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"Adapt or Die": How Young Millennials are Surviving the Threat of Ontological Insecurity

Nathalie Marx
Scripps College

"ADAPT OR DIE": HOW YOUNG MILLENIALS ARE SURVIVING THE THREAT OF
ONTOLOGICAL INSECURITY

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NATHALIE E. MARX

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PROFESSOR HUNG CAM THAI
PROFESSOR SARAH STEFANOS

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Abstract: Postmodernity has been dictated by a thirst for advancement, efficiency, and discovery. It has also created unimaginable risk: threats of nuclear war, frightening climate events, unreliable economic systems. This thesis investigates the tension between external risks, threat of future instability, and individual action and resistance. Through an analysis of twelve in-depth interviews with young millennials, I suggest that through perceived "zones of security," individuals develop cognitive schemata to calculate the probability of their own, and others', ontological continuity. This paper contributes to the scarce collection of sociological literature that represents the modern, intersecting crises which might contribute to a culture of fear and instability and responds to postmodern theorists, Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens, and Zygmunt Bauman, with empirical research. Additionally, the findings place heightened emphasize on the connection between individual histories and patterns of social behavior and how personal pasts influence one's constructed imagination of society's future.

Keywords: postmodernity, climate crisis, ontological insecurity, life-course trajectories, millennial generation

I'm facing the greatest
The greatest loss of them all
The culture is lit and I had a ball
I guess that I'm burned out after all
If this is it, I'm signing off
Miss doin' nothin' the most of all
Hawaii just missed a fireball
L.A. is in flames, it's getting hot
Kanye West is blond and gone
'Life on Mars' ain't just a song
Oh, the livestream's almost on
—The greatest, Lana Del Rey

Hope locates itself in the premises that we don't know what will happen and that in the spaciousness of uncertainty is room to act.
—Rebecca Solnit

INTRODUCTION

In March of 2020, my friends and I packed up all our belongings and left our college campus just in time for the world to shut down. I remember wearing a little scarf around my nose and mouth on the airplane ride back home, and some man rolled his eyes at me. When my mom and I stopped by the grocery store on the way home from the airport, we wore the N95 masks she had picked up from the hardware store a few days earlier. She has a way of knowing to do these things at the right time. As we walked by the deli, one of the employees of the grocery store turned to his coworker after seeing our masks, and said, "Yep, it's happening." It felt like the end of the world was coming. I moved into a little converted garage during the following months. I lived alone and kept myself occupied with hikes, running, elaborate meals for one and lots and lots of "park hangouts." I was terrified of COVID, but lucky to be living in a place where I could be outside, with friends and family, surrounded by buttes and rivers and mountains and forests. It kept me sane—sane enough. And then, I woke up one morning and ash covered the ground. The fires came and destroyed a million acres of land in my home state. Old growth forests were gone, little critters and animals died, and thousands of people were displaced from their homes. The forests that line the river I used to raft down as a kid were totally gone. The sky was orange, the sun was red, and the little haven I had created to stay okay was gone. People were advised not leave their homes, unless absolutely necessary, and only with a N95 mask. The air outside could not be breathed. The air inside might have COVID. I paced around in my garage apartment, waiting for the challah bread in my oven to rise, wondering if when the world was ending.

This project initially developed during the year I took off from school, when I spent much of my time in my little apartment, doom-scrolling on Twitter and talking to my friends, mostly

on the phone, about how frightened we were by the national and global crises that we were either experiencing or witnessing. I would see tweets like these daily:

> "Ngl [not gonna lie] it's really strange to read that without major change you and everyone you love has about 20 years to live & then to like just hop on the bus and go to work, I am so deeply tired" (@shantilly_t, 11/2/21).

> "I am interested in:
> ------women
> ------men
> --X--making peace with the terror of being alive" (@Sorrowscopes, 6/23/2020).

> "I see 'Millennials Aren't Having Babies' is making the rounds again. To sum it up: our planet is dying, no one is getting paid enough, there's not adequate maternity leave, no one can afford hospital bills, most of us can't afford a house— like what did you think would happen? It'd be really refreshing if news outlets did even the smallest of dives and started reporting on the dysfunction happening in this country but you know, whatever" (@Whatapityonyou, 11/3/21).

Like these tweeters, my friends and I have become increasingly worried about our futures—not always because of personal worries or concerns—but because of seemingly unstoppable and unmanageable global risks and crises. Despite these anxieties many of us continue to live and make choices as if our predictions might not come to fruition, while we joke about how we only have another decade or so to live. This tension, paradox, dissonance— whatever you want to call it—is what inspired this project.

There were several questions I wanted to answer through this research. How has the instability of the past few years affected young millennials' decision-making about their lives? Is there a connection between social forces, emotional reactions, and concrete actions? Are there mediators between fears of the future and current behavior? Have we reached a point of such instability and uncertainty that hope has disappeared? If so, what are coping strategies that push people to keep going?

These questions drove the heart of this project. During my first few interviews, however, I realized that the time frame I had marked as incredibly "unstable" (the start of COVID to 2022) did not reflect when many of my respondents began to feel anxious about social, economic, political, and environmental crises, or when they believed a departure from "normalcy" began. For example, one of my respondents, Rachael, remembers "Al Gore and […] climate change being part of social discourse as a small kid who had no idea, no resources for dealing with that." Another interviewee, Oliver, says, "we didn't really return to normal after 9/11… normal became something different. You know, it's a new normal." I believe my assumption that the last few years were *more* unstable or fear-provoking than previous years was due to the age gap between myself and my participants. I was three years old when 9/11 happened; my oldest respondent was eight. Many of my respondents were either seniors in college or had already graduated when Trump was elected; I was a senior in high school. To correct for my own assumptions when designing this study, I shifted my interview guide after speaking with my first two respondents from questions that sought to understand if the last few years were uniquely turbulent, to more general questions about present fears and life course decision-making. Thus, my analysis does not focus on any period of time, but instead on modern interactions between perceived security and potential risk.

I first provide a short review of the sociological, postmodern theory that frames this project and the empirical studies which are tangential to the interview data I have gathered. I then give an overview of my methodology and discuss the demographic characteristics of this sample. In my analysis, I offer a new conception of where we find personal safety in a world that threatens our existence and provide three cognitive schemas used by the young millennials interviewed that help them to orient their personal lives towards an unpredictable future. I

conclude with a discussion about the postmodern theory which I thought explained the world I saw; the world I saw before conducting these interviews.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Modern risks exist at the end of a continuum of the societal trends that followed the Industrial Revolution. While constant modernization and innovation led to advances in sciences, health, technology, and efficiency, it has also created conditions of constant change and instability. At the end of the 20th century, Zigmunt Bauman writes *Liquid Modernity* which details the uniqueness of our postmodern era. Bauman argues we have ceased to believe that attaining "a state of perfection" is possible and thus, are in constant search of improvement and modernization, knowing that something better is always possible (1991, 29). The postmodern world is defined by a "compulsive and obsessive, continuous, unstoppable, forever incomplete *modernization;* the overwhelming and ineradicable, unquenchable thirst for creative destruction" (28). The destruction of the old is accompanied with the demand that something better must be created as obtaining a utopic society is impossible. These advancements, however, lead to a deterioration of traditional structures and institutions which produces what Ulrich Beck calls a "risk society" (1986).

Important to Beck's account of risk and postmodernity is social reflexivity. He postulates that as we modernize, and as our scientific advances allow us to understand the world more accurately, we become increasingly aware of the negative consequences and impacts of the postmodern project; for example, we now have indisputable knowledge that our social and economic habits cause significant climate change. Rather than changing our behaviors to avoid known risks, Beck theorizes instead that these risks become consciously produced in exchange for, and as a mere side effect of, modernization. But these side effects are not felt equally across

society. As the power elite has disproportionally distributed wealth, risk is now distributed, with those who have historically been at the bottom of social hierarchies facing the most threat. But despite this "stratification" of risks, at one point, everyone will be affected regardless of their status. He points out, "poverty is hierarchic, smog is democratic" (1986, 36). Beck postulates we live in a society defined by risk. It is not something those only most oppressed must face—such as poverty, racism, lack of resources, social exclusion—but is instead a key component to the postmodern era.

It is the individual, in the postmodern world, who must live with a "calculative attitude to the open possibility of action, positive and negative, with which […] we are confronted in a continuous way in our contemporary social existence" (Giddens 1991, 28). This distinct relationship between the "self" and postmodern world is detailed by Anthony Giddens who analyzes how the obsessive search for utopic modernity reflects on individual security and trust. He begins his argument claiming that we build faith in social systems and foundations that are meant to provide an "inoculation" against ontological anxieties—that is anxieties of self-preservation and threats to existence. It is through our trust in these "abstract systems" which allow (most of) us to carry on with our day-to-day activities. As Giddens explains, those with a "normal sense of self-identity" have an understanding of their biological continuity and, through "early trust relations," can filter out most ontological anxieties. The rise of modernity, however, forces the societal structures fundamental to our creation of trust to change at a constant rate, challenging our belief in ontological security. Giddens believes this has grave consequences for the development of self-identity. It is in our interactions with the world beyond ourself that constitute our identity. The general anxiety that Giddens witnesses is so omnipresent that it is "disturbing no matter how far [an individual] seeks to put it to the back of his mind" and leads to

frequent confrontations with "crises situations which may sometimes threaten the very core of self-identity" (185). Modernization and its consequential increase in societal crises—as theorized by Bauman and Beck—results in the foundations we are meant to trust shifting in such unstable ways that our security and individual identity become threatened, and we become fearful of what is to come.

Frank Furedi has written extensively about the sociology of fear, expanding upon the work of sociologists such as Durkheim and Giddens, to argue that fear is not only part of our culture, but that it is—in our postmodern state—inevitable. He claims that even when we examine the constructive parts of our world, we tend to focus on the potential harms, resulting in our fear of advancements—such as genetic research or phones—as a distraction from more prominent crises. Following in the footsteps of Ulrich Beck, Furedi explains that the "perception of being at risk expresses a pervasive mood in society" and is "one that influences action is general" (1997, 28). While Furedi might believe we live in a generalized culture of fear, he theorizes that we select what fears we choose to act on through individual avoidance or shifts in behavior—people are more willing to accept "voluntary" risks, such as smoking cigarettes, opposed to risks such as "chemical pollution, over which they have no control" (35). The risks that we have no control over are described to be "free-floating" meaning that they can attach to any experience, visible or invisible. The ever-present cloud of fear that looms above means that we tend to presume that "a particular product of technology" might not cause problems today, but "will only be known by future generations" (43). Because we believe that advancements in society inherently come attached with risk, we fear that any change or innovation will eventually result in consequence.

Building from an understanding that we live in a "culture of fear," Bauman finds that similar to the constant changes of the postmodern society which include the "jobs and the companies that offer them, or partners and networks of friends, the standing we enjoy in wider society," there now exists uncontrollable "existential tremors" that create the "ground on which our life prospects rest […] shaky and friable" (2006, 139). He points to the paradox—which is highlighted by Furedi's observation that new advances are always met with anxious skepticism—that despite being the "most technologically equipped generation in human history […] we feel more threatened, insecure and frightened […] than the people of most other societies on record" (101). He attributes this phenomenon to our reliance on the assumption that society's problem are "challenges" that are, at the end of the day, "soluble" with the next scientific discovery or new technology (76). Modernization has made us believe that societal crises are fixable, subject to change, and temporary. Yet, more recently, we have been introduced with problems that we cannot manage, such as natural disasters, which cause free-floating fear, as described also by Furedi. Bauman suggests that we focus on what we *can* do as a coping mechanism to ensure there is "no time to occupy ourselves reflecting on things about which we can't do anything." But this technique to insulate our sanity and our mental wellbeing, "does not necessarily make us more secure" (11). This theory can help us to understand if unmanageable fears affect decision-making or if they are pushed to the back of our minds, such that we focus on the problems we *can* solve as we try to retain control over our ontological security, and consequentially, our sanity.

This project seeks to discover if young millennials are altering their life-courses considering recent global crises and discussions of future risks. Glen Elder pioneered sociological theories about life course developments and believed they can be understood as a

"multilevel phenomenon, ranging from structured pathways though social institutions and organizations to the social trajectories of individuals and their developmental pathways" (1994, 5). He identifies *lives and historical times, timing of lives,* as well as *human agency,* as being central to the "life course paradigm." Elder explains that life courses often reflect the historical times in which a person is living in, as well as the "incidence, duration, and sequence of roles, and relevant expectations and beliefs based on age" (6). He theorizes that these sequential events and social conditions that mark our life span, form to create "interlocking trajectories or pathways" that define the life course (1995, 454). Shifts in social conditions and historical forces affect what constitutes a traditional life course trajectory. For example, with women attending college at higher rates than ever and prioritizing their career development due to the increased accessibility of women to access higher education and desirable careers, the average age of women to have their first birth has increased from 21.4 years to 26.8 years old between the years of 1970 and 2017 (Guzzo and Payne, 2018). Other markers of adulthood are shifting as well. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the completion of education, marriage, moving out of the parental home, and securing a job with a livable wage are all less likely to be achieved by young adults of all genders today as contrasted with young adults in the mid to late twentieth century.

