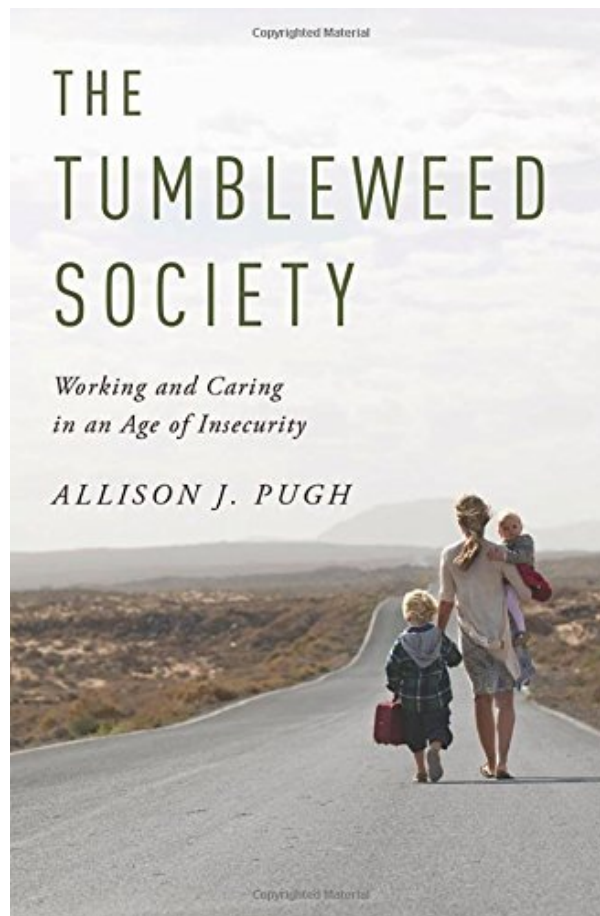


**THE TUMBLEWEED SOCIETY: WORKING  
AND CARING IN AN AGE OF INSECURITY  
BY ALLISON J. PUGH**



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# THE TUMBLEWEED SOCIETY

*Working and Caring  
in an Age of Insecurity*

*ALLISON J. PUGH*



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Today we live in a society in which relationships, social ties, and jobs seem to change constantly. People roll this way and that, like tumbleweeds blown across an arid plain. Yet we know little about the broader impact of job insecurity and uncertainty in our lives.

In *The Tumbleweed Society*, Allison Pugh offers a moving exploration of sacrifice, betrayal, defiance, and resignation, as people adapt to insecurity with their own negotiations of commitment on the job and in intimate life. When people no longer expect commitment from their employers, how do they think about their own obligations? How do we raise children, put down roots in our communities, and live up to our promises at a time when flexibility and job insecurity reign?

Based on eighty in-depth interviews with parents who vary in their experiences of job insecurity and socio-economic status, Pugh finds that most people accept job insecurity as inevitable, even as many maintain high standards for their own dedication: a "one-way honor system" in which workers are beholden but employers are not. But while many seem to either embrace or resign themselves to insecurity at work, they try to hold off that insecurity from infiltrating their home lives. Erecting a "moral wall" to corral the maelstrom at work, however, comes with a price. Placing nearly all of their hopes for enduring connections on their intimate relationships, she argues, can place intolerable stress on their intimate lives, often sparking the very instability they long to avoid.

By shining a light on how we ourselves adapt-and prepare our children-for the new environment of uncertainty, Allison Pugh gives us a finely detailed portrait of what commitment and obligation mean today.

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#### Most helpful customer reviews

5 of 5 people found the following review helpful.

Job insecurity creates personal insecurity--a sad comment on our society

By Joanna D.

This is an important book. The change in work life in American life is dramatic. And it's disruptive. You may have to move, it takes time to learn the new job, the new people, the new territory, the new politics. This kind of insecurity is now rampant--most people under forty have a resume with many two- or three- year positions. And when you get over forty, it's precarious. You may not get hired again.

Individuals born from 1957 to 1964 held an average of 11.3 jobs from ages 18 to 46. These are the "Baby Boomers." The average Millennial (1977-1997) will probably hold 15-20 jobs. (This data sourced from Bureau of Labor Statistics.)

