The White-Collar Opt-Out: Toward a Theory of Consent to Alienation

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Abstract

Why do elite business professionals leave their hard-earned, high-prestige and high-salary careers? How do such quit processes begin and unfold? How do they feel and experience the aftermath of opting out? While “the Great Resignation” that began to unfold with the Covid-19 pandemic caught considerable attention in the US, white-collar opt-out had been an ongoing issue across the world, although at a lesser intensity and rate. Drawing from 68 in-depth interviews I had with Turkish professional-managerial employees of transnational corporations in Istanbul and New York during 2017-2018—15 of whom are “corporate dropouts,” this article capitalizes on their opt-out narratives to better understand the perplexing quality of work life experiences that “good jobs” can entail. The quitters typically report that compared to their corporate jobs, they earn less but work fewer hours and get more fulfillment from their new, non-corporate jobs, and thus, become more content with their lives. However, white-collar opt-out is a highly contingent process. Interpreting such broad resignations from corporate careers as a failure of consent to alienation, I develop a layered model of consent and its breakdown. It proposes that such overdetermined consent of upper-middle class professionals to alienating labor can fail only when the “pushes” of workplace resonate with the “pulls” of non-work life-spheres. Furthermore, such resonance is a necessary but not sufficient condition for opt-outs; resignations can be carried out insofar as “safety nets” are mobilized and “golden handcuffs” are relaxed. Providing us with a comprehensive model of resigning, this article contributes to our understanding of labor markets, career decisions, and quality of work life.
Introduction

Suppose we are the lucky few; we behaved ourselves, studied hard and succeeded through high-stakes tests, survived demanding schooling and extracurriculars, successfully graduated from the top colleges, and immediately secured the best corporate jobs in the labor market. In short, suppose we made the globally accepted script of the American Dream come true. What then?

Conventional wisdom prescribes landing high-salary, high-prestige jobs for a happy and content life, particularly witnessing soaring inequalities in the past decades (Piketty and Saez 2014). Indeed, the quality gap between “good jobs”—often white-collar, well-paying jobs that offer some level of job security to workers and relative autonomy over labor—and “bad jobs” has been on the rise (Kalleberg 2011). And yet, many occupants of the so-called good jobs do not report contentment; for example, David Graeber’s (2018) electrifying book, “Bullshit Jobs,” resonated with them and caught broad public attention. Some occupants of the highest-paying jobs, such as investment bankers, were even dubbed as “miserable” in popular media.¹

This paper embarks upon a qualitative inquiry into the highest echelons of the global labor market. It explores what happens when everything goes right and this dream is actualized in Turkey through white-collar employment at prestigious transnational corporations. Drawing from 68 in-depth interviews with Turkish elite business professionals who participate in the global elite workforce in New York and Istanbul via companies such as McKinsey, Google, and Unilever, I analyze their quality of work life narratives and examine how good their “Good Jobs” feel. The interviews, which were done in 2017 and 2018, cover their career histories, including their stories of opt-out and their aftermath as well as their work orientation, job satisfaction, and ideal work

¹ For instance, the New York Times Magazine’s February 2019 special issue on the theme of the future of work opens its lead article on American elite business professionals with the title “Wealthy, Successful and Miserable.”
narratives. Among the ones “who made it” to the high echelons of the global labor market, I comparatively hone in on the ones who end up quitting after “making it,” and their tales of opting out of corporate careers.

I find that opt-outs are often triggered by alienation from elite white-collar labor, shaped mainly by disappointment and exhaustion. Some experience underemployment qua overqualification and complain of lacking intrinsic satisfaction from their daily tasks at work. Others experience value mismatches and recognition deficits at their workplace, inhibiting them from finding or attaching meaning to their work. Against the backdrop of high hopes structured by their continuous hard work and success throughout their schooling, their disappointment is framed by relative deprivation. In addition, many feel exhausted due to overwork—long and/or intensified work schedules. Their complaints cover a range of problems, including work-family conflicts, decay of physical and mental health, shortened and undermined leisure, and social deprivation due to limited non-work social interactions with, among other things, friends and family.

While these push factors incite opt-out impulses, I find that elite business professionals’ consent to alienating labor is overdetermined; push factors often need to be complemented by pull factors that revolve around a quest of self-realization or yearning for “positive freedom” (Fromm 1941). I identify four trajectories following their resignations: taking time off (e.g., going on long and elaborate vacations such as backpacking around the world), engaging with family (e.g., spending high-quality time with family or solving two-body problems qua long-distance relationships), changing the mode of earning a living (e.g., pursuing entrepreneurship, becoming a freelancer, or even cultivating new skillsets for an occupational change), and urban flight (e.g., migrating to rural areas and engaging with subsistence farming).
However, the process of opt-out is not straightforward, even when push factors resonate with pull factors. I argue that while a resonance between push and pull factors is a necessary but not sufficient condition for the decision of opt-out; its execution is often contingent upon the activation of “safety nets” and the relaxation of “golden handcuffs.” Safety nets constitute various economic, social, and psychological support that encourage opting out behavior. Golden handcuffs refer to the resistance to losing various privileges such as employee stock options and luxurious lifestyles accompanied by status anxiety and credit card debts, tying these individuals to their high-salary corporate jobs. The presence and absence of safety nets and golden handcuffs both inform elite business professionals’ decision-making throughout their careers and influence their capacity to realize their decisions to quit or not. Put differently, even if push and pull factors drive an individual to the edge of the corporate life, it might not be possible to call it quits if there is a lack of safety net or similarly, having debt, dependents, or status anxiety might handcuff an individual to their corporate job and career.