While impacted by external forces, Elder also believes that through *human agency,* life courses can break from traditional pathways and be developed independent of social expectations. Human agency might account for what researchers Hareven and Masaoka describe as *turning points,* or the life-course transitions that differ from normative and "socially constructed time tables" (1988, 274). Arising from unexpected crises or important societal events, *turning points* mark critical changes or new beginnings during an individual's life.

Limited literature exists illuminating the extent to which an overarching "culture" of risk and fear affects individual's life courses. This might be in part due to the proximity we have to many national and global crises, such as the COVID pandemic, the frequency of Pacific Northwest and California wildfires, the Black Lives Matter protests, and the January 6th insurrection. However, as many of the respondents stated, they began having fears about their futures long before these events occurred—fears that could have certainly been studied by now. Further, the effect of compounding crises—climate change, economic immobility, fascism, white supremacy, COVID—in creating a heightened culture of fear has also remained largely unstudied.

Most of the empirical studies that have been completed about the interaction between risk and social behavior focus on a single variable of instability and test its direct effect on individual decision-making. And to my knowledge, no qualitative study has been published that addresses the overwhelming fear and anxiety millennials have for their futures. I hope in the future more research is done to investigate how a general culture of risk impacts life decisions.

In 1999, Ann Nilsen conducted a qualitative and explorative study to understand how fears of environmental problems are connected to young people's envisions of the future. Nilsen completed in-depth interviews with "young people with secondary education at university attendance level" in Norway and found that people had fears about the state of the environment but had a hard time making the connection to their current actions with far off environmental problems, because there was "no one single, directly observable cause [that led] to an immediately observable effect in time and place" (187). Climate disaster was simply too far away to seriously impact the plans and hopes of young people.

It appears this might no longer be the case. Kari Marie Norgaard, an expert on the modern correlation between climate change and social responses, has spent significant time in both Norway and the United States studying how climate change produces a phenomenon of communal denial. In her book, *Living in Denial: Climate Change, Emotions, and Everyday Life,* she describes the residents of Bydaby, a pseudonym for a small rural town in Norway, as being highly informed about climate change, as they expressed concern frequently, yet failed to display their fear through tangible actions. Many of her participants described feeling guilty about how their actions contributed to the climate problem and felt that "knowing too much" evoked extreme feelings of uncertainty and fear. While the information of climate change was not rejected as being false, her residents minimized the "psychological, political or moral implications that conventionally follow" by building a socially organized state of denial through "distanc[ing] themselves from information" (2011, 9-11). As opposed to the participants in Nilsen's study who felt that their actions had little to no direct impact on the consequences of future climate change, the residents of Bygdaby seem to recognize themselves as potential agents of change, as evidenced by their feelings of guilt, yet chose to protect themselves from feeling an overwhelming or debilitating amount of fear or anxiety. Perhaps limiting their confrontation with crisis helped to protect a narrative of stability that builds foundation for the maintenance of "self-identity" (Giddens, 1991).

While Norgaard found that societal crisis—climate fears—created a phenomenon of denial which prevented changes in individual political or social action, recent empirical data shows that recent widespread instability *has* affected childbearing decisions. One study published in 2021 (Helm et. al.) analyzed interviews from participants aged 18-35 living in both New Zealand and the United States and found that environmental concerns created three distinct

reasons to not have children. The first was the belief that not having children was one of the best ways to help the environment and reduce the problem of overpopulation. The second was that not having children would reduce overconsumption of natural resources and reduce environmental harms such as greenhouse gases. And lastly, participants reported experiencing an overall feeling of uncertainty and worry about the future. They felt emotionally conflicted about the prospect of bringing a child into the world given general their fears and anxieties. Survey data from a 2020 study that included young adult respondents from India, Australia, Bangladesh, and England found similar results (Sanya and Das, 2020). Of the 150 young adults sampled, sixty-two percent described having "existential dread" about the fact that survival could be impacted by climate change, and sixty-three percent claimed that these dreads make then rethink their crucial life plans, including the decision to have children.

The COVID-19 pandemic was also found to be an external force that affected reproductive choices. Survey data collected following the initial outbreak from over 1100 women in New York City who had already had recently become new mothers, found that more than a third of the women had been attempted to become pregnant again pre-pandemic, stopped trying during lockdown, and slightly less than half of those women indicated that they did not have any more plans on having children after the pandemic (Trasande et. al., 2021).

One recent study looked at the converging impact of COVID and beliefs about climate change to find that the two crises produced distinct risks, and thus affected reproductive decision making differently (Gordon, 2021). The participants were aged between 18 and 35 years, living in the United Kingdom, and surveyed at the beginning of August 2020 about five months after the UK national lockdown had begun. The researchers found that COVID was seen as an extrinsic risk, one which threatens an individual's life, whereas climate change was an existential

risk, one which threatens the existence of the human species. Accordingly, a significant amount of the participants who had been close to someone seriously ill from COVID correlated with the increased desire to have more children as "even a brief change in extrinsic risk can potentially result in a faster life history." However, contrary to the studies discussed earlier, the authors reported existential risk—climate change—did not have any significant correlation with reproductive-decision making. The authors did suggest that possibly extrinsic and existential risks factors worked in conjunction with each other, meaning that concerns such as COVID might induce a faster life history, whereas concerns such as climate change might reduce desires to reproduce. Even if climate change had no significant correlation on reproductive decision-making, it might be explained by the fact that some millennials, while having bleak thoughts about the future, felt that the decision to have children provided the possibility for a moment of hope, and choosing to not do so was thought of as an indication that people had "given up the fight" (Helm et. al. 2021). Additionally, some participants in the Helm et. al. study conceptualized the decision to have children as a method to combat climate change as they could help raise part of a "new generation" of people who are climate conscious. This data doesn't necessarily invalidate previous research indicating that societal crises produce fear, but rather highlight the ways that fear can produce a variety of reactions. Further, it could be a possible explanation for why some studies find that climate change doesn't affect reproductive choices as found in the Gordon 2021 study. Feelings of fear might heighten the desire to have children in some of the respondents, as a method of resistance, and be the reason to not have children in other respondents, corresponding to an overall analysis of the data as showing no significant correlations.

Limited data exists about how American political instability affects reproductive choices, however a recent article published by the New York Times, found that of the 1858 men and women aged 20 to 45, thirty-seven percent cited global instability and thirty-six percent cited a "worry" about domestic politics as reasons to not have children. Only thirty-three percent reported climate change affecting their choices (Miller, *New York Times,* 2018). In Hungary, following the collapse of the socialist regime, young couples reported that the "insecure and unpredictable" conditions of the new regime, "especially contrasted with an idealized socialist past" contributed to changing reproductive patterns (Hollos and Bernardi, 2009). One respondent claimed that "people don't know exactly what to expect, who to trust, who not to trust," when reflecting on feelings on the previous feeling of reliability and safety felt during the socialist years. Although the United States has yet to experience a regime change, when Norgaard extended her research to the United States, she found that the unique political conditions of "individualism, extensive […] alienation, and a lack of fluency in the workings of the political system" contributed to Americans feeling hopeless, and as if they could not affect significant change (2011).

Historically, the declines in fertility rates have been explained by the simple "structural constraints such as labor, housing, or income," however this data shows that reproductive choices—around the world—are instead being made within a web of uncertain conditions (Vignoli et. al., 2021). When making decisions about our life course, we build *narratives of the future* to reflect a connection between "individual agency and structural constraints" (Vignoli et. al., 2021). Learning of the common narratives being constructed by people at the expected age of childbearing—young millennials—can help us to understand how decisions made within current

social and political are not entirely dependent on current conditions, but rather the pervasive expectations that dictate our imaginations of the future (Vignoli et. al., 2021).

METHODOLOGY

I. Data

The data for this analysis is comprised of twelve in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted during February and March of 2022. The interviews lasted between an hour and fifteen minutes to two and a half hours. Eleven out of twelve of these interviews were conducted over Zoom, and one was conducted in person. I found my first set of participants through personal networks and then used a "snowball sampling" method. One participant was found through a local Facebook group; she messaged me after I posted a call for respondents. Out of the twelve respondents, I knew six prior to conducting the interview. Out of these six respondents, I only spoke to one person I had spent considerable time with since childhood; despite our familiarity, we had never discussed any of the topics pertaining to this study. Additionally, this participant was not part of my current social group and I felt we had enough personal distance that I had no idea how the questions would be answered. The other five respondents were either friends of friends who I have spent little time with or were people who I had not communicated with in many years. Although I was familiar with half of my respondents and had varying amounts of prior knowledge about their demographical data—such as their career, relationship status, and political affiliation—I asked the same set of introductory and follow-up questions in each interview. The interviews were semi-structured and while I had an interview guide that I referenced throughout, I found the responses most useful and interesting when I allowed my respondents to guide the discussion. Each of my respondents was extremely open and vulnerable with me—for which I thank them immensely—and despite a Zoom

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interview being the first time I met six of them, I felt rapport was developed quickly and seamlessly. This might be in part due to the relatively small age gap between myself and those I interviewed. Although one might argue that the analysis is less "objective," as I often related heavily to my respondents, I hope that my closeness in age, and the similarities I had with my respondents helped me to develop questions that best promoted an accurate portrayal of their individual lives and collective social patterns. Lastly, each respondent has been given a carefully selected and thought-about-for-way-too-long pseudonym to protect their anonymity, and any explicitly identifying information, such as city of residence, has been redacted.

II. Controlling the Sample

I controlled three variables when selecting who to interview for this study: age, college graduation status, and parental status. As I was interested in how young people were either altering or not altering their life plans considering social, economic, political, and environmental crises, I chose to interview millennials. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, anyone born between 1982 and 2000 is included in the millennial generation. I further limited the study to only interview *young* millennials, aged between twenty-four and thirty years old at the time of the interview, to understand how emerging adults were structuring their lives given societal instability and unpredictability. In addition to restricting the age range of my sample, I also talked to people who had either not attended college or had already graduated (although my sample ended up consisting of all college graduates). I placed this restriction when recruiting participants to ensure I was observing a sample of young millennials who were in the early or developing years of their professional careers and—for the most part—had not yet "stabilized" their lives, but also were unrestrained from any rigid institutional structure which might dictate life-course decisions. I acknowledge that many people are in school while also working, raising

children, and attending to other responsibilities, and thus, leaving out a population of young millennials who are both in school and working, might decrease the generalizability of this data set. However, due to the wide range of variables that might impact each respondent, limiting the population of young millennials who participated in this study beyond their age was necessary to tease out comparable personal and social factors influencing the respondents. Lastly, I spoke only to people who had not yet had children. This was the most important constraint I placed on my sample, as I was interested in understanding if there was a correlation between young millennials' "narratives of the future" and their responses to those narratives (Vignoli et. al., 2021). I was less concerned with participants' moral stance on having children (although the discussion of whether biological reproduction was ethically responsible came up in several interviews), than with how reproductive choices can be a measure of the way "individuals, families, and social groups conceive of the future" (Rapp 2000, 318). Unlike a career decision, moving locations, getting married—all of which are life-course choices that can be altered or undone—the decision to have a child will (most likely) impact the rest of an individual's life. As one of my respondents, Oliver, stated: "I got a tattoo when I was 18…And I'm happy with it. I'm glad I got it. I don't regret it. But you don't understand permanence until something happens that's permanent. […] And so that's like the ultimate tattoo, children." Asking my interviewees about their childbearing plans allowed me access into their constructed timelines of potential instability, the relationship between fear and behavior, and rationale for current decision-making.

Most of my social life is contained on the West Coast (as it is where I grew up and currently attend college), and as such, many of my respondents are either currently living in or from the West Coast. Two currently live on the East Coast, three grew up in the Midwest, and one is from a southern state. The average age of my respondents is 25.7 years old, and the

median age is 25.5; overall the interviewees are on the younger end of the age range I set during recruiting, but I found that age did not correlate with the categories which emerged from the data. My respondents had varying levels of economic security both during their childhood and presently. I did not ask for salary information or annual income, and instead asked respondents to share their current and childhood economic security.

This sample of young millennials is not representative of the broader American population in a few ways. Each participant has completed an undergraduate education, and four have their master's degrees. Eight of my respondents are white, two are Hispanic, one is mixed-race, and one is Japanese American. Eleven of my twelve respondents are either married, engaged, or in serious and committed romantic relationships. Finally, this sample of millennials is overwhelmingly Democrat and politically left-leaning. The one respondent who explicitly stated she did not affiliate with the Democratic or Republican party explained that she doesn't "really associate with either side […and doesn't] go based off parties, [she goes] based off of listening to who's running." During the last three presidential elections, however, she did vote for the Democratic candidate. Four of my respondents explicitly stated that they grew up in Republican households.

