

**"Generational Work Ethic Differences: From Baby Boomers to Gen Z"**

**(2023) Journal of Managerial Issues (35(4), 401-422)**

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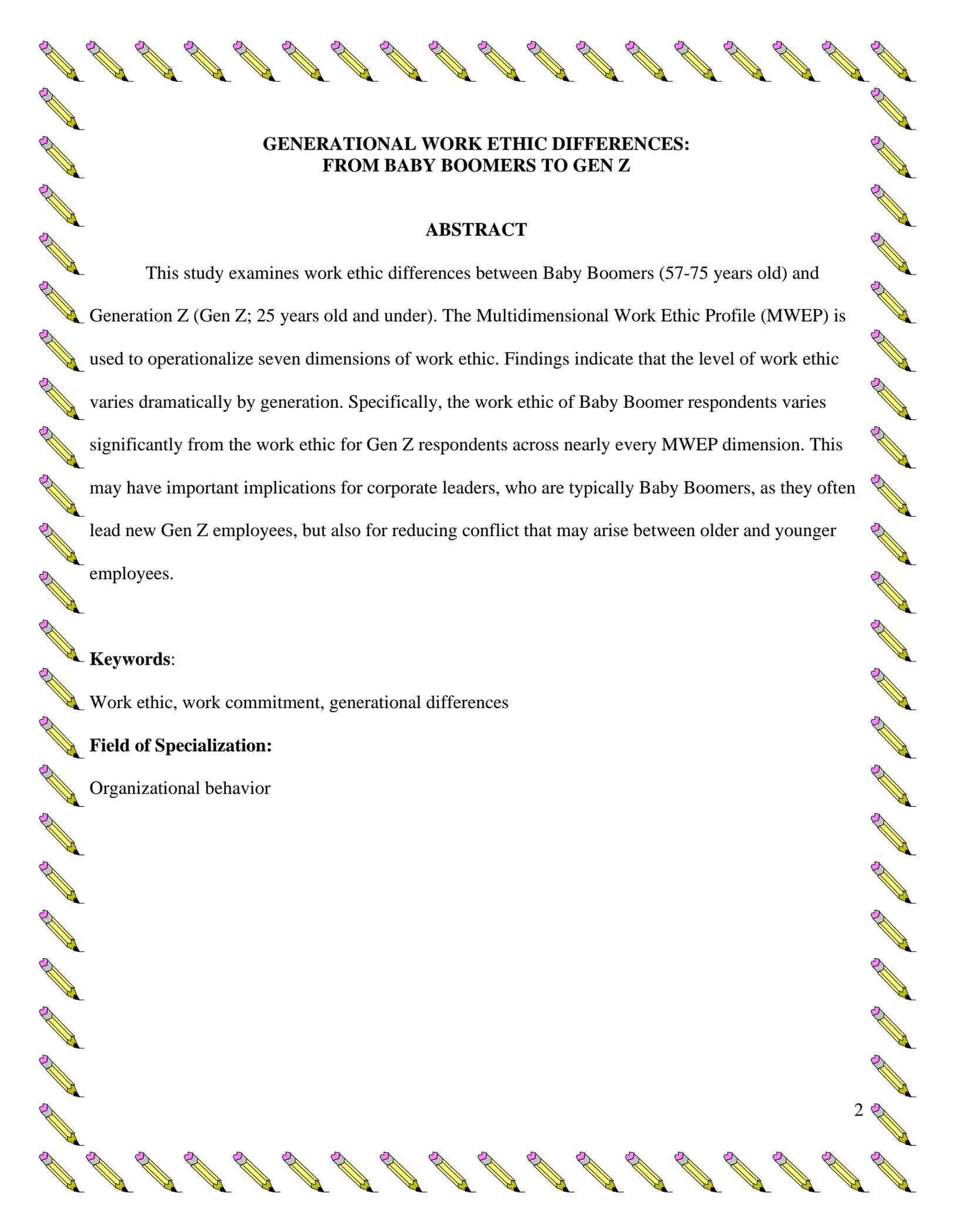
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## GENERATIONAL WORK ETHIC DIFFERENCES: FROM BABY BOOMERS TO GEN Z

### ABSTRACT

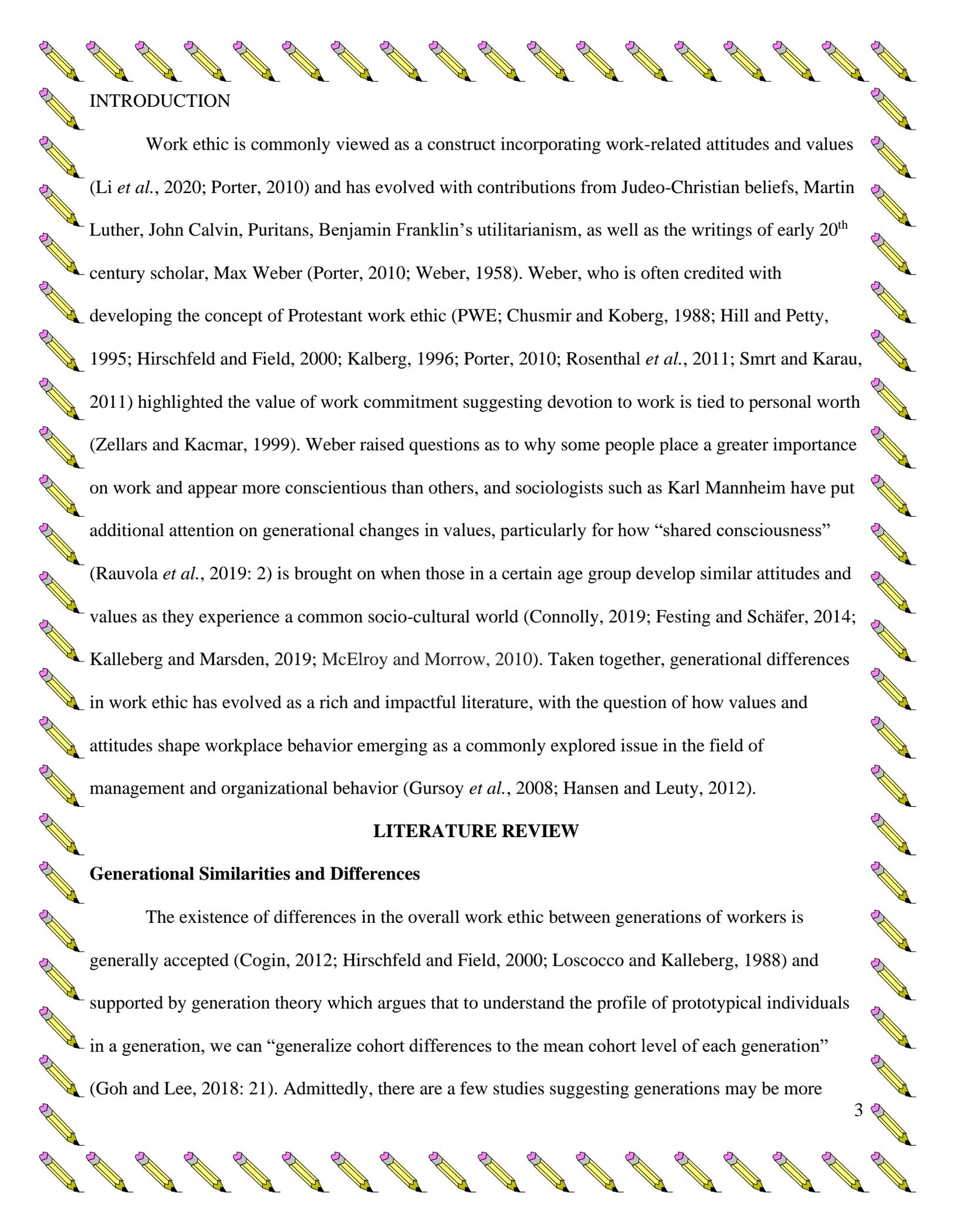
This study examines work ethic differences between Baby Boomers (57-75 years old) and Generation Z (Gen Z; 25 years old and under). The Multidimensional Work Ethic Profile (MWEP) is used to operationalize seven dimensions of work ethic. Findings indicate that the level of work ethic varies dramatically by generation. Specifically, the work ethic of Baby Boomer respondents varies significantly from the work ethic for Gen Z respondents across nearly every MWEP dimension. This may have important implications for corporate leaders, who are typically Baby Boomers, as they often lead new Gen Z employees, but also for reducing conflict that may arise between older and younger employees.

#### **Keywords:**

Work ethic, work commitment, generational differences

#### **Field of Specialization:**

Organizational behavior



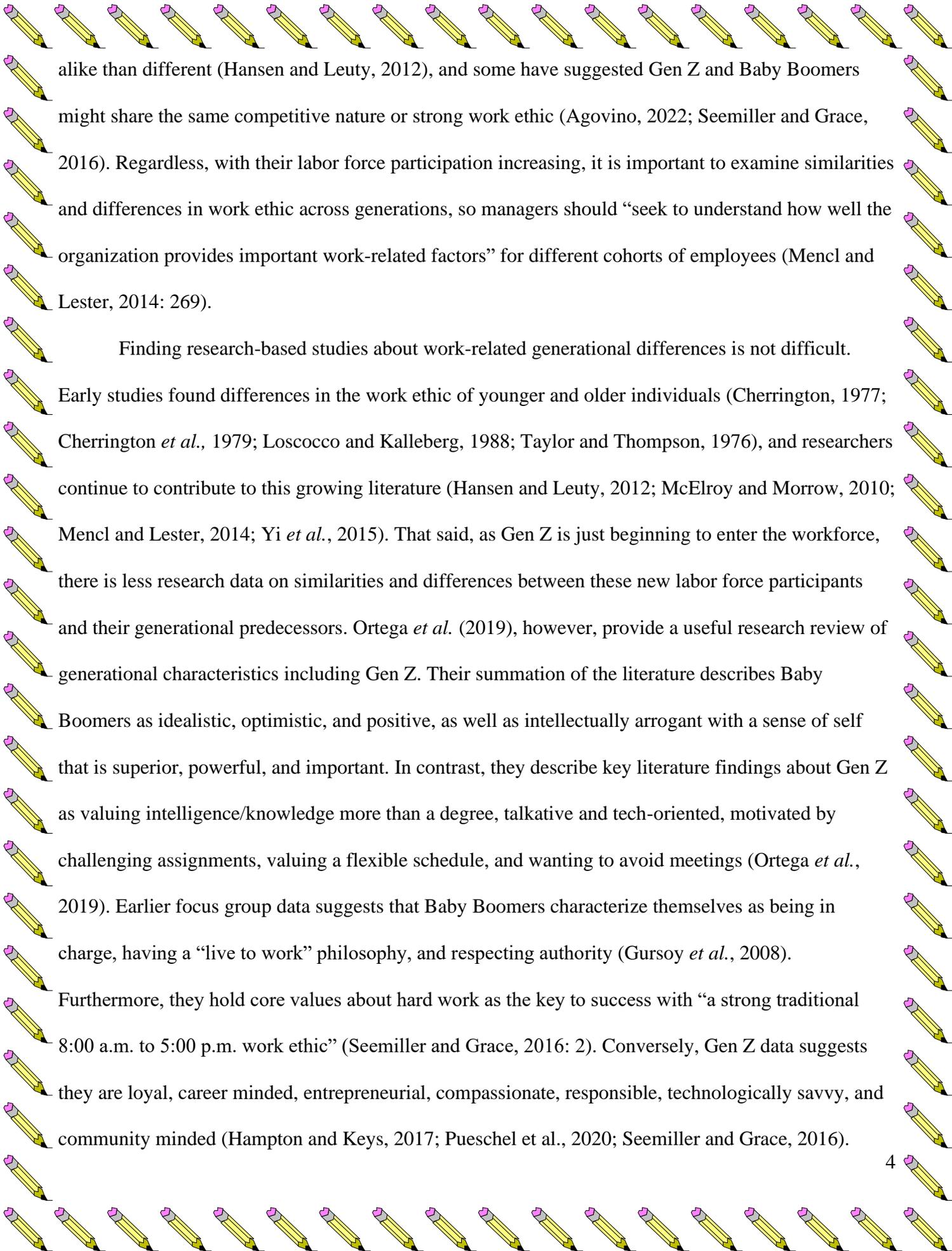
## INTRODUCTION

Work ethic is commonly viewed as a construct incorporating work-related attitudes and values (Li *et al.*, 2020; Porter, 2010) and has evolved with contributions from Judeo-Christian beliefs, Martin Luther, John Calvin, Puritans, Benjamin Franklin's utilitarianism, as well as the writings of early 20<sup>th</sup> century scholar, Max Weber (Porter, 2010; Weber, 1958). Weber, who is often credited with developing the concept of Protestant work ethic (PWE; Chusmir and Koberg, 1988; Hill and Petty, 1995; Hirschfeld and Field, 2000; Kalberg, 1996; Porter, 2010; Rosenthal *et al.*, 2011; Smrt and Karau, 2011) highlighted the value of work commitment suggesting devotion to work is tied to personal worth (Zellars and Kacmar, 1999). Weber raised questions as to why some people place a greater importance on work and appear more conscientious than others, and sociologists such as Karl Mannheim have put additional attention on generational changes in values, particularly for how "shared consciousness" (Rauvola *et al.*, 2019: 2) is brought on when those in a certain age group develop similar attitudes and values as they experience a common socio-cultural world (Connolly, 2019; Festing and Schäfer, 2014; Kalleberg and Marsden, 2019; McElroy and Morrow, 2010). Taken together, generational differences in work ethic has evolved as a rich and impactful literature, with the question of how values and attitudes shape workplace behavior emerging as a commonly explored issue in the field of management and organizational behavior (Gursoy *et al.*, 2008; Hansen and Leuty, 2012).