Compared with their corporate employment before their opt-out, the quitters with non-corporate jobs typically earn less but work fewer hours and get more fulfillment from their new jobs; they find their jobs more meaningful and get more intrinsic satisfaction from their labor. Overall, they report a higher quality of work life and a more content feeling with their lives.

The article continues with a brief review of the opt-out phenomenon from the perspectives of gender and family, sociology of work, and social class. Afterward, I construct an ideal-typical process of opting out and analyze the factors that drive and facilitate or inhibit quitting corporate jobs. I continue with an analysis of the changes they experienced in their quality of work lives after opting out and then conclude with a discussion of my findings’ implications for labor markets.
**Opt-Out?**

The phrase “opt-out” was popularized with an article, “The Opt-Out Revolution,” by the journalist Lisa Belkin which appeared in The New York Times Magazine in 2003. The article covers the issue of how and why increasing numbers of women—particularly well-educated, upper-middle class business professionals and managers—forgo the fruits of decades-long feminist struggles over work and instead go back to the traditional role of stay-at-home motherhood.

The opt-out phenomenon that I study here corresponds to a wider range of triggers and motivations, outcomes, and populations. The opting out subjects, for instance, include single young adult men with no parental responsibilities. As such, work-family conflict, an important driver of opt-outs studied in-depth by gender and family literature (Blair-Loy 2006; Mainiero and Sullivan 2006; Percheski 2008; Stone 2007; Stone and Lovejoy 2019; Weisshaar 2018), can only explain a subset of the opt-out phenomenon. The opt-out explanations of low job satisfaction and non-linear career paths engendered by the shift from Fordist to Post-Fordist organizations of work, while very important insights advanced by job and career change literature (Cuzzocrea and Lyon 2011; Farrugia 2019; Kalleberg and Mouw 2018; Osterman 1996; Potter 2019; Rhodes and Doering 1983; Rosenfeld 1992; Spilerman 1977), also can only carry us so far because an opt-out is not simply a job change, an employee turnover (switching from one company to another).

Rather, the white-collar opt-out I study here encompasses a *broader resignation* from any kind of full-time professional-managerial jobs that provide their occupants with high-pay and high-status: a corporate career. Prompted by various discontents and accompanied by various forms of existentialist questioning of “What am I doing with my life?”, opting out covers escaping the corporate or *yuppie* lifestyle that revolves around a cycle of overwork and overspending (Schor 1991, 1998). Anchored in such white-collar careers, such corporate lifestyles are often
characterized as urban, fast-paced, and extremely busy—more so for parents, and especially mothers. Accordingly, opt-outs are mostly experienced as profound biographical changes, disrupting the flow of life. Most importantly, they are usually facilitated by a fundamental change in the way of earning a living.

As such, an alternative approach to such puzzling behavior is to look at it from the perspective of hegemony and consent (Gramsci 1971) and interpret it as an instance of the failure of consent. Relying on the metaphor of games—which the notion of career can easily afford due to its graduated nature, and indeed, the overlap has been mentioned by my subjects in my interviews—opting out of corporate careers corresponds to the action of ceasing to play the game (Burawoy 1979, 1985) and points toward a loss of faith in the illusio (Bourdieu 1984).

In order to make sense of the failure of consent, we need to examine the formation of hegemony, which has been studied significantly more than its failure. Hegemony, which I define as the organization and cultivation of subordinate entities’ consent or voluntary compliance to their subordination, often relies conditionally upon the potential of coercive power in case of a failure of consent (Gramsci 1971). Of course, as we are talking about the well-to-do white-collar labor instead of proletariat, the subordination that I am primarily interested in here is alienating work rather than exploitation. The voluntary aspect of compliance is constructed and reproduced discursively (Laclau and Mouffe 1985), via a coordination of the interests of the subordinate entities with that of the dominant entities (Przeworski 1985). Such formation of consent takes place within both the realm of production via particularities of the culture of labor process in the workplace (Burawoy 1979), which operate under certain “production regimes” (Burawoy 1985), as well as non-work spheres of life via “ideological state apparatuses” (Althusser 1971) and via “culture industry” (Horkheimer and Adorno 1944). From these perspectives, we can expect opt-
out behavior when the production of consent of elite white-collar workers is sufficiently interrupted in one or several of these sites, because there is no coercive core to keep them working for their corporations, unlike the working-class individuals who have to continue selling their labor to earn their subsistence.

**Failure of Consent to Alienating Labor?**

Why do people forgo such hard-earned, privileged positions of high socioeconomic status and how do their opt-out processes begin and unfold? Quitting the corporate life is almost never an impulsive decision. After all, having a high-prestige, high-salary position in a top-tier corporation is the dream outcome for many people. To wit in Marxist parlance, in contrast to the proletariat’s condition as highlighted in *the Communist Manifesto*, the white-collar salariat have a lot to lose—as I discuss below—in addition to their (golden) chains. Therefore, calling it quits is always preceded by a long period of evaluation of the current state of affairs, re-trying within one’s current job as well as other corporate settings, scouting for non-corporate alternatives, and sometimes even trying those out while still working at one’s corporate job. Eventually, the decision of whether to quit takes place, usually months after its conception.