While I do wish that this sample of young millennials is more representative of the racial diversity, education levels, and relationship status of the American population, am I to continue this project, I would intentionally limit my sample to people who believe in climate change. While there are other external risks discussed as potentially impacting humankind—such as nuclear war—climate change was consistently the most frequently cited crisis that impacted conceptions and narratives of my respondents' futures. Kari Norgaard, who authors *Living in Denial,* conducts her ethnographic study in the town of Bygdaby (a pseudonym for a small town

in Norway) to understand why people who were informed and concerned about global warming were "uncomfortable" talking about the issue and took little social action (Norgaard 2011). Similarly, this project is not driven by a desire to discover *why* people believe or do not believe in the existence of climate change. (To be transparent, I adamantly believe in climate change's extreme threat to human life, wildlife, and our broader ecosystems—as evidenced by several IPCC reports—although offering a comprehensive scientific analysis of this belief is beyond the scope of this paper.) But like Norgaard, I sought to investigate a paradox about global risk and social behavior: why do people discuss their futures (either jokingly or seriously) as if they might be intensely impacted by climate change, fascism, economic insecurity—or other existential crises—yet continue to live seemingly detached from these fears? And how does damning knowledge of external risk interact with how one creates their personal and social life? Thus, while I did not impose an intentional restriction of political affiliation or belief in climate change when recruiting young millennials, I am ultimately grateful that the sample only included those who have a common belief that climate change, as well as other external insecurities, exist.

ANALYSIS

I. Widespread Anxiety of External Risk

Each of my respondents expressed concern about the external conditions that currently or are predicted to exert power on their personal lives. These concerns ranged from political to economic to environmental and were described as both presently anxiety-inducing, as well as forces that would eventually constrain the enjoyability and livability of life in the future. Through the "narratives of the future" these young millennials constructed as I asked them questions about their planned life-course, a discussion of their *fears of the future* developed (Vignoli et. al., 2021). These fears were not discussed as uniformly catastrophic, or as happening

with certainty, but produced a state of anxiety among most of these twelve participants. At times, some reported, the anxiety was so severe it was nearly "debilitating."

a. Political Instability

Most of my interviews were conducted during the first month of Russia's invasion of Ukraine and each of the ten respondents I spoke with after the date of initial invasion—February 24th, 2022—discussed the war and their emerging worries, most often without my prompting. When I asked Chris, a twenty-six-year-old development project manager for an affordable housing and service provider nonprofit, what currently brings him the most fear in his life, he answered almost immediately, "Right now, top of mind is nuclear war. Fingers crossed [his current location] is not a target, but maybe Seattle is. It's like one of the only nuclear facilities on the West Coast." And Belle, a recent graduate who intends to work as a youth counselor for under-resourced kids said:

> I've seen things like, this is really bad, like Putin is going to invade other
> countries. And I… have always been terrified of nuclear war, um, since I took
> Humans and the Environment at [community college] and I had a teacher that was
> really intense about it and it was really, really scary.

I had a lengthy talk with one of my respondents, Patrick, about national politics and the "anxiety-inducing chaos" of the Trump era. Patrick grew up in a "super" conservative household and Fox News was on frequently. He considered himself to be a centrist before 2016, but since the election says, "it's just been a steady march to the left," citing the "craziness" of Trump's rise to power and his "worry about some psycho being in office." I asked him if he sees the American political system becoming less chaotic now that Trump has (not so gracefully) left office:

> I think it depends on the 2024 election. If Joe Biden runs again and wins, if
> Kamala Harris runs and wins, if another Democrat…if Trump wins, no way, but if
> a real person wins, then yeah, I think there's a shot.

I then asked Patrick if he fears Trump will win the 2024 election and he responded quickly, "Oh yeah, yeah." Many of those I interviewed talked about the anxiety they felt during the entirety of former-president Donald Trump's term and the anger and shock they experienced seeing the violence that Trump incited. Important, however, as evidenced by Patrick and many of the respondents: Trumpism is not a distant nightmare, but an imminent threat. The rise of fascism, racism, and bigotry were cited as *fears of the future* and while President Biden's win ended Trump's presidency, for now, the political future was not imagined to be stable. One respondent explained, "For me, Biden, it was just kind of like, yes, we won. But at the same time, it's what about the next term…like what…what's going to happen then?"

These responses do not deviate from national sentiments. The insurrection of January 6th highlighted that even democracy, the supposed cornerstone of American politics, is subject to threat. According to a CNN poll conducted by an independent research company, SSRS, seventy-nine percent of Democrats, thirty-six percent of Republicans, and sixty-four percent of independents felt concerned about democracy following January 6th (Agiesta, *CNN,* 2021). The poll also found that seventy-one percent of Americans said political violence in response to election results is somewhat likely, and thirty-four percent felt it was very likely. One conclusion to draw from these surveys is that the more visible instability of American politics is no longer conceived of as a Trumpian anomaly, but an expected feature of modern society.

b. Economic Insecurity

Many of my respondents also discussed their financial insecurities. Luis is a twenty-four-year-old from the Midwest currently living on the East Coast where he works as a teacher at a private Christian school based out of his church. His wife is planning to attend law school soon

and despite Luis telling me that his employers always reassure him that even in "a stressful time, you're going to get paid," he talked about his finances, saying:

> …inflation's high, you know, and so I say, can I live off of a teacher's salary while my wife is in school? So for me, it's kind of like, you know, where am I going to be?

Maria, a twenty-seven-year-old program manager at a cancer hospital, also mentioned inflation when considering if she and her husband were ready to have kids. I asked what anxieties she has about her future, and she said that one of the first things that came to mind is:

> …if we do decide to have a family at the rate inflation is going. Can I afford to be home with my child, at least for a couple of years until they're old enough for daycare? And then when that time comes, can I afford daycare?

Belle voiced similar concerns about having a child explaining, "money is really tight and really scary and…where I'm at financially, I can't even imagine having a child." Belle currently works at a grocery store as a cashier. She described a debilitating anxiety that she has dealt with since she was young that hindered her socially and prevented her from doing the things she enjoyed, like singing and performing. Belle was extremely thoughtful when answering my questions and there was a timidness with which she spoke—a caution, maybe, to explain each of the thoughts in her head accurately. During her first year of college, away from her hometown, she experienced anxiety she had not felt in "a few years," and moved back home. During COVID, she moved out again to live with her boyfriend, but the stress of the pandemic sent her "down a rabbit hole," and she began to frequently drink and smoke. She worked at a restaurant during the beginning of the pandemic and talked about how "people [got] really violent" if she asked them to wear a mask, citing one customer who coughed on her. The stress was too much. Belle moved back home and tells me she is now doing a lot better. She graduated from college recently, feels more protected at her current job, and said she has been sober "for a while now." But despite

Belle having a financial safety net during college and through the difficulties she faced during the COVID pandemic—with her parents making sure she's "not on the street"—she described trying to live as though a safety net doesn't exist; for example, she pays her parents rent. Belle is excited to move out soon and live with her long-time boyfriend, but frequently cited financial insecurity as a predominant stressor in her life.

Chase, twenty-four years old, also faced economic precarity following his college graduation. He applied to five jobs a day in his field, even the "weird ones eventually too," and did not find anything. After not obtaining a job in his career field—physics and engineering—he took a job as a barista to "make ends meet." Chase described himself as coming from an "affluent, upper middle class setting," and while he used his barista income to pay for rent, groceries, and save a little bit for "fun," his parents helped with expenses such as car insurance and his phone bill. He now works for a university lab, where he makes $43,000 which he says, "is still plenty." Most of the engineering jobs he applied to, however, had an entry salary of more than $70,000. Even though Chase described his current salary as enough, and he has "the safety net of [his] parents to fall back on," he is one of several millennials in the United States to experience downward mobility after graduating college (Cramer, 2014).

When I asked Rachael, a twenty-six-year-old working in the architecture sector, what currently brings fear when thinking about the rest of her life, she quickly blurted, "so much fear," and then went on to specify, "the threat of capitalism." Rachael pointed to the economic structuring of our society that means despite both her and her fiancé "doing well" and holding a belief that their salaries are only going to grow, she "doesn't know yet if it's going to be enough." She has no idea at one point it will be clear that she is, indeed, economically secure. Rachael's articulation of her financial insecurity is important. The neighborhood that she

recently moved to is one of the more expensive areas in her city (citation excluded to protect her anonymity), both she and her fiancé have stable incomes, and she explained that she came from a "privileged" economic household. After completing her undergraduate degree, she was able to live "at a place" her parents owned and save money while she prepared to apply to master's programs. Yet, despite these economic advantages that many Americans are not afforded, she perceived her current financial security to be uncertain and expressed anxiety about never reaching "financial freedom."

I do not emphasize this distinction to claim that Rachael's fear is outlandish or unique. In fact, millennials might become the first generation to experience as much downward mobility as upward mobility (Hout, 2019). Because of the lack of social safety nets provided by the American government, a financial emergency can be life destructing. An article published by the New York Times in 2016 discussed the "crushing medical debt" and financial upheaval caused by medical crises and health problems. But these financial crises were not contained to only those uninsured and "the rates at which people with medical bill problems sought charity or borrowed money from friends was similar among people earning less than $25,000 and those earning more than $100,000" (Sanger-Katz, *NY Times,* 2016). The lack of socialized, state support makes security a rarity. As such, while there are objective differences in the economic security of each of my participants—most often due to the existence or absence of familial financial safety nets—the *perception* of risk provoked an anxiety independent of current financial stability. A Gallup poll found that between April 2016 and April 2019, although Americans felt that economic conditions had improved and identifications of the economy of being "fair or poor" dropped by twenty-seven percent, the percentage of people worried about personal finances—such as making minimum payments on credit cards, paying for children's

colleges, healthcare, rent or mortgage—dropped only between one and four percent (Tarrence, *Gallup,* 2021). Unlike those in the Gallup poll Rachael did not express confidence in national "economic conditions. Despite her current financial security, she describes a distrust in the system of American capitalism to offer continued and sufficient economic stability.

c. Climate Change

Climate change was discussed as posing the most apocalyptic and devastating consequences for these young millennials' futures. Two of the respondents used the movie *Mad Max: Fury Road*—a post-apocalyptic action film set in a desert where resources such as gasoline and water are extremely limited—to describe their worries:

> I worry that we'll live in this like *Mad Max* kind of like thing where we're just like all at the bottom of this cliff begging this overlord for water. Like it scares me to think that that's something that could happen (Belle).

> Yeah, I'm so scared of like a *Mad Max: Fury Road* kind of world where like water is the currency, or like scarce…and yeah, with so many droughts, especially in [current location] and like the tap water you can't drink, you have to filter it yourself… (Chase).

Chase expressed the most concern about climate change of those interviewed. When I asked him to give a timeline of when things will get bad (whatever bad meant to him) he said, "Like irreversibly, undeniably Earth is now a shithole…? Probably like seven or eight years from now." Admittedly, I was taken aback by this—as I, like many of my respondents, try to "protect myself a little bit" from predictions like this one (Norgaard 2006)—and I repeated back to Chase, "seven or eight years?" to make sure I had understood him correctly. He confirmed my concern, explaining that his girlfriend's uncle is a leading climate scientist who he talks with frequently and "that's where [he] got that number from." The 2018 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) released a special report in 2018, titled "Global Warming of 1.5 °C," detailing

the necessity of restricting global warming to only 1.5 °C. The IPCC predicts with high confidence that "global warming is *likely* to reach 1.5°C between 2030 and 2052 if it continues to increase at the current rate," which would result in "storms growing even more powerful; oceans becoming more acidic and killing off major sections of coral; whole sections of landmasses transforming from one ecosystem to another." The impacts of global warming beyond 1.5°C, although not explicitly known, would at the very least "not be safe," according to the IPCC (2018).

Chase is not alone in his dire predictions about climate change. A 2020 survey found that seventy percent of Americans are somewhat or very worried about "global warming" (Leiserowitz et. al., 2020). An even more expansive study released in 2021 (that is in the process of being peer-reviewed by the Lancet Planetary Health Journal) collected data from 10,000 participants aged 16-25 from the United Kingdom, Finland, France, the United States, Australia, Portugal, Brazil, India, Philippines, and Nigeria, and found that close to sixty percent of respondents were "very" or "extremely" worried about climate change and seventy-seven percent felt their "future was frightening" (Marks, et. al.).

Although one of my respondents, Oliver, twenty five years old, expressed little concern about climate change immediately impacting human life, citing weekly headlines about "some new plastic-eating bacteria that's going to save us" and the fact that "humans are incredibly smart […] that's probably the smartest force that we know of is human's survival instinct," even he prefaced these assurances a bit humorously, saying "and I'm not saying this as an excuse for climate change, which it definitely…like this could be…it just might be the one."

d. Constellations of Anxiety

Amidst this pervasive anxiety, many respondents felt powerless to enact change and felt they could only watch these crises unfold in horror, from afar. This powerlessness translated to heightened feelings of anxiety as not only could developing humanitarian and environmental crises be viewed in real time with frequent updates from social media platforms and news outlets, but they forced people to wonder if they were "doing enough." This sentiment was expressed by Luis, a devout Christian, who framed many of his responses to my questions about world events through the lens of his religious practice:

> Then I'll turn on the TV and I'll watch PBS. And I mean, everything we're talking about, even with Ukraine. You know, the situation there, it's super sad. So, you know, for me, it's like, I just don't want to see that. And sometimes it's almost a selfish thing because, as a Christian, I should be worried or I should be trying to do something. But it's almost like, you know, all this anxiety that builds up within you…you're just like, 'What can I do?,' or, 'I'm not doing enough.' And that kind of transitions into when we talk about global warming or anything really, like, am I doing enough?

