

# The Tenuous Attachments of Working-Class Men

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**W**ork, family, and religion have traditionally played an important role in furnishing working-class Americans with economic resources, moral guidance, and opportunities for civic engagement (Cherlin 2009; McLanahan 2004; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995; Wuthnow 2002). Ongoing attachments to work, family, and religion connected working-class men to social bonds and defined identities that kept them in the formal labor market and forestalled health problems. Conversely, precarious attachments to these key social institutions, we argue, may now dilute their power to shepherd and shift men's trajectories and may place them at risk of a host of negative outcomes. This is in line with sociologist Emile Durkheim's seminal study *Suicide* (1897 [1997]), which argued that "anomie," or normlessness, could explain variations in suicide rates across countries and over time.

In this essay, we explore how working-class men describe their attachments to work, family, and religion. We draw upon in-depth, life history interviews conducted in four metropolitan areas with racially and ethnically diverse groups of working-class men with a high school diploma but no four-year college degree. Between 2000 and 2013, we deployed heterogeneous sampling techniques in the

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black and white working-class neighborhoods of four metropolitan areas: Boston, Massachusetts; Charleston, South Carolina; Chicago, Illinois; and the Philadelphia/Camden area of Pennsylvania and New Jersey. We placed fliers in public places, sought referrals from a variety of grassroots organizations, and engaged in street sampling (approaching men on commercial streets and transit stops during daylight hours). We invited each of these men to refer up to two men to our study.

Because we were interested in these men's family ties, we screened to ensure that each respondent had at least one minor child. In Charleston and Philadelphia/Camden, we limited our sample to men with at least one child who could potentially have made the respondent subject to a child support order, because he was neither married to the child's mother nor living with her. We interviewed roughly even numbers of black and white men in each site for a total of 107 respondents.

We spoke at length with each respondent at least once, but usually twice. Interviews ranged from 90 minutes to three hours. All conversations were transcribed verbatim and coded using MaxQDA, a software program that is useful for identifying and systematically examining themes in qualitative data. We sorted men's narratives into codes capturing information relevant to prior constructs, as well as themes that emerged inductively from the transcripts.

In the first three sections of this paper, we describe the pattern of tenuous connections we found to key social institutions of work, family, and religion among the working-class men with whom we spoke. Although others have made similar arguments (Putnam 2015; Wilcox, Wolfinger, and Stokes 2015), we provide new evidence. Unlike past research, however, we show that working-class men are not simply reacting to changes in the economy, family norms, or religious organizations. Rather, they are attempting to renegotiate their relationships to these institutions by attempting to construct autonomous, generative selves. For example, these men's desire for autonomy in jobs seems rooted in their rejection of the monotony and limited autonomy that their fathers and grandfathers experienced in the workplace, along with a new ethos of self-expression (Cherlin 2014). Similarly, these working-class men focus on their ties to their children even when they have little relationship with the children's mothers, and they seek spiritual fulfillment even though they disdain organized religion. The drive toward generativity, by which we mean a desire to guide and nurture the next generation (Erikson 1963), is often rooted in past trauma often deriving from their family of origin. Many say that "giving back" in ways that they believe can make the world a better place is a way to redeem their own past as well as protect and nurture the next generation.

In sum, these working-class men show both a detachment from institutions and an engagement with more autonomous forms of work, childrearing, and spirituality, often with an emphasis on generativity. Autonomy refers to independent action in pursuit of personal growth and development. Personal growth has come to be highly valued among middle class Americans (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, and Tipton 1985), but until recently has not been associated with the working class. The emphasis on activities directed toward personal growth among the working class that we and others (Silva 2013) found surprised us, as past scholarship typically

assumed that such forms of action would usually only be found among those so materially comfortable that they needn't spend time worrying about their economic circumstances (Inglehart 1977). Subsequent to Eric Erikson's definition, which emphasized guidance and care of the next generation, researchers have expanded the concept of generativity to include "being a responsible citizen and a contributing member of a community" (McAdams, Hart, and Maruna 1998, p. 7). In other words, generativity is a special type of autonomous action, one directed at encouraging the growth and development not of oneself but of persons one cares about and knows well, such as one's children, as well as those in the community that need care and protection, such as the youth in one's neighborhood.