Table 5.1 compares the average of a set of socioeconomic and demographic variables for my subjects who were in the labor force during my interviews and whom I label as “corporate dropouts.” This simple comparison alone suggests gender/family as a contributor to opt-out. It also suggests a weaker experience of upward social mobility (due to mainly having higher parental class background on average) as a potential driver of opt-out, despite having a higher percentage of managers among quitters. Arguably, considering both elite high school attendance and higher family class background in conjunction with lower average salary despite having higher seniority (i.e., managerial positions), this could be a “falling short of high hopes” or relative deprivation
story. Alternatively, the higher managerial portion might also signal a saturation/satisfaction and Maslowian argument that only after they felt that they achieved a milestone, such as becoming a manager, can they stop “playing the game” of proving one’s self. Of course, I should note that these are not representative populations and hence, we should be mindful of the comparison, and think of it as an exploratory exercise instead of a proper means of explanation.

Table 5.1. Comparison of the “consenting” and “dissenting” subjects.²

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Workers in Istanbul</th>
<th>Quitters</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>30.6</td>
<td>30.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Male</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Married</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents’ Class, Income [1, 5]</td>
<td>3.23</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents’ Class, Consumption [1, 5]</td>
<td>3.16</td>
<td>3.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Attended Elite High Schools</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Mobility, Income [-4, 4]</td>
<td>0.29</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Mobility, Consumption [-4, 4]</td>
<td>0.32</td>
<td>0.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Manager</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% with a Graduate-degree</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annual Income</td>
<td>193k ₺</td>
<td>172.5k ₺³</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For a deeper understanding, we need to go beyond comparing a set of variables and focus on the actual stories of these people. Based on the opt-out narratives I heard in my interviews as well as others that I came across during my fieldwork, I construct an ideal typical process of white-collar opting out as follows:

² I compiled these values from the surveys my subjects filled out at the end of their interviews with me. Here, I use a five-fold class map, where 1 is working class, 2 is lower-middle class, 3 is middle class, 4 is upper-middle class, and 5 is upper class. I calculated their social mobility by comparing their own perceived class positions and that of their parents. For instance, having a social mobility score of 4 stands for having working-class parents but making it to the upper class.

³ Note that this is their average annual income from their last corporate job.
Calling it Quits

If you are a white-collar worker and you begin to increasingly recognize the negative aspects of your job, such as consistently lacking fulfillment from work and feeling exhausted due to overwork, a plethora of push and pull factors become more visible to you. You can first try to fix the problems by engaging with “job crafting” to some extent (Wrzesniewski and Dutton 2001). If the remaining problems continue to bother you significantly, you think of whether you can find a better alternative in another corporation (a.k.a. job change, which includes changing your employer/workplace or changing your position in the corporate business world). When you find a potentially better job—which usually consists of a trade-off rather than a strictly better outcome, such as a job that is either more fulfilling but more demanding or less fulfilling yet more relaxed—you switch to it. After some time, you either face recurring problems or new ones, and somehow you realize that they are endemic to a corporate career. Then, you go through a re-evaluation of your priorities and whether you can bear these problems or not. In the meantime, you start to prepare yourself mentally, socially, and financially: you reach out to your family and friends and deliberate with them, you start paying off your debts and saving money, you start making calculations about whether and how long you can survive without any source of income. Before you call it quits once and for all, you usually try out (usually in your mind) some non-corporate career alternatives and sometimes, have some proof-of-concept baby steps. If you think or already know through experience that you have a promising alternative—at least for some while, you take a leap of faith and quit! Then, you slow down, stop and think, and enjoy life for a while, depending on your financial resources. Afterwards, you either find a way to earn a living in a non-corporate setting, or you (are forced to/want to) go back to your corporate life—you opt back in, albeit usually with a different mindset.
Of course, none of the stages in the above ideal typical process have a predetermined termination date; it is an open-ended process with multiple points at which you can return to recommit to white-collar life. As we will see, the decision to quit in real life is very contingent and never straightforward. Usually, it requires a plethora of causes coming together, resonating with each other, and thereby creating a sufficient drive to opt-out. Nevertheless, if such a drive cannot find a proper venue, if the facilitating conditions are missing or the preventing conditions are strong, the decision to quit may not be realized.

If we think of the parallels between explaining a macro-historical event, such as a revolution, and a micro-historical event in a person’s life, such as quitting one’s high-prestige, high-salary corporate job, then in order to properly explain the opt-out of the corporate jobs, we need a diligent tripartite comparative analysis: comparing and contrasting the people who do not consider quitting at all, the people who want to quit yet cannot realize their aims for various reasons, and the people who can and do quit. However, in the remainder of this section, I focus on the last group, and I mostly analyze the before and after of the actual quits and identify important elements and themes in the opting out process (though I occasionally draw from my elite business professional and manager interviewees who belong the former two categories).

**Push and Pull Factors**

The decision to quit is contingent upon a myriad of drivers coming together. There is no guarantee that observing a single factor would suffice, and in fact, the factors I detail below are interrelated and usually, a subset of them co-occur. However, for analytical purposes, I divide them into push and pull factors.
Push Factors

I gather the push factors under two broad categories: lack of fulfillment from work and lack of work-life balance. To begin with, a deep unfulfillment from work pushes these individuals away from their jobs and corporate life. When they begin to feel that what they do at work does not matter or worse, that their efforts hurt society at large, that their work is meaningless, that they do not get any intrinsic satisfaction because of the repetitive or boring nature of their jobs, the desire to quit slowly builds up. Sarp, for example, who used to be a manager in a professional service firm and quit to travel around Latin America for a year, answers my question of how he decided to quit his job as follows:

“I was fed up with wearing a mask. In consulting, it is all about wearing a mask, maybe in all business but… I realized that I frequently find myself feeling that I’m with people that I don’t want to be with, going to places that I don’t want to go, speaking on topics that I have no interest in, and that my working life covers a huge portion of my life. This is exhausting. After you realize this and name the problem, it becomes even worse.”