## LITERATURE REVIEW

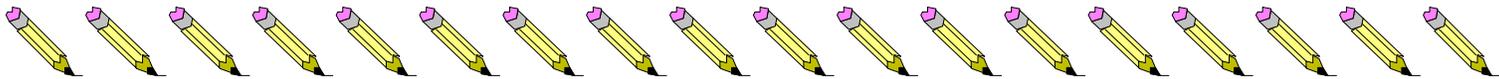
### Generational Similarities and Differences

The existence of differences in the overall work ethic between generations of workers is generally accepted (Cogin, 2012; Hirschfeld and Field, 2000; Loscocco and Kalleberg, 1988) and supported by generation theory which argues that to understand the profile of prototypical individuals in a generation, we can "generalize cohort differences to the mean cohort level of each generation" (Goh and Lee, 2018: 21). Admittedly, there are a few studies suggesting generations may be more



alike than different (Hansen and Leuty, 2012), and some have suggested Gen Z and Baby Boomers might share the same competitive nature or strong work ethic (Agovino, 2022; Seemiller and Grace, 2016). Regardless, with their labor force participation increasing, it is important to examine similarities and differences in work ethic across generations, so managers should “seek to understand how well the organization provides important work-related factors” for different cohorts of employees (Mencil and Lester, 2014: 269).

Finding research-based studies about work-related generational differences is not difficult. Early studies found differences in the work ethic of younger and older individuals (Cherrington, 1977; Cherrington *et al.*, 1979; Loscocco and Kalleberg, 1988; Taylor and Thompson, 1976), and researchers continue to contribute to this growing literature (Hansen and Leuty, 2012; McElroy and Morrow, 2010; Mencil and Lester, 2014; Yi *et al.*, 2015). That said, as Gen Z is just beginning to enter the workforce, there is less research data on similarities and differences between these new labor force participants and their generational predecessors. Ortega *et al.* (2019), however, provide a useful research review of generational characteristics including Gen Z. Their summation of the literature describes Baby Boomers as idealistic, optimistic, and positive, as well as intellectually arrogant with a sense of self that is superior, powerful, and important. In contrast, they describe key literature findings about Gen Z as valuing intelligence/knowledge more than a degree, talkative and tech-oriented, motivated by challenging assignments, valuing a flexible schedule, and wanting to avoid meetings (Ortega *et al.*, 2019). Earlier focus group data suggests that Baby Boomers characterize themselves as being in charge, having a “live to work” philosophy, and respecting authority (Gursoy *et al.*, 2008). Furthermore, they hold core values about hard work as the key to success with “a strong traditional 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. work ethic” (Seemiller and Grace, 2016: 2). Conversely, Gen Z data suggests they are loyal, career minded, entrepreneurial, compassionate, responsible, technologically savvy, and community minded (Hampton and Keys, 2017; Pueschel *et al.*, 2020; Seemiller and Grace, 2016).

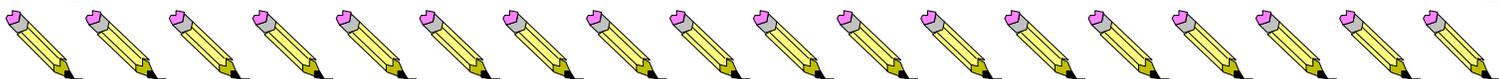


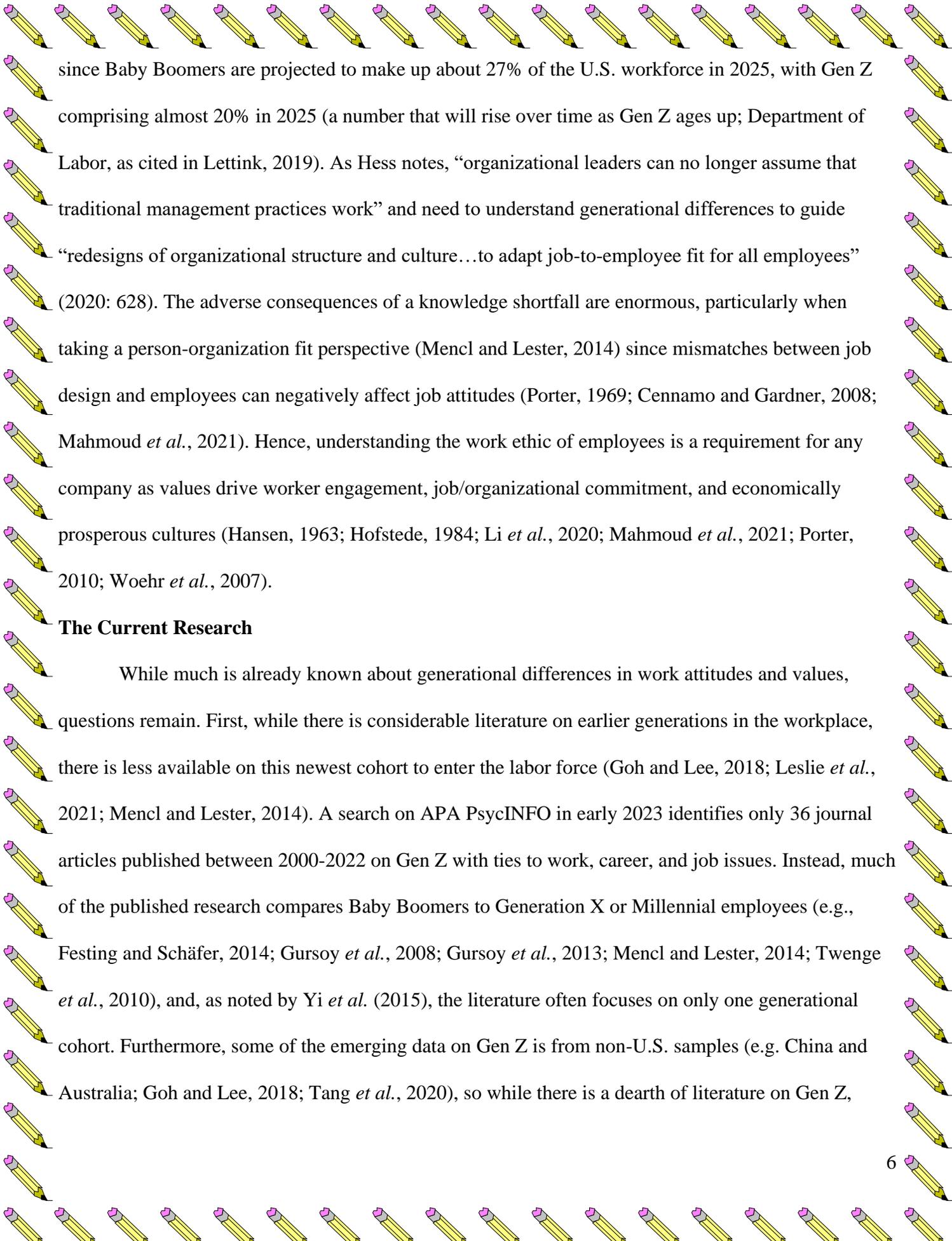
Survey results of 1000 recent college graduates from the National Association of Colleges and Employers suggests Gen Z works to live (instead of lives to work like Baby Boomers); Gen Z carries a different attitude about work – it’s not just being happy to get a job anymore, it’s a sense of assertiveness in expecting to know details of what a job will entail before signing on (Maurer, 2022). Researchers have also identified cohorts within the Gen Z generation. In a sample of 41 Gen Zers, they identified one group of “Go Getters” were focused on career advancement, another group of “Chill Worker Bees” desired a comfortable workplace environment, and a third group called “Social Investors” are focused on finding work-life balance (Leslie *et al.*, 2021, p. 171).

Of course, some of the labels ascribed to different age groups could be seen as stereotyping, but the scholarly research literature backs up many of these claims with evidential data. So, when the Society for Human Resource Management describes Gen Z as feeling more emotionally distressed than Baby Boomers (25% of Gen Z compared to 8% of Boomers) and wanting more purpose and meaning in their work, employers start listening to find new ways to attract and retain younger workers with wellness programs, student debt repayment, and more flexibility (Avogino, 2022). But there is more researchers and practitioners still need to learn about Gen Z.

### **Reasons Why Generational Differences Matter**

HR experts are lining up to share opinions on how the workforce is changing (e.g., Agovino, 2022; Deichler, 2021; Dua *et al.*, 2022). With Baby Boomers sitting in many management positions, leading younger employees (Gursoy *et al.*, 2013), and holding a high degree of institutional memory and expert knowledge, they have a considerable impact on the workplace and (given the economy and Covid-19 pandemic) some are choosing to stay in the labor force longer (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022). That many Baby Boomers and Gen Zers are working alongside each other or, at times, with older workers reporting to younger managers, makes understanding their work values more relevant in an effort to reduce conflict (Cogin, 2012). The momentum behind this need is even greater