Our primary goal is to show that in order to comprehend these men's lives, we must consider both the unmaking and remaking aspects of their stories. We then turn to a discussion of the extent to which this autonomous and generative self is also a haphazard self, which may be aligned with counterproductive behaviors. As a secondary aim, we discuss racial and ethnic differences in what have been called "deaths of despair": the recent rise in mortality among whites with no more than a high school diploma due to suicides, drug overdoses, and alcohol-related liver failure (Case and Deaton 2015, 2017; see also Coile and Duggan, this volume). Working-class adults often make comparisons between their own and their parents' standards of living when their parents were their age, as shown in our in-depth interviews. However, drawing both on our interviews and representative survey data, we find that this comparison often leads to more negative assessments among whites than minorities (for both men and women in survey data). The reason is that non-college-educated whites are often comparing themselves to a generation that they feel had more opportunities than they have, whereas many blacks and Hispanics are more often comparing themselves to a generation that, in their view, had fewer opportunities.

Our interview methodology has both weaknesses and strengths. First, we are not drawing on a representative sample. Our interview subjects do not include working-class men without children, or from smaller cities and rural areas, or from the western or south-central regions of the United States. Moreover, men in our sample are more disadvantaged than a simple random sample of men with a high school degree but no college diploma, in part because they were all living in cities where many traditional working-class neighborhoods were in decline. However, an advantage of our approach is that it allows us to explore complex questions in a rich and granular way that allows unanticipated results to emerge. It is also useful for identifying processes and mechanisms that may not be captured in surveys or administrative data sources. Finally, in-depth qualitative interviews allow researchers to situate specific actions and attitudes within the larger context of respondent's lives.

The autonomous, generative identity we describe here can be seen in part as a way in which working-class men have reacted to structural changes in the labor market. Yet the way people describe their perceptions and aspirations will also have further effects on their behavior. We view the hypotheses advanced in this paper, derived from these interviews, as starting points worth further exploration by social scientists, not as definitive evidence.

## Work

Studies of the relationship between working-class men and their jobs have traditionally highlighted claims that much of the identity of working-class men is heavily influenced by the nature of the job itself, from the living standard it permitted, and from the authority it allowed them to wield at home. For example, qualitative studies by Michele Lamont (2000) and Paul Willis (1977), as well as Melvin Kohn's surveys (1969) of white working-class men in prior generations, showed that they often claimed identity from their capacity for hard work at demanding, repetitive tasks—what Lamont calls “the disciplined self.” In-depth interviews with blue-collar workers by Komarovskiy (1964), Rubin (1976), and Halle (1984), conducted in the late 1950s through the early 1980s, call into question the idea that dignity always derived merely from the job itself—especially for those on the lower rungs—rather it may have also stemmed from the level of consumption the job afforded, a family wage that allowed men to be the sole or primary breadwinners. Salaries were usually sufficient for workers to purchase homes plus some luxuries; among those studied by Rubin (1976, p. 199) in the late 1970s, fully one-quarter owned a travel camper or boat. These earnings, in turn, allowed them to exercise considerable authority within the household, a further source of respect.

When describing their own fathers and grandfathers, our respondents often echoed the portrait offered by these older ethnographic studies. In contrast, the identity they themselves drew from their movements in and out of unskilled and semi-skilled jobs was more tenuous (Coglianese 2018). For example, Bernard had earned an HVAC (heating, ventilation, and air-conditioning systems) certification eight years earlier, but hadn't found employment in the field. Since then, he had worked as a security guard in a strip mall “just to pay the bills. I'm not really [into] law enforcement.”

The successful performance of the disciplined self requires not only a certain kind of attitude, but also the availability of a certain type of job—manual occupations that provide the opportunity for stable work with good wages (Cherlin 2014). For the current generation of men, such jobs, plus the family wage and familial authority they allowed, have been in short supply (Autor, Katz, and Kearney 2006).

Given the tenuous nature of the work available to them, a good number of the men we interviewed had tried to build expertise, and gain the attendant certifications, in several different occupations, believing that “[I have to] hedge my bets” in order to remain employed. Iraq veteran Demario told us that he aspired to have “at least three options for ... income. And if one doesn't work out, then I could have the other two as a fallback.” Accordingly, after leaving the Army, he used his Veteran's Administration benefits to enroll in a diesel mechanics program and, more recently, had earned certification as a barber. When we interviewed him, he had just applied to a “visual production” program offered by a nearby state college. This strategy may be far from frivolous, as men sometimes obtain training in specific trades—like Bernard's HVAC certification—yet cannot find employment in that profession. However, hedging bets can also saddle men with thousands of dollars in

student loan debt for training they are not using, while finding themselves actually working as security guards (as Bernard did), in retail, or unskilled manual labor.

Several men in our sample were working off-the-books, sometimes for extended periods. When Jeff quit a grueling factory job that required him to work twelve-hour shifts seven days a week and his felony conviction made it hard to find another position, he worked sporadic odd jobs for family and friends and provided childcare for his sister, who had two boys. Since 11th grade, 28-year-old Arthur had worked under-the-table as a handyman for a property manager. Ken had held a similar position with a man he called “my best friend, my landlord, and my boss.” For 15 years, he had painted apartments between tenants and served as an unlicensed carpenter, plumber, and electrician on the landlord’s properties, all for cash.