Note that most of these experiences are subjective. For instance, while many of my interviewees reported that management consulting involves problem solving, skill use, and skill development, it might feel quite repetitive and boring after a while, to the point that Berk, an ex-management consultant who now runs a startup, defined his experience as, “I began to feel like Sisyphus.” Contrary to Albert Camus’ advice of finding a way look at the boulder anew to smile and enjoy the grind, he decided to quit.

“Office politics” is another contributor to the quitting decisions and it could be thought as an example of value mismatch, one of the sources of lacking meaning from work. The office politics involves, inter alia, instrumental use of social networking for individual gains at the expense of colleagues, which at times can take dire forms of Machiavellianism, such as stealing.

4 Other alternative ways to describe the same problem are workplace incivility, workplace bullying, etc.
the recognition of others’ work, gossiping to manipulate supervisors, mobbing qua bullying, and the like. For example, Nisa who quit her marketing manager job at a consumer goods giant, cites her problematic relationship with her supervisor among the reasons of her leaving. She reports how he abused his authority over her, including presenting her work to upper management while giving her no credit, and sometimes insulting and shouting at her when things went wrong. Similarly, Songül who was a marketing manager at a bank, states how in a period of corporate restructuring, she was exposed to an intricate series of misinformation and manipulation, pushing her to quit her job to save her dignity in addition to better look after her baby.

Second, the lack of work-life balance engenders a serious drive to get away from the current working conditions. Burnout due to overwork creates a lot of problems from one’s mental as well as physical health. For example, Necla, an investment banker whom I interviewed one week after she quit her job, tells me that she felt so completely drained after long workdays that she usually found herself sitting on her bed, blankly staring at the wall for an hour or so before she went to bed. Thanks to smartphones, the physical separation between the workplace and the home evaporated for overworked white-collar workers. She recalls vividly how the red blink of her phone, indicating unread emails in her inbox, used to bring tears to her eyes before her sleep, only to wake up to the same grind for another day.

Arda was used to feeling the grind, too. He was employed at an elite professional service firm but quit a couple of months ago, and now he teaches sailing and arranges sailing tours, where the majority of his clientele consists of elite business professionals. When I asked him to make some free associations and images about corporate life, he goes as follows:

“Some cuts on my face… Because I had to shave in a hurry, forgot to clip my nails, got out of the house without brushing my teeth… I mean, I could not fit 30-minutes of running in my day; they called me to come back in the middle of my exercise… I started to have red rashes on my skin, here and there on my hands and arms… My body was signaling to me…”
For example, when I saw people getting out of a coffee shop, I was jealous because I was thinking ‘yeah, you are going to chat with your friends for an hour or so. How lucky are you?’”

In the middle of his thinking, he goes back to a story that he told earlier in the interview. In a period of overwork in which he, together his team, was staying in a hotel away from home to finish a project for a distant client, he felt suffocated and wanted to go for a run in the hotel gym. However, 5 minutes after he started to run on the treadmill, he got a call, asking him to come back.

Work-family conflict is another important driver for parents to quit their demanding corporate jobs, more so for mothers. Songül, who was a marketing manager at a bank, states that she felt that her and their babysitter’s roles were swapped in the eyes her baby. She disclosed how it hurt to realize that, “my own daughter was treating me as if I am a distant aunt or her babysitter and not her mother.”

Additionally, the hustle and bustle of living a city life, particularly in a very crowded city like Istanbul, also intertwines with the difficulties of busy work life. The concentration of transnational corporations’ offices in global cities usually anchors elite business professionals to an urban life. Particularly for people who were not born and raised in a fast-paced large city, the rhythm of a metropolis can be exhausting, more so when it is coupled with frequent traffic jams, skyrocketing accommodation costs, and constantly waiting for a table at your favorite cafes and restaurants. Commuting, for example, is a huge problem for Istanbulite elite white-collar workers. Living close to one’s workplace is a rare luxury. The amount of time wasted on the roads can make commuting last as long as 2-3 hours per day. Unlike commuting on a train, which gives you some time and space to be productive or engage with some leisure, being on a crowded bus or taking subway or driving is exhausting. For example, Hakan, who was a senior manager at a Big Four company, tells me that if he is to leave the office at rush hour, he simply waits in his office instead
of torturing himself in the traffic. While this is a rational choice on his end, he also laments that it reduces the amount of time he spends at home with his family and creates tensions at the workplace as well because he does not want to work any longer and instead watches TV on his PC, which draws some frowning from his colleagues.

Didem, on the other hand, who was a finance manager at a consumer goods giant, compares and contrasts her hometown to Istanbul, and how she resented that Istanbul was wasting her time, money, and livelihood. Complaining about how her thick paycheck lagged behind Istanbul’s high cost of living and how her overall quality of life was not satisfactory even though she intentionally curates her non-work life, she realized that she could live a richer and higher quality life if she moved back to her hometown.

**Pull Factors**

I gather the pull reasons under three broad categories: family, freedom, and self-realization. These items could also be thought as push factors but I categorize them as pull factors mainly because, they were articulated more as expressions of desire than escaping from negative conditions (Fromm 1941).

First, some of the individuals state family—here, I define family in its broadest sense, covering romantic relationships, parenting children, and being in touch with parents and siblings—as a source of joy and meaning in life. Didem, for example, an ex-finance manager at a consumer goods giant, discloses that she wants to be close to her parents who were not living in Istanbul. Moreover, after giving birth to her daughter, she and her partner realized that they do not want to raise their daughter in a city but rather in a more suburban context where they are surrounded by the love and support of extended family. Similarly, Hakan, lamenting the democratic erosion in Turkey and the associated decline in the quality of life in broader spheres of life, describes his
decision to quit his current job and migrate to the Netherlands as a move to secure her daughter’s future by providing her a better education.