The author analyzes the outcome of the insecurity. One outcome is a lack of devotion or fulfillment from work. One outcome is that younger workers view themselves as "free agents" rather than part of an organization. Private life becomes the primary place where we seek relationships. But since we spend eight or more hours a day at the work place, forty or more hours a week--this is a large amount of time to be spending in a place where we have become isolated from interpersonal relationships. Is this job insecurity effect slopping over into the higher divorce rate? Allison Pugh seems to think so. And divorce with children has them involved in the "tumbleweed society" too--as they trudge from mom's to dad's house like nomads, rather than living with a set of parents in the same house, the same room.

Now, expectations for people in the work force is that they must be "flexible" that is, have little expectation of security. But emotionally, that's not in keeping with the feeling of being rejected, lost and unhooked from familiarity. When we bond with people, whether in our family or at our workplace, it makes for deep, personal connections that are beneficial to us, because friends are important support, and it makes our personal life richer and more satisfying as well as relieving the pressure from having only a small, intimate circle (family.)

This is a perceptive work that ties the disruption in American worklife with disruption in family life and ultimately society. Caring and intimacy are important for personal emotional health, and the new paradigm in the workplace of constant flux is, according to Pugh, having vast and unsettling ripples throughout our society, in places we didn't expect.

A must-read.

6 of 6 people found the following review helpful.

Untangling the "knots of duty"

By E.M. Bristol

"The Tumbleweed Society: Working and Caring in an Age of Insecurity," explores how both people with no job security and those with relative security cope in both their personal and professional lives. Author Allison J. Pugh interviewed eighty parents: 33 of whom experienced layoffs; 32 who are currently in stable professions; and 20 who had to move as a result of theirs' or their spouse's job being relocated. (There was category overlap with some of the subjects.) The subjects are described as "mostly white women with some college," but there are men and people of color interviewed, as well. The subjects came from the Washington, D.C. area, as well as Virginia and two large coastal cities. Their thoughts on the subject are interwoven with insights from the author on the current state of American society.

The author found that there is a marked difference (unsurprisingly) between how people with job security and people without it view their jobs, and by extension, their personal lives. Those who fall in the latter category, for example, tend to have what she calls a "one way honor system," meaning that they hold



themselves professionally to certain standards while expecting nothing in the way of job stability from their employers. In contrast, people with relative job security often maintain a pragmatic approach to their marriages and families, being willing to "settle" for a less than ideal situation. Interestingly, people who experience little job security, can wind up pushing themselves to what many would consider heroic standards to care for their family members. At the same time, however, even people with very little job security can and do make decisions in their personal lives that put them in the position of doing the choosing. (One woman interviewed who had had money troubles with her first husband, decided after her second marriage, to keep separate financial accounts.)

The author also examines the way people describe their professional and personal lives, including the use of humor. My own conclusion was that humor is simply more socially acceptable in the US when it comes to discussing such sensitive subjects with a stranger than "whining" about one's problems, but the author puts this all a lot more sophisticatedly than I could.

As the author points out, other countries have done a better job of addressing the current, instable global economy and its impact on their citizens. However, the United States (in the author's opinion) is lagging far behind. In the afterword, Pugh states that it would be helpful to the people currently adrift in this "tumbleweed society" to have a conversation about what employers and employees owe each other. This book goes a long way to getting such a conversation started.

Five stars for insight; four for execution. There seemed to be some repetition, and at times, I found it easy to lose the thread of what was being discussed. However, "The Tumbleweed Society," is overall a thought-provoking read about a timely topic.

5 of 5 people found the following review helpful.

Difficult to get into, and could be distilled quickly into a long article.

By Jason Stokes

I found this book difficult to read - not due to the subject matter, or the prose, but simply because it wasn't saying much. Overall, the social contract has broken down, and people don't really seem to hold their former employers accountable. It's a shrug your shoulders and move on society, and this book illustrates that point, along with others.

Based on many interviews (80, I believe), the author draws conclusions about how our society has evolved in its approach to job loss, moving on, and dealing with the consequences. While interesting, I didn't learn anything new from this, and found the ground more suitably covered in other approaches from the recent past, with far greater details about the impact of job loss on people's lives.

Overall, a good book, but too many pages saying the same thing without getting to the truly interesting parts made it less appealing to me.

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