A few men recalled periods when they were younger that reflected the current stereotype of the 20-something in his mother’s basement playing video games. After high school and before he became a father, Rick went on a “surfing safari” with a friend, traveling across Mexico and California in a VW van for almost four years, subsisting on odd jobs and on funds sent from his well-off suburban family. “We were totally hippied out. Patchouli oil, the whole nine yards,” he recalls. In his 20s, Kirk moved back in with his mother, joined a “social club” of owners of classic Pontiac Grand Prix cars, and spent nearly two years “just enjoying the time off, hanging with my buddies.” This sojourn ended abruptly when his girlfriend got pregnant. Feeling a new sense of responsibility, he quickly got a job, and secured an apartment for the soon-to-be threesome. None of the men in our sample were currently pursuing leisure full-time, perhaps because, like Rick and Kirk, they were all now fathers.

Other men were in and out of formal sector work while avidly cultivating “side bets”—entrepreneurial hobbies and informal occupations that they hoped to “take commercial” eventually. These took a wide variety of forms. For example, several worked as weekend DJs and hoped to open their own recording studios. Some designed tattoos while planning to forge a career as a tattoo artist, or to open a tattoo parlor. Several penned novels or self-help books and hoped to land a commercial publisher. Gene, who had worked in the past as a private investigator, told us he had interviewed dozens of others in the field about their experiences investigating infidelity. Based on these interviews, he had compiled “a complete profile of the American infidel ... Everything that’s in that profile is everything you need to survive a marriage.” He insists he will “publish it someday.” Jeremy, who was inspired to write by a high school internship at *Boston Globe*, self-published a novel when he was 19 with the hope of paying for college with the proceeds. While that first venture had earned little profit, he had sent several additional manuscripts to an Amazon contest for aspiring authors in hopes of attracting the attention of a publisher.<sup>1</sup>

Through these side bets, the men that we interviewed were attempting to renegotiate their attachments to work in ways that provided the autonomy and

<sup>1</sup>We distinguish these activities from “side hustles” (Komarovskiy 1964, p. 281), a concept that refers to ways to supplement one’s income more immediately. However, we did note quite a few side hustles as well—especially selling drugs while also working a legitimate job.

capacity for creativity and self-expression that they desired. This is reflected in the entrepreneurial nature of many of the side bets, and the emphasis on the creative and performing arts. The desire for autonomy is also evident in the jobs many hoped to obtain eventually. A considerable number dreamed of starting their own businesses, a theme that also appears in studies of prior generations of the working class (Halle 1984). For the men we interviewed, these ranged from opening a barbershop to starting a cannabis farm. A few had even quit steady jobs to start a business or go in on ventures with friends (as one example, a catering firm). Most, though, had had to return to wage work after the businesses failed, either in the wake of the Great Recession or when an injury or family illness sapped their resources.

The attempts of these men to renegotiate their involvements with work not only tended to emphasize autonomy, but generativity.<sup>2</sup> Demario, the barber mentioned earlier, joined a fraternity geared toward those in the “beauty industry.” He valued the fact that the fraternity chapters hosted community events focused on boosting the self-esteem of youth and also did charitable work in the community. Blake, who had completed three years of college but was currently training to become a forklift operator, worked part time as assistant coach for an AAU basketball team so he could serve as a mentor to neighborhood youth. This desire was rooted in his own childhood, when a next-door neighbor “used to come out and coach [the kids] in the neighborhood basketball games. He saw something in the guys that I was around, and so he took us all in and pretty much adopted us. ... And he’s the reason that all of us [enrolled in] college.” Bernard, the security guard mentioned earlier, dreamed of starting a company “doing landscaping and snow removal ... and then I can employ the ... kids from the neighborhood. Each kid can have a block, you know? A lot of people ... they don’t even want to give these kids a chance ..., but I’m giving them something to work with first, work for your neighborhood, you know what I’m saying?” Steve had worked on a Charleston fishing trawler for two decades—despite being an alcoholic. Now sober and a convert to Christianity, he spent free time volunteering at a halfway house for recovering addicts. He dreamed of starting his own business because, “That way I’ll be able to create jobs for these guys.” Larry, a Boston resident hailing from Barbados, had noted how youth in his neighborhood had few resources to learn about Caribbean culture. For several years, he had sewn costumes for Boston’s Caribbean American Heritage Festival. When we interviewed him, he was trying to find ways to make his hobby a commercial venture, with the goal of providing neighborhood youth with a source of employment that stoked a sense of cultural pride. Eventually, he wanted to open a community center where young people could learn about Caribbean culture while making and selling ethnic handicrafts.

