

Working Revisited:

NARRATIVES OF WORK MEANING AND MEANINGFULNESS ACROSS GENERATIONS

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ABSTRACT

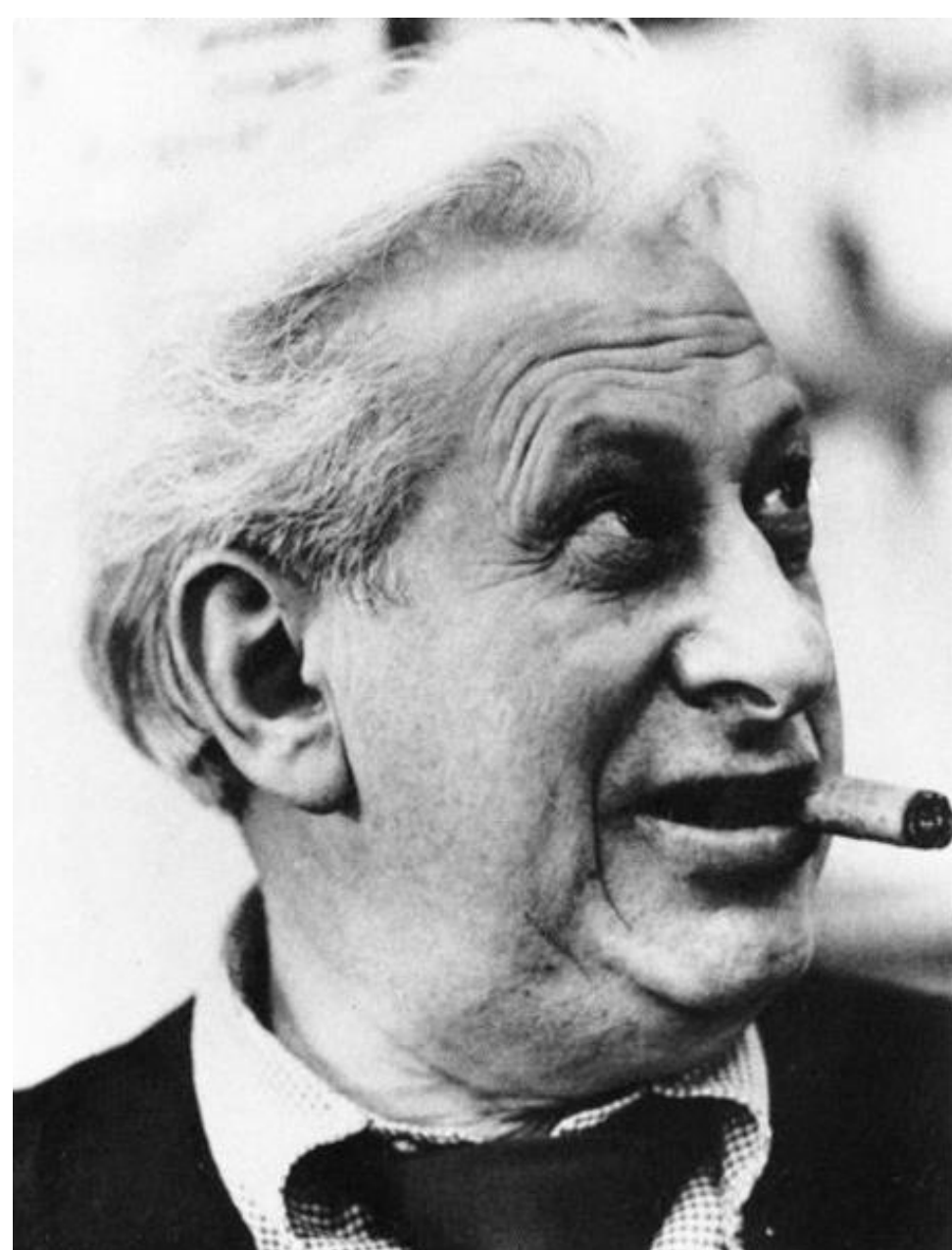
"Working" (Terkel, 1974) is a compilation of oral history interviews focused on the meaning individuals ascribe to their work and the meaningfulness individuals derive from their work. Building off Terkel's (1974) narratives, this project aims to articulate the various meanings of work and experiences of meaningfulness in work for individuals from various generations. Students in HNRS 127 conducted a series of oral history interviews with members of the Silent Generation, the Baby Boomer generation, Generation X, the Millennial generation, and iGen. Interview transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis techniques. The results of this investigation illuminate the various ways that individuals of different ages think about and interact with work. These findings could help employers evaluate if their practices align with the expectations of the individuals currently working in their organizations.

