average positional ranking respondents gave to each factor (first, second, third, etc.), rather than the likelihood that they would rate a factor their top priority (as we did in Table 3). In supplemental ordinary least squares regression models, and consistent with results above, we found no significant difference in the average positional ranking of job security and salary by job (in)stability. But, as in Table 3, passion-related considerations had a significantly higher average ranking among job-unstable respondents than among job-stable respondents ($B = .268, p = .004$, net of controls).

Fourth, to place the effect of job instability in context with other axes of variation in passion-related career prioritization, we calculated the Cohen’s $d$ effect sizes ($d = \text{difference in means/pooled standard deviation}$) for the difference in means between job-unstable and job-stable respondents, between women and men, between parents and nonparents, and between people with and without advanced degrees. As illustrated in Table A1 in the Appendix, the job (in)stability effect sizes are comparable with the effect sizes for these other important axes of variation in career prioritization.

Finally, we tested whether the effect of employment instability on these job priorities was moderated by (i.e., varied across) demographic categories. Tables 2 to 4 show some patterns of variation in the prioritization of passion by gender, parenthood status, and race/ethnicity. Consistent with gendered patterns in passion principle adherence generally (Cech 2021), women rated passion more highly than men did on average, and salary lower than men did on average, in their understandings of good career decision making. Parents generally rated salary considerations higher than nonparents rated them, and mothers were slightly less likely than childless women to see passion as important in career decisions. However, using interaction terms between instability and demographic factors in supplemental regression models, we find little moderating effect of gender and parenthood status on the relationships between job instability and the focal outcomes above. The only difference by gender and parenthood status is that mothers who experienced job instability reported a slightly lower increase in the importance of passion in their minds over the pandemic than childless women who had experienced job instability. This may be due in part to the intense increase in caregiving burdens resulting from childcare facility and school shutdowns that were overwhelmingly shoudered by mothers (Collins et al. 2020; Landivar et al. 2020).

Furthermore, consistent with patterns in passion principle adherence overall, Tables 2 to 4 show that Black and Asian respondents rated passion slightly lower in importance in good career decision making than white respondents, and the importance of passion to Black and Asian respondents increased slightly less over the pandemic than it did for white respondents. We find that the job instability effect on the importance respondents gave to passion in their abstract assessments of good career decision making (Table 2) was slightly lower among Black workers compared with white workers and that Black workers who had experienced job instability were more likely than job-stable Black workers and all white workers to rank job security as their top priority in a new job. These patterns may be the result of the highly racialized impact of the economic turmoil of the pandemic, which affected workers of color, especially Black workers, most widely and most severely (Congressional Research Service 2021; Williams 2020). Yet Black workers who experienced job instability were still more likely than Black workers who were stably employed to emphasize passion on the three outcomes.

Finally, possibly reflecting their access to inheritance-based financial safety nets, job-unstable workers who were raised in wealthier families were less likely than those from less wealthy socioeconomic backgrounds to say that job security increased in importance in their minds over the pandemic. We did not find that class background moderated the effects of job instability on any of the passion-related factors, however. These points of demographic variation suggest the importance of exploring gender, race, and class dynamics of the effects of crisis-produced employment instability on career prioritization in future research. These
are differences in degree, not direction; job instability was related to an increased emphasis on passion-seeking across demographic groups.

Conclusion

In the context of tumultuous historical periods that include dramatic employment disruptions, it is vital that scholars take stock of how individuals affected by employment crises make sense of their work circumstances and how such sense-making may translate into career-related priorities and strategies of action. In this study we asked, How did the career priorities of college-educated workers who were laid off or furloughed as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic compare with those of workers with stable employment? Standard scholarly perspectives on economic crises presume that job-unstable workers are typically most concerned about the financial aspects of their work and deprioritize other considerations. In contrast, we argued that the “unsettling” that accompanies job instability during economic crises may encourage workers, especially comparatively privileged college-educated workers, to consider a wider range of extrafinancial cultural priorities about the role of work in their lives.

Using proportionally representative survey data collected during the pandemic, we found that college-educated workers who experienced pandemic-related job loss were more likely than job-stable respondents to emphasize passion for work in their career priorities. Furthermore, they were more likely to report that passion had increased in importance to them over the course of the pandemic. As such, rather than pandemic-induced employment insecurity heightening economically rational decision making, our results suggest that the unsettling that accompanied job instability may have increased the salience of cultural narratives such as the passion principle that emphasize extrafinancial conceptualizations of good work and a good life.