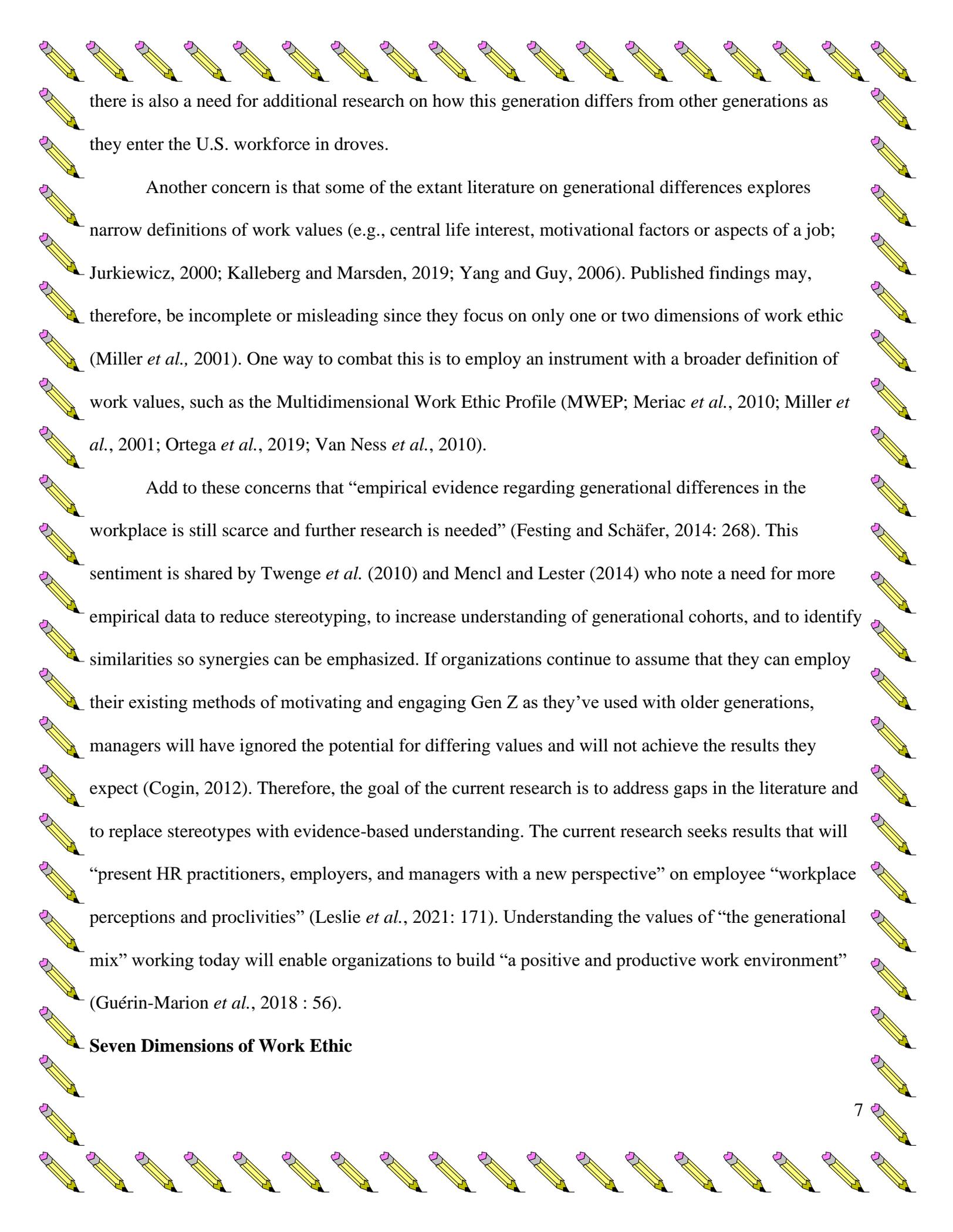




since Baby Boomers are projected to make up about 27% of the U.S. workforce in 2025, with Gen Z comprising almost 20% in 2025 (a number that will rise over time as Gen Z ages up; Department of Labor, as cited in Lettink, 2019). As Hess notes, “organizational leaders can no longer assume that traditional management practices work” and need to understand generational differences to guide “redesigns of organizational structure and culture...to adapt job-to-employee fit for all employees” (2020: 628). The adverse consequences of a knowledge shortfall are enormous, particularly when taking a person-organization fit perspective (Mencl and Lester, 2014) since mismatches between job design and employees can negatively affect job attitudes (Porter, 1969; Cennamo and Gardner, 2008; Mahmoud *et al.*, 2021). Hence, understanding the work ethic of employees is a requirement for any company as values drive worker engagement, job/organizational commitment, and economically prosperous cultures (Hansen, 1963; Hofstede, 1984; Li *et al.*, 2020; Mahmoud *et al.*, 2021; Porter, 2010; Woehr *et al.*, 2007).

### **The Current Research**

While much is already known about generational differences in work attitudes and values, questions remain. First, while there is considerable literature on earlier generations in the workplace, there is less available on this newest cohort to enter the labor force (Goh and Lee, 2018; Leslie *et al.*, 2021; Mencl and Lester, 2014). A search on APA PsycINFO in early 2023 identifies only 36 journal articles published between 2000-2022 on Gen Z with ties to work, career, and job issues. Instead, much of the published research compares Baby Boomers to Generation X or Millennial employees (e.g., Festing and Schäfer, 2014; Gursoy *et al.*, 2008; Gursoy *et al.*, 2013; Mencl and Lester, 2014; Twenge *et al.*, 2010), and, as noted by Yi *et al.* (2015), the literature often focuses on only one generational cohort. Furthermore, some of the emerging data on Gen Z is from non-U.S. samples (e.g. China and Australia; Goh and Lee, 2018; Tang *et al.*, 2020), so while there is a dearth of literature on Gen Z,

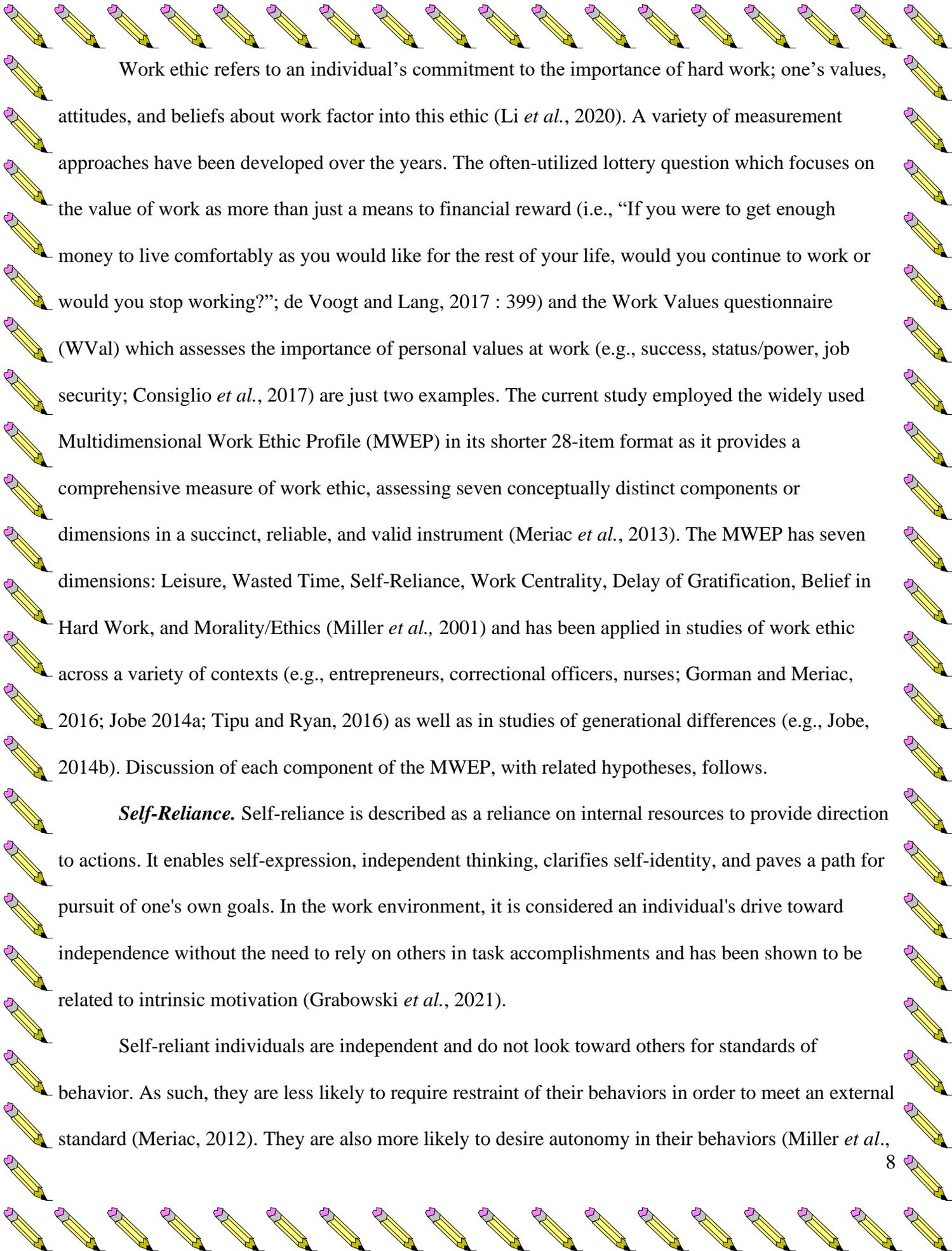


there is also a need for additional research on how this generation differs from other generations as they enter the U.S. workforce in droves.

Another concern is that some of the extant literature on generational differences explores narrow definitions of work values (e.g., central life interest, motivational factors or aspects of a job; Jurkiewicz, 2000; Kalleberg and Marsden, 2019; Yang and Guy, 2006). Published findings may, therefore, be incomplete or misleading since they focus on only one or two dimensions of work ethic (Miller *et al.*, 2001). One way to combat this is to employ an instrument with a broader definition of work values, such as the Multidimensional Work Ethic Profile (MWEP; Meriac *et al.*, 2010; Miller *et al.*, 2001; Ortega *et al.*, 2019; Van Ness *et al.*, 2010).

Add to these concerns that “empirical evidence regarding generational differences in the workplace is still scarce and further research is needed” (Festing and Schäfer, 2014: 268). This sentiment is shared by Twenge *et al.* (2010) and Mencl and Lester (2014) who note a need for more empirical data to reduce stereotyping, to increase understanding of generational cohorts, and to identify similarities so synergies can be emphasized. If organizations continue to assume that they can employ their existing methods of motivating and engaging Gen Z as they’ve used with older generations, managers will have ignored the potential for differing values and will not achieve the results they expect (Cogin, 2012). Therefore, the goal of the current research is to address gaps in the literature and to replace stereotypes with evidence-based understanding. The current research seeks results that will “present HR practitioners, employers, and managers with a new perspective” on employee “workplace perceptions and proclivities” (Leslie *et al.*, 2021: 171). Understanding the values of “the generational mix” working today will enable organizations to build “a positive and productive work environment” (Guérin-Marion *et al.*, 2018 : 56).

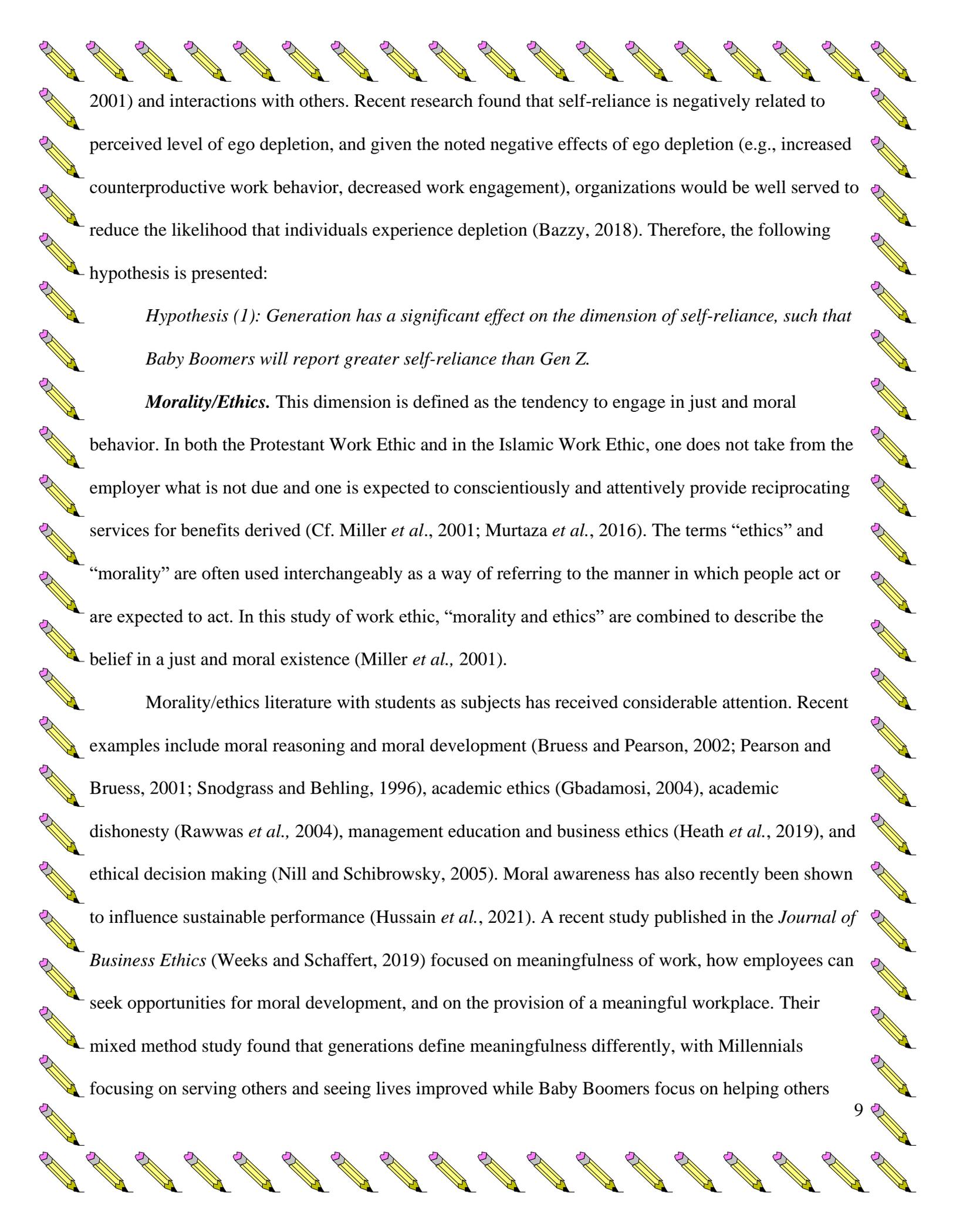
### **Seven Dimensions of Work Ethic**



Work ethic refers to an individual's commitment to the importance of hard work; one's values, attitudes, and beliefs about work factor into this ethic (Li *et al.*, 2020). A variety of measurement approaches have been developed over the years. The often-utilized lottery question which focuses on the value of work as more than just a means to financial reward (i.e., "If you were to get enough money to live comfortably as you would like for the rest of your life, would you continue to work or would you stop working?"; de Voogt and Lang, 2017 : 399) and the Work Values questionnaire (WVal) which assesses the importance of personal values at work (e.g., success, status/power, job security; Consiglio *et al.*, 2017) are just two examples. The current study employed the widely used Multidimensional Work Ethic Profile (MWEP) in its shorter 28-item format as it provides a comprehensive measure of work ethic, assessing seven conceptually distinct components or dimensions in a succinct, reliable, and valid instrument (Meriac *et al.*, 2013). The MWEP has seven dimensions: Leisure, Wasted Time, Self-Reliance, Work Centrality, Delay of Gratification, Belief in Hard Work, and Morality/Ethics (Miller *et al.*, 2001) and has been applied in studies of work ethic across a variety of contexts (e.g., entrepreneurs, correctional officers, nurses; Gorman and Meriac, 2016; Jobe 2014a; Tipu and Ryan, 2016) as well as in studies of generational differences (e.g., Jobe, 2014b). Discussion of each component of the MWEP, with related hypotheses, follows.