INTRODUCTION

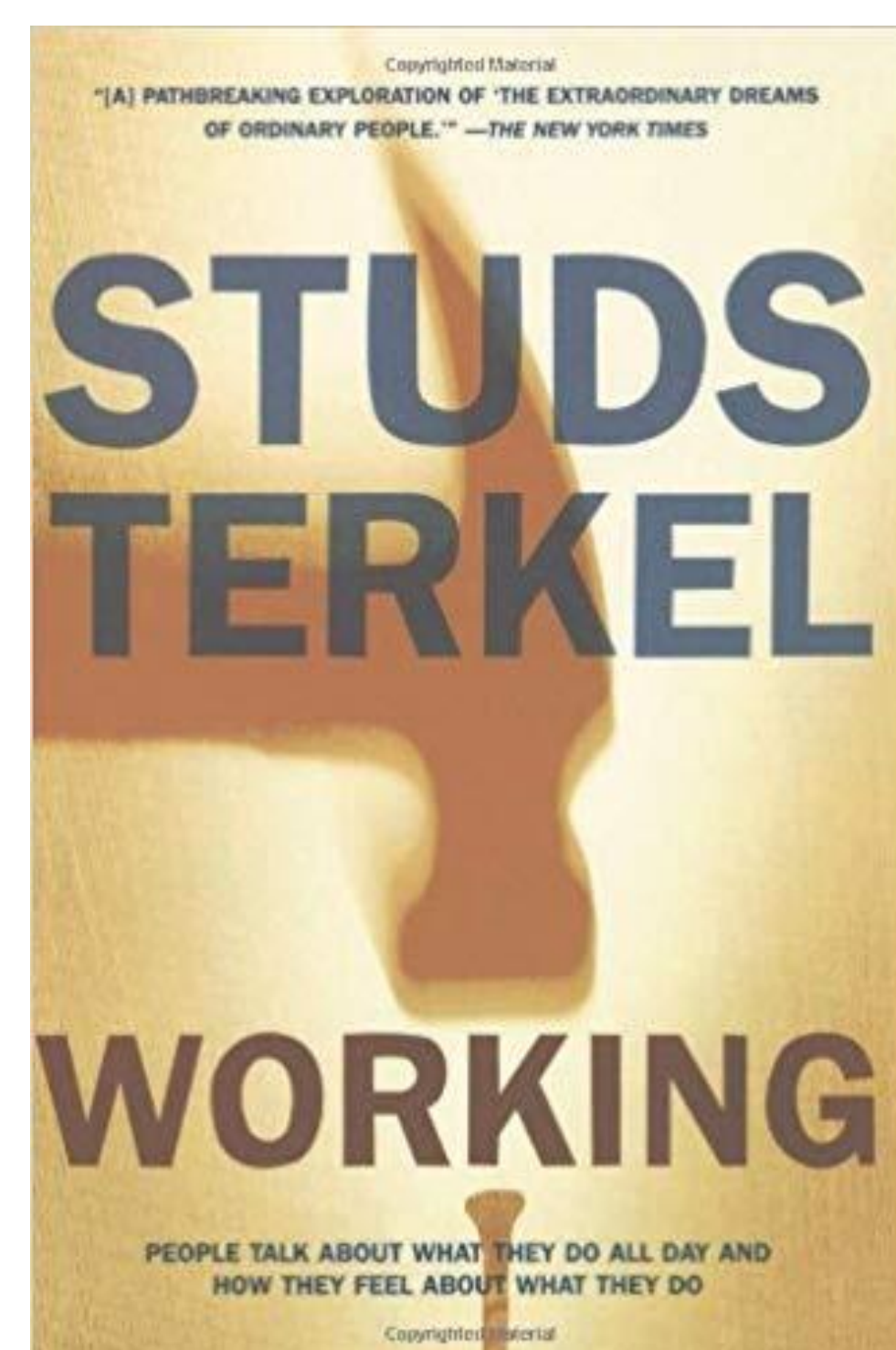
STUD'S TERKEL AND "WORKING"

Louis "Studs" Terkel was born in New York City on May 16, 1912 to Russian-Jewish immigrants and had two brothers. He moved to Chicago when he was 8 years old, spending most of his life there. He got married to Ida Goldberg in 1939 and had one son. Terkel was a part of the Works Progress Administration's Federal Writers' Project where he did radio broadcasting with multiple different programs. He interviewed a wide range of people. Terkel became well known in Chicago for radio shows, television programs, and books he published such as *Working*, *The Good War: An Oral History of World War Two*, and *Hard Times: An Oral History of the Great Depression*, all attempts to preserve American oral history. In 1995, Terkel received the Chicago History Museum "Making History Award." He died on October 31, 2008 in Chicago at age 96.