Taking care of one’s child is one aspect of a familial pathway of opting out. Another drive is to be close to one’s parents. Didem, for instance, mentions that, in addition to escaping from the suffocating and exhausting urban life, taking better care of her newborn, and initiating a new business of her own, she wanted to live close to her elderly parents also to spend more time with them. Moreover, her husband wanted to take over his family business.

Second, the yearning for freedom and autonomy in one’s life is another pull reason. While this could be thought as an issue of fulfillment from work and work-life balance, I treat this as a separate pull reason whenever I heard my interviewees express their motive for opt-out as a desire rather than as a complaint. For instance, Sertaç, who was working as a software engineer, thinks that he wants to be fully in charge of his periods of work and non-work and being attached to a corporation, no matter how flexible the working conditions are, cannot satisfy his priority of control over his labor. He finds it degrading to ask for permission for a day off:

“It deeply bothers me to ask for permission; as if I am a kid. I find it ridiculous to go to work the day after I worked hard, built something beautiful, and finished a project. Just because I have to show up to work... I should celebrate instead.”

Therefore, relying on his confidence that he can earn a living thanks to his skillset of software development, Sertaç opted out from his white-collar job at a famous bank, and now, he works as a freelancer.

Finally, the most unexpected reason that drives the decision to quit for these individuals is self-actualization. Following the famous psychological model of Abraham Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, these individuals are somewhat satisfied with respect to their careers and work; nevertheless, they would like to move beyond and do more with their lives. This reasoning is
usually expressed as, in the words of Halis, who was a brand manager at a consumer goods giant:
“In the end, we have only one life.”

For some, the reason to quit is to check whether they are indeed happy and content, arguably the first step toward self-actualization, while for others, their path is more obvious and they just quit to pursue their predetermined wants. Suna, for example, an ex-management consultant, had tried many different jobs in addition to management consulting, including dancing and acting. Eventually, she realized that she would like to become a psychoanalyst and she decided to re-start college to pursue her dream. Similarly, for Cüneyt, an ex-software engineer at a tech giant working and living in the US, entrepreneurship was something that he would regret if he had not tried. He told me how he was fine with his job in terms of various job rewards, from pay to fulfillment through skill use and the scale of his work’s impact on the world. Nevertheless, upon feeling secure with respect to his economic well-being and social status, he felt the need to quit his job and found a tech startup.

**Safety Nets and Golden Handcuffs**

While the push and pull factors shed light on the motivation side of the enigmatic decisions of these individuals to quit their prestigious and well-paying corporate positions, figuring out under what conditions and how these decisions are actualized requires further attention. In a similar manner to the previous subsection, I categorize these conditions into facilitating and debilitating factors.

**Safety Nets**

The decision to quit one’s job is highly contingent upon having, if not constructing, and activating various safety nets. Put differently, such a risky and bold move to quit one’s job requires some economic, social, and psychological support. Below, I discuss each of these kinds of supports, and
while they are interpenetrated in reality, and a combination of these are mobilized together to be able to call it quits, I discuss them separately for analytical clarity.

In the absence of strong welfare state practices such as efficacious unemployment benefits in Germany, the institution of family turns out to function as a safety net. The economic support of the family can take a direct form, such as providing a steady inflow of income via stipends, or if the family owns a business, they may welcome their sons and daughters to run part of the enterprise. While Didem’s parents provided her with a house, her partner began to run their family business, and both of these factors allowed Didem to pursue her own entrepreneurship, which, as is the case with many start-ups, is not expected to return profits in the early years.

The familial economic support can also take an indirect form such as providing rent-free accommodation via sharing their own apartments or, for the wealthier families, via buying their children’s apartments—as Didem’s case demonstrates. While returning to the nest is usually not an ideal scenario for many, some subjects report that they feel empowered to know that they can count on their parents such that in the worst-case scenario, they can always come back for food and shelter to sustain their livelihoods. For instance, Nisa, who was a marketing manager at a consumer goods giant, tells me that some of her friends have to continue work even though they want to quit because they cannot sustain a living in Istanbul due to high rents. In contrast, in addition to her own savings, she is free of paying rents as she lives with her parents, and this helped her in her decision to quit.

For married people, the notion of family also includes their partners in addition to their parents. In some cases, one of the partners can count on the other’s income, and usually this takes a gendered form, echoing the opt-out literature. Songül, who was a marketing manager at a bank, for instance, tells me that she could quit her job when she faced the dark side of office politics
mainly because her partner could support the family. Similarly, Gül mentions her partner alongside her father as resources that she thought that she can count on economically if she quits her job, even though doing so would hurt her self-esteem.

For many individuals, particularly for the upwardly mobile or single white-collar employees, however, family cannot provide them with an efficacious economic safety net. Rather, many individuals either form their own safety net with their personal savings or reinforce it with their familial safety net. Sertaç, for instance, a software engineer who was working at a bank, discloses that he is the owner of his apartment and that he already saved money that could sustain him for six months in case he cannot find any source of income. For many people, personal savings are built up deliberately to sustain themselves in the aftermath of their resignations. Deniz and Ebru, for example, tell me that they started paying off their credit card debts months before they quit.

