



**BRITISH ACADEMY
OF MANAGEMENT**

BAM
CONFERENCE

3RD-5TH SEPTEMBER

ASTON UNIVERSITY BIRMINGHAM UNITED KINGDOM

This paper is from the BAM2019 Conference Proceedings

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I LOVE MY JOB BUT HATE MY OFFICE: THE DICHOTOMY OF JOB ALIENATION AND ORGANIZATIONAL ALIENATION

ABSTRACT

Work Alienation, or the feeling of detachment from one's work owing to prolonged exposure to negative experiences, has been associated with turnover, presentism, and other negative work behaviour. Research is relatively silent on the contexts of work alienation. Work alienation occurs when one's work fails to satisfy one's salient needs as an individual – leading to detachment from the work eventual withdrawal from the organization. However, it is possible that while one's job in itself may be frustrating, organizational kinship and co-worker ties would make the person want to continue in the same workplace. Thus, work itself has multiple contexts, and alienation from each context may not happen at once and for the same reasons. In this research, we propose two sub-dimensions of work alienation, namely job and organizational alienation, and how they interact and operate to determine how the negative effects of alienation shall be manifested for an individual.

Keywords: work alienation, job alienation, organizational alienation, performance

Track – Organizational Psychology

Word Count – 3767 words

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INTRODUCTION

The twenty first century is characterized by high dynamism in the nature of the work, the composition of the workforce, the needs of the workers, and the situation of the market and the economy. Long-term commitment to a single workplace or even a career has fallen out of favor leading to the concepts of growth ladders being replaced by boundary less career plans. While this in general has enhanced the bargaining power of the worker of today and has helped keep the modern workplace open to new possibilities, it has also contributed to the gradual severing of emotional ties and a floating world syndrome for the modern worker, making the workforce of today open to the impact of alienation at the workplace.

A person is said to be alienated with his or her work when he or she possesses a generally unenthusiastic view towards work and is poorly engaged with the work role (Kosaba, Maddi & Kahn, 1982). It is characterized by a state of low positive affect towards work (Hirschfeld & Field, 2000) and work settings (Seeman, 1991), psychological disengagement from work activities (Hirschfeld & Field, 2000) and low preoccupation with and concern about specific job tasks (Gagne, Senecal & Koestner, 1997). Specifically, work alienation is a state in which one's intrinsic needs are not satisfied – or there are few opportunities to give expression to one's intrinsic drives. Research has predominantly identified such salient needs to be same as one's self-actualizing needs – particularly those of autonomy, control and achievement (Kanungo, 1990).

While existing literature has sought to address employee alienation and its causal connections, not much has been done to illustrate what shape and form alienation might take if some of the variables identified by existing literature were to be re-grouped/ re-conceptualized. This paper takes off from this gap and is organized as follows. We examine alienation at work and its causal connections as discussed in literature and reconceptualise work alienation as taking two predominant forms in the workplace: organizational alienation (OA) and job alienation (JA). In doing so, we reflect on how a re-grouping of variables is feasible to indicate work alienation forms in the short run and in the long run. Finally, we present our conceptual model that establishes the linkages between the constructs discussed.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The term alienation refers to a state of separation or detachment from something. The term usually carries a negative connotation – implying that the state of detachment is not one that is ideal or desired. The broad concept of alienation has its origin in theology. Christian theology defines alienation in terms of detachment from God and moral principles, from one's own body, and detachment of the individual from his institutions (Kanungo, 1979). The latter may be seen as the precursor of the concept of alienation as studied by sociologists and psychologists.

Nature of Work Alienation

Kanungo (1979) proposes that work alienation may be seen either as an individual phenomenon or a collective phenomenon. As a collective phenomenon, work alienation may be demonstrated through

absenteeism, sabotage etc. – showing poor engagement of all or the majority of the workers at the organizational level. At a personal level, it is detachment from work of a single worker, due to non-satisfaction of his or her unique needs.

Seeman (1959, 1971) stated that work alienation could take different forms, depending on the affective state it arouses in a person. He classified work alienation as powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, isolation and self-estrangement. Maddi, Kosaba, and Hoover (1979) stated that work alienation could be of the following types:

1. Vegetativeness - it occurs when one is unable to appreciate the importance or value of or take interest in one's work. It is described to be the opposite of commitment (Maddi & Kosaba, 1980).
2. Adventurousness – it consists of involvement in high risk and manipulation and interest in dangerous activities. It is characterized by deviancy and normlessness (Seeman, 1975) and is a reaction to everyday experiences that have lost their meaning.
3. Nihilism – in this one discredits everything that appears to be meaningful and moves towards a state of detachment from the society.
4. Powerlessness – in this one feels incapable of achieving important goals as they appear to be decided and controlled externally.