***Self-Reliance.*** Self-reliance is described as a reliance on internal resources to provide direction to actions. It enables self-expression, independent thinking, clarifies self-identity, and paves a path for pursuit of one's own goals. In the work environment, it is considered an individual's drive toward independence without the need to rely on others in task accomplishments and has been shown to be related to intrinsic motivation (Grabowski *et al.*, 2021).

Self-reliant individuals are independent and do not look toward others for standards of behavior. As such, they are less likely to require restraint of their behaviors in order to meet an external standard (Meriac, 2012). They are also more likely to desire autonomy in their behaviors (Miller *et al.*,

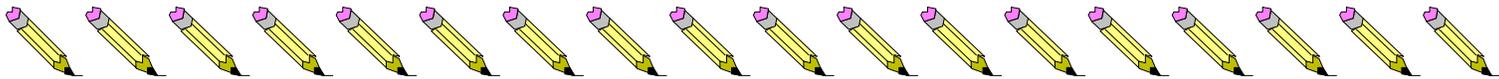


2001) and interactions with others. Recent research found that self-reliance is negatively related to perceived level of ego depletion, and given the noted negative effects of ego depletion (e.g., increased counterproductive work behavior, decreased work engagement), organizations would be well served to reduce the likelihood that individuals experience depletion (Bazzy, 2018). Therefore, the following hypothesis is presented:

*Hypothesis (1): Generation has a significant effect on the dimension of self-reliance, such that Baby Boomers will report greater self-reliance than Gen Z.*

**Morality/Ethics.** This dimension is defined as the tendency to engage in just and moral behavior. In both the Protestant Work Ethic and in the Islamic Work Ethic, one does not take from the employer what is not due and one is expected to conscientiously and attentively provide reciprocating services for benefits derived (Cf. Miller *et al.*, 2001; Murtaza *et al.*, 2016). The terms “ethics” and “morality” are often used interchangeably as a way of referring to the manner in which people act or are expected to act. In this study of work ethic, “morality and ethics” are combined to describe the belief in a just and moral existence (Miller *et al.*, 2001).

Morality/ethics literature with students as subjects has received considerable attention. Recent examples include moral reasoning and moral development (Bruess and Pearson, 2002; Pearson and Bruess, 2001; Snodgrass and Behling, 1996), academic ethics (Gbadamosi, 2004), academic dishonesty (Rawwas *et al.*, 2004), management education and business ethics (Heath *et al.*, 2019), and ethical decision making (Nill and Schibrowsky, 2005). Moral awareness has also recently been shown to influence sustainable performance (Hussain *et al.*, 2021). A recent study published in the *Journal of Business Ethics* (Weeks and Schaffert, 2019) focused on meaningfulness of work, how employees can seek opportunities for moral development, and on the provision of a meaningful workplace. Their mixed method study found that generations define meaningfulness differently, with Millennials focusing on serving others and seeing lives improved while Baby Boomers focus on helping others

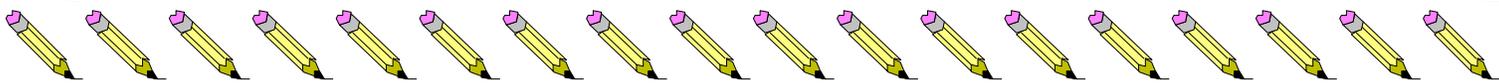


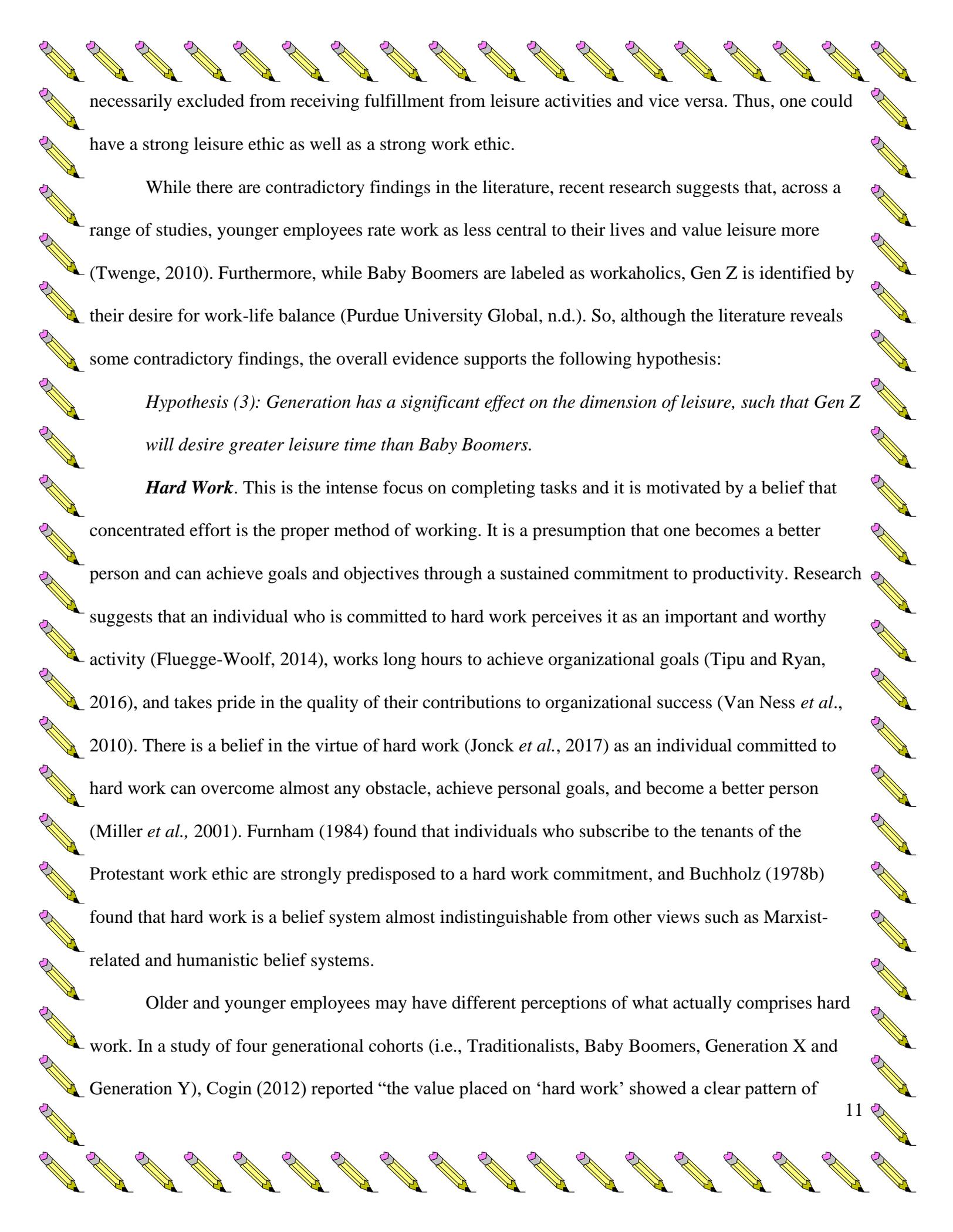
achieve goals and reaching personal goals. Moreover, different generations were found to carry stereotyped views about whether other generations value meaning and ethical value in their work. While there may be variability between different sources of finding meaning in a job, their data demonstrated “all employees are seeking meaning” (Weeks and Schaffert, 2019: 1057). Since researchers have identified “stereotypes about young people as less giving and kind” and that older individuals carry some “cynicism” about the moral values of younger generations (Hookway and Woodman, 2021: 842), understanding Gen Z’s and Baby Boomers’ attitudes toward the morality and ethics of work continues to be needed. Hence, the following hypothesis is proposed:

*Hypothesis (2): Generation has a significant effect on the dimension of morality/ethics, such that Baby Boomers will place greater importance on morality than Gen Z.*

**Leisure.** Leisure is defined as a desire for more discretionary time or "downtime" (McNall *et al.*, 2009) and is presumed to include a desire for a flexible work schedule and enhanced freedom from work restrictions. In the 21st Century, workers are bombarded with endless emails, virtual impromptu meetings, and a need to be accessible in off-hours; these demands on an individual's time and attention may diminish the work satisfaction of an employee and increase their desire for downtime (Cf. Rojewski and Hill, 2017; Ter Hoeven *et al.*, 2016). Indeed, a large-scale longitudinal study of over 16,500 students demonstrated that leisure values have increased over time (particularly between Baby Boomers and Millennials; Twenge *et al.*, 2010).

A strong pro-leisure orientation may be the antithesis of a strong pro-work ethic (Buchholz, 1978a; Miller *et al.*, 2001; Tsaor and Yen, 2018; Weber, 1958) as workers have been known to trade their leisure time for their jobs (Schor, 1992) and as work can be a defining element in an individual’s identity (Porter, 2010). Other studies find that a high leisure orientation and a high work ethic are not necessarily opposite ends of a spectrum (Furnham, 1990; Furnham and Rose, 1987; Pryor and Davies, 1989; Tang, 1993). These studies propose that individuals who receive fulfillment from work are not