As these stories illustrate, a desire for generative work—jobs that allow men to “give back” to their communities—is most often voiced when they are asked about

<sup>2</sup>Maruna (2001) has used the concept of generativity to describe the kinds of jobs (such as drug counselor, youth worker, and community volunteer) that were most useful in helping the ex-offenders he studied desist from crime.

the jobs to which they aspire. Aside from the examples above, which involve working with youth, other trades commonly named include substance abuse counselors and first responders. For example, one man who went by the nickname Bear told us that he aspired to be a firefighter “not so much for the pay [but because] it’s self-fulfilling, you know? Just to save one baby. To run in and save someone else’s child from burning to death.” These men often defined a “good” job as one in which they could save someone else from harm.

Yet our analysis of men’s life narratives suggests that many are also focused on rescuing themselves or those they see as younger versions of themselves. They tell stories of overcoming past trauma or substance abuse (Silva 2013). For instance, John had the words “my pain” tattooed across his neck. He told the interviewer, “I don’t want [my son] to experience the pain I went through [in childhood] of neglect, someone not loving you, not being there.” Bob is the child of two heroin addicts. His father died of a drug overdose when he was five and his mother left him home alone for extended periods of time. He told us his goal was to become a “psychologist,” saying he wanted to counsel people about their problems. “I have been through everything. And I dealt with so much, [so] I know how to [help others].” In sum, the desire for generative work may represent a wish to help young people avoid the difficulties they perceive themselves to have experienced while growing up. The act of helping others may be a form of self-healing for many of them. Generativity expressed through “intergenerational buffering” has been described by psychologists Kotre and Kotre (1998, p. 367), who write, “although they themselves may bear scars, they say of a sequence of intergenerational damage, ‘It stops here. It ends with me.’”

## **Family**

The decline in labor force participation among prime-age men may be driven partly by the retreat from marriage because a lack of family responsibility may decrease men’s motivation to work (as discussed in this issue by Binder and Bound). While the men that we interviewed seldom invested strongly in the role of romantic partner, they nonetheless embraced their paternal roles enthusiastically. While some were married or had been divorced, most had postponed marriage, claiming their financial situation wasn’t sufficient, or more rarely, because they eschewed marriage altogether. This is in line with marriage trends for the working class as a whole. The proportion of households with children headed by a married couple, for example, declined markedly among those without a college degree since 1980 (Cherlin 2014; see also Binder and Bound, this volume).

For example, Manuel and his girlfriend were parents of two preschoolers, and planned on marrying, but were holding off until they could save money for a “big wedding.” Jeff and his fiancé had set a wedding date, but at the time of our interview that date had come and gone. While she was ready to get married, he wanted more of a financial cushion beforehand. “I don’t want to get married, have a honeymoon,

and now we [are] worried about the mortgage next month. Let's get financially straight. We ain't got to be balling, but just to where the bills are paid," he explained.

As Jeff's narrative suggests, even those in marriage-like relationships (living together with children in common) usually expressed some degree of doubt about the permanency of their relationships (for example, "*If* we're still together in five years, *then* maybe we'll get married"). The married men were generally more confident that their relationships would last, but some were nonetheless hesitant to recommend marriage to friends. Thirty-three year-old Robert, a father of three, had gotten engaged at 18 but had waited to get married until 21 so he could drink at his wedding; "I figured if I was legal to drink—that was the point." He told us, "I have known so many people that have lived together for years, have kids together, things were great. They got married, six months later they're divorced. And I think that piece of paper changes ... the way people act [for the worse]."

Yet fatherhood was a highly salient source of meaning and identity for nearly all these men. When asked about parenting his six-year-old, Fred said, "It's definitely great being a father. You just have a little person who looks up to you and [is] trying to emulate some of the stuff that you do. [A child is] someone who you can kind of help shape and form into like a, into a good person." Brian described fatherhood as follows: "To be honest with you it's taught me pure love. I knew pure love with my [ex-]wife, but with my daughter..., you don't get anything [better] than that. You know what I mean?" In contrast, men who have been separated from their children are often emotionally devastated. Bill lived with his twins' mother for nine years. Since they separated, she has not let him see the children. "She wants me completely out of their lives. She has completely slammed the door and made sure that I cannot do anything about it. It's destroyed me. It has destroyed me."