The theory also identifies five contexts over which any of the four kinds of the alienations may be manifested. These include work, social institutions, family, other persons and the self (Maddi, Hoover & Kobasa, 1982).

Causes of Work alienation

Work alienation is said to occur when one perceives that the work fails to help one attain, at present or in future, one's salient needs or personal goals - (Kanungo, 1983; Csikszentmihalyi, 1975) – leading to a loss of interest in and detachment from one's work. Researchers have forwarded diverse explanations for the phenomenon of work alienation.

Marx (1932) stated that in the capitalist system, work is not voluntary, but is imposed, forced labour – being only a means to satisfy other needs rather than being an end in itself. Work is thus a form of self-denial for the worker, leaving him physically exhausted and miserable – causing alienation. According to Kanungo (1979), Marx states work alienation will occur when the worker's need for autonomy and control are frustrated at work. Further, Marx appears to draw distinction between two properties of job behavior – instrumental (means to satisfy derived needs) and consummatory (an end in itself). According to Marx, prolonged instrumental behavior will lead to feelings of alienation. Durkheim (1893), on the other hand, stated that work alienation occurs due to anomie – lack of social norms and means to guide one's behavior. It appears to arise from the frustration of social and security needs, need for social comparison and social approval (Maslow, 1954; Festinger, 1954).

Most modern Western theories, following Marx, have emphasized lack of satisfaction of intrinsic needs to be the basic condition for work alienation (Kanungo, 1990). Work alienation is said to occur when the self-actualizing needs such as personal achievement, control, and autonomy are not satisfied by the job one holds (Agarwal, 1993). According to these theories, work alienation has two sources. One, it may arise out of the worker's attitude towards work. It has been said that past socialization, that leads to adherence to Protestant work-ethic ideals (Rabinowitz and Hall, 1977; Shepard, 1971) and modernity (high personal growth aspiration and emphasis on intrinsic work values of personal achievement, control and autonomy) help in creating involved workers and guard against work alienation. (Inkeles & Smith, 1974; Orpen, 1978). Two, work alienation may be a result of work conditions that are simply instrumental in satisfying extrinsic needs of money or security and do not provide for high autonomy and control and expression of abilities and potentialities (Kanungo, 1990).

Hirschfeld (2002) found that transactional leadership, as opposed to transformational leadership, was associated with lower job alienation.

Based on previous research on negative job experiences and outcomes, Korman, Wittig-Berman and LangSource (1981) presented a comprehensive model of the antecedents and features of alienation in professionals and managers. According to this theory, the antecedents of work alienation may be divided into three categories:

1. Work/Life history factors – this consist of the following:
 - a. Disconfirmed Expectations – it consists of the realization of having wrong expectancies from people, events and plans – leading to feelings of violation of equity and a loss of ability to belong and plan for the future.
 - b. Contradictory role demands – it involves the realization that one’s various roles have demands that go against one another, making sacrifice of personal desires and needs inevitable.
 - c. Sense of External Control – it involves a feeling of being controlled and manipulated by others – leading to feelings of powerlessness
 - d. Loss of Affiliative Satisfaction – it comes from lack of opportunities to have meaningful social interactions, due to demanding work schedules, frequent mobility and high expenditure of energy at work
2. Developmental factors
 - a. Age 30 transition – it is characterized by realization of possibility of non-success, recognition of wrong life and early career choices and possible work family conflicts characterizing middle adulthood
 - b. Mid-Life Transition – it consists of negative feelings arising out of awareness of ageing, decline of performance, unfulfilled and unachievable life goals and feelings of being obsolete due to changing family and work relations.

The work/life factors and developmental factors together contribute to feelings of alienation, which may take two forms:

1. Personal Alienation – this leads to feelings of high anxiety, low self-actualization and nonrationality or lack of planning
2. Social Alienation – this leads to non-rationality, characterized by lack of planning.

Effects of Work Alienation

Work alienation, identified to be the opposite of work involvement, is characterized by a sense of detachment from one’s work, the job activities and the work settings. It has been found that there is a negative correlation between alienation and intrinsic job satisfaction (Maddi, Hoover, & Kobasa, 1982). In addition, it was found that work alienation significantly reduces exploratory behavior (Seeman & Evans, 1962) – owing to a general sense of powerlessness or external locus of control. It is also reasoned that self-acceptance is necessary before one can explore an unfamiliar environment. Persons with feelings of alienation are deficient on this aspect and thus would be hesitant in displaying exploratory behavior (Maddi, Hoover, & Kobasa, 1982). Johnston, Parasuraman, Futrell, and Black (1990) stated that alienated personnel expend little energy at work, perform only for external rewards and are more likely to quit (Moch, 1980).