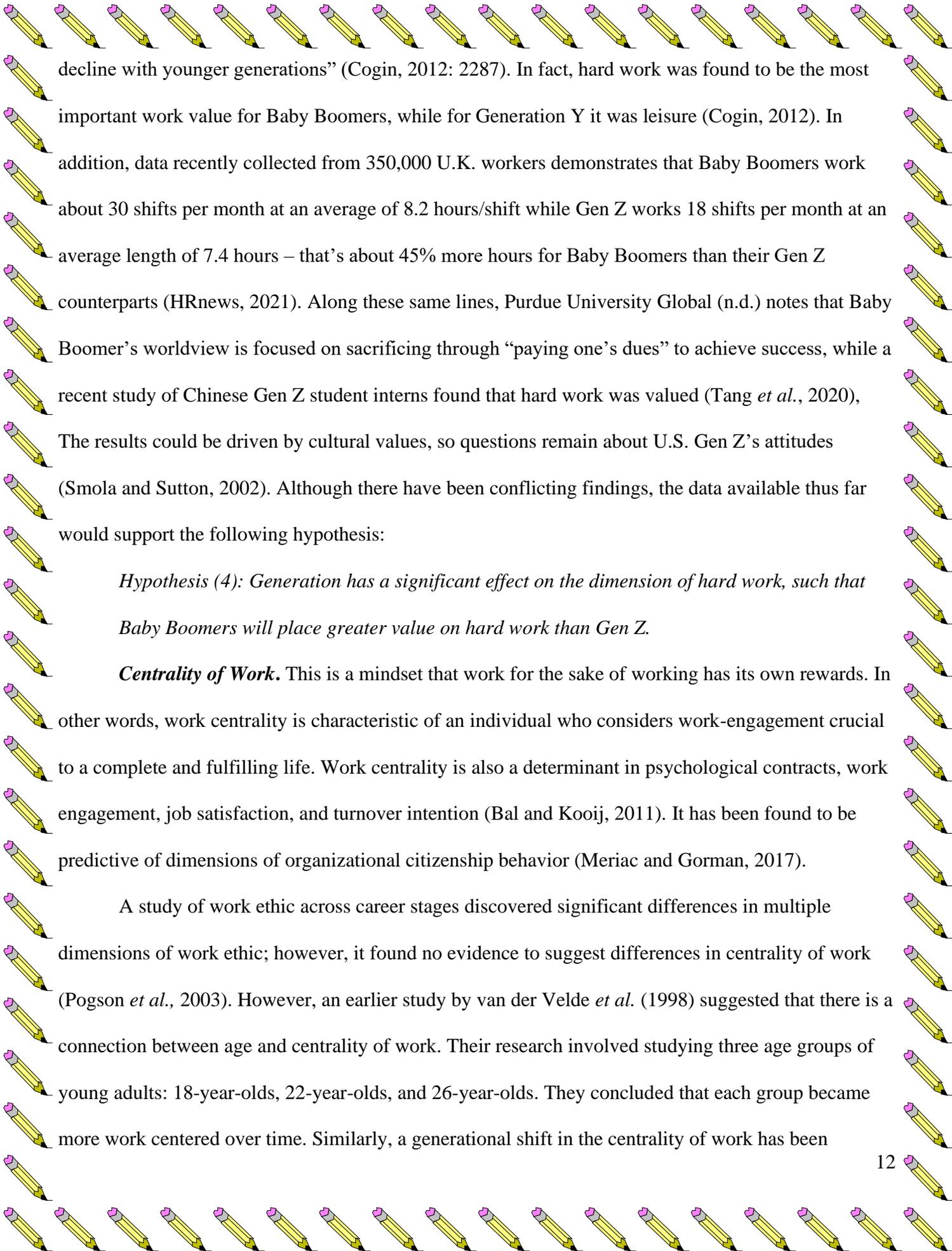
necessarily excluded from receiving fulfillment from leisure activities and vice versa. Thus, one could have a strong leisure ethic as well as a strong work ethic.

While there are contradictory findings in the literature, recent research suggests that, across a range of studies, younger employees rate work as less central to their lives and value leisure more (Twenge, 2010). Furthermore, while Baby Boomers are labeled as workaholics, Gen Z is identified by their desire for work-life balance (Purdue University Global, n.d.). So, although the literature reveals some contradictory findings, the overall evidence supports the following hypothesis:

*Hypothesis (3): Generation has a significant effect on the dimension of leisure, such that Gen Z will desire greater leisure time than Baby Boomers.*

**Hard Work.** This is the intense focus on completing tasks and it is motivated by a belief that concentrated effort is the proper method of working. It is a presumption that one becomes a better person and can achieve goals and objectives through a sustained commitment to productivity. Research suggests that an individual who is committed to hard work perceives it as an important and worthy activity (Fluegge-Woolf, 2014), works long hours to achieve organizational goals (Tipu and Ryan, 2016), and takes pride in the quality of their contributions to organizational success (Van Ness *et al.*, 2010). There is a belief in the virtue of hard work (Jonck *et al.*, 2017) as an individual committed to hard work can overcome almost any obstacle, achieve personal goals, and become a better person (Miller *et al.*, 2001). Furnham (1984) found that individuals who subscribe to the tenants of the Protestant work ethic are strongly predisposed to a hard work commitment, and Buchholz (1978b) found that hard work is a belief system almost indistinguishable from other views such as Marxist-related and humanistic belief systems.

Older and younger employees may have different perceptions of what actually comprises hard work. In a study of four generational cohorts (i.e., Traditionalists, Baby Boomers, Generation X and Generation Y), Cugin (2012) reported “the value placed on ‘hard work’ showed a clear pattern of

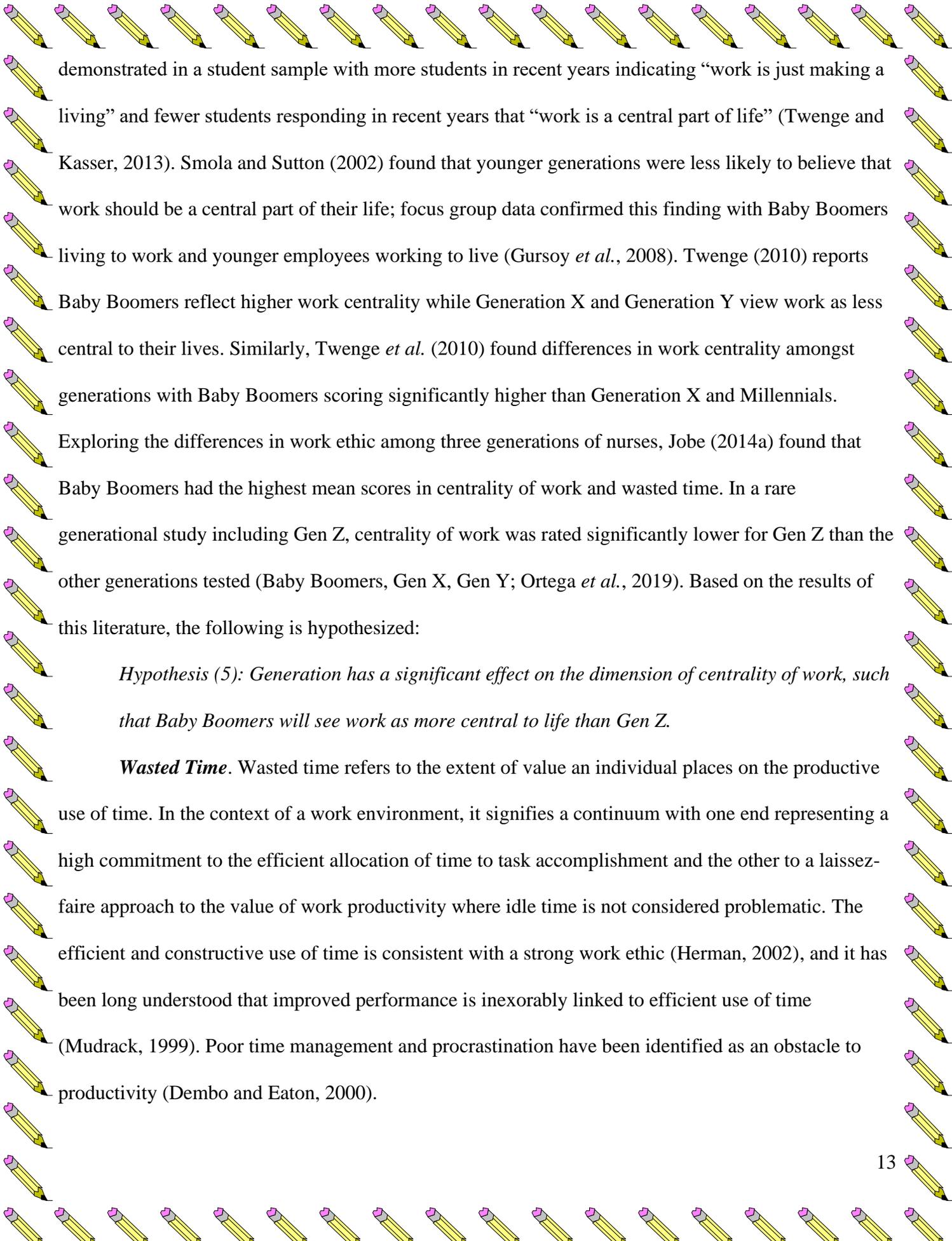


decline with younger generations” (Cogin, 2012: 2287). In fact, hard work was found to be the most important work value for Baby Boomers, while for Generation Y it was leisure (Cogin, 2012). In addition, data recently collected from 350,000 U.K. workers demonstrates that Baby Boomers work about 30 shifts per month at an average of 8.2 hours/shift while Gen Z works 18 shifts per month at an average length of 7.4 hours – that’s about 45% more hours for Baby Boomers than their Gen Z counterparts (HRnews, 2021). Along these same lines, Purdue University Global (n.d.) notes that Baby Boomer’s worldview is focused on sacrificing through “paying one’s dues” to achieve success, while a recent study of Chinese Gen Z student interns found that hard work was valued (Tang *et al.*, 2020). The results could be driven by cultural values, so questions remain about U.S. Gen Z’s attitudes (Smola and Sutton, 2002). Although there have been conflicting findings, the data available thus far would support the following hypothesis:

*Hypothesis (4): Generation has a significant effect on the dimension of hard work, such that Baby Boomers will place greater value on hard work than Gen Z.*

**Centrality of Work.** This is a mindset that work for the sake of working has its own rewards. In other words, work centrality is characteristic of an individual who considers work-engagement crucial to a complete and fulfilling life. Work centrality is also a determinant in psychological contracts, work engagement, job satisfaction, and turnover intention (Bal and Kooij, 2011). It has been found to be predictive of dimensions of organizational citizenship behavior (Meriac and Gorman, 2017).

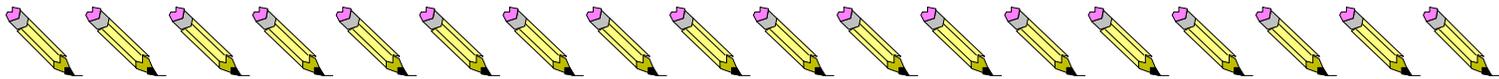
A study of work ethic across career stages discovered significant differences in multiple dimensions of work ethic; however, it found no evidence to suggest differences in centrality of work (Pogson *et al.*, 2003). However, an earlier study by van der Velde *et al.* (1998) suggested that there is a connection between age and centrality of work. Their research involved studying three age groups of young adults: 18-year-olds, 22-year-olds, and 26-year-olds. They concluded that each group became more work centered over time. Similarly, a generational shift in the centrality of work has been



demonstrated in a student sample with more students in recent years indicating “work is just making a living” and fewer students responding in recent years that “work is a central part of life” (Twenge and Kasser, 2013). Smola and Sutton (2002) found that younger generations were less likely to believe that work should be a central part of their life; focus group data confirmed this finding with Baby Boomers living to work and younger employees working to live (Gursoy *et al.*, 2008). Twenge (2010) reports Baby Boomers reflect higher work centrality while Generation X and Generation Y view work as less central to their lives. Similarly, Twenge *et al.* (2010) found differences in work centrality amongst generations with Baby Boomers scoring significantly higher than Generation X and Millennials. Exploring the differences in work ethic among three generations of nurses, Jobe (2014a) found that Baby Boomers had the highest mean scores in centrality of work and wasted time. In a rare generational study including Gen Z, centrality of work was rated significantly lower for Gen Z than the other generations tested (Baby Boomers, Gen X, Gen Y; Ortega *et al.*, 2019). Based on the results of this literature, the following is hypothesized:

*Hypothesis (5): Generation has a significant effect on the dimension of centrality of work, such that Baby Boomers will see work as more central to life than Gen Z.*

**Wasted Time.** Wasted time refers to the extent of value an individual places on the productive use of time. In the context of a work environment, it signifies a continuum with one end representing a high commitment to the efficient allocation of time to task accomplishment and the other to a laissez-faire approach to the value of work productivity where idle time is not considered problematic. The efficient and constructive use of time is consistent with a strong work ethic (Herman, 2002), and it has been long understood that improved performance is inexorably linked to efficient use of time (Mudrack, 1999). Poor time management and procrastination have been identified as an obstacle to productivity (Dembo and Eaton, 2000).