Luis was not the only person I interviewed to frame his anxieties about global events as compounding or interconnected. Climate change was deemed to be influenced by capitalist greed, and COVID was often not discussed as a public health concern but rather a political crisis. Kristy, a twenty-nine-year-old online content writer, discussed how overwhelming it was to feel as though she needed to be constantly involved in solving every crisis. For her, though, understanding each social justice movement or political issue as interconnected brought a sliver of comfort:

> There's all this stuff going on with, like the 'Don't Say Gay' bill in Florida and the trans kids in Texas and all of the everything in Ukraine and Russia. And I saw something that was basically like, if you're overwhelmed by all of this and you feel like you need to be doing more, just remember that whatever corner of activism that you're working in, is helping [and] the good thing is that all of these horrible things are related, and whatever string you're pulling is helping to unravel the whole thing. So that I felt was really helpful because I always feel like I'm not

doing enough. […] I definitely think it takes a toll. There's so many things
happening at the same time, and we can't do everything at once.

Whether conceptualized as comforting or horrifying, many respondents described a constellation
of crises that contributed to their *fears of the future*, highlighting the incalculability and
magnitude of global forces that currently—or are thought to one day—affect this group of young
millennials.

II. Internal Zones of Security

In response to these constellating anxieties of political instability, financial insecurity,
and environmental destruction, I observed that these respondents frequently discussed the
different ways they felt "lucky" or safe or imagined themselves to "be okay" despite their fears
of external risk. Most of these internal protective shields fell into three categories which I refer to
as the *zones of security*. These zones included personal, nuclear, and communal security (Figure
1).

The zones of security can be understood as the resources that individuals rely on to
persevere and maintain one's sense of security and trust in their continued existence. The zones
are developed both from tangible forms of security, such as a family support system or wealth, or
security that is perceived to be attainable in the future, such as a belief in economic mobility.
Psychiatrist R.D. Laing introduces the idea of "ontological insecurity" in his book *The Divided
Self* to explain the state in which he found many of his schizophrenic patients. He posits that
abnormal or disturbed family relationships during childhood may result in a "failure to achieve a
secure sense of [one's] own identity" and as such, "a schizoid nature is partly a direct expression
of, and occasion for, his ontological insecurity, and partly an attempt to overcome it" (1960,
108). Self-consciousness, low self-worth, and inner inconsistency can result in a threatened or
non-existent self-identity. I am in no position, nor do I seek, to reflect upon the psychological
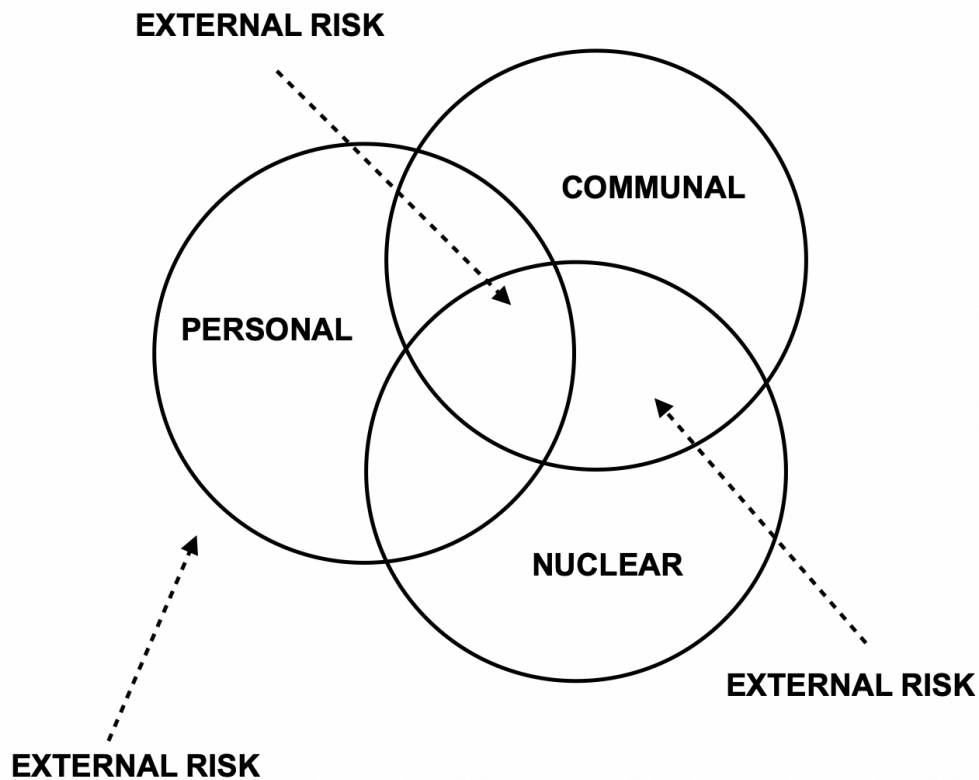
Figure 1. Zones of Security Conceptualized to Shield Against External Risk

health or well-being of my respondents, and we might consider that Laing's theories are more

"ethical rather than scientific" (Crichton, 2007). We know now that there exists a variety of

reasons that someone's sense of identity might be disturbed. Laing's "ontological insecurity" is

instead used to comprehend what might be the consequence if people are unable to "keep a

particular narrative going" and maintain a sense of internal stability (Giddens 1991, 154). What

forms of protection does an individual utilize to avoid ontological insecurity? One of my

respondents, Luke—a whimsical twenty-seven-year-old who works as a freelance production

assistant and had many brilliantly hilarious one-liners to share during our interview—explained

his philosophy for remaining ontologically secure despite objective insecurity:

LUKE: Like, the conclusion of the climate is…is not a pseudoscience, but it's just…it's science is always developing and you just have to kind of trust…you either trust the process or you scream right at the corner of a street or something.
NATHALIE: And you're not screaming at the corner of a street so you're trusting the process?
LUKE: (hesitantly) Yeah…yeah, we're all scared and we're all anxious, but it's either that or you scream, so.

I theorize that these zones of security are used as shields against an ontological insecurity which might threaten one's internal sense of stability. Basically, how we prevent ourselves from screaming at the corner of a street[1].

a. Communal

The communal zone of security can be understood politically, socially, and environmentally. Patrick talked about the possibility of moving to the Midwest if "we get to 2030 and are way off" the environmental targets that must be hit to prevent catastrophic climate-related devastation. Chris talked about fleeing with his girlfriend to his mom's house to escape the smoke that had leaked into his apartment during the wildfire season in 2020. Later in our conversation I asked if he had ethical concerns about bringing biological children into the world after he described an imagination of his future life that might not be "great." He talked about potential insect infestations and diminishing water supplies and discussed the "trauma" of the wildfires. He had hope that:

…there's ways that we can create communities, even if it's just on a local scale that are going to be resilient and be able to combat what's ahead. And if I don't see it in my local community happening, maybe find a way to move somewhere

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[1] When I first drew these zones on a whiteboard, I drew them as concentric circles with the personal zone in the center surrounded by a nuclear, and then communal layer. Upon further consideration, however, I felt that this representation was incorrect, as some people had a strong nuclear zone of security, for example, but little communal security. For each respondent, the zones of security overlapped in unique ways, resembling a Venn diagram. Additionally, the zones were described as fluctuating in strength and importance at different periods of time through each of the participant's lives.

else that is doing a better job of it. Whether that's like Canada or something…I don't know… [laughs] maybe try to escape across the border.

Athena, a twenty-four-year-old mental health therapist, also thought about the possibility of raising kids in a community other than her current one. Athena said that she has "always had the standpoint—and it has been since I was probably like seventeen—that if the planet is good enough, and the person I am with is good enough, I will have kids." She feels confident she has a partner who is "good enough," but still had anxiety about the state of the planet:

> Five years from now, you know, if the planet is in rapid decline, then I'm not going to have a child because what's the point of bringing a human—that I have to be responsible for—while I'm trying to find drinking water? Or shelter from the sun that's now making the planet a thousand degrees?

Despite these apocalyptic musings, Athena has some hope because her partner is from France, and she learned through him that both the culture and the climate is different than in the United States. The stories she tells him about her upbringing—an upbringing filled with unimaginable violence, trauma, pain, racism, financial insecurity—horrify him (as I think anyone would be horrified). But she said he is frightened even "by the possibility that any of it could happen, like any one individual story that I tell" as he has "never gone through any trauma, zero, [holding up an "O" with her hand emphatically] zero trauma" and:

> …he says that's generally the way that people live over there. Like, the climate is chill, it's not super hot in the summer, it's not super cold in the winter. Like people are generally just happy. So like the culture of where I would be having kids is already better.

The communal zone of security might be thought of as a "safe haven": a place on Earth that is thought to provide protection against environmental threats or protection from a culture which produces, or contributes to, personal insecurities and hardships.

b. Nuclear

The nuclear zone of security encapsulates a person's familial support, romantic partnerships, social networks, and financial stability. Both Chase and Maria talked about the reliance of their nuclear spheres of support during the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. I asked Chase if he remembered how he felt in March of 2020 and he explained:

> Well, we were really scared. I mean, I remember like us all being in the living room together and it was, like, nice to have each other. Me and [my girlfriend] and our roommates, as well. And so we kind of formed a tight little group and really depended on each other to, like, be okay and we would send pairs out to go get groceries, you know, like little missions.

Maria also described forming a pod with her fiancé, her cousin, and her cousin's fiancé during the beginning of the pandemic. Reflecting on that time she said:

> It was scary because of the uncertainty, but luckily, we all had each other and financially, and in that sense, we were okay. […] And more than anything, I think just having my fiancé, my cousin, who was here visiting, having each other.

At the end of the interview, when I asked what brought her hope when she thinks about her future, she talked about her fiancé who she was marrying just two weeks after of our interview, and the support she has from both their families:

> I know it's super cheesy, but my relationship with my fiancé. I really do love him, and we get along so well and he's really my best friend in so many ways. So when I think about us in ten years and hopefully being able to go on vacation or just if we do have a family, what that would be like, and I have two little wiener dogs and we treat them like our children for now. So that gives me a little bit of hope, just knowing that we have a good relationship and I'm sure we're going to do our best to face these challenges together, and I'm not alone in that. And that we both have our families, thankfully like his parents and my parents are both still here, and if we ever want that support, I can count on them as well.

Maria expressed significant concern about her financial security, the current political landscape, and the environment, yet her answers through most of the interview were tied to some sense of possibility or hope (a phenomena I discuss later). However, about an hour into the

interview, when discussing the decision to have children considering climate change concerns, her tone changed, and her answers become more exhausted as she became slightly less cheerful. Of course, this could have been for a variety of reasons unrelated to the interview subject matter, but the shift was noticeable. Throughout the next half hour, it was when discussing her fiancé or her family that a language of hope reemerged. For example, when I asked if her anxieties about external risks—like COVID or climate change—impact her day-to-day life, she ended her answer saying:

> I think I…I and my fiancé and my family, we did okay. We made it out okay and that's the best we can ask for it.

Kristy was recently married and plans to start having children soon. She expressed confidence in raising children because of the financial and emotional support from her family that she knows she can rely on:

> And I think also like we both come from families where the parents are still together. Our grandparents were all together, like aunts and uncles, all together. […] And so that definitely plays a role, I think […] I mean, I think a huge part of it too is like both of our families now live in [current location] and like, we would have not just financial support if we need it, but physical support in having children; we would have babysitters. We would have…our parents are here, and our siblings are here. And that, I think, plays a huge role…

The importance of a nuclear zone of security is emphasized by the work of Émile Durkheim. Although he is best known for his theories on the social cohesion of large groups of society—most famously through the function of religion—Durkheim extends his argument to the importance of friendships "which implies cohesion between two human beings […] viewed as a micro-level form of solidarity" (Wallace and Hartley, 1988). In addition to romantic partnerships, many respondents found security in their broader familial and social networks for stable forms of support. Smaller societies—and even micro-economies in the form of familial

financial support—were developed to replace a larger society whose function of providing social cohesion has, at times, failed.

c. Personal

The personal zone of security is unattached from more socialized forms of stability and connectivity. It has no geographic location, no attachment to tangible goods—such as money, housing, or a career—and is not necessarily assured through social cohesion. It is what exists in our internal self that allows us to remain hopeful, propel us through each day (even when getting through each day is a daunting task) and combat fears of insecurity. The personal zone of security is developed through confidence and ego, mental well-being, and internal belief systems. It is what is left when other zones of security have disappeared, or were never there in the first place.