The form of fatherhood these men wish to enact is not modeled on what they observed among their own fathers and grandfathers, who—in their view—were inadequate. Rather, this generation places strong emphasis on nurture and warmth (see also Edin and Nelson 2013). Many derided their own fathers if they "merely" provided financially for the family but didn't provide emotional support. For example, Brian was critical of his father because "he doesn't show emotions. Now don't get me wrong, he's a phenomenal father when it comes to supporting his family and doing what needs to be done to take care of his family. He's always done that. But as far as showing emotion, giving us a hug, he just doesn't do that stuff."

One might question whether the emphasis on nurture and warmth has supplanted men's sense of duty to provide financially. Though the men we interviewed nearly always adhered to the notion that fathers should provide for their children economically, this sense of responsibility could be negated in cases where the custodial parent would not let them see their children, as in Bill's case, or if they felt that she did not need the money, due to her earnings or those of her current partner or spouse. Furthermore, men who did not live with their children often conceived of themselves as "helpers" rather than "providers" financially. Though men did not explicitly say so, the fact that they placed more emphasis on their emotional than their financial role may have weakened their motivation to work.



In sum, nearly all the men we spoke to viewed the father-child tie as central while the partner relationship was more peripheral. As with work, this renegotiation of the family role allows working-class men to exercise autonomy from the constraints of the spousal role while practicing generativity in the parental role. But as Bill's case shows, the success of men's attempts to renegotiate family life are often contingent on the cooperation of the children's mothers.

## **Religion**

Although a small minority of our respondents claimed membership in an established religious tradition—"Irish Catholic" or "Holiness," for example—these identities were only rarely very salient. As Greg told us, "I'm 100 percent Christian at the heart of it. But as far as the practicing part, maybe 2 percent...." Jeremy said, "I treat church just like I treat my girlfriends.... I'll stick around for a while and then I'll go on to the next one."

As recently as the 1970s, white working-class Americans attended religious services as often as white college graduates did, but by 2010 the attendance of high-school-educated whites had fallen substantially, more than that of white college graduates (Wilcox, Cherlin, Uecker, and Messel 2012). Scholarship to date has noted this trend, but has not explained it. Several of the men in our study noted that growing mistrust of religious leaders may have played some role. In addition, ethnographies of prior generations of white working-class Americans referenced earlier in this article suggest that men were often tied to religious institutions through their wives. As marriage declined, men's church attendance might have fallen in tandem. However, it is also true that religious norms and sanctions tie men to the institution of marriage and that these have weakened. Participation in these institutions is intertwined.

Yet the majority of the men that we spoke to asserted the importance of faith. Brian, for example said he was "religious to a certain point.... I don't know if it's necessarily God or something else." Yet he also asserted that "you got to have faith ... because why else would you want to be a human being? Why would you want to have kids ... or take care of your kids? There's lots of whys [that require faith]." He believed there must be some sort of ultimate meaning because of "some of the things that I've been through in life.... There's a reason that I am here, because I should be dead."

While many of the men we interviewed grew up in households that were at least somewhat religious, most stopped attending services as soon as they were given a choice, generally in late elementary or junior high school. Only a few still identified strongly with an established religious tradition, and even many of those currently questioned the basic tenets of these faiths. Mark told us, "I'm not going to say I'm a whole-hearted believer—there's something far-fetched about him dying and coming back to life ..." Blake explained that "... I believe in God, and in Jesus and that he died for our sins [but] I am not quick to say that I'm a Christian because religion itself was manmade and it contradicts itself."

Mistrust of religious leaders was often cited as a reason for eschewing a childhood faith. Some viewed clergy as little more than scam artists, a theme also evident in ethnographies of the white working class of prior generations (Gans 1962; Halle 1984). Of the Catholic Church in which he was raised, one interviewee said, “I mean, it’s a beautiful religion, but I see some of the stuff that they’ve done around the world. You know, here you’ve got priests drinking out of gold goblets while [in the] villages around them ... people are starving to death.”

Some of the mistrust among those we interviewed stemmed from the sex abuse scandal in the Catholic Church. Greg, for example, still tried to “mold myself to be like Jesus ... even though he may or may not have existed.” Yet he rejected the childhood faith in which he was raised “when that whole priest thing came out. I became an agnostic.” David hinted that his disbelief stemmed from abuse at the hands of the church; an altar boy who sang in the choir as a child, he said: “[S]omething happened to me when I was a kid that kind of set me in a tailspin, so I kind of gave up on all that shit.” Yet he prayed to his dead grandmother twice a day—more if he was really struggling.

As these comments illustrate, almost all the men we spoke with rejected organized religion, yet a substantial minority insisted they were nonetheless deeply engaged in spiritual pursuits. They were attempting to renegotiate their relationship with religion by picking and choosing elements of various religious traditions they found appealing while visiting various congregations and conducting research on the internet or in the public library.