Second, the scary decision to quit one’s job also requires some social support from friends, family, and partners. Working constitutes a huge chunk of our waking time, more so for the time-deprived elite business professionals. For instance, Gülce, who used to work as a lawyer at a prestigious law firm, and Sarp, who used to be a manager at a professional service firm, quit their jobs and travelled through Latin America, and both of them did so with their partners. Similarly, Gül, who was a marketing manager, reports the emotional support of her partner in going through her decision to quit and its aftermath. Parents can also be an important source of encouragement and support. For both Fevzi, who used to work as an engineer at a major automobile manufacturer, and Nisa, who was a marketing manager at a consumer goods giant, it was their mothers who told them that they did not look happy and they should look for some alternatives. Finally, the prospects of mobilizing one’s friendship network in case of emergencies can also engender a convincing
social support for quitting decision. Ebru, for example, an ex-auditor at a Big Four firm, acknowledges how she deliberated with her close friends on the decision to quit as well as how she relied on them for both social and sometimes economic support by means of working for them via some contract-based gigs.

Finally, as the description of these individuals as “insecure overachievers” (Empson 2017) suggests, quitting their prestigious jobs seems like a daunting adventure for them. Therefore, having a high-level self-confidence has an important facilitating effect. We can even think of it as a psychological safety net. While such self-confidence is usually a matter of personality that evades the explanatory gaze of sociologists, there are some examples of self-confidence that shed light on the non-personal sources of self-confidence that require a learning period following the opt-out. Sertaç, for example, a software engineer, realized that he can earn a living thanks to his very marketable skillset of software development and coding. On a very different level, Ebru, an ex-auditor working at a Big Four firm, shares how she learnt through her solo travel experiences in Thailand that she can survive by finding temporary employment in the service sector:

“And I understood that I don’t need to carry a label like a P&G employee. If the aim is to earn a living, I can earn it numerous ways. Before I quit my job, I was thinking whether I would starve or not, but I also saw that I can survive hunger, too. […] And I also learnt that I am trusting myself. It is that (self-)confidence which carried me to today.”

Lowering her expectations from life and experiencing that pink and blue-collar work is not that “horrible”, she feels confident and in control over her life, and hence, emancipated.

Golden Handcuffs

While the phrase “golden handcuffs” usually refers to financial mechanisms that aim to keep high-skilled employees working for their companies for prolonged durations, herein I expand upon it by including non-economic aspects as well. These factors can chain elite business professionals to their high-salary, high-prestige corporate jobs for the sake of maintaining their status, a coherent
identity, or their responsibilities for children. While the imagery of the handcuff is a parallel to Marx’s famous sentence, “The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains,” the term ‘golden’ somewhat highlights luxury. Nevertheless, as I will discuss below and as is the case in many subjective/objective binaries in social scientific reasoning, it is the subjective understandings of white-collar workers’ constraints that matter in their decisions whether to quit their jobs or not, instead of their objective conditions. To use Ehrenreich’s (1990) influential phrase to describe the inner life of American middle classes, particularly of the professional-managerial class, “fear of falling” is also quite real for their Turkish counterparts.

Debt, of course, is the financial instrument that keeps a large majority of elite white-collar workers dependent on their corporate jobs (Hodson, Dwyer, and Neilson 2014; Schor 1998; Zaloom 2019). The allure of an upper middle-class life is realized through distinction-seeking consumption (Bourdieu 1984), if not outright a Veblenesque “conspicuous consumption.” Of course, seeking such a lifestyle is expensive and usually results in an accumulation of credit card debt, even for the young adults of the upper middle class. Schor (1991) provides us with the concept of the “work-and-spend cycle” and arguably, it is elite white-collar workers that are the forebearers of this vicious cycle all over the world, including Turkey. To illustrate, Berk, an ex-management consultant at a Big Three firm, explains his “fear of falling”:

“I thought a lot [about whether to quit or not]. You know, you get used to your lifestyle, you dine in luxury places, you travel as you wish, you go and see beautiful places in the world… And as a [one of the Big Three firm’s name] employee, you have the chance to fly business class and dine in the best restaurants of the world simply thanks to your work, and on top of all these, you earn a lot! But I could break the cycle.”

While he was considering to quit, he thought that he was losing his privilege and status; after all, for instance, at age 23, he was flying business class, wining and dining in the best restaurants in
the world, staying at the most luxurious hotels, and accumulating miles on his credit card (indeed, he mentioned that he still uses those miles even years after his opt-out).

An interesting aspect of the transnational middle class in Turkey is that one of the status signals of being a member of this class is to display global forms of cultural capital such as travelling abroad for vacations, mostly through Europe. Of course, the disadvantage of Turkish Lira vis-à-vis the US Dollar, the British Pound, or the Euro, increases the costs (and corresponding debts) of this consumption. Moreover, thinking of the long-lasting status markers of the middle class, cars and houses, mortgage and car loans are also key financial instruments that tie these individuals to their corporate jobs. In fact, I learnt from my interviews that not having a mortgage loan can be interpreted as a reason that an individual may quit the job one day and hence, a basis for deciding that someone is not an ideal candidate to promote to upper management roles.

Having kids is another important discouraging factor that ties people’s hands when it comes to quitting their high-salary, high-prestige corporate jobs. This responsibility can be felt at a higher sense of urgency due to the “concerted cultivation” of the middle-class parenting culture (Lareau 2011). Moreover, as authoritarianism, hand-in-hand with neoliberalism, in Turkey has been on the rise, plaguing the quality of public education and introducing conservative values (İnal and Akkaymak 2012). This frustrates many middle class parents and pushes them harder to prefer the more expensive private schools.