These findings have implications for cultural sociologists and work and occupations scholars studying how workers orient themselves within crisis-rocked labor markets. First, they point to the need for scholars to investigate how the perspectives and priorities of those directly affected by economic crises may be deeply entwined with cultural priorities that are tangential to or even contradict the maximization of material resources or financial opportunities. Second, more research is needed to understand whether shifts in career priorities that may occur during unsettled times may extend beyond them. Will college-educated workers who experienced job insecurity as a result of the pandemic continue to be more likely to prioritize passion after labor market recovery, for example?

Third, these results hint at broader shifts in college-educated workers’ relationships to work over the course of the pandemic. Although it remains to be seen whether the elevated prioritization of passion-based factors among job-unstable workers will linger after the pandemic, this differential prioritization, in addition to the perception among job-unstable workers that passion for work became more important to them over the pandemic, suggest an even stronger emphasis on meaning and fulfillment among these job-unstable workers than they held before the pandemic. These results indicate that the economic fallout accompanying the pandemic did not quell the popularity of meaning and fulfillment as guiding principles for career decision making, at least for the college educated, and may have even amplified it.

Fourth, scholars should consider how labor and employment trends accelerated by the pandemic, particularly the increase in remote work, automation, and temporary and contract work, may have facilitated these shifting priorities and how these trends may affect career decision making in the future (McKinsey Global Institute, 2021; Schor 2021).10 The emerging pattern of the Great Resignation, for instance, hints at a widespread dissatisfaction with conditions of work that may catalyze reprioritization around paid labor force participation (Krugman 2021; Sánchez-Vallejo 2021). Last, future studies should examine how job insecurity influences not only workers’ job priorities but also their attitudes toward employment-related policies such as paid family leave and health insurance (cf. Williams 2020).11

These findings are also relevant to policy makers and organization leaders seeking to interpret and respond to pandemic- and other crisis-related employment dynamics. Policy and media accounts of economic recovery that presume that workers prioritize financial stability when seeking work or planning their career trajectories may not only mischaracterize workers’ own decision making but also misrepresent standard markers of recovery. For example, college-educated workers who experienced pandemic-induced layoffs but prioritize fulfilling work in their next jobs may be unwilling to take available jobs that match their education level or former salary but for which they are not passionate. Such workers may be counted as “unsuccessful” in standard measures of labor market recovery that assume salary and skill level matches are the sole or principal way job seekers make decisions. The patterns observed here lend insights into debates about the perceived paradox of high unemployment alongside high job vacancy rates during economic recovery (Noah 2021; Porter 2021).

---

10 For instance, the experience of daily work changed significantly for many college-educated workers: 62 percent of working-age adults with bachelor’s degrees and 73 percent of those with postgraduate degrees worked from home for some period of time during the pandemic (Pew Research Center 2020).

11 As employment is linked to so many aspects of livelihood in the United States (Williams 2020), experiencing job precarity during the pandemic may have prompted some workers to consider how employers can better meet the needs of employees beyond wages (e.g., employer-based health care).
On the flip side, policy makers and organization leaders must consider how to protect workers from the pitfalls of prioritizing passion. Job-unstable workers’ prioritization of fulfilling work may expose them to exploitation by employers who seek to fill job vacancies with passionate workers but offer substandard wages or working conditions in return (Cech 2021; Kim et al. 2019). Additionally, there are limited support structures in the United States for workers who seek to prioritize fulfillment in their work (Williams 2020). Passion prioritization may thus perpetuate economic disadvantages among job-unstable workers who seek work they are passionate about in the absence of robust safety nets (Wilson 2019).

Overall, ongoing and future efforts to promote economic recovery should account for the fact that the pandemic was not just an economic unsettling but, for many workers, an existential one (Williams 2021). Understanding how crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic affect the lives of workers requires attention not only to patterns in paychecks and employment stability but also to the broader ways workers make sense of paid work in their lives.