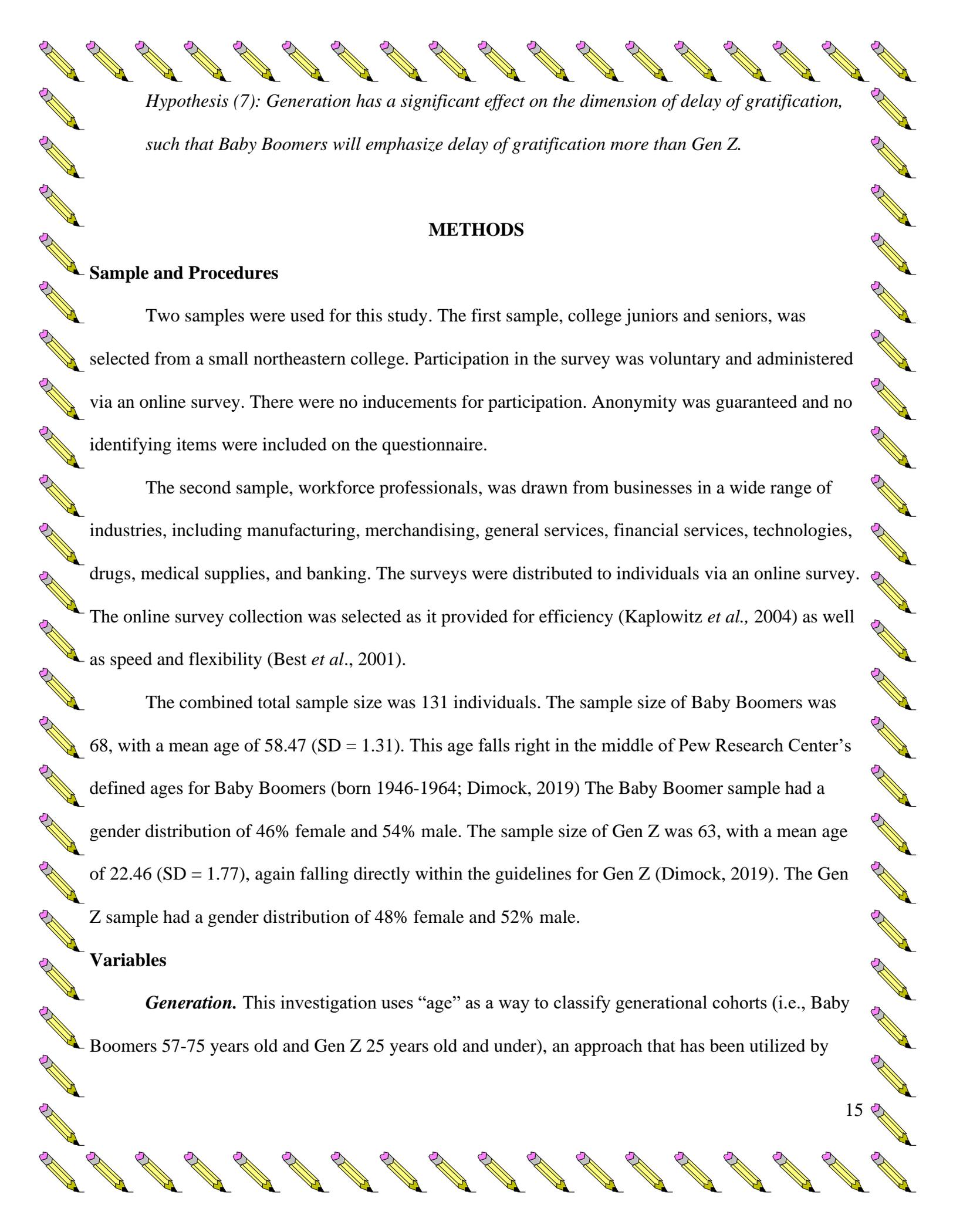


While a number of studies investigate how workers waste time (Aftab, 2003; Bauza, 2006; Donkin, 2002; Gimein, 1999; Libet *et al.*, 2001), there is little scholarly literature regarding the value different generations place on work productivity versus accepting wasted time. Since Baby Boomers are focused on efficiency (Purdue University Global, n.d.) and efficient use of time can be a learned skill, it is hypothesized that:

*Hypothesis (6): Generation has a significant effect on the dimension of wasted time, such that Baby Boomers will place a greater emphasis on productivity than Gen Z.*

**Delay of Gratification.** Delayed gratification is described as the tendency to postpone rewards until a later time. It is the ability to defer short-term rewards in order to achieve a future goal. An individual with this ability is able to choose and sustain a course of action for the achievement of a long-term goal even though there are tempting alternatives for short-term gratification (Reynolds and Schiffbauer, 2005). Impulsive behaviors are subdued, and the individual possesses a faith and trust in management's willingness and ability to sustain an environment in which long-term goals are achievable (Liu and Yu, 2017).

Delay of gratification has been studied relative to socioeconomic status and impulse buying (Wood, 1998), job performance over time (Liu and Yu, 2017), affective decision-making and perspective taking (Prencipe and Zelazo, 2005), gender (Silverman, 2003; Witt, 1990), life themes and motivations among students re-entering a university environment (Bauer and Mott, 1990), organizational satisfaction and commitment (Witt, 1990), procedural justice and distributive justice relationship (Joy and Witt, 1992), and impulsive choices and problem behaviors (Wulfert *et al.*, 2002). A few studies have examined the differences between generations. Results of these studies suggest that delay of gratification is greater for baby boomers than for other generations (Meriac *et al.*, 2010; Phillips, 2016; van der Walt *et al.*, 2017; Witt, 1990; Wulfert *et al.*, 2002;). Based on the literature results, the following is hypothesized:



*Hypothesis (7): Generation has a significant effect on the dimension of delay of gratification, such that Baby Boomers will emphasize delay of gratification more than Gen Z.*

## METHODS

### Sample and Procedures

Two samples were used for this study. The first sample, college juniors and seniors, was selected from a small northeastern college. Participation in the survey was voluntary and administered via an online survey. There were no inducements for participation. Anonymity was guaranteed and no identifying items were included on the questionnaire.

The second sample, workforce professionals, was drawn from businesses in a wide range of industries, including manufacturing, merchandising, general services, financial services, technologies, drugs, medical supplies, and banking. The surveys were distributed to individuals via an online survey. The online survey collection was selected as it provided for efficiency (Kaplowitz *et al.*, 2004) as well as speed and flexibility (Best *et al.*, 2001).

The combined total sample size was 131 individuals. The sample size of Baby Boomers was 68, with a mean age of 58.47 (SD = 1.31). This age falls right in the middle of Pew Research Center's defined ages for Baby Boomers (born 1946-1964; Dimock, 2019) The Baby Boomer sample had a gender distribution of 46% female and 54% male. The sample size of Gen Z was 63, with a mean age of 22.46 (SD = 1.77), again falling directly within the guidelines for Gen Z (Dimock, 2019). The Gen Z sample had a gender distribution of 48% female and 52% male.

### Variables

**Generation.** This investigation uses "age" as a way to classify generational cohorts (i.e., Baby Boomers 57-75 years old and Gen Z 25 years old and under), an approach that has been utilized by

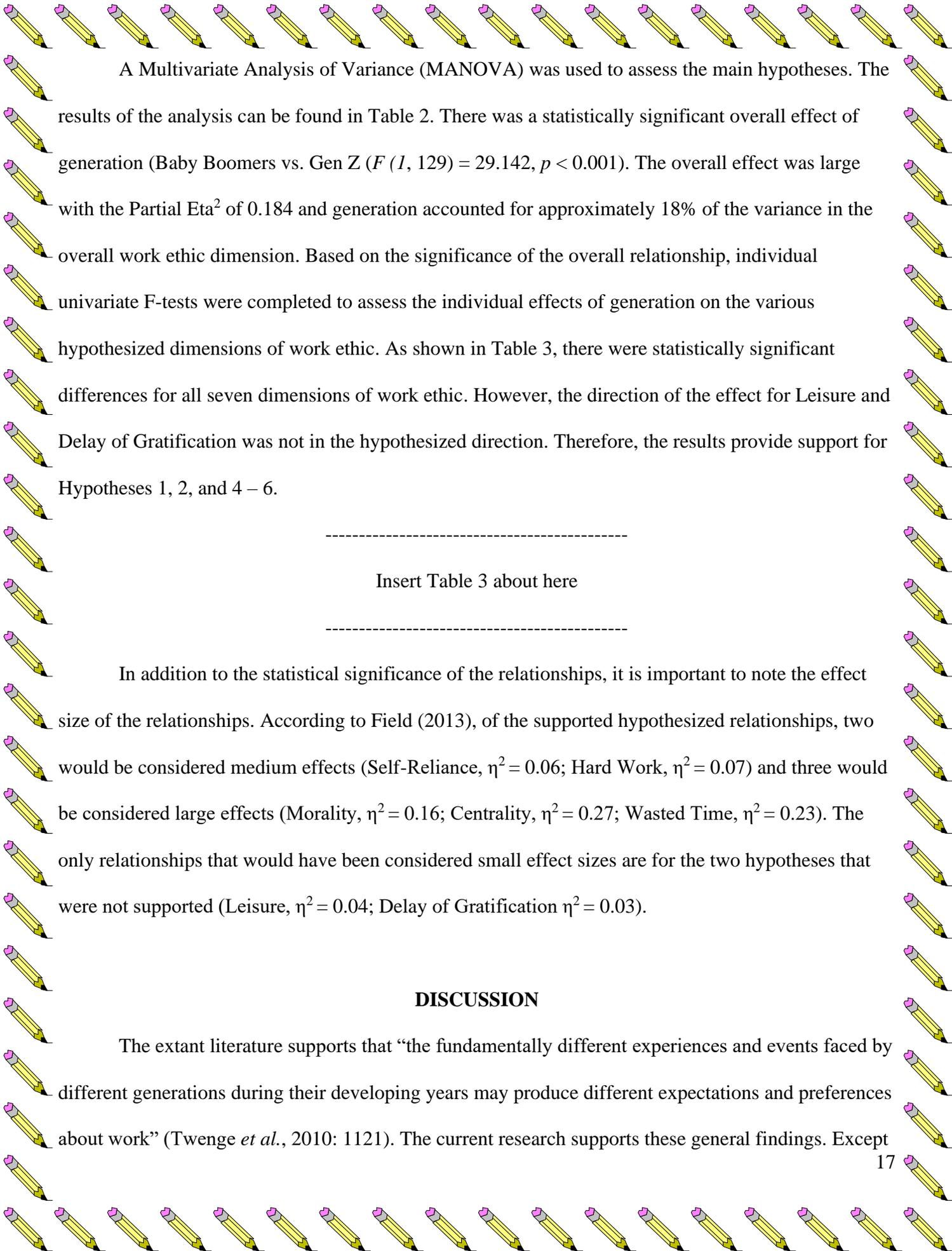
other researchers studying generations and work ethics (e.g., Joshi et al., 2010; Weeks and Schaffert, 2019).

**Work Ethic.** The short form for the multidimensional work ethic profile (Meriac *et al.*, 2013) was used to measure the seven dimensions of work ethic. The scale had 28 items, in random order, and used a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from 5 = Strongly Agree to 1 = Strongly Disagree. The seven dimensions measured in the study were Self-Reliance, Morality/Ethics, Leisure, Hard Work, Centrality of Work, Wasted Time, and Delay of Gratification. Each dimension was assessed using four items. The survey and the scales have previously been subjected to psychometric validation (Meriac *et al.*, 2013). Chronbach's alphas were computed for the sample which yielded the following levels of reliability: Self-Reliance (0.84), Morality/Ethics (0.91), Leisure (0.79), Hard Work (0.86), Centrality of Work (0.90), Wasted Time (0.81), and Delay of Gratification (0.67). All reliabilities, with the exception of Delay of Gratification, were within the acceptable range. As will be discussed later in the analysis section, the Delay of Gratification dimension also had the smallest effect size (partial eta squared).

## RESULTS

The means, standard deviations, and two-tailed Pearson correlations were calculated for the seven dimensions of work ethic. The results can be seen in Table 1. Cronbach alpha calculations are inserted on the table's diagonal axis. The means and standard deviations for all variables by generation can be found in Table 2.