Terkel's book *Working*, was written in 1974, and is a compilation of narratives from many different people with various occupations. The text investigates the meaning of work for these people. Terkel interviewed these people over the course of three years with some common findings, yet also some very influential findings. Not all people find life-changing meaning within their occupations; for many, there is a feeling of discontent. Some do, however, find great meaning within their work, and a reward of more than just money. One consistent message is found connecting with work: whether there is an immense sense of meaning or not, almost everybody, no matter how normal, is aware of their personal worth.



https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/0/0b/Studs_Terkel_-_1979-1.jpg



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THE MEANINGS OF WORK

Work as a Job. Sometimes, people see work simply as a way to earn a paycheck. Money is needed to pay for life's necessities, so work is simply a means to an end (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton; 1985). For those with "jobs," meaning is typically found outside of the work domain (Wrzesniewski, McCauley, Rozin, & Schwartz; 1997).

Work as a Career. Sometimes, people work to advance in a company or a field. Advancement tends to come with more money and clout and as such, these are strong motivators for those with "careers" (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton; 1985).

Work as a Calling. Sometimes, people work because they find the work fulfilling. To these individuals, doing the work is the reward; typically the work is believed to improve others' lives and/or the world (Davidson & Caddell; 1994).

MEANINGFUL WORK

Meaningful work is "work that employees believe is significant in that it serves an important purpose" (Berg, Dutton, & Wrzesniewski, 2013, p. 81). Meaningfulness is something that an individual ascribes to their work, so there are no limits to the types of work that can be considered "meaningful," just the assumption that the individual performing the work must derive meaning from engaging in the task.

Berg, Dutton and Wrzesniewski (2013) indicate that meaningfulness has been associated with "increased job satisfaction, motivation, and performance (Grant, 2007; Hackman & Oldham, 1980; Rosso et al., 2010)" (pp. 81-82).

RESEARCH QUESTION

RQ1: What themes about meaningfulness in and at work emerge from individual's discussions of their working lives?

METHOD

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEWING

The oral history paradigm assumes that ordinary people's accounts of everyday experiences are worthy of study (Labov & Waletzky, 1967). When conducting an oral history interview, the interviewer asks the narrator (interviewee) a few open-ended questions and allows the narrator to tell their story. The interviewer's goal is not to ensure a series of specific questions are answered, but rather to ensure that the narrator's story is heard and preserved.

After conducting the oral history interviews, students in HNRS 127 wrote up the narrative of each narrator. Those narratives as well as the interview audio served as texts for further analysis.

THEMATIC ANALYSIS

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the interviews and written narratives. In thematic analysis, the researcher examines texts and records relevant themes that emerge from the data (Guest, 2012).

PARTICIPANTS

Participants in this study included 11 individuals, of various ages, who have experience with work.

RESULTS

THEME ONE: PEOPLE ARE IMPORTANT

Every narrator discussed the importance of people. This aligns with Giddens' Structuration Theory (1984) which is the basis of the notion that communication is constitutive of organizations (CCO; McPhee & Zaig, 2000). If organizations are created through the interactions of organizational members (i.e., communication causes the organization, it doesn't result from the organization), then it makes sense that employees would see people as important to their understandings of their working lives. Their work exists because the relationships exist.

Being able to make a difference in a stranger's life is really cool. I don't think I'd be able to do that if I had a desk job.

Having those relationships and feeling like you're actually at home there is very important.

Be nice to people, you never know what their story is.

THEME TWO: ADVICE ON WORK

While not necessarily connected to meaningfulness, narrators spent a lot of time providing the student interviewers with advice about work.

If you get the chance to travel, travel as much as you can because it really does change your opinion of the world.

Gosh, the sky's the limit for you. You can do just about whatever you want. I think you ought to dream big, and not limit yourselves on what you can do.

I think it's important for everyone in their career to reinvent themselves from time to time.

You can find passion in a job, and that's where you can find fulfillment.

Don't be afraid to try and test it out. And don't be afraid to pivot and change if it doesn't feel right. It's probably because it's not right.

What might seem like a failure is probably insurance that it won't happen again.