## Appendix

### Table A1. Effect Sizes of Mean Differences along the Focal Passion Prioritization Measures between Job-Unstable and Job-Unstable Respondents, Women and Men, Parents and Nonparents, and Respondents with and without Advanced Degrees.

|                               | Job Unstable vs. Job Stable | Women vs. Men | Parents vs. Nonparents | Advanced Degree vs. No Advanced Degree |
|-------------------------------|-----------------------------|---------------|-------------------------|----------------------------------------|
| Good career decisions: passion| .123                        | .133          | .121                    | .067                                   |
| Top priority in new job: passion| .154                        | .034          | .141                    | .209                                   |
| Change in importance over the pandemic: passion| .204                        | .335          | .139                    | .270                                   |

*Note: Columns represent Cohen’s d effect sizes (d = difference in means/pooled standard deviation) on difference in means on each focal outcome measure between job-unstable and job-stable respondents, between women and men, between parents and nonparents, and between those with and without advanced degrees.*

---

### Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This research was conducted with support from the Population Studies Center at the University of Michigan.

### ORCID iD

Erin A. Cech [https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6913-7150](https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6913-7150)

### Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

### References

Blustein, David L., Ryan Duffy, Joaquim A. Ferreira, Valerie Cohen-Scali, Rachel Gali Cinamon, and Blake A. Allan. 2020. “Unemployment in the Time of COVID-19: A Research Agenda.” *Journal of Vocational Behavior* 119:103436.

Cech, Erin A. 2021. *The Trouble with Passion: How Searching for Fulfillment at Work Fosters Inequality*. Oakland: University of California Press.

Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. 2021. “Tracking the COVID-19 Economy’s Effects on Food, Housing, and Employment Hardships.” Retrieved June 30, 2021. [https://www.cbpp.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/8-13-20pov.pdf](https://www.cbpp.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/8-13-20pov.pdf).

Collins, Caitlyn, Liana Christin Landivar, Leah Ruppanner, and William J. Scarborough. 2020. “COVID-19 and the Gender Gap in Work Hours.” *Gender, Work & Organization* 28(S1):101–12.

Congressional Budget Office. 2021. “An Overview of the Economic Outlook: 2021 to 2031.” Retrieved June 30, 2021. [https://www.cbo.gov/publication/56965](https://www.cbo.gov/publication/56965).

Cook, Ian. 2021. “Who Is Driving the Great Resignation?” *Harvard Business Review*. Retrieved November 22, 2021. [https://hbr.org/2021/09/who-is-driving-the-great-resignation](https://hbr.org/2021/09/who-is-driving-the-great-resignation).

Corbett, Holly. 2021. “The Great Resignation: Why Employees Don’t Want to Go Back to the Office.” *Forbes*. Retrieved December 14, 2021. [https://www.forbes.com/sites/hollycorbett/2021/07/28/the-great-resignation-why-employees-dont-want-to-go-back-to-the-office/?sh=3ec6d5db2000](https://www.forbes.com/sites/hollycorbett/2021/07/28/the-great-resignation-why-employees-dont-want-to-go-back-to-the-office/?sh=3ec6d5db2000).

DePalma, Lindsay. 2020. “The Passion Paradigm: Professional Adherence to and Consequences of the Ideology of ‘Do What You Love.’” *Sociological Forum* 36(1):134–58.