THE DICHOTOMY: TWO VANTAGE POINTS IN ALIENATION RESEARCH

There are two distinct vantage points from which scholars have sought to conceptualize employee alienation. One, looks at alienation as a structural syndrome embedded in the work organization. This view originates from Marx's discussion of alienated labour as an inevitable condition of all employees serving under monopoly capitalism (Marx, 1969: 99-100); reinforced later by scholars such as Israel (1971) and Braverman (1974). Studies conducted by Aiken and Hage (1966), Allen and Lafollette (1977), Greene (1978), and Sarros et al. (2002) have identified structural properties of organizations such as formalization and centralization as the key determinants of work alienation. Similarly, the role of structural variables in defining work alienation have been noted by many scholars (Miller 1975; Mendoza & Lara, 2007; Yang, Yang, & Kawachi, 2001). Various studies have explored the relationship of alienation to job characteristics (Kanungo, 1979; Roodt, 2004; Nasurdin et al. 2005). The schism inherent in the notion of expected environment and its actual confirmation has been noted to drive the degree of dissatisfaction within the employee (Keniston, 1965; Clarke, 1959; Cable, 1988) which combined with other organizational factors might decide the response of the employee. The key antecedents leading to work alienation identified by Nair and Vohra (2010) draw on the variables Hackman and Oldham (1980) posits in explicating the Job Characteristics Model; they include organizational structure, nature of work/ task, quality of relationships, and justice perceptions as the key antecedents for assessing work alienation. Shantz et al. (2015) follow a similar route as Nair and Vohra and link alienation to four antecedents: autonomy, variety, task identity, and social relationships at work. Hackman (1980) also provides the inspiration for research into the linkages between job design elements and employee engagement (Kahn, 1990; May, Gilson, & Harter, 2004; Bakker and Bal, 2010; Christian, Garza, & Slaughter, 2011; Saks, 2006) and those linking job characteristics to job satisfaction and internal work motivation (Fried & Ferris, 1987; Humphrey et al., 2007).

The subjective view on alienation can be traced to Blauner's (1964) empirical study of the dimensions of alienation. Blauner had drawn on Seeman's (1959) work, which established alienation as a multi-dimensional concept and proposed five alternate variables of alienation, namely, powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, isolation, and self-estrangement. Blauner's work had far reaching implications in that it depicted the likelihood of different employees having different alienation profiles and this he leveraged to ultimately understand occupational work groups and production systems as active contexts for increasing alienation or otherwise. Mottaz (1981) measured alienation using seven items each for the dimensions of powerlessness, meaninglessness, and self-estrangement, concluding, however, that powerlessness and meaninglessness are actually determinants of self-estrangement. Cable's (1988) study of situational factors identified three distinct categories of individual response: acceptance, accommodation, and rebellion, with each category having a number of sub types that are defined by the attributions that illustrate the response. Researchers have studied the impact of locus of control on alienation and seen that individuals with an external locus of control cultivate more alienation from work setting (Banai, Reisel, & Probst, 2004; Korman et al., 1981). Korman et al. (1981) and Lang (1985) have addressed the issues of personal and social alienation. While Korman et al. (1981) tested a model of alienation among professionals and managers and found that the gap between expected and actual environments, and affiliative needs not being met, result in alienation; Lang (1985) found that people from advantageous economic backgrounds more prone to alienation when faced with dissatisfaction. Banai and Reisel (2007) further explored alienation as having two symptoms namely, personal and social, and focused on economically established workers experiencing disengagement from work processes because of work conditions being antagonistic to their internal need satisfaction. Rosner and Putterman (1991) suggested that education of the individual accounts for both rise in his/her ability to derive satisfaction from work and also the disenchantment when subjected to routine and unchallenging work.

RE-CONCEPTUALIZING ALIENATION

Sifting through extant literature makes one thing clear that a basic premise of work alienation has been understood to be the separation of an employee's expected psychological state from the one in which she is actually engaged in her work environment. A significant amount of research has been devoted to relating work alienation to job characteristics (Kanungo, 1979; Roodt, 2004; Nasurdin et al. 2005), and this strain continues in the recent studies by Nair and Vohra (2010) and Shantz et al. (2015). On the other hand, there is also the prefiguring of alienation through another lens termed as 'organizational alienation' by Aiken and Hage (1966), wherein they sought to identify aspects of the organization, such as formalization and centralization, rather than job characteristics alone, as leading to alienation of the worker.

We find the trajectory of organizational alienation developed by Aiken and Hage; antecedents of alienation identified by Nair and Vohra's and Shantz et al, crucial to our discussion in this paper. We find the variables of autonomy, variety, task identity, and social relationships, taken up by Nair and Vohra and Shanthem as antecedents of alienation could again be regrouped as *job or task related* (variety and task identity) and *organization related* (social relationships) factors of alienation. Autonomy may be a feature of the task or a function of the organizational environment.