Finally, an overarching theme of status anxiety appears to be another important reason handcuffing these individuals to their corporate jobs. In addition to luxurious consumption, an imperative of success plays into elite business professionals’ decision whether to quit their jobs. The gate keeping mechanisms at transnational corporations, the hiring processes, prefer overachievers who almost always were successful in their pre-work lives—including classes,
exams, and extracurriculars—such that their sense of self-worth is highly contingent upon being successful. For instance, Kaan, a management consultant, quotes from a movie to express his obsession with being successful: “I was born in it, molded by it.” I defined this as “success-driven habitus,” mainly because a major disposition of elite business professionals is to be successful at whatever position/field they are in, and prioritizing success over many things including their current well-being and social relationships.5

Of course, deviance from success brings “hysteresis” to these people (Bourdieu 1984). Having a high-salary white-collar job at a prestigious transnational corporation is among the most important signs of success in their post-college lives, and quitting elite corporate life or even jumping off to a “worse” job (a 9 to 5 job, not-so demanding regarding workload, however, with fewer material rewards and future career prospects) is usually seen as a sign of being unsuccessful. Opting out of prestigious white-collar employment feels equivalent to going through a change in their identities, a change that involves losing of a pillar of their self-worth.

For example, Ayşe, an auditor working at a Big Four firm, tells how she suffered from overwork such that she “woke up sad every single day” during a harsh overwork period. Nevertheless, she carried on because “I want people to say that, ‘Yeah, Ayşe can manage this. She is successful.’” Such tight coupling between success and the “culture of smartness” of elite labor force (Ho 2009) keeps elite workers’ anxiety intact. Many of my respondents told me that what they liked most about their jobs is that they are part of select people, which is usually told via elite college names, such as “all my colleagues are Harvard alumni.” This brings in a constant

5 I want to note that to experience status anxiety is somehow conditional upon an assumption of meritocracy and whether the society is actually meritocratic or not is tangential to my inquiry here. Rather, I emphasize that these people put a lot of work into their achievements so much so that, regardless of their ascriptions, they feel that they made their way thanks to their grit.
judgement over one’s success at work, which is measured by one’s smartness. Ayşe, the auditor, tells that “one of the most frightening things for me is that people at work would think of me as a dumb person.”

Let alone quitting these enviable jobs, even the lack of promotion to higher positions can feel like being unsuccessful for the elite business professionals. Melih, a software engineer at a world-renowned tech company, curiously feels uneasy with his “not fast enough rise” in his career:

“My only discontent is that I could have worked harder and got a promotion earlier. It makes me think because I have always been the most successful person in wherever I was and whatever I was doing. I am now thinking if I am losing this ability of mine, something what defines me.” [emphasis mine]

Indeed, while we were discussing what a perfect job would look like for him, he told me that he loved playing basketball so he might have wanted to become a basketball player but he immediately changed his mind in the middle of his stream of thought, adding that he was not good at it because he was not tall enough, so he would not want to be an “unsuccessful” player.

The Aftermath of Opt-Outs

Of course, one of the most important issues of opt-outs is whether such a risky career move is justified or not. In other words, there is an empirical question to be answered, and that is, what kind of changes—improvements as well as degradations—do the “corporate dropouts” experience with respect to their post-quit working arrangements? When I ask Ebru an open-ended question, what kind of commonalities she sees in people she knows who quit their corporate jobs—for which I expect to hear some patterns regarding class, gender, occupation, personality, and the like—she smiles and immediately answers without any hesitation, “None of them regret their decisions.” Of course, there is a possibility that this is peculiar to Ebru’s social network. Nevertheless, I compare quitters job satisfaction and job orientation scores (see the appendix for
the vignette instrument), and as can be seen in Table 5.2, a clear improvement is observed.\(^6\) Examining their quality of work life narratives, I infer that such improvement stems from the qualitative differences between their corporate and non-corporate work experiences and respective job qualities.

Table 5.2. The comparison of average job satisfaction and work orientation scores.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Workers in NYC</th>
<th>Workers in IST</th>
<th>Quitters-Before</th>
<th>Quitters-After</th>
<th>% Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Job Satisfaction [1 - 10]</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job Orientation [0 - 3]</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>-39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career Orientation [0 - 3]</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>-4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calling Orientation [0 - 3]</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Overall, “corporate dropouts” earn less, but work fewer hours and get more fulfillment from their jobs. To begin with, we see a 39% increase in job satisfaction. Validating the consensus regarding job satisfaction scores’ predictive power for turnover, they report that their job satisfaction scores were significantly low—to highlight, it is below 5, a symbolical cut off pointing toward an overall negative rather than positive feeling—and also it is lower than the average of elite white-collar workers I interviewed in Istanbul and New York. Of course, focusing only on the job satisfaction measures is inadequate; job satisfaction provides us with a black box account of perceived job quality, including virtually everything related one’s job. To shed more light on why we see such an increase, we need to better understand various aspects of job quality and their narratives.

Pay is among the most important aspects of job quality, and I discussed that the high salaries of elite white-collar employees were part of the reason why we see that their job

\(^6\) Note that their accounts could be biased because thinking in retrospect, they could be justifying their opt-out by magnifying the gap. Nevertheless, I use this comparison descriptively and support it with their narratives.
satisfaction scores are relatively high on average. And this suggests that if we remove income from the equation, other aspects of their job quality were not that satisfactory. Following a parallel logic, we can interpret from the fact that without exception, they either earn less or the same amount of money following their quits, that the other aspects of their job quality are the main reason for the significant increase in their job satisfaction.

Previously, I narrowed the important sources of variation with respect to quality of work life of elite business professionals down to two dimensions: work-life balance and fulfillment from work. To begin with, the amount of effort that is devoted to work at the expense of non-work activities is an important part of the picture. We see that the quitters’ working hours are again either less or the same, with the exception of entrepreneurs. They had been working 59 hours/week on average before they quit their corporate jobs. Now, they work—if they are employed—37.5 hours/week on average—almost the typical/legal workweek, which is a 37.5% decrease in their workhours. Such an important shift in the amount of working time implies a huge improvement in the experience of work-life balance, and therefore, overall quality of work life and job satisfaction.

