

# The Trouble with Passion

HOW SEARCHING FOR FULFILLMENT AT  
WORK FOSTERS INEQUALITY

Erin A. Cech



UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS

# Contents

<i>List of Illustrations</i>	vii
<i>Preface</i>	xi
Introduction	1
1. What Is the Passion Principle?	33
2. Why Is the Passion Principle Compelling?	76
3. The Privilege of Passion? Passion-Seeking and Socioeconomic Inequality among Career Aspirants	117
4. The Passion Principle as Prescriptive and Explanatory Narrative? How the Passion Principle Choicewashes Workforce Inequalities	162
5. Exploiting Passion? The Demand Side of the Passion Principle	189
Conclusion	214
Epilogue	234

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	239
<i>Appendix A: Methods</i>	243
<i>Appendix B: Supplemental Analysis of 2020 College Student Survey</i>	257
<i>Appendix C: Supporting Data</i>	262
<i>Notes</i>	271
<i>References</i>	305
<i>Index</i>	321

# Illustrations

## FIGURES

- |   |    |
|---|----|
| 1.1 Importance of passion-related and financial considerations in college-educated workers' beliefs about choosing college majors and career fields (PPS data)  | 50 |
| 1.2 Adherence to passion principle among college-educated workers, by demographic category (PPS data)   | 51 |
| 1.3 Proportion of college-educated workers who rated passion more important than salary and job security in career decision-making, by demographic category (PPS data)  | 53 |
| 1.4 College students' top priority when choosing their major (N = 100)  | 57 |
| 1.5 College students' top priority when planning for their postgraduation career path (N = 100)   | 58 |
| 1.6 Proportion of college-educated workers who ranked each of five considerations as (a) the most important factor and (b) among the top two most important factors in deciding whether or not to take a new job in the future (PPS data) | 67 |
| 1.7 Predicted means by education level of the importance of four factors on whether US workers would consider taking a new job (N = 2,286)  | 69 |

2.1 Google Ngram of books from 1950 to 2008 with the search phrases “follow your passion” and “earn more money”	83
2.2 Importance to US workers of “interesting work” and “salary” in their jobs, weighted means by education level (GSS data 1989, 1998, 2006, and 2016)	84
2.3 College-educated workers’ beliefs about career decision-making by passion principle adherence (PPS data)	87
3.1 Schematic two-dimensional axis representing workers’ degree of passion for their work and the stability or precarity of their labor force position, and the location of follow-up interviewees on this passion-stability axis	132
4.1 Meritocratic, personal responsibility, and choicewashing beliefs among college-educated workers, by passion principle adherence (PPS data)	171
5.1 Means on worker engagement and voluntary extra effort measures for passionate and non-passionate US workers (MPS and NSCW data)	197
5.2 Proportion of college-educated workers who preferred employee A, B, and C on four considerations, for all respondents and for the subsample of respondents with hiring authority (PPE data)	201
5.3 Percent of respondents interested in hiring the applicant they reviewed for the accounting job and the youth program manager job, by cover letter emphasis	205
5.4 Respondents’ impressions of applicants to the accounting job and the youth program manager job, by cover letter emphasis	207
6.1 Highway billboard, eastern Michigan	223
A.1 Means on focal measures from 2018 and 2020 waves of the PPS survey of college-educated workers (2018 N = 1,752; 2020 N = 1,750)	253
B.1 College students’ agreement that pursuing passion was most important factor in choosing their college major (N = 522)	259
B.2 Average ranking of the importance of five factors in college students’ postgraduation career planning (N = 522)	259
C.1 Adherence to passion principle among college-educated workers, by occupational field (PPS data)	262

## TABLES

1.1 Proportion of college student interview respondents who said passion, financial considerations, and employment opportunities should be top priorities when choosing a major and a career path (N = 100)	44
2.1 Themes and example responses from respondents for why they would advise Joe to leave his IT job to follow his passion or stay in his IT job	94
C.7 Indirect effects from structural equation models predicting college-educated workers' likelihood of recommending hiring an applicant, by cover letter condition, mediated by assessment of applicant as a "hard worker" and "willing to take on additional responsibilities without an increase in pay" (PPE data)	269
C.8 OLS regression model predicting respondent salary (logged value), with passion for work and controls (all workers; NSCW data)	270