Bernard, for example, believed he heard the voice of God on his 26th birthday, which happened to be a Sunday, February 26th. He recalled that he was sitting in church when he heard a voice, telling him, “If you can do better [than the Holiness faith], then do it.” First, he turned to Islam, then to Judaism, and then to various Christian denominations and sects: “Catholics, Pentecostal, and the Baptist and the Methodists and the Latter Day Saints and Jehovah’s Witnesses.” Bernard believed Martin Luther King was a prophet, just as Moses, Jesus, and Mohammed were. At the time we interviewed him, he was listing to YouTube recordings from a 95-year-old Jehovah’s Witness.

Brandon’s journey was similar. He was “heavily” involved in a Baptist church for about three years when he was in his early 20s, but then started “hearing a lot of stuff that didn’t really sit right with me, [so I started] researching.” Brandon said he did not “identify myself with any organized religion... I believe in spiritual energies.”

Donald’s beliefs were also more spiritual than religious. He followed Protestant televangelist Joel Osteen, whom he believed was also more spiritual than religious. Raised a Catholic, Donald’s interest in faith didn’t take hold until he joined Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous. That is when “I finally sat down and took an inventory of the spiritual part and the religious part [of my life].” Donald recited the Serenity Prayer “about 25 times a day” and had recently received a birthday gift—a ring—with the prayer engraved on it. He was strongly opposed to organized religion and “religious people,” but nonetheless deeply engaged in

his spiritual life, which was grounded in his experience of addiction and pain. He told us: “[S]piritual people have been to hell, religious people are afraid of hell. . . . People like me who are spiritual [have already been to hell and back]. You can’t scare an addict. . . . You can’t scare me with jail, you can’t scare me with death. I am not scared of anything. [But] it’s religious people who are scared of everything. That’s why they pray and need Jesus, because they are afraid.”

John believed in the basic unity of all religions and studied them for underlying truths. He researched “all ancient religions” but particularly Christianity. Yet he was now convinced that only by studying the most ancient writing of the Sumerians, which, he claimed, have the “real story of creation,” and other civilizations such as “Mayans, Incas, Aztecs,” could one find hidden truths that have been obscured by technological distractions and authoritarian suppression. John believed that there are actually twelve planets, not nine, and that this has been known by scientists for some time, but “for some reason the government doesn’t want you to know this.”

Greg, described earlier, watched “a lot of documentaries [about religion] and [I] read a lot,” including daily meditations written by the Dalai Lama, a book of the Tao, and also a book on parenting from a Christian perspective which he found “very helpful.” This religious eclecticism was reflected in the tattoos he had gotten over the years, which included a large crucifix, an elven star which he referred to as a “pagan symbol,” and the Eye of Horus, which he thought was the Egyptian God of the Sun.

These men’s spiritual quests are often so specialized that they struggle to find others with common beliefs. Brian, who had an intense interest in ancient astronaut theories (that Earth has been visited by such beings in the past, even as recently as World War II with the cargo cults) and who was particularly drawn to the Earth Chronicles series by Zecharia Sitchin, told us, “I’m having a hard time with finding friends that I’m able to have conversations about this stuff [with].”

The questing, seeking religious style these men described is one example of autonomous action. But while offering men something they value—independent action that has the capacity for personal growth and development—this form of faith fails to tie men to other societal institutions such as the family. Nor does it promote conformity with behavioral expectations that may be conducive to work, such as being honest, hardworking, or sober. Like most others we talked to, Ed, who prays “to the God of my understanding,” explicitly rejected the idea that faith should constrain his behavior. He told us that the God he learned about in Sunday school was “a God with strings telling us how to live. That didn’t work for me.”

In sum, this approach to religion often lacks the communal aspect of faith that, for centuries, has provided the norms and sanctions that promoted adherence to traditional social roles, plus the legitimation of these arrangements.

## **Haphazard Lives**

Our interviews strongly suggest that the autonomous, generative self that many men described is also a haphazard self. For example, vocational aspirations usually

remain nebulous and tentative, rarely taking the form of an explicit strategy. In the meantime, career trajectories are often replaced by a string of random jobs.

These men typically transitioned to parenthood more by accident than design, and in the context of tenuous romantic relationships. Some, like Demario, described earlier, didn't learn they were fathers until after their children were born. Others found out only when their children were several years old. Brandon's suspicions first formed when he viewed a Facebook post from his ex-girlfriend with photographs of her two-year-old twins. A subsequent email from her sister claimed he was the father. Both men demanded DNA tests (Brandon sought the test for both of the twins). Yet in keeping with our argument that fatherhood has become highly salient for working-class men, both were excited to learn that they were fathers, and now delighted in the role. Yet as Bill's case (above) illustrates, their ability to play this role in the future will be contingent on the willingness of their children's mothers to play along. Mothers often limit access to children after a breakup (Claessens 2007; Edin, Tach, and Mincy 2009). When children's mothers move to new partnerships, fathers are especially likely to become disengaged. Frequency of contact also falls when fathers have children with subsequent partners (Tach, Mincy, and Edin 2009).