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Insert Table 1 and Table 2 about here  
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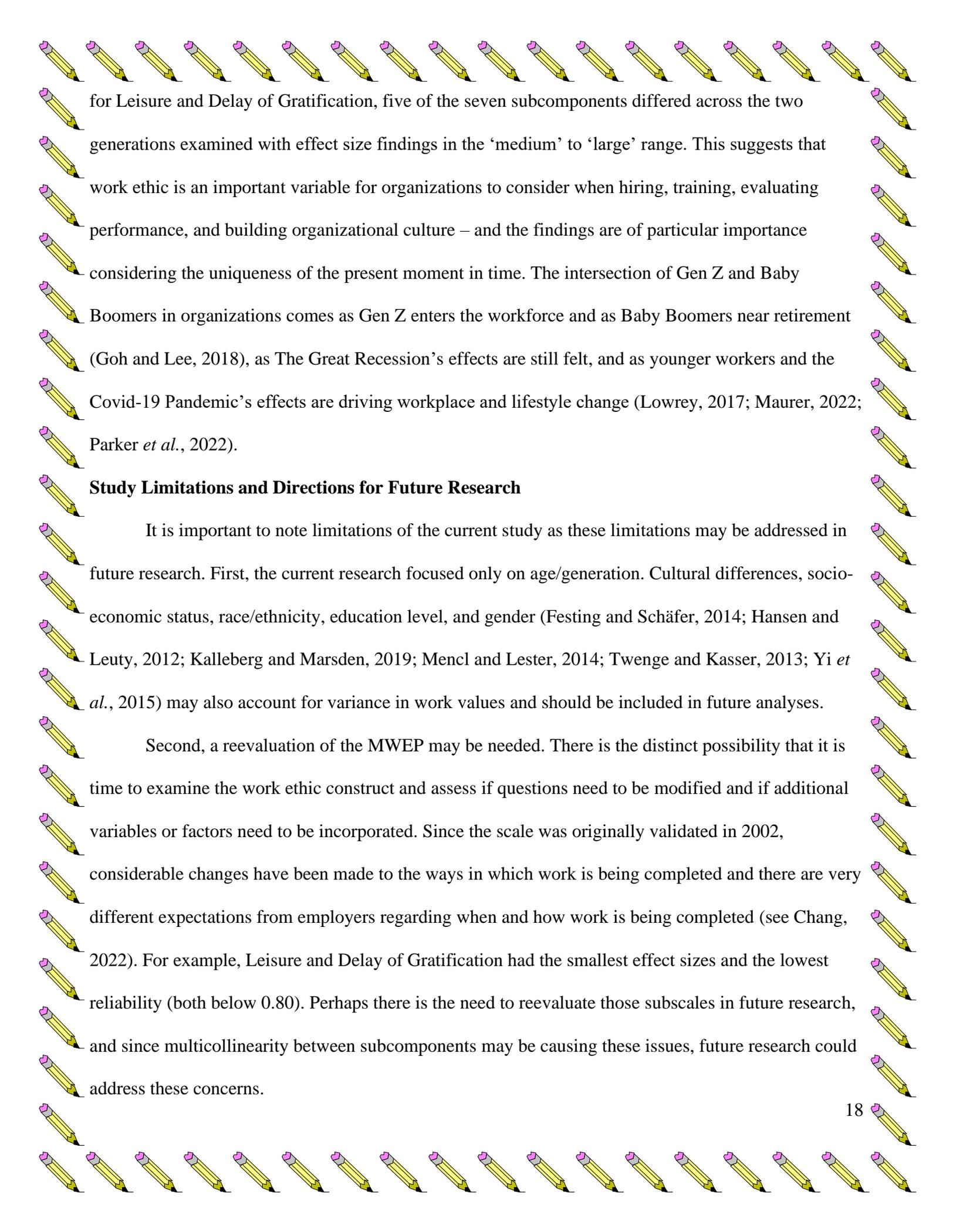
A Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) was used to assess the main hypotheses. The results of the analysis can be found in Table 2. There was a statistically significant overall effect of generation (Baby Boomers vs. Gen Z ( $F(1, 129) = 29.142, p < 0.001$ ). The overall effect was large with the Partial Eta<sup>2</sup> of 0.184 and generation accounted for approximately 18% of the variance in the overall work ethic dimension. Based on the significance of the overall relationship, individual univariate F-tests were completed to assess the individual effects of generation on the various hypothesized dimensions of work ethic. As shown in Table 3, there were statistically significant differences for all seven dimensions of work ethic. However, the direction of the effect for Leisure and Delay of Gratification was not in the hypothesized direction. Therefore, the results provide support for Hypotheses 1, 2, and 4 – 6.

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Insert Table 3 about here  
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In addition to the statistical significance of the relationships, it is important to note the effect size of the relationships. According to Field (2013), of the supported hypothesized relationships, two would be considered medium effects (Self-Reliance,  $\eta^2 = 0.06$ ; Hard Work,  $\eta^2 = 0.07$ ) and three would be considered large effects (Morality,  $\eta^2 = 0.16$ ; Centrality,  $\eta^2 = 0.27$ ; Wasted Time,  $\eta^2 = 0.23$ ). The only relationships that would have been considered small effect sizes are for the two hypotheses that were not supported (Leisure,  $\eta^2 = 0.04$ ; Delay of Gratification  $\eta^2 = 0.03$ ).

## DISCUSSION

The extant literature supports that “the fundamentally different experiences and events faced by different generations during their developing years may produce different expectations and preferences about work” (Twenge *et al.*, 2010: 1121). The current research supports these general findings. Except

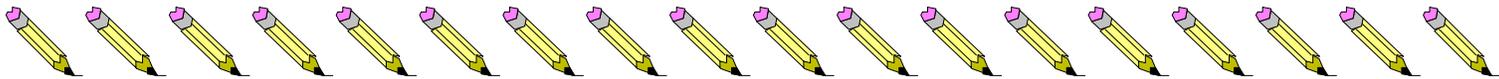


for Leisure and Delay of Gratification, five of the seven subcomponents differed across the two generations examined with effect size findings in the ‘medium’ to ‘large’ range. This suggests that work ethic is an important variable for organizations to consider when hiring, training, evaluating performance, and building organizational culture – and the findings are of particular importance considering the uniqueness of the present moment in time. The intersection of Gen Z and Baby Boomers in organizations comes as Gen Z enters the workforce and as Baby Boomers near retirement (Goh and Lee, 2018), as The Great Recession’s effects are still felt, and as younger workers and the Covid-19 Pandemic’s effects are driving workplace and lifestyle change (Lowrey, 2017; Maurer, 2022; Parker *et al.*, 2022).

### **Study Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

It is important to note limitations of the current study as these limitations may be addressed in future research. First, the current research focused only on age/generation. Cultural differences, socio-economic status, race/ethnicity, education level, and gender (Festing and Schäfer, 2014; Hansen and Leuty, 2012; Kalleberg and Marsden, 2019; Mencl and Lester, 2014; Twenge and Kasser, 2013; Yi *et al.*, 2015) may also account for variance in work values and should be included in future analyses.

Second, a reevaluation of the MWEP may be needed. There is the distinct possibility that it is time to examine the work ethic construct and assess if questions need to be modified and if additional variables or factors need to be incorporated. Since the scale was originally validated in 2002, considerable changes have been made to the ways in which work is being completed and there are very different expectations from employers regarding when and how work is being completed (see Chang, 2022). For example, Leisure and Delay of Gratification had the smallest effect sizes and the lowest reliability (both below 0.80). Perhaps there is the need to reevaluate those subscales in future research, and since multicollinearity between subcomponents may be causing these issues, future research could address these concerns.

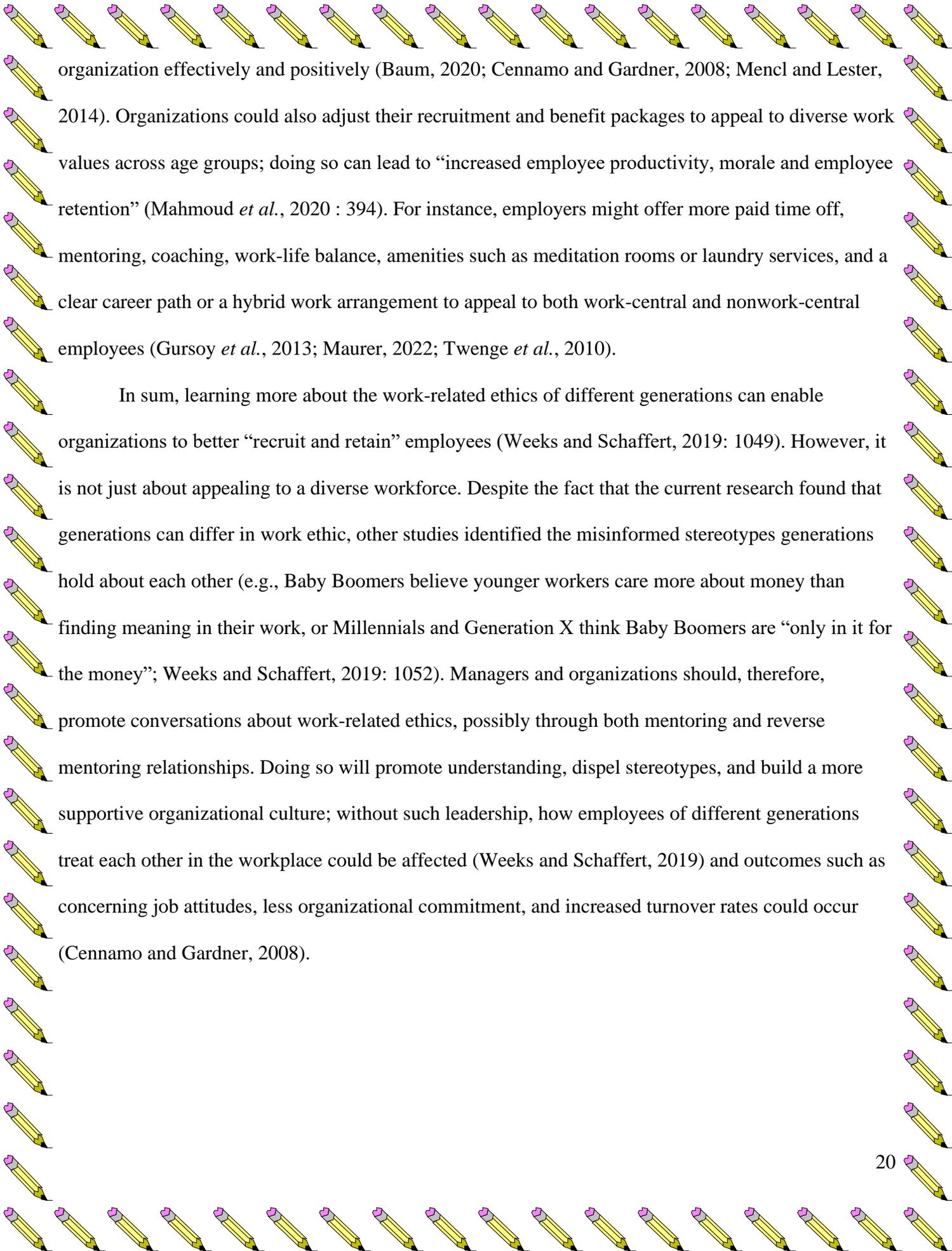


Another direction for future research is to incorporate the meaningfulness of work, measured with the Comprehensive Meaningful Work Scale (Lips-Wiersma and Wright, 2012) to studies of work ethic. Such data could provide useful insights to the different ways older and younger workers find meaning in their work. Finally, studies about work ethic and generational differences need to be repeated periodically, as new generations enter the workforce and older generations retire. Future research should be directed at longitudinal and replication studies, using the MWEP, CMWS, or other scales to continue to understand how values change and how those shifts shape organizations over time.

### **Implications for Practice**

In terms of practical implications, the more that is known about how employees of different generations value work in their lives, the more organizational leaders can adjust policies and practices accordingly. The cost of not addressing generational differences in work values is substantial (Cogin, 2012), with turnover (Gursoy *et al.*, 2013) and quiet quitting (Harter, 2022) affecting organizational profitability and performance. The differences in work ethic identified between Baby Boomers and Gen Z provides organizations an opportunity to become more aware and attuned to the commonalities among and differences between cohorts of employees – and to act on at knowledge. For example, results of the current study find commonalities across generations in the areas of morality and centrality of work. Leaders could further explore these commonalities, attempt to assess why it is these commonalities exist, and then use this as a stepping-stone for building greater understanding across generations.

There are further steps that organizations can take to bridge the generation gap. Employers should engage their employees (young and older) in understanding their specific lifestyle and work values; doing so will enable Baby Boomer and Gen Z employees to have a voice in workplace and job design (maybe using Appreciative Inquiry; Gursoy *et al.*, 2008), so that they can contribute to the



organization effectively and positively (Baum, 2020; Cennamo and Gardner, 2008; Mencl and Lester, 2014). Organizations could also adjust their recruitment and benefit packages to appeal to diverse work values across age groups; doing so can lead to “increased employee productivity, morale and employee retention” (Mahmoud *et al.*, 2020 : 394). For instance, employers might offer more paid time off, mentoring, coaching, work-life balance, amenities such as meditation rooms or laundry services, and a clear career path or a hybrid work arrangement to appeal to both work-central and nonwork-central employees (Gursoy *et al.*, 2013; Maurer, 2022; Twenge *et al.*, 2010).