Out of the twelve young millennials I interviewed, Luis was the only one who described adhering to strong and consistent religious rituals. His church was both where he attended services and community events, as well as where he worked as a teacher. He described growing up as a Fundamental Baptist, but ultimately left as he didn't agree with "the theology of it all" and found a different Christian community. We might think of Luis' religious belief as a "social action;" his religion was often practiced with others, and he frequently discussed the importance of his close, religious community (Weber, 1914). But Luis' personal relationship with Jesus and his studying of biblical texts is what provided guidance, comfort, and personal security during the most difficult times of his life. He found community *through* Christianity, but it was not through community that he remained religious. As Weber explains, "religious behavior is not social if it is simply a matter of contemplation or of solitary prayer" (Weber, 1914, 225). I discuss Luis' faith to emphasize the difference between the personal and socialized or

geographic zones of security. Like Luis, other participants talked about their personal will and devotion to remaining hopeful, yet theirs was grounded instead in a secular conviction rather than religious practice. Maintaining purpose and resiliency during challenging times, whether through religious belief or an inner will or fight, is encapsulated by a *personal* zone of security.

d. Ontological Continuity

Through a mental calculation that balances the potential threat of external risks and the believed protection granted from internal zones of security, I suggest that each of my respondents based their life-course decisions on a perception, or an estimate, of their own *ontological continuity*. Ontological continuity includes an assessment of both the timeline and severity of potential external risks that might affect one's existence, or the existence of one's offspring as children were often talked about as an extension—both politically and socially—of the respondents. It also includes not just physical life, but the imagined ability to maintain a sense of purpose or a connection with society; a prediction of when Laing's "ontological insecurity," or Luke's "screaming at a corner of the street," might ensue. Whereas Anthony Gidden's "ontological security"—formulated in direct response to R.D. Laing's ontological insecurity—is rooted in the belief that a sense of identity is created through trust in the structures and "abstract systems" which make up our world, many of my respondents had a weak, or wavering, belief that stability would continue externally, but described remaining internally stable through these fears (or so far as they shared with me). I discuss these findings, which at times might appear paradoxical, through the observation that my respondents developed cognitive schemas—possession of security, necessity of hope and adaptability, and accepted hopelessness—that were used to understand the relationships between ontological continuity, ontological security, and external risk.

III. Cognitive Schemas

These cognitive schemas provided a framework for each participant to understand their

own vulnerability in response to the magnitude of external threat to which they might be

exposed. The respondents who felt secure in their, and their future children's (if planning on

having biological children), ontological continuity often relied on a *possession of security.* The

accepted hopelessness schema was used by those who felt little hope that global conditions

would improve. And those who felt large amounts of anxiety about external risk, yet remained

hopeful about their ontological continuity, relied on a *necessity of hope and adaptability* schema.

I want to make clear that the schemas used to conceptualize one's ontological continuity did not

necessarily correlate with heightened or lowered amounts of anxiety, and they do <u>not</u> correlate

with the political, social, or environmental protection action of the respondent. I make no ethical

claims in assigning these schemas.

The schemas allowed these young millennials to build timelines of their futures despite

living in an unpredictable world. For example, after she expressed her deep anxiety about climate

change and talked to me about her plans to start having children soon, I asked Kristy if she

imagines that her kids will have kids. She offered a detailed timeline of her own imagined

ontological continuity, and the ontological continuity of future generations:

> I think I do imagine my kids having kids. I think after that is where I'm…I feel
> like things are more questionable because I think…I feel like it's so
> unpredictable…assuming…let's say I have kids in the next five years, right? And
> they have kids, you know, 30 years after that. That's less than 50 years from now.
> And I don't think my time frame is like, I don't feel like things are going to
> completely fall apart by 50 years from now. I think my…I think things could get
> bad after that, so I think that's where that's why I think that that next generation
> would be like, I'm not having kids, I'm not doing that because I don't want to
> contribute to whatever the problem is at that time. That feels a lot less predictable
> to me. I think that the next 50 or so years feel more predictable, even though I
> think things will change. I don't think that like the Earth is going to explode, you

know, like I don't think everything is going to completely fall apart in the next 50 years, I think after that is kind of where I feel like I think, yeah, I mean, I think nowadays when you're thinking about bringing another generation into the world, it's like a full essentially 80 years, right, that you should be considering maybe longer, maybe less. But like, you know, average lifespan right now is 70 to 80 years, wherever you are. So I think like, okay, if I bring kids into the world in the next few years, like do I think 80 years from then they will be like, things will still be okay? I mean, I'm not entirely sure at the end there [laughs] but I feel like, you know, the most significant parts of that, yes, I think things will be okay.

Included in Kristy's account is both a prediction of the quality of future life, as well as a prediction of when things will start to get significantly worse, or unlivable. When combined, they build her perception of ontological continuity. Even though she does not imagine the Earth will explode in the next fifty years, she imagines there will be changes to how we live our lives—but nothing so catastrophic that her children would choose to not continue producing life. Towards the end of eighty years from now, she believes ontological continuity is less promised.

There was a clear correlation between a respondent's confidence in their ontological continuity—at least through their lives and their children's lives—and plans to have biological children (*Figure 2*). As such, I offer that life-course decision-making patterns are made through a calculation of one's ontological continuity, as even those who were unsure if they wanted biological children for reasons unrelated to anxieties about external risks, talked about their "narratives of the future" within some sort of timeline of livability or environmental comfortability and expressed little concern about other people their age having biological children.

Many respondents explained that they believed they—and their children—would be okay because of the protection granted to them through internal zones of security, however, there was not a strong correlation between perceived internal security and vulnerability to external risks *(Figure 3)*. This is curious, as it might be imagined that the more confidence one has in their

Confidence in Ontological Continuity

low   waivering   high

Concerns about Producing Biological Children?

yes

Chase

Rachael   Belle

some

Athena
Maria
Luis

Kristy
Chris

no

Patrick

Luke

Oliver

Samantha
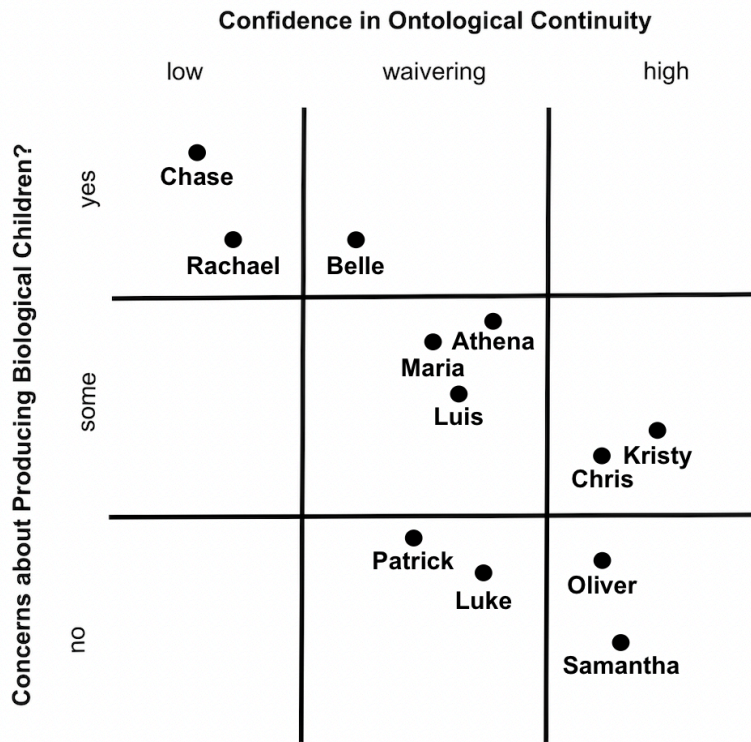
Figure 2. Biological Childbearing and Ontological Continuity

Perceived Security from External Risk

weak   wavering   strong

Perceived Internal Security

weak

Luke   Luis

wavering

Athena
Belle
Maria
Patrick

Chase   Rachael

strong

Chris
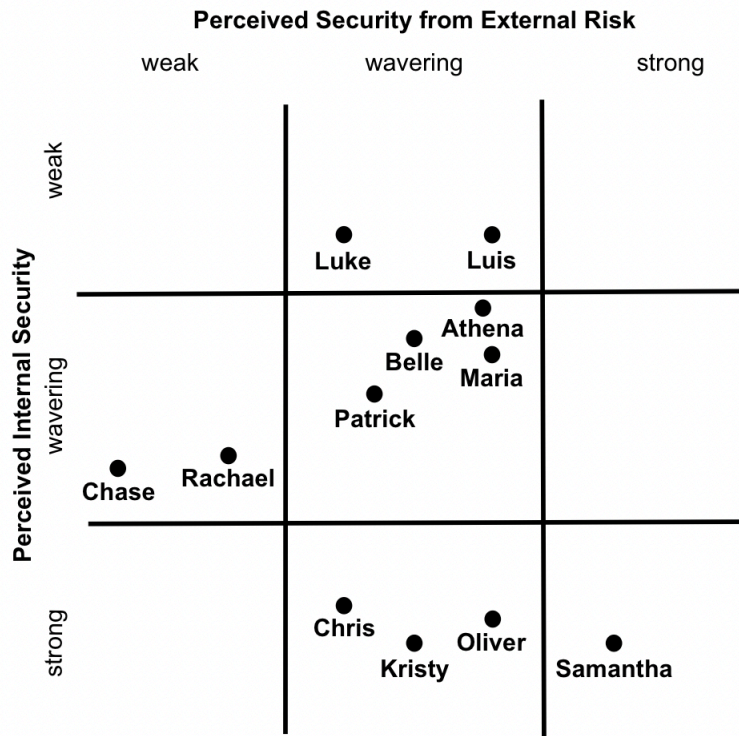
Oliver

Kristy

Samantha

Figure 3. Perceived Internal Security and Perceived Security from Internal Risk

internal security, the more confidence they would have in their protection from external threat.

For example, Chase and Rachel had relatively strong internal security. Although Rachael was worried about her financial security, she also described herself as economically privileged—as did Chase—and was able to rely on her family for housing when she needed to save money between undergraduate and graduate school. Additionally, both Rachael and Chase talked about the security and safety they gained from their romantic partners. Yet, both had an extremely low perception of safety from external risk.

Luis had a much stronger belief in his ontological insecurity than Rachael and Chase but described having far less internal security. Luis' family immigrated to the United States from Mexico when he was very young, and he discussed the constant insecurity of being an unnaturalized immigrant:

> I was brought as a young person and I'm in DACA, you know, Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals. And so, with that, we don't take anything for granted because we know that what we have is…it's almost temporary. You never know when you'll lose it. We know that we're still, we're still not stable. So, yeah, that's something that we're very mindful of. […] It was like my dad said, your job is to provide always, you know, so no matter how you do it, whether it be me in my teaching job or me going out and hanging drywall, you know, it's…I got to keep doing something to be able to bring some money back, right? It's just, you know, the, the fear is always there. Always there. You know, the instability. Where are you going to get your money from? How are you going to pay your bills next month or so? Yeah, that for sure, it's always with you.

Like many respondents, Luis talked about the horror of the Trump era, but also the unique stress he felt as an immigrant in the months leading up to the 2020 presidential election thinking that Donald Trump might win again:

> And for me, it was just like another four years…man. You know, like, how am I going to get through? How is…how are my people going to get through, you know, and are minorities going to get through?

For Luis, the prospect of another four years of Trump meant the possibility of being forced from the country he has lived in his entire life. As mentioned earlier, he also expressed deep anxiety about what might happen in the 2024 election and the political instability that could follow. Yet, throughout our interview he had a narrative more hopeful than some of the respondents who had more tangible forms of security. This is just one example of how, overall, the correlation was weak between an individual's internal security and their perceived protection from external risk. I suggest that another way the respondents used the cognitive schemas: to provide a mediator between anxieties of external risks and an acceptance of the consequences of those risks. I develop this phenomenon further in the following analysis of each cognitive schema used by these young millennials.

a. Possession of Security

Samantha is twenty-five years old and currently works as a teacher at a private school in the Pacific Northwest. She lives with her husband who she met in the dorms during her freshman year of college and with whom she recently bought a house. She explained to me that she decided to be a teacher because she has never had to worry about finances and could choose a career based only on her passions. Her family has always provided emotional as well as financial support and she described herself as being able to "bounce back from things really easily" as she has an inherently sunny and trusting personality. She plans to try having children in one and a half years and told me she originally planned on having two children, but the pandemic made her want to have three or more because "not being able to interact with lots of different people every day […] triggered something in me that was like, 'you need to have a million children.'" Even over Zoom I could tell that Samantha was extremely outgoing and personable, and I understood why she wanted to have a lot of kids: she really, really likes people.

Throughout our conversation, Samantha responded to my questions about political events, environmental destruction, and her future with a narrative of hope: a belief that things will—generally—be okay for her. Her approach in maintaining this optimism is twofold: nihilism and idealism. To me, these two philosophies appeared to be in conflict with each other, but Samantha explained she gets her nihilism from her mom and her idealism from, just, who she is. Her mom is a chorus director and tends to get stressed about the little things, like a new arrangement she wants to try at rehearsal. When her mom gets stressed, she uses nihilism to ease her anxiety:

> She says, 'We could all die tomorrow, right?' to make herself feel better. This is not worth worrying about. She likes to say the chorus she directs is a barbershop chorus and she likes to say, 'There are no barbershop emergencies' to calm down. […] The nihilism is more of a coping mechanism for not stressing out about things that could actually be problematic.