Religious community and a systemic belief system have been replaced by a patched-together religious identity that holds little sway over behavior, especially as it is divorced from the communal aspects of faith that have adhered working-class men to a set of behavioral norms.

Yet through their attempts to renegotiate work, family, and religious roles, working-class men, whose fathers' and grandfathers' lives were often marked by limited autonomy in the workplace, gender-segregated roles within their family, and religious structures that dictated a set of rigid behavioral norms—these men are showing signs of moving beyond such strictures. Many will likely falter. Yet they are laying claim to a measure of autonomy and generativity in these spheres that were less often available in prior generations.

For their fathers and grandfathers, work, family, and religion created the attachments, investments, involvements, and beliefs (Hirschi 1969) that guided and gave meaning to human activity in specific social domains. In addition, this pattern was broadly shared within the community and successfully reproduced over time (Friedland and Alford 1991). These institutions not only organized social activity into common patterns of behavior, but supplied norms, beliefs, and rituals that legitimated such patterns. If traditional social roles in these domains are now only tenuously embraced, a few may craft lives that are more rewarding than those of prior generations, but the majority will struggle.

## **Racial and Ethnic Difference in Perceptions of Social Standing**

Mortality statistics show sharp differences between racial and ethnic groups in suicide, drug overdoses, and liver-related mortality—"deaths of despair"—which

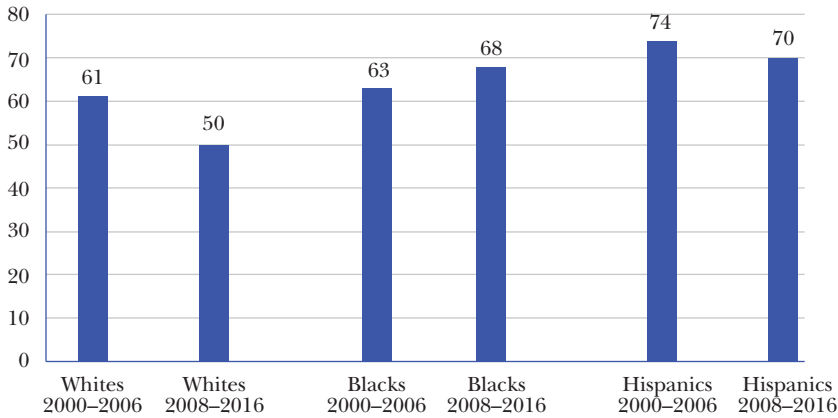
have grown dramatically since the late 1990s among white men without college degrees. Among these men, all five-year age groups between 30–34 and 60–64 saw marked and similar increases in mortality from these causes between 1999 and 2013. For white men closest in age to those we studied, mortality from these causes nearly doubled (Case and Deaton 2015, figure 4). One explanation for these trends may lie in the striking racial and ethnic differences in satisfaction with one’s social standing relative to one’s parents.

Fathers and grandfathers of today’s young working-class men provided a standard of living that many of their adult sons cannot match today. This is particularly true for the whites, who when they look back can remember fathers and grandfathers who were sustained by the booming industrial economy of post-World War II America. African-Americans, however, did not get a fair share of the blue-collar prosperity of the post-World War II period. As a result, they may look back to a time when discrimination deprived their parents of such opportunities. Many Hispanics may look back to the lower standard of living their parents experienced in their countries of origin. Thus, whites are more likely to compare themselves to a reference group that makes them feel worse off, while blacks and Hispanics compare themselves to reference groups that may make them feel better off.

While acknowledging struggles brought on by the Great Recession, Blake, an African American father interviewed in 2012, nonetheless believes his generation is better prepared than his father’s cohort. “I feel like our generation is taking steps to become more qualified for certain positions,” he said. Greg, also African American, told us, “I think there are better opportunities now because ... the color barrier is not as harsh as it was back then.”

In contrast, Rick, a 35-year-old white construction worker, said, “It’s much harder for me as a grown man than it was for my father.” He remembered his father saying that back when he was 35, “‘I had a house and I had five kids or four kids.’ You know, ‘Look where I was at.’ And I’m like, ‘Well, Dad, things have changed.’” Aaron, also white, explained: “I think that the whole job infrastructure has changed. I think for my dad’s generation, there was more jobs in the sense that you could go out and you go learn how to build chairs. Now, I don’t think you can learn how to build chairs because there’s no work there, because they’re not making them here, you know. ... You can’t do that now. At least not in the United States anyway. ... I think that Americans are going to have less and less opportunities unless things change.”