In sum, learning more about the work-related ethics of different generations can enable organizations to better “recruit and retain” employees (Weeks and Schaffert, 2019: 1049). However, it is not just about appealing to a diverse workforce. Despite the fact that the current research found that generations can differ in work ethic, other studies identified the misinformed stereotypes generations hold about each other (e.g., Baby Boomers believe younger workers care more about money than finding meaning in their work, or Millennials and Generation X think Baby Boomers are “only in it for the money”; Weeks and Schaffert, 2019: 1052). Managers and organizations should, therefore, promote conversations about work-related ethics, possibly through both mentoring and reverse mentoring relationships. Doing so will promote understanding, dispel stereotypes, and build a more supportive organizational culture; without such leadership, how employees of different generations treat each other in the workplace could be affected (Weeks and Schaffert, 2019) and outcomes such as concerning job attitudes, less organizational commitment, and increased turnover rates could occur (Cennamo and Gardner, 2008).



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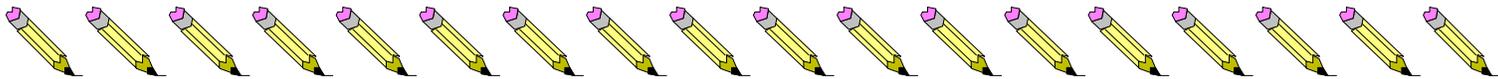
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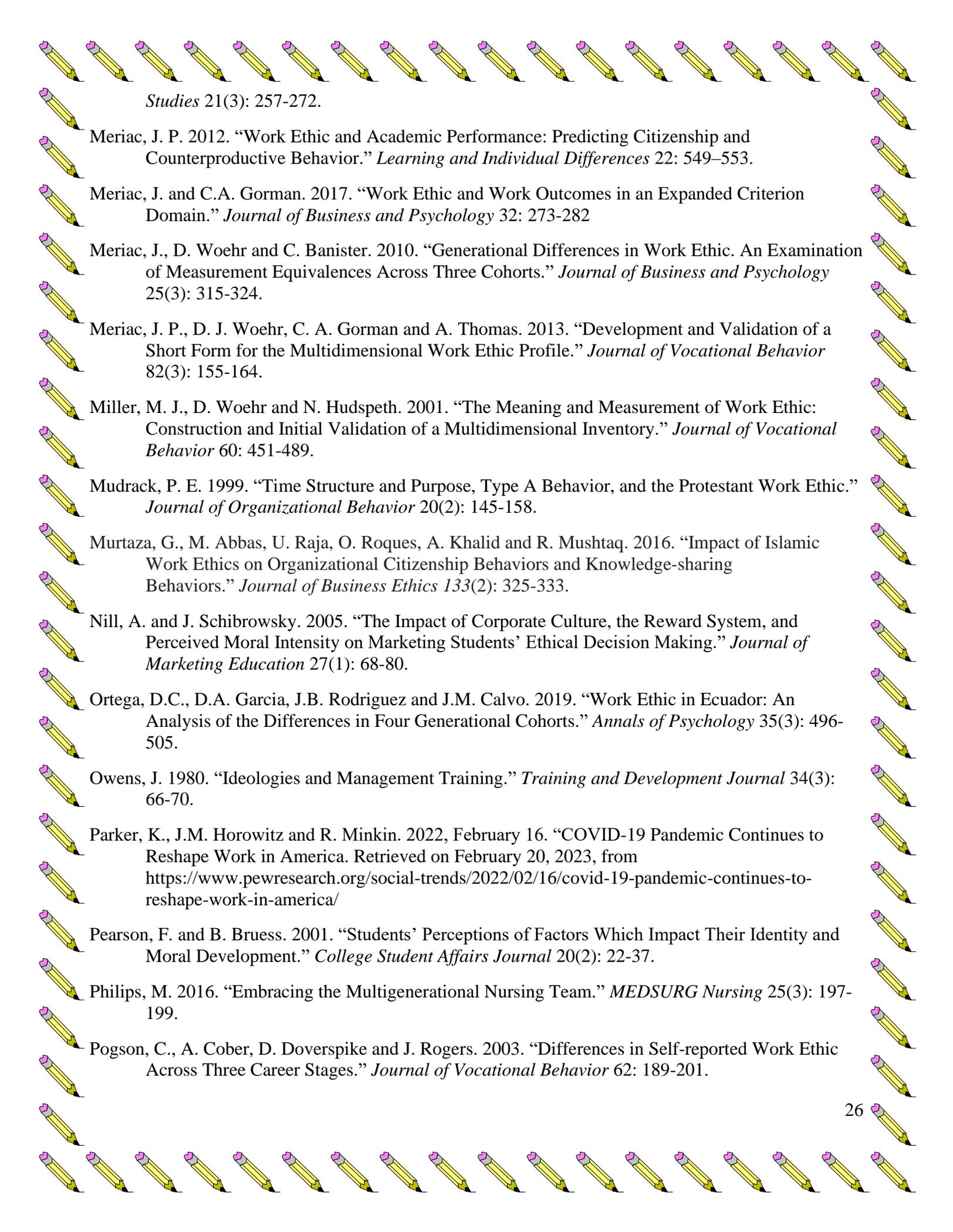
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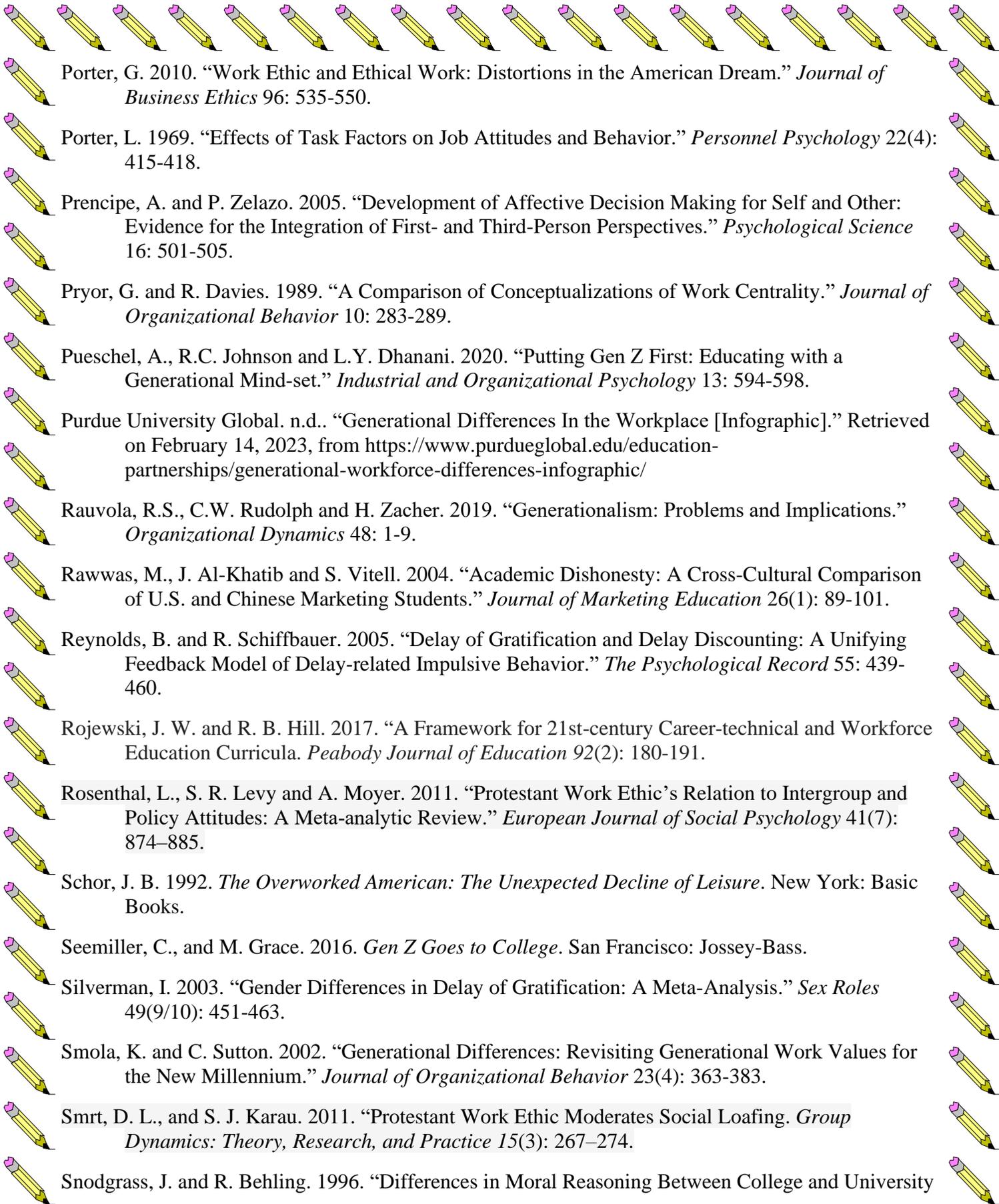
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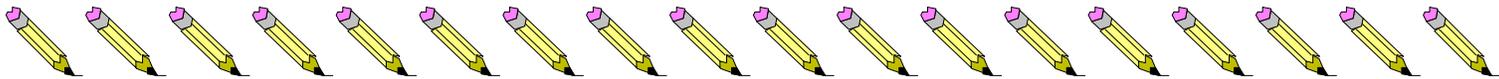
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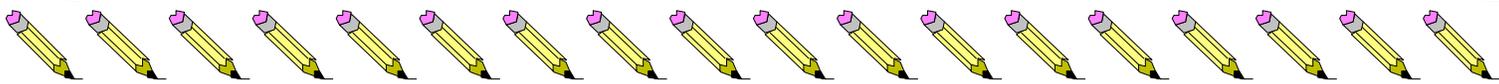
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**Table 1**

**Pearson Correlation Matrix of the Factors of Work Ethic**

	Mean	Std. Deviation	Self-Reliance	Morality	Leisure	Hard Work	Centrality	Wasted Time	Delay	Gratification
Self-Reliance	3.26	0.94	0.84							
Morality	4.52	0.79	0.33**	0.91						
Leisure	3.17	0.67	0.39**	0.26**	0.79					
Hard Work	3.98	0.81	0.41**	0.62**	0.05	0.86				
Centrality	4.23	0.82	0.36**	0.83**	0.04	0.71**	0.90			
Wasted Time	4.12	0.64	0.52**	0.83**	0.18*	0.73**	0.82**	0.81		
Delay	2.93	0.45	0.24**	-0.03	-0.02	0.03	-0.05	0.14	0.67	
Gratification										

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed).

**Table 2**

**Means and Standard Deviations of the Factors of Work Ethic by Generation Status**

Factor Name	Generation	
	Gen Z (n = 63)	Baby Boomers (n = 68)
Self-Reliance	3.06 (0.87)	3.49 (0.95)
Morality	4.18 (0.95)	4.82 (0.44)
Leisure	3.04 (0.81)	3.29 (0.50)
Hard Work	3.76 (0.86)	4.20 (0.70)
Centrality	3.79 (0.86)	4.63 (0.53)
Wasted Time	3.81 (0.61)	4.42 (0.54)
Delay Gratification	3.02 (0.49)	2.85 (0.41)

Note: Data collected on a five-point scale (1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree).

Note: A larger mean indicates greater support for the importance of the work ethic factor.

**Table 3**

**Test of Main Effects and Tests of Generation on Work Ethic Factors**

IV Name	DV Name	Wilks' Lambda ( <i>F</i> )	Univariate <i>F</i>	Partial Eta <sup>2</sup>
Generation		.60 (29.14) <sup>***</sup>		0.18
	Self-Reliance		7.49 <sup>**</sup>	0.06
	Morality		25.15 <sup>***</sup>	0.16
	Leisure		4.94 <sup>*</sup>	0.04
	Hard Work		10.165 <sup>**</sup>	0.07
	Centrality		47.03 <sup>***</sup>	0.27
	Wasted Time		37.31 <sup>***</sup>	0.23
	Delay Gratification		4.26 <sup>*</sup>	0.03

Notes \**p* < 0.05; \*\**p* < 0.01; \*\*\**p* < 0.001 N = 131