There is a comfort for Samantha's mom—and consequentially for Samantha—even though the world is unpredictably dangerous. Therefore, there is no need to stress over the little things, because something "actually problematic" could always happen. Samantha's idealism comes from who she is at her core and the type of life she has lived up to this point:

> I'm just sort of a fundamentally trusting person who sees the positive things and in other people who are in my life. […] So I guess I would say that idealism is kind of inherent. Like I have always had kind of a sunny personality, according to my family. I bounce back from things really easily and I have not had a very difficult life. Things don't faze me very much.

Her idealism and her nihilism led to cohesive life narrative: The little things in life are not worth stressing about, because there is always a possibility for something bad to happen. And the bad things will probably happen regardless of whether they are stressed about, so it is best to just keep going. I asked how this philosophy applies to national or global crises—as we had discussed the Black Lives Matter protests, the COVID pandemic, and climate change earlier in

our conversation—and she explained that, in terms of climate events, she will talk to her husband who is much more scientific than she is. She will ask him, "This is climate change, right?" and he will respond, "Maybe, but we can't really prove it." Then they will have a "scientific conversation" about what they know for sure, and what they don't know.

She did not seem as certain as most of the respondents in this sample that climate change was going to have a large impact on her life, but she made clear that *even if* the "world is absolute chaos, we're setting ourselves up so well relative to the general population." And later, reflecting on the last few years:

> Even through the chaos, things have worked out for me because I'm so privileged and supported, and have this giant safety net…it gives me hope because why wouldn't it continue? My safety net, I would say, and my privilege just mean that I don't have to worry so existentially about things.

Samantha does not discount the external risks which loom as potential threats, yet she feels confident that her future will be okay because of the internal security she possesses. She also described wanting to have children because she knows that "no matter what the world looks like for my kids, it will be better because they're there." She frequently discussed the importance of "being useful," and felt confident that her family would be able to contribute positively to whatever problems they might face. Her nihilism (which reminds her the world is unpredictably threatening) was ultimately overpowered by her idealism: things will be okay for her and her family because, well, why wouldn't they be?

Chris expressed much more fear about climate change than Samantha, and throughout our conversation frequently discussed it as an existentially important issue for his and future generations. During the COVID-19 pandemic he sold his car—for environmental reasons—and tries to bike as much as he can. He frequently talked about the importance of enacting change on a local level, as he had largely lost faith in the federal government to enact the type of policy

reforms he thinks are necessary. For example, "the dependence on fossil fuels and the expansion

of bike and pedestrian infrastructure and transit infrastructure to replace automobile

infrastructure" are goals he believes should be prioritized, but he does not imagine will be

worked toward "fast enough":

> I think there are a lot of things in Europe that are maybe on the table, that in
> America will take a hundred years, or near close, in my opinion. Um, which is
> unfortunate because, you know, we've got a climate crisis with, you know, the
> heat dome of the last year, wildfires, you know, extreme weather events in the
> wintertime, tropical places as well. So…yeah, I think, you know, taking
> significant action on climate change, I think is one of the things that isn't going to
> change.

He went on to discuss other policy issues that he does not believe are going to be nationally

addressed:

> I see also like gender identity issues, you know, all these anti-trans laws that are
> going into place across the country. There's going to be like safe havens of states
> because the Supreme Court is… the way that is seated right now isn't going to put
> federal laws in place for gender laws, abortion laws. So there's going to be these
> havens of states that, you know…the young people are going to be flocking to
> eventually, that's going to come with its own set of issues for population growth
> and being able to accommodate that, but you're going to have a vast majority of
> red states that are going to be completely hostile to certain groups of people,
> which is unfortunate, because as much as we are like separate individual states
> like, the people that live in red states aren't exclusively supportive [of those laws],
> like there's people that are vulnerable to all these things. So, yeah, I mean, those
> are like among things that I don't think I'm going to change. I don't think we're
> going to get really anywhere nationally on police brutality or actually reforming
> the police. [An exhausted sigh] Yeah…that's about, I think, off the top of my
> head, what I can think of.

Chris here describes a constellation of external threats that he does not believe are going to be

addressed in an adequate amount of time. When I asked if he and his girlfriend of eight years

plan to have children, he explained:

I wouldn't doubt it if we had one kid. Um…but would be kind of surprised if we ended up having two. I think there's the financial perspective, there's the environmental perspective. And just like everything in between.

Considering the exhaustive list of global and social threats Chris mentioned earlier, I asked if he accounted for those concerns when deciding to have children. He offered a few reasons why he still plans to have a biological child: humans' capacity to be "resilient and innovative", the desire to bring "decent people" into the world, and the ability to be in a more protected, local community. These were, generally, the three main reasons that all four respondents (Samantha, Oliver, Kristy, and Chris) who relied on a "possession of security" schema gave when I asked if they were anxious about having biological children[2]. Despite Samantha, Oliver, Kristy, and Chris being concerned about environmental and social issues at varying levels, they each relied on a narrative of general security to determine ontological continuity would be afforded to—at the very least—both their generation and their future children's generation. The narrative of security included both a faith in the ability for the world to be resilient towards existential risks, if they do in fact ripen into threat, as well as a reliance on internal zones of security.

Oliver and I discussed the types of tweets that helped to develop this project—which he too has seen—in which people consider the world falling apart, for whatever reason, in twenty, thirty, forty years from now. I asked if he thought people who tweeted predictions like that *actually* believed them to be true, or if it was something just said to be humorous, or "edgy":

> OLIVER: In terms of the actual belief, I think they do believe that, and are very scared by that.
> NATHALIE: And it sounds like you're not…?

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[2] Oliver was unsure if he wanted to have children, in general, yet said that he is "less worried about bringing a kid into the world with the threat of climate catastrophe" for reasons similar to those that Chris provided.

OLIVER: I…Okay, like, forty years ago was 1982. I feel like during the Cold War, it's like the world was going to be ending like any day. And people lived with that anxiety for decades. History is just like literally full—like at every single point in history—you can find a group of people, or maybe just everyone, feeling like the world is ending right? Or like, we're not going to get past this, and we always do. […] I think humans are incredibly smart and probably the strongest force that we know of is human's survival instinct, and yeah...so, I'm confident the world will be here in 40 years. I'm not worried about that. But I am worried about like, a billion people dying from a climate change catastrophe or starvation and flooding and all that stuff. But I'm not worried about that affecting me materially because like just like in terms of global statistics, me and every single person I know are in the top one percent of global citizens in terms of like wealth and education and where we live, and we don't need to worry about climate change.

Within Oliver's answer are two narratives that help him orient towards a belief in his ontological continuity. First, is the idea that throughout history humans have been through difficult times and yet, we are still here. He gave another analogy: "people probably thought the world was ending during World War II, and then you had the baby boom." Society's past crises gave him hope that external risks can be met with the force of human's survival instinct. Also, however, Oliver still worries that crises like climate change will impact many people on Earth, but not him and those in his social networks. To imagine a stable future for himself, he relied on his privilege of being wealthy and educated. His perception of protection mirrored Samantha's articulation that because of her privilege and financial and familial safety net, she is less likely to be affected by global risks and threats.

Chris did not use a rhetoric of privilege to discuss his ontological continuity but instead spoke of his hope—and belief—that local communities will find resiliency and security despite compounding external risk, and thus, he too still relied of a general narrative of security. This narrative, in part, came from the work he did at his affordable housing nonprofit:

> We're doing some really awesome housing developments, and the agency as a whole is really shifting towards being more climate resilient, eliminating fossil fuels from our buildings, more natural gas supply, solar energy efficiency, things like that. So that's really exciting for me. And I think there's some positive changes happening within the housing policy realm, within the transportation realm in [current location], where I find a lot of joy and where there are nonprofits or just like city initiatives that I'm really supportive of.

Chris was an active participant in building the communities that he, his family, and his community, may need to rely on for their future security and safety. For example, he talked about recently attending a protest to stop a highway expansion in his city that would significantly increase carbon emissions. He also mentioned attending the BLM protests in the summer of 2020, and he was extremely knowledgeable about his area's local politics. Consequentially, he, as well as Kristy and Samantha, stressed their decision to have children in terms of "raising the next generation in a way that is thoughtful." Producing biological children was a way for these respondents' values to survive beyond their own lives. As Chris explained, "I would rather there be decent people in the world than let, like, more prominent people lead us into our doom."

What is striking, perhaps, about these four respondents is that they demonstrated varied levels of concern about the external risks which might affect their lives yet planned to have biological children (or for Oliver, was unconcerned about the prospects of having children given issues like climate change). They believed their own ontological continuity would be stable through at least their generation and their children's generation. Whether through personal, nuclear, or communal zones of security, these respondents believed they would be afforded some level of protection in their futures, even if the world around them threatened instability.

b. Accepted Hopelessness

Rachael and Chase were the two respondents in this sample of young millennials to express that they did not plan on having biological children. They both discussed the possibility of adopting children in the future but felt certain that the world would not provide their children with a comfortable—and for Chase especially—livable future. Rachael told me:

> I've had like explicit fears of like, why would you bring a kid a new kid into the world knowing that, like the Earth is going to be like on fire when they're adults all the time? I mean, it already is. But you know, I definitely have visions of what the world will be like when they're adults and I'm long gone and it's not good…it's, it's scary. I think that's…I think that climate change in particular is something that lends itself to like how I feel about having kids right now.

Chase provided me with the shortest timeline of when he believed the Earth would be "an undeniable shithole." When I asked if he was planning on having children with his girlfriend, he responded in a tone that almost implied my question was rhetorical:

> Yeah, yeah, no. Definitely <u>don't</u> want to conceive a child. So, adoption in the future like, say, *say* the world didn't end in 7 or 8 years, that would be great. You know, it's possible we could turn things around. So like adoption could be, you know, a potential. If [my girlfriend] and I were to say we want to have kids, it wouldn't be like, we want to make a kid. It would be like, we want to adopt a kid who's already alive and needs a home, rather than adding to the, you know, massive population that's going to suffer.

Chase's word choice highlights how he makes decisions about his life-course. He spoke with the assumption that a massive population will suffer; his decision to not conceive children is not predicated upon a fear of risk, but upon a future predetermined. Rachael did not provide an exact timeline of when she imagines the "end" will come, but discussed her frightening imaginations of the future when her hypothetical children would be adults, as well as the political and social threats that pose a current risk to her and her social network. Rachael is Japanese American and discussed how she was forced to reflect on the United States' racism when Trump was first elected. And then, with the increase in hate crimes against Asian-Americans during the COVID-

19 pandemic, she began to reflect on her past, and understand herself to have been personally

affected and harmed by racism, even though, at the time, she often disregarded her own

experiences:

> And obviously, I'm not Black, so I can't say that like I felt personally victimized
> or anything like that. But it was kind of a buildup of like all of that fear that arose
> when Trump got elected of just knowing like, 'Oh,' I didn't realize that enough
> people were complacent in being racist to the point that he could even get elected.
> You know, even though he lost the popular vote, it was still kind of like, 'This is
> like not the country that I thought I lived in,' and that all kind of came to a head.
> […] And then I think it resurfaced again this past year with all the 'Stop Asian
> Hate' stuff […]. One of the things I got really curious about was like my own
> heritage. And, you know, even though I lived in a pretty diverse area, we didn't
> have a lot of Asian people at my school, so I felt like a true minority. […] And so
> I think the George Floyd stuff kind of triggered curiosity about my own place in
> society, how I was viewed by others and also like how I had internalized
> everything that comes along with being a minority […] Yeah, I think that it woke
> me up a little bit to the fact that it is relevant and immediate to me, but at the same
> time, like there is still a lot of unpacking of all that internalization and all that,
> really just like, ignorance to what I was doing to myself mentally for all those
> years.

The racism she has witnessed, specifically since the 2016 election—along with the climate-

related fears she mentioned earlier in our interview—corresponded to her anxiety about new

people being born into the world:

> Since the 2016 election is kind of like when I started to have thoughts of that
> nature, where I was starting to know people who are having kids […] that like
> really scared me at the time because I was like, 'How can you like, bring a child
> into this world and feel good about it? That they're going to have a good and safe
> life in this climate?' And I think that hasn't gone away at all. I still get that feeling
> whenever, whenever someone I know, or especially someone I love, has a kid.
> Like there is a part of me where the anxiety is triggered by that because, I mean,
> you can't know. You can't know that everything is going to be okay with your
> kid.