The General Social Survey, a biennial survey of the US adult population, has included this question: “Compared to your parents when they were the age you are now, do you think your own standard of living is much better, somewhat better, about the same, somewhat worse, or much worse than theirs was?” Figure 1 shows the percentage responding “much better” or “somewhat better” among people without college degrees between the prime working ages of 25 and 55. We compare responses from 2000–2006 (the years immediately prior to the Great Recession) to 2008–2016, similar to the period in which deaths among less-educated non-Hispanic whites due to overdose, suicide, and liver-related mortality grew so dramatically, as documented by

*Figure 1***Percent Saying that Their Standard of Living is Better than Their Parents at the Same Age: Non-College-Graduates Ages 25–55**

*Source:* Data from the General Social Survey, a biennial survey of the US adult population.

*Note:* Sample includes both men and women.

Case and Deaton (2015).<sup>3</sup> Since these patterns hold for both women and men, we distinguish by race, but not by gender. In both time periods, whites were less likely than blacks or Hispanics to say that they were doing better than their parents. In addition, the proportion judging their living standards to be better than their parents declined among whites from the earlier to the later period, whereas it rose among blacks and remained relatively high among Hispanics. This pessimism among whites may have been a motivating factor in the rise in suicide, and in the increasing use of opioids and alcohol that has led to racial disparities in mortality trends.

## Conclusion

One of the central questions this analysis raises is whether valuing autonomy and generativity is a response to poor labor market options or a reflection of broader cultural trends. In our view, these economic and cultural forces are both at work, and mutually reinforcing (Zelizer 2002). When the extrinsic rewards of work (such as wages or job security) decline, the salience of intrinsic rewards may grow. Yet economic forces are insufficient to explain the specific form in which certain aspects of work that have become valued, namely the emphasis on independent action that has the potential for growth and development, not

<sup>3</sup> The General Social Survey does not indicate whether respondents were of Hispanic origin until 2000. Prior to that time, respondents were simply asked to describe their race/ethnicity, and were coded as black, white, or “other.”

only for oneself and one's loved ones, but for others in community in need of protection and care. We see little chance that attempts to craft autonomous, generative selves will disappear even if economic opportunities expand, in part because of the salience of these values among the middle class (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, and Tipton 1985). Evidence bolstering the claim that cultural forces may have relevance beyond economic conditions includes Kearney and Wilson's (2017) recent finding that the increases in economic opportunity due to localized fracking booms led to increased wages for less-educated men, but no corresponding increase in marriage.

This brings us back to the question of why labor force detachment is becoming more common among men with a high school diploma but no four-year college degree, especially when the official unemployment rate is so low. It is tempting to look for a single explanation for this increase. Although only a starting point, our findings suggest that these changes may be driven by the fact that the workplace, the family, and religion have all been transformed, along with men's sense of what constitutes fulfillment in all these domains. In addition, the salience of manual labor in identity formation seems to have weakened, compared to prior generations. If significant changes in any one of those arenas can be life-altering, the combined effect of all these changes will be quite unpredictable and will vary with the temperamental differences of the men who confront them.

Though our analysis should sound an alarm for the near term, we believe it is too soon to predict how these changes will play out over time as society adjusts to them. Society has faced shifts in the relationship of men to work, family, and religion before. Of the transition from mechanical solidarity (agrarian societies, with bonds based on likeness) to organic solidarity (industrial and postindustrial societies, where bonds are based on difference) in the late 19th century, Durkheim (1893 [1984], p. 339) wrote: "It has been rightly stated that morality ... is in the throes of an appalling crisis. [T]he remedy for the ill is nevertheless not to seek to revive traditions and practices that no longer correspond to present-day social conditions." Rather, he argued, "We need to introduce greater justice into their relationships by diminishing those external inequalities that are the source of our ills." To ease the crisis of working-class men in labor force attachment, ill health, and mortality more than a century later, we may need to do the same.

The optimistic reading of the developments we have described is that working-class men are now sharing in the autonomy and generativity that was largely the province of middle- and upper-class men in previous generations. Moreover, the interest they show in being involved as fathers and in helping others could represent a widening of the boundaries of masculinity in ways that are more consistent with contemporary family and work life. The pessimistic reading is that these men are pursuing goals that they are unlikely to achieve due to their lack of social integration. They must find their way without ties to steady work, stable families, and organized religion. Without social support, their chances of success diminish. Those who fail to achieve the autonomous, generative selves they crave will have little to fall back on and few people to prevent them from sinking into despair.

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