

Studs Terkel's 1974 Alienation Study

Michelle E. Tully, M.A.

Jonathan B. Santo, Ph.D.

University of Nebraska at Omaha

Psychology studies have changed the world in many ways, but few have served as the basis for both a Broadway musical and a graphic novel. Studs Terkel's nonfiction book, *Working: People Talk About What They Do All Day and How They Feel About What They Do*, was an immediate bestseller when it was published in 1974. While not a psychology study in the strictest quantitative definition, 'Working' served as an ethnography on the working life of the American adult.

Compiled over three years and drawing from over one hundred in-person interviews with workers from a wide array of jobs, Terkel aimed to examine both the physical and psychological impact of work. Terkel was already by this time well-versed in the art of the interview, having had many famous guests on his radio show *The Studs Terkel Program*, which had run since 1952. As the *New York Times* review of 'Working' described, one of his notable skills was in creating a space where his interviewees could take emotional risks and speak openly.

While several famous people of the time did an interview for the book, including an actor, a football coach, and a baseball player, Terkel's main interest was in the lives of ordinary Americans. His subjects included farmers, a receptionist, a prostitute, a janitor, policemen, spot-welders, a bus driver, a dentist, stockbrokers, a librarian, and a gravedigger. Terkel gathered his interviews mostly through referral and word of mouth. For structure, he divided 'Working' into nine sections based on loose themes shared between careers. Book One, for example, collected

interviews that connected to working the land, whereas Book Three focused on cleaners and watchers.

Interestingly for a study which spawned a musical, Terkel avoided giving the work any overarching narrative, and left no editorializing comments on any specific interview. He worked to erase himself from the interviews, leaving the reader to process and consolidate the work for his or herself. The one exception to this is the introduction. Herein Terkel penned a rather sharp indictment of what he saw as the depersonalization that arises from the institution of work. “Perhaps it is this specter that most haunts working men and women,” Terkel wrote, “The planned obsolescence of people that is of a piece with the planned obsolescence of the things they make. Or sell.”

Repeatedly, the subjects Terkel interviewed cycled back to their feelings of alienation from the work they did. They described themselves as robots, objects, machines, as doing work monkeys could do. The specter of automation loomed above many; either of the individual being rendered to no more than a cog in the assembly line, or of machines replacing people altogether. Terkel explained how those interviewed, serving as ambassadors for the general American worker, struggled to find significance in what they did. “Work is about a search for daily meaning as well as daily bread, for recognition as well as cash, for astonishment rather than torpor; in short, for a sort of life rather than a Monday through Friday sort of dying.”

Those interviewed complained that work ethic had begun to matter less and less. Automatization removes craftsmanship and the impact of the human hand, they said, rendering it better in society’s eyes to produce high amounts of low quality goods than vice versa. They wondered: What purpose then is there in caring about the process? The workers spoke of giving their years and labor to companies only to be left behind when the company felt they were no

longer useful. They worried about how to maintain their dignity and self-respect, especially those in jobs society deemed as 'lesser'. Terkel argued that euphemistic titles were given to offer an empty sense of status, such as a garbage man being called a sanitary engineer. A few interviewed did find purpose in their job, among them a dentist, a fireman, a stonemason, a piano tuner, and a bookbinder. While not directly stated by any, a common theme amongst them was seeing a tangible, positive change due to their work.

'Working' was only one of Terkel's many published works, but it has been one of his most enduring. The occupational landscape has changed in many ways since 1974. Some of the jobs in 'Working' are now obsolete, and some of today's common jobs had yet to exist at time of publication. Outsourcing was not yet a term, nor portfolio career, globalization, or work-life balance. Few of Terkel's subjects worried about computers. Nonetheless, only a sliver of today's workers has not grappled with the same existential questions asked by Terkel's interviewees. While Terkel's subjects have managed to find some lasting renown due to their involvement with 'Working', what solutions exist for the rest of us regarding these questions is less clear.