Rachael and Chase both derived their loss of hope that an adequate response to climate change would come from the lack of action they witnessed following the Black Lives Matter movement. For them the reforms that were demanded for during the Black Lives Matter protests and through the subsequent lobbying and political pressure are of "obvious moral" importance. If we are unable to rally around the belief that Black lives do, in fact, matter, they felt little hope that a collective, non-partisan coalition would develop to prevent environmental destruction. Chase frequently attended the BLM protests during the summer of 2020 and looking back, characterizes those months as both inspiring and disheartening:

> I think that if everyone got together and was like we're only going to fly once a year or whatever, you know, like that would fight against this. That would force those big companies to stop producing as much as they are. And so like, yeah, we could all band together and it would be pretty sick. But like, we can't even do that about simple, like the most obvious, you know, moral issue. Right? We went to quite a few [BLM protests] and like that was obviously really inspiring in terms of collective action. Because being out there with all those humans who you know are fighting for, like I said, the most obvious moral issue like the Black Lives Matter movement, […] And as inspiring as it was to be out there during those protests, here we are a year later, and the same shit is happening every day. So even with so many people collectivizing, it just goes to show you that, I guess with climate change as well, you know, even if the people collectivized, like, would it? Would it be enough to fight those massive systems and corporations that have been in place for, like all time? You know. So that was…that really inspiring and disheartening.

And for Rachael, she imagined that dismantling—or at the very least reforming—racist institutions is a goal perhaps more feasible than stopping climate change. And yet, she still sees failure:

> And then like other issues, I just I guess it's like, maybe they're more infuriating because it seems like compared to climate change—I don't want to minimize anything significant—but it feels like reforming or abolishing the police is a lot easier than turning climate change around. And so, in some ways more infuriating because it's like, what are we? What are we doing? We can't do anything right.

While difficult to implement due to political and economic roadblocks, Chase was confident that the technology existed to significantly decrease our consumption of fossil fuel. The knowledge that the technology exists, makes him even more frustrated and hopeless:

> But now I realized, you know, we already have that technology, that technology has already been invented and just hasn't been implemented. Like we could, we really could be powering the whole U.S. on solar panels really easily. But like, they just don't. There's not money in it. And so, you know, like even if we did that, for example, it's still like planes, airplanes are actually the leading contributor. It's, it's also the industry is increasing, like they're making more, more, and more planes every year and there's more flights every year and they're just dumping fuel into the sky. […] And then, you know, just realizing, for example, if we have enough solar panels to power the U.S., but we're still not…Like technology is not going to be the solution. Like it already exists, but they're just like not implementing it.. So inventing something like [electric plane engines], unless it's profitable enough, would not fix the problem. And like, I don't know how to do both of those things are right? Like, make something that's going to fix everything and also make rich people richer, right? Yeah. I think there's like contradiction. A huge contradiction, obviously.

Chase and Rachael express their narrative of hopelessness from an observation that social justice issues which should be universally supported remain divisive and polarizing, and, even if the collective were to organize—as was done during the summer of 2020—the institutions which contribute to systematic violence and oppression are massively effective in resisting substantive change. Like Chase, Rachael also discussed the unique difficulty of addressing climate change within the constraints of an economy which she believes make progressive and meaningful action infeasible:

> I want to believe that people in politics will prioritize this soon. But it's also the single most fundamentally like threatening thing to life on Earth, right? And the fact that nothing's happened like intellectually, I feel like I know that it's not going to change. But there's like also, I think a little bit of acceptance that maybe comes along with that fact, because it's not like it's new, with climate change. It's

kind of just like the whole…the way our entire economy works makes it really not feasible for even more progressive politicians to do anything about it. It just feels like we're…It feels so hopeless in that sense.

These two young millennials were not nihilistic. As evidenced above, Chase frequently discussed the types of solutions that would lead to a decreased reliance on fossil fuels, and while Rachael wouldn't call it "hope," she believes there "is a distance opportunity for us to turn things around a little bit." Although an opportunity exists, both felt—at this time—it was unrealistic to believe that the opportunity would be utilized meaningfully. Also, both Chase and Rachael described the strong zones of security they possessed. They both had relied on financial support from their families after their undergraduate graduation and mentioned the joy, hope, and security they gained from their romantic partners and friends. Chase and Rachael's rhetoric of security often reflected language of privilege and possession of resources used by the respondents who expected their ontological continuity would be protected, at least, through their and their children's lives. And Chase and Rachel also both grew up imagining themselves having biological children. So why did these two decide that it was too risky, or simply not responsible, to bring new people into the world? I theorize that for Chase and Rachael, their internal security did not matter in their calculation of ontological continuity—the threat of external risk was too severe for any zone of security to provide potential protection. Whereas there was a spectrum of the perceived threat of external risk for those who adopted a "possession of security" schema, I imagine—were there to be a larger sample of young millennials in this study—those who have "accepted hopelessness" would not be persuaded of their ontological continuity even if in possession of strong, internal security. At the end of my interview with Rachael when I asked her what brought her hope when she thinks about her future and she gave me an answer—still— laced with threads of hopelessness:

…[my fiancé and I] really have started to build a life and we have good jobs and like are discovering more about our earning potential every day, like those things are valuable to me. And also that we have each other and we have the full support of both of our families, which is amazing and probably the best thing I have in my life. And there are certainly people out there that make me hopeful, like all of Bernie's protégés, AOC and the squad, Elizabeth Warren, like people are out there fighting the fight and it gives me hope. But it's also stressful to think about because I don't know if that's enough. I mean, it's not enough.

c. Necessity of Hope and Adaptability

Athena currently works as a mental health therapist for adults in the Pacific Northwest. She is twenty-five years old and got her master's in social work immediately after completing her undergraduate degree. In addition to always knowing that she wanted to help people, she wanted to do social work because her mother had as well. Athena was eight when her mother was murdered, in front of her, by her stepbrother. In the years before her mother's passing, she had been subjected to extreme abuse from her brothers. At times she was scared she might die and was hospitalized multiple times. After her mother's death, her father went "completely went off the rails for two years," as his prior "functioning" drug and gambling addiction became significantly worse. In the years that followed she, and her siblings, had to completely fend for themselves—without a mother and with an absent father—until they began living with their former babysitter. But even then, her home was not a safe place. Athena's adoptive mother "didn't favor her" and she was the least favorite child. She knows because she was told. Athena attended a school where the student body was mostly rich, white students and so, as a mixed-race person, she was unable to find a space of security or comfort. Athena concluded talking about her childhood by explaining "from 0 to 18—not that there weren't good times—but for the general part when looking at people's life situations, pretty shitty." At this point, that much at least, I had pieced together. But what I had not yet understood was how the person who just

shared with me one of the most horrifying childhoods I could imagine, beamed back at me through the computer screen. She was goofy and she seemed happy. Like genuinely happy.

I asked her what coping skills or mechanisms ("to put it lightly") she had used to get to where she is today. She talked about her best friend who she met when she was nine, who also came from a "really traumatic household." But ultimately:

> How most children kinda go through…or cope with childhood trauma…sometimes there's nothing and you just go the next day until you no longer feel…I don't know, a really good question that I haven't really thought about.

Important to Athena's account of how people survive trauma, hardship, fears of death, ideations of suicide, is that you can help yourself. She explained her own "self-help journey" she embarked on when she got to college and was finally free from the traumatic and abusive environments to which she had become accustomed:

> I googled how to deal with this […] and listening to podcasts and books and like sort of meditating and doing anything I could to stop feeling like I wanted to die. It got real fucking old, really quick. So I felt like I had no choice. It was adapt or die.

Athena's "adapt or die" mentality was discussed by many of my respondents who faced threats to their personal survival or struggled with their emotional and mental health. After Belle and I had discussed a range of global crises—from the recent rise in American bigotry to climate change—she told me "it feels like it's not going to…like I feel like we're never going to feel like we can kind of exhale and like, relax." Given this hopeless imagination of the future, I asked what propels her to put one foot in front of the other[3]:

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[3] At this point in the interviews, I usually apologized for the depressing line of questioning and offered for us to not talk about this. I struggled asking this question to people who had shared with me their stories of depression, mental health struggles, and trauma. And I thank my respondents immensely for continuing on with, what I imagine, was a difficult interview at times.

Um, I just constantly…I need to be excited about something at all times, that kind of keeps me going. Like, right now I am really excited about being proposed to and that's keeping me going…I'm still going to live my life, which is maybe such a gross display of white privilege… But like I could easily, with like just my depression or anxiety, I could easily get sucked in and like, never want to do anything and just like, stay in bed.

For Belle, it was continuing to live her life that allowed her to, well, live her life. She frequently discussed the importance of her boyfriend and the security and joy he provided, but in general described to me a process of adapting to new circumstances and pushing herself to the next day, even when it is immensely difficult.

Luke grew up facing financial insecurity and described experiencing what he called an internal "personal suffering." He said his family was "middle class" before 2008, but then his father went bankrupt. Although his family was able to keep up appearances—living in a nice house in a nice neighborhood—he talked about living with "literally negative money" and for dinner, "a lot of noodles and shredded cheese kinda thing." I asked Luke how he felt during that time in his life, and he explained: "I was definitely afraid, but trusted my dad. […] I knew he would always provide." After his college graduation, Luke moved across the country with a small amount of savings, no job, and no connections. He recalled:

It was pretty scary [laughing] I think I just suffocated any rational thought of, 'This is a bad idea,' and just sort of like, 'Well, let's see what happens.'

Luke trusted himself. He has been in California for six years now, surviving, but still lives in economic precarity—paycheck-to-paycheck, job to job. He talked about the several times he had been underpaid, unpaid, or forced to quit a job because of mistreatment from his employers. When I asked Luke if he remembers how he felt during March of 2020, he said that COVID was "actually like a gift from god" because at that point in his career he had no connections, no job,

and no prospects of finding work. "Serendipitously," the world shutting down allowed him to collect unemployment much more easily.

About halfway through our interview, after talking about the summer of 2020, I asked Luke if the global events of the past few years were ever stressful for him:

> LUKE: …Like it did feel like the end of the world, in a way. But I was just sort of like, you know, I don't know. I always have like a stupid sense of hope or I'm just like, 'Oh, I'll probably be okay.'
> NATHALIE: Where do you think that sense of hope came from?
> LUKE: Hmmm…honestly, I don't know, that's a really good question. I don't know…I guess I've always been so introverted that I always felt like anything that happens could not be that bad. Almost in a spiritual sense, just sort of like the Earth abides, like, [almost sarcastically] it'll work itself out. It felt like we were acting out a drama of like, what's happening internally with each of us. And it was just happening on like a symbolic, like group level. Of like people fighting and disagreeing and feeling cheated. And so, I was like, it'll figure itself out. It always does.

Luke had difficulty identifying the source of his creation of hope. Like Belle and Athena, the ability to engage and interact with an outside world that produced insecurity and instability came from an intangible, inner strength that could not be described as an attached to any object—like money or a house—or any person. These responses were entirely different from those of the respondents who used a "possession of security" schema and often tied their formulation of hope to some sort of system or social structure on which they could rely. For Oliver and Samantha, it was their wealth and resources, for Kristy, it was her family, and for Chris, his girlfriend and local community. When Luke responded to my question about his own source of hope, his answer quickly devolved into a statement about Earth, as well: the Earth's chaos is symbolic of our internal suffering and disagreement. I suggest that for the six respondents who adopted a "necessity of hope and adaptability" schema—Athena, Belle, Luke, Luis, Maria, and Patrick— the narratives used to understand their personal survival were reapplied to retain a sense of hope

in their ontological continuity and the continuity of the world in the face of external threats. As

Athena explains:

> As humans who are so self-aware, we love to ask the question: How did you
> survive it? […] And the reality is our bodies just survive. Like anyone put in my
> situation, watching their mother get murdered…you would survive it, literally,
> anybody. Like nobody's going to die on the spot, like our…nature is adapt or die.
> Like, that's it. Those are the two options. […] sometimes you don't have anything,
> and you just wait for time to pass and you just do your best. So that's kind of how
> I've been feeling the last few years, and that's how I feel like everyone's kind of
> been feeling and like, you know, you'll see it right now [referencing COVID], the
> world is opening back up.

Often these respondents' hope came not from thinking about the future but from the ways

that we have survived hardships in the past. Belle, early in our conversation had told me,

"Everything with like Russia and Ukraine, like, it's really, really scary. And I like don't know,

like I feel like. I try to be positive, but I am really scared that like this is going to kind of become

like the new normal." And then later, when talking about climate change, she imagined that we

might depart from this new normal:

> I guess I have like some aspect of hope because I guess climate change has been
> progressively getting worse. [..] I'm sure you know, during the Great Depression,
> people thought like this was never going to end and it did, like things ended up
> getting okay. And so, and then I think…maybe I'm just…maybe I'm being….I
> don't know if my hope is based in any sort of like fact or like logic. I think it's just
> kind of something that's like keeping me going.

And Patrick—who had just told me how his anxiety about global crises was increasing again

after the recent uptick in COVID cases, the ongoing war in Ukraine, and the possibility that

Trump might be elected again—responded to my inquiring if he thought a state of normalcy

would be present in his future by discussing the Roman Empire:

> I mean, this is super random, but I think about like the Roman Empire and I'm
> like, there were like moments in that civilization's history where it was like crazy.
> And then it was like fine for a hundred years and then it's like crazy again. And

> then they break up. And then now there's two. So I just think about like historical examples of like chaos, and I do think it recedes after time.