Ersoy, Fulya Y. 2020. “The Effects of the Great Recession on College Majors.” *Economics of Education Review* 77:102018.
Liu, Shimeng, Weizeng Sun, and John V. Winters. 2019. “Up in Landivar, Liana Christin, Leah Ruppanner, William J. Lamont, Michèle. 1992. Krugman, Paul. 2021. “Working Out: Is the Great Resignation a Kochhar, Rakesh. 2020. “Unemployment Rose Higher in Three Kim, Jae Yun, Troy H. Campbell, Steven Shepherd, and Aaron Kidman, Rachel., Margolis, Rachel., and Smith-Greenaway, Emily. Heen, Miliaikeala S. J., Joel D. Lieberman, and Terance Miethe. Hacker, Jacob S. 2019. Modernity and self-identity: self and soci- Kalleberg, Arne L. 2012. The Time Divide: Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right. New York: New Jacobs, Jerry A., and Kathleen Gerson. 2005. The Time Divide: Work, Family, and Gender Inequality. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. Kalleberg, Arne L. 2012. Good Jobs, Bad Jobs: The Rise of Polarized and Precarious Employment Systems in the United States, 1970s–2000s. New York: Russell Sage. Kidman, Rachel., Margolis, Rachel., and Smith-Greenaway, Emily. 2021. Estimates and projections of COVID-19 and parental death in the US. JAMA Pediatrics 175(7):745–746. https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamapediatrics/fullarticle/2778229 Kim, Jae Yun, Troy H. Campbell, Steven Shepherd, and Aaron C. Kay. 2019. “Understanding Contemporary Forms of Exploitation: Attributions of Passion Serve to Legitimize the Poor Treatment of Workers.” Journal of Personality and Social Psychology 118(1):121–48. Kochhar, Rakesh. 2020. “Unemployment Rose Higher in Three Months of COVID-19 Than It Did in Two Years of the Great Recession.” Pew Research Center. Retrieved December 14, 2021. https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/06/11/unemployment-rose-higher-in-three-months-of-covid-19-than-it-did-in-two-years-of-the-great-recession/. Krugman, Paul. 2021. “Working Out: Is the Great Resignation a Great Rethink?” The New York Times, November 5. Lamont, Michèle. 1992. Money, Morals, and Manners: The Culture of the French and the American Middle Class. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. Landivar, Liana Christin, Leah Ruppanner, William J. Scarborough, and Caitlyn Collins. 2020. “Early Signs Indicate That COVID-19 Is Exacerbating Gender Inequality in the Labor Force.” Socius 6. Retrieved December 14, 2021. https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/2378023120947997. Liu, Shimeng, Weizeng Sun, and John V. Winters. 2019. “Up in STEM, Down in Business: Changing College Major Decisions with the Great Recession.” Contemporary Economic Policy 37(3):476–91. McKinsey Global Institute. 2021. “The Future of Work after COVID-19.” Retrieved June 30, 2021. https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/future-of-work/the-future-of-work-after-covid-19. Mervosh, Sarah, Denise Lu, and Vanessa Swales. 2020. “See Which States and Cities Have Told Residents to Stay at Home.” The New York Times, April 20. Molteni, Francesco, Riccardo Ladini, Ferruccio Biocati, Antonio M. Chiesi, Giulia Maria Dotti Sani, Simona Guglielmi, Marco Maraffi, et al. 2021. “Searching for Comfort in Religion: Insecurity and Religious Behaviour During the COVID-19 Pandemic in Italy.” European Societies 23 (Suppl. 1):S704–20. Noah, Timothy. 2021. “We Regret to Inform You That Workers Are Not Suddenly Winning.” The New Republic, June 11. Retrieved December 14, 2021. https://newrepublic.com/article/162713/worker-wages-boost-pandemic-labor. Ocejo, Richard E. 2017. Masters of Craft: Old Jobs in the New Urban Economy. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. Oppenheimer, Daniel M., Tom Meyvis, and Nicholas Davidenko. 2009. “Instructional Manipulation Checks: Detecting Satiscifying to Increase Statistical Power.” Journal of Experimental Social Psychology 45(4):867–72. Parker, Kim, Ruth Igielnik, and Rakesh Kochhar. 2021. “Unemployed Americans Are Feeling the Emotional Strain of Job Loss; Most Have Considered Changing Occupations.” Pew Research Center. Retrieved December 13, 2021. https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2009/02/12/as-jobs-crisis-spreads-worries-climb-the-economic-ladder/. Porter, Eduardo. 2021. “Low Wage Workers Now Have Options, Which Could Mean a Raise.” The New York Times, July 20. Retrieved December 14, 2021. https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/20/business/economy/workers-wages-mobility.html. Pugh, Allison J. 2015. The Tumbleweed Society: Working and Caring in an Age of Insecurity. New York: Oxford University Press. Rao, Aliya Hamid. 2017. ‘You don’t dare plan much’: contract work and personal life for international early-career professionals. Research in the Sociology of Work 31:429–453. Rao, Aliya Hamid. 