The exception of entrepreneurs is very informative. A lack of justification for undesirable working conditions is an important aspect of the perceived job quality (or in this case, lack thereof). The exception of entrepreneurs who quit their corporate jobs implies that if overwork is justified with a sense of ownership or altruism, then its negative impact is somehow tolerated by the individuals. In fact, we can even argue that any sort of justification and meaning attributed to one’s overwork can ameliorate, if not do away, the negative effects of overwork.

When it comes to the issue of fulfillment from work, I also heard tangible changes in my subjects’ narratives of quality of work life. To begin with, when we compare the job orientation scores of the quitters in Table 5.2, we see a shift from having a stronger job orientation (Person A)
to a stronger calling orientation (Person C). Such a shift implies that they both get higher rates of intrinsic satisfaction from their work and also find their labor activities more meaningful. For instance, Sertaç shares with me that he enjoys freelancing more because he declines the projects which he finds boring, whereas in his corporate job, he could not get away from them. Didem, on the other hand, exemplifies how she finds her entrepreneurship meaningful by emphasizing, “I provide employment to many people, produce for my country, and it is a women-only enterprise.” Ebru’s story of babysitting highlights how getting meaning and intrinsic satisfaction from work intertwines. She cites how much she loves to spend time with kids and how parents thank her, looking her in the eye and feeling grateful, and says, “I don’t earn much but I feel my labor has value.”

Moreover, when we compare job orientation scores of the elite white-collar workers in Istanbul and New York with quitters before they quit, we see that the former group have a higher prevalence of career orientation at the expense of job orientation—the two parties’ calling orientations are more or less the same. This suggests that having a career orientation, or put differently, gamification of attitudes toward work, keeps elite business professionals’ consent in the corporate world alive, or put differently, keeps them in “the game.”

**Conclusion**

Let us go back to the original question I posed in the beginning: Why do elite business professionals leave their high-prestige, high-salary corporate jobs?

I answer this question, drawing from my empirical material and analyzing it with the insights of the existing sociological literature on opt-out that I articulated above, as follows: Given a certain set of safety nets and a lack of golden handcuffs, when the pushes from the workplace resonate with the pulls of non-work spheres of life *sufficiently*, we can expect the failure of consent.
Note that such resonance is very idiosyncratic and contingent upon myriad factors, including personality traits (e.g., self-confidence) and many conjunctural moments in life, and thereby, almost never predictable. Yet, such pulls and pushes from work and non-work spheres of life, hand-in-hand with the encouragement of safety nets against golden handcuffs, structure and narrow down the possible courses of action, if not determining one.

This paper contributes to our understanding of the opt-out phenomena in various ways. The analysis here covers a wider range of elite workforce by extending the scope of focus to young single men and women, and to non-US contexts, casting it as a global phenomenon. It thereby highlights other push reasons at work besides lacking work-life balance such as unfulfillment and other pull reasons besides work-family conflict such as self-actualization (it also expands the notion of family to romantic partners, parents, and extended family). Working through these, the article provides us with a comprehensive model of opt-out with push and pull factors from both work and non-work spheres of life that refract through an ensemble of safety nets and golden handcuffs. This account provides us with a structuralist understanding of opt-out without doing away with the agency of our subjects—it indeed casts opt-out as a choice, albeit a structurally limited one. Future research includes comparatively engaging with “the Great Resignation” that began to unfold with the Covid-19 pandemic and testing the efficacy of the model developed here.

One of the broader implications of this article for labor market studies is that the overall positive experience of upper-middle class white-collar employees who opted out can provide us with an alternative narrative to the powerful script of the American Dream (in fact, the middle class dream all around the globe), the prescription of going to an elite college and landing a well-paying, prestigious corporate job in a metropolis: Amy Binder et al. (2016) finds that almost 50% of Harvard’s 2014 graduates pursued careers only in a few industries: consulting, finance, and
tech. I find that, just like their American counterparts, the most successful and educated Turkish students tend to favor a very narrow range of career paths, mostly preferring to work for transnational corporations upon graduation. Coupled with a profound “fear of falling” (Ehrenreich 1990), such “career funneling” render attaining high-prestige, high-salary corporate jobs an issue of all or nothing, and significantly distorts their aspirants’ understanding of labor market. Nevertheless, such refusals of the corporate career paths I examine could help us demystify and desacralize corporate jobs, and “promot[e] a plurality of criteria of worth” (Lamont 2019:662).

My examination of white-collar opt-outs also suggests that 70-hour workweeks of elite business professionals, known as 9-9-6 (from 9 am to 9 pm, 6 days a week), could be considered as an indirect form of social closure; after all, cutting these strenuous work schedules down to the typical 40-hour workweek, known as 9-5-5 (from 9 am to 5 pm, 5 days a week), could almost double the amount of “good jobs” in the labor market. Indeed, reducing working time could be a silver bullet: as my discussion of alienation as overwork suggests, it would immediately boost the quality of work life of the overworked, and it could decrease unemployment. Of course, this pollyannaish statement is conditional upon an implicit ceteris paribus clause, that is, keeping the cost of labor (i.e., salaries and wages) constant. Nevertheless, the analysis of opt-outs highlights that reducing working time without lowering wages and salaries is emerging as a key demand for our individual and collective well-being, as crucial as higher minimum wages and job security.

References