Patrick, like Belle, also talked about his struggle with anxiety, and how it manifested itself when thinking about political conflicts, COVID, and climate change. But he maintained an imagination of a future which will be kinder to him, and to others. At the end of our conversation, when I asked Patrick what brings him hope for his future, he told me a bit about his past: growing up in a religious, conservative environment, wondering if he would ever be able to be himself:

> I think going to work and someone is like, 'Hey, what did you do this weekend?,' and I can be like, 'Oh yeah, my boyfriend and I did A, B, and C.' And like no one even blinks. And if you told me ten years ago, I'd be like, 'What are you talking about, there's no way.' So it's things like that. Growing up, I could feel like I was different, and I didn't know if I'd ever be able to be myself or feel normal.

Whether it be depression, anxiety, violence, loss, homophobia, risk of deportation, financial insecurity, these respondents each faced threats to their internal security—and, at times, threats to their own existence—which could not be solved with money or external resources. Often, the only way through was to remain hopeful and to adapt to the environment until things got better. When I was first trying to understand this group of respondents, I jotted down that maybe their fears about external risks and their determination to remain hopeful was due to some form of cognitive dissonance; as it was only these six respondents in the sample who told me that they try to avoid the news, or avoid information, about external risks to protect themselves. Patrick explained he has "to stay willfully ignorant," otherwise he might "crumble under the anxiety" and not "function in [his] day-to-day life." And Luke thinks that "we all feel that intuitively, to trust your rational mind to an extreme is unhealthy." He later exemplified this theory when talking about how he deals with the knowledge of the threat of climate change:

I think there are some scientists who have said something like by 2050…know, like we will run out of energy, right? And it's like, well, like I can read scientific studies and be like, 'Well, that is in my lifetime.' And like, I know the facts, I can put two and two together. Yet I think that if I—this is just, for me, personally—lived my life in a way where I was adhering to that information, I would not be very happy and I would be incredibly anxious and stressed out and probably like debilitated with fear.

You see, if Luke had listened to his rational mind, he would not have moved across the country and started a new life in California. And if Belle listened to her anxieties, she might not be excited about her proposal and the life she has planned with her boyfriend. Patrick grew up not knowing if he would ever be able to be himself, yet there was something—something which maybe cannot be explained—that allowed him to continue on. Athena had to believe that a life existed beyond the violence and trauma that filled her childhood. And now she has plans to move to a new country with her boyfriend. Luis, who was brought to the United States as a young boy, had to remain hopeful as Trump threatened to deport him, his family, and community. Maria, who also grew up with unnaturalized, immigrant parents, paid her way through college by putting her tuition on different credit cards and working to pay each of them off. Her wedding with her fiancé was two weeks after our interview, and she looks forward to having children when it is financially possible. She told me that she can't stop her life for things which we are not entirely certain. For her: "having a little bit of hope, I think is important."

I do not think it would be fair to simply say that these respondents have "cognitive dissonance" about their futures even though at times, the level of fear they had about external risks matched that of Chase and Rachel, and their confidence in ontological security was wavering, if not verging on strong—like Oliver, Samantha, Kristy, and Chris. Maria and Athena both expected to have children, Patrick and Luke expressed that the thought of having biological children was not distressing although they themselves were not sure if they wanted children

(Patrick said he would probably like to adopt to provide a kid with two dads who would let the kid be whoever they want), and Luis and Belle were both extremely unsure about having children. If they were to, it would be in a long, long time. The thought of bringing new life into the world was not unimaginable for these six respondents, as for Chase and Rachael.

The necessity for these six young millennials to remain hopeful was not just a tool—not just a schema—that helped to orient their lives towards the future. It was an embedded and essential part of their stories and of their own, personal survival; a survival that was, for some, never reliant on the possession of internal security. To accept that the world is a hopeless place is simply not an option, because their *own* ontological continuity has depended on their hope and their ability to adapt. Samantha wondered why her financial security and privilege would not continue to protect her, as it had done for her entire life. These six respondents look towards the future to continue to protect them, as it has done in the past.

DISCUSSION

This data contributes to the theoretical writings and empirical data that have helped us to understand how individuals respond to a world that is unstable and insecure. By analyzing these twelve in-depth interviews with young millennials, we see how people's responses to external forces are dependent on their personal demographics, narratives, and sense of internal security. This research has important implications for further studies of political activism, generational pattering, and sociological phenomena produced because of climate change. Most (if not all?) of the sociological research that has focused on millennials and their plans to have children has been quantitative and is unable to explain the reasons *why exactly* there exists a fear to reproduce life, or, why millennials are changing their life plans. Elder hypothesized that life-courses are determined by historical times, the timing of lives, and human agency. This study shows that

each of these factors does, indeed, contribute to life decision-making, and it also shows how these three factors interact with each other. The amount of security each respondent possessed often correlated to the amount of personal agency with which they acted. Rachael and Chase felt constrained by the "historical" variables which exerted pressure onto their personal lives and thus, did not feel free to make life decisions detached from their predictions of the future. The respondents who used a "possession of security" schema, felt free enough from historical forces to act with personal agency. And the respondents who relied on a "necessity of hope and adaptability" narrative often had been restrained by the "historical" and external pressures of their lifetime, such that agency had been often non-existent. Part of their necessity to have hope and to plan for their futures is also a necessity to take back the personal agency that had been wrongfully nonexistent. Lastly, the factors which formed each respondent's life plans were not static. Rachael talked about the impact of the 2016 election on her plans to have children. This "turning point" might have shifted her decision-making about life from a reliance on agency to a fear of external risk. A study might be done in the future to see how life-courses continue to evolve alongside the development of our "risk society," and what global "turning points" influence a significant amount of people to adopt a new schema which orients their life decisions.

In addition to an insight into young millennials' life-course decision-making, this study is also a response to the postmodern theorists who correctly predicted the evolution of modernization and its impact on social life. Beck predicted that risk—in particular, climate change—would eventually cut across demographical boundaries, but not before being distributed in a hierarchal fashion. This is seen through the reliance on privilege for some of these respondents to imagine a safe future. However, although I had everything I needed, and more,

during the Oregon wildfires of 2020, the smoke and air quality affected me and my friends—who have varied amounts of internal security—in frightening ways. My privilege gave me a place to be, protected from the hazardous air, but it did not give me the life I wanted to live as I sheltered. Although the intensity of anxiety about external risk fluctuated throughout these twelve millennials, each was aware of its potential impact on human and environmental life.

In the face of this risk, many of these young millennials expressed fear about their futures. Frank Furedi wrote *Culture of Fear* twenty years ago and suggests that people assume the problems of the new technologies of today will "only ever be known by future generations" (1997, 43). These fears may have been "free-floating" twenty years ago, yet they are vividly imagined—or even already experienced—threats today. Several respondents had explicit predictions—often backed up by scientific data—of the quality of life they might be beholden to in the future. While some of the respondents imagined that a solution might come from technological advancement, most had abandoned hope that these external risks are only "challenges" which could be met adequately with the latest advancement (Bauman 2006, 76). Instead, they stressed the importance of collective action and resistance. Many respondents had lost hope that their individual actions would result in systemic change. But this does not mean that they passively lived in denial (Norgaard, 2011). Kristy explained, "climate change feels unmeasurable, like I don't know what the goalposts are. […] It just feels exhausting, and it makes it even more important to [act], but harder to convince yourself to do it or harder to know what to do." Without any national protocol or messaging about how we can contribute to the slowing down of climate change, collectivizing becomes difficult. More studies that look in-depth at how younger generations feel about their futures—and the changes they wish they could make—might make us all not feel so alone, unable to see our place in the collective.

Finally, Giddens makes a prediction about how these external risks might affect our individual identities. They are surely "disturbing," but I did not witness an "ontological insecurity" from these twelve millennials. Not even from Chase who predicts the Earth will be an undeniable shithole in seven or eight years. Important to Giddens' theory is that our self-identity and ontological security is built through a trust in the systems and institutions which provide protection from the threats of the world. Many of the respondents grew up not trusting the "abstract systems" meant to protect them. How could Maria have trust in a government which threatened to deport their parents? How could Athena trust a state which did not protect her from violence? And why should Patrick trust the institutions which did not allow him to be himself? A foundation of trust—and consequentially, our development of identity—is not only built upon the social structures that create the external. It also comes from within.

CONCLUSION: WHEN THE WORLD WAS AT WAR WE KEPT DANCING

> Is it the end of an era?
> Is it the end of America?
> No
> It's only the beginning
> We'll have a happy ending
> —Lana Del Rey

If the qualitative data collected from these twelve young millennials is representative of their demographic, it would be concluded we live in Beck's theorized "risk society." In exchange for technological advancement, productivity, and modernization, a generation of young people who should be looking towards their futures excited of the uncertainty of endless possibility, instead prepare themselves for the possibilities of threat. Perhaps one of the reasons that more data does not exist about the collective anxiety of the millennial generation is that these respondents continue to live their lives in a seemingly normal way. No one would know why Chase is not going to have biological children unless someone were to ask. Despite an intense

fear that the Earth will be severely damaged by climate change in the next decade, he goes to work, sees his friends, and participates in our social world. He is not screaming at the corner of a street. He is not one of R.D. Laing's patients.

Chris found joy through the work he did to ensure that the buildings and infrastructure in his city are sustainable and that his area becomes more walkable and bikeable. Patrick, who works in architecture, felt excited about the increase in "net-zero" buildings in his city. Belle plans to counsel at-risk youth. Athena often works with adults who have been completely abandoned by the social systems which should protect them. Many of her patients live in shelters or live out of their cars. Some of them were "completely financially stable" until they had a bad accident, or they lost their jobs. She explains:

> I had a few clients who came to me and were going to kill themselves, like they
> came in because they went to the hospital because they tried to kill themselves.
> And weeks later, they're not at all suicidal and they're excited and hopeful for life.
> And just being able to be a part of that feels very rewarding.

What these young millennials want for their futures is hardly lavish. A walkable city, manageable work weeks, racial justice, a reliable income, social safety nets, a clean environment. Despite the failure of our society to provide the pasts, presents, and futures they deserve, they continue to take advantage of the opportunity that still exists to build a world they hope to one day see. The cognitive dissonance that I observed was not that these young millennials continued to "live their lives"—without action or responsibility—as the world was in crisis around them. The tension existed in their continual fight, despite the world failing them in the past and threatening to prevent their futures.

When Chase moved to his current location after college, he wanted to join a team to help build an electric plane engine. He has been working out his own design since junior year of high school but was unable to "break into that industry" and was in no position to "get a group

together to help [him] design and engineer something." When I asked him what gives him hope, he responded:

> I try to give myself hope. Maybe one day I could help design some sort of electric plane engine. I do have hope there, that is I guess a source of hope for me although I've never thought of it that way. But I would a hundred percent say that it is.

Like the respondents who relied on a "necessity of hope and adaptability" schema, what little hope he had, ultimately came from within—the will to create something which did not exist before. He told me that most of his sources of joy are also his sources of hope. His girlfriend, friends, and all his relationships:

> It's like, you know, no matter what happens, it's going to be okay. That kind of hope right. […] Because we are all together. Even if we have to huddle and let the final wave crash over us [laughing] like the very last scene of *Don't Look Up* where they're all at dinner together, and they all know it's happening, but they're just going to share this moment, and all love each other. And I thought it was, like, a perfect ending.

Earlier in our conversation Chase disclosed to me that he had a "big struggle" with depression in high school. Eventually, he went to therapy and is doing better, even though he says it will stick with him forever. He has learned to tell himself that things will be okay and to see the positive side. He tells himself, "Why would you end it all when you can just ride it out? You know, that kind of thing?" If we fail to use the opportunity we still possess to collectivize, resist, and imagine a future that is sustainable for all, I fear "that kind of thing" is all that will be left.

Names	Age	Occupation	Race	Education	Relationship Status	Location
Athena	24	Mental health therapist	Mixed-race	Master's degree	Dating	Pacific Northwest
Belle	25	Grocery store cashier	White	Bachelor's degree	Dating (engagement soon)	Southern California
Chase	24	Research assistant at university lab (electronics/physics)	White	Bachelor's degree	Dating	Southern California
Chris	26	Development project manager for affordable housing nonprofit	White	Master's degree	Dating (engagement soon)	Pacific Northwest
Kristy	29	Writer for online content publisher	White	Bachelor's degree	Married	East Coast
Luis	24	Teacher at private Christian school (through a large church)	Hispanic	Bachelor's degree	Married	East Coast
Luke	27	Production Assistant	White	Bachelor's degree	Dating	Southern California
Maria	27	Program coordinator at cancer hospital	Hispanic	Bachelor's degree	Engaged (married two weeks after interview)	Southern California
Oliver	25	Wine company salesperson	White	Bachelor's degree	Single	Southern California
Patrick	26	Architect	White	Bachelor's degree	Dating	Pacific Northwest
Rachael	26	Architect	Japanese-American	Master's degree	Engaged	Pacific Northwest
Samantha	25	Teacher at private school	White	Master's degree	Married	Pacific Northwest

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