2020. “How the Spike in Unemployment from Covid-19 Could Set Us Back on Gender Equality.” UC Press Blog. Retrieved December 14, 2021. https://www.ucpress.edu/blog/50853/how-the-spike-in-unemployment-from-covid-19-could-set-us-back-on-gender-equality/. Rao, Aliya Hamid. 2021. Crunch Time: How Married Couples Confront Unemployment. Berkeley: University of California Press. Rao, Aliya Hamid, and Megan Tobias Neely. 2019. “What’s Love Got to Do with It? Passion and Inequality in White-Collar Work.” Sociology Compass 13(12):e12744. Sánchez-Vallejo, Maria Antonia. 2021. “The Great Resignation: Why Four Million US Workers a Month Are Leaving Their Jobs.” El País, November 23. Retrieved December 14, 2021. https://english.elpais.com/usa/2021-11-23/the-great-resignation-why-four-million-us-workers-a-month-are-leaving-their-jobs.html. Schor, Juliet. 2021. After the Gig: How the Sharing Economy Got Hijacked. Berkeley: University of California Press. Schoon, Ingrid. 2008. “A Transgenerational Model of Status Attainment: The Potential Mediating Role of School
Motivation and Education.” National Institute Economic Review (205):72–82.
Sharone, Ofer. 2013. Flawed System/Flawed Self: Job Searching and Unemployment Experiences. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Shepherd, Hana, Norah MacKendrick, and G. Cristina Mora. 2020. “Pandemic Politics: Political Worldviews and COVID-19 Beliefs and Practices in an Unsettled Time.” Socius 6. Retrieved December 14, 2021. https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/2378023120972575.
Silva, Jennifer M. 2013. Coming Up Short: Working-Class Adulthood in an Age of Uncertainty. New York: Oxford University Press.
Swidler, Ann. 1986. “Culture in Action: Symbols and Strategies.” American Sociological Review 51(2):273–86.
Tokumitsu, Miya. 2015. Do What You Love: And Other Lies about Success and Happiness. New York: Reagan Arts.
Turner, Sarah E., and William G. Bowen. 1999. “Choice of Major: The Changing (Unchanging) Gender Gap.” Industrial and Labor Relations Review 52(2):289–313.
USC Dornsife. 2020. “Survey Reveals Extent of Coronavirus-Related Job Loss, Outsized Impact on Blacks and Latinos.” Retrieved December 14, 2021. https://dornsife.usc.edu/news/stories/3198/coronavirus-covid-19-job-loss-and-anxiety-increases/.
Verdery, Ashton M., Smith-Greenaway, Emily., Margolis, Rachel. and Daw, Jonathan. 2020. “Tracking the reach of COVID-19 kin loss with a bereavement multiplier applied to the United States.” PNAS 117(3):17695–17701. https://www.pnas.org/content/117/30/17695
Williams, Christine. 2021. “Life Support: The Problems of Working for a Living.” American Sociological Review 86(2):191–200.
Williams, Jhacova. 2020. “Laid Off More, Hired Less: Black Workers and the COVID-19 Recession.” The RAND Blog. Retrieved June 30, 2021. https://www.rand.org/blog/2020/09/laid-off-more-hired-less-black-workers-in-the-covid.html.
Williams, Joan C. 2000. Unbending Gender: Why Family and Work Conflict and What to Do about It. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
Wilson, Eli R. 2019. “Managing Portfolio Lives: Flexibility and Privilege amongst Upscale Restaurant Workers in Los Angeles.” Qualitative Sociology 42:321–36.
Wright, Erik Olin. 2002. “The Shadow of Exploitation in Weber’s Class Analysis.” American Sociological Review 67(6):832–53.
Zelizer, Viviana A. 2017. The Social Meaning of Money: Pin Money, Paychecks, Poor Relief, & Other Currencies. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Author Biographies

Erin A. Cech is an associate professor of sociology and mechanical engineering (by courtesy) at the University of Michigan. Previously, she was a postdoctoral fellow at the Clayman Institute for Gender Research at Stanford University and was on faculty at Rice University. She earned her PhD in sociology from the University of California, San Diego, and undergraduate degrees in electrical engineering and sociology from Montana State University. Here research examines cultural mechanisms of inequality reproduction, especially through seemingly innocuous cultural beliefs and practices. Her research has appeared in the American Journal of Sociology, American Sociological Review, and the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences. Her first book, The Trouble with Passion: How Searching for Fulfillment at Work Fosters Inequality (University of California Press) was published in fall 2021, and her coauthored book with Mary Blair-Loy, Misconceiving Merit: Paradoxes of Excellence and Devotion in Academic Science and Engineering (University of Chicago Press), will be published in 2022.

Sofia Hiltner is a doctoral student in the Department of Sociology and a predoctoral trainee in the Population Studies Center at the University of Michigan. Her research interests include aging and medical sociology.