Based on our analysis of the extant literature, we define job alienation (JA) as *alienation arising out of work or task specific reasons such as skill or education level discrepancy between employee and job; or a discrepancy between ambitions of an employee and the possible prospects of the given job role*. On the other hand, we define organizational alienation (OA) as *arising out of a discrepancy between autonomy and social relationship requirements of an employee as opposed to what is available in the work environment*. The idea of discrepancy or lack of alignment derives from the *Expectancy Disconfirmation* framework (Weaver & Brickman, 1974; Campbell, Converse, & Rodgers, 1976; Locker & Dunt, 1978; Ilgen, 1971; Oliver, 1980). Expectancy Disconfirmation, according to the research cited, involves the forming of expectations and the disconfirmation of those expectations through comparisons of the expectancy and experience states. It is a negative disconfirmation if the experience is worse than expected, and positive disconfirmation if better than expected. with the Disconfirmation effects will take shape from associated emotions of the individual, just as past experience of the person will have a strong (positive) impact in his/her expectation of a future episode (Anderson & Hair, 1972; Fache', 2000; Oliver, 1997; Oliver & Burke, 1999).

We further posit that the two kinds of alienation (OA and JA) are independent of each other and either may exist in the absence of another or the two may coexist. However, we accept that over a longer term there is a strong possibility of one kind of alienation leading to another and vice versa. We would also like to clarify that since our work aims to look at the overall phenomena from an existing short term (less than a year) perspective and not a long-term prospect, therefore our assumption of the independence of two kinds of alienation is valid in our proposed framework.

PROPOSITIONS

We have so far identified alienation as taking two predominant forms in the workplace, namely, organizational alienation (OA) and job alienation (JA). We now intend to link the above work to a primary construct of importance in the HR literature, the performance of the employee.

Before we present our proposed model and set of relationships, it is critical to discuss the link between alienation and performance. If we look at the sizeable scholarly work on employee performance, engagement has been flagged as an important variable impacting employee performance and thereby firm performance. Research has similarly established that higher performance is expected when affective commitment to the organization is greater (Allen & Meyer, 1990; Hatch & Schultz,

2000; Johnson & Saboe, 2010; Meyer & Allen, 1991; Meyer, Stanley, Herscovith, & Topolnytsky, 2002).

Thus, a firm comprising of positively attuned and engaged employees tends to perform better than a firm with employees having low levels of affective commitment and engagement, *ceteris paribus*. If we compare the constructs of alienation and engagement, and their roles in employee performance, we can say that the two act in opposite directions. Whereas, engagement leads to improved performance, alienation usually leads to a dip in performance. The two variables therefore seem to be antithetical of each other. So, the basic premise of our work is that alienation is opposite in nature to engagement in terms of impact on performance.

We now present our model establishing the linkages between the constructs we have discussed. The two forms of alienation, organizational alienation and job alienation, impact performance of an employee (and thereby the performance of the firm, but our unit of analysis is an employee here and not the firm). In the short run, presence of only organizational alienation is likely to impact activities that involve collective action or group work, although it may or may not directly impact the individual performance of an employee. For instance, a doctor or a professor employed in a hospital or a university might perform well in terms of individual requirements but may not contribute to other possible organizational benefits say by referring more patients to the hospital or getting more consulting or research funding for the university. Similarly, in a manufacturing or a service setting, a manager who is organizationally alienated may simply play by the book in terms of job description without donning a proactive stance on/towards any activity. We refer to this behaviour as the *threshold effort syndrome*. This is further exacerbated if employees are professionals and like their respective jobs (no job alienation) but suffer from a perception of injustice meted out to them from the organization (could be in terms of financial rewards or designation or any other social or hierarchical concern), that could adversely impact their level of connect with the organization. So, we would expect the group level outcome to be directly impacted in a negative way as a result of organizational alienation. Based on this we propose:

Proposition 1: In the short run, presence of organizational alienation alone would impact employee performance in a negative way.

In the short run, presence of only job alienation may not always result in an immediate dip in the individual performance. Job alienation is usually caused by job and expectation mismatch as discussed above. So, a job may be worse than expected or it may be better than expected. In case the job is worse than expected (below the capabilities of the individual), one may perform well initially, but it can be assumed that it will result in a negative individual performance as time progresses. However, if the employee is not organizationally alienated, there is hope in an individual's mind that the situation might change for better in the future, and her job role may change. Therefore, (in case the job is worse than expected) in the short run, an employee may produce stellar performances individually, but she would want to contribute in a major way when it comes to an activity that has high organizational visibility or enables organizational good in some way. Thus, team work and group work outside her immediate job role might actually see a fillip from the employee side, so as to prove her worth and also seek a better job role.

Similar is the case when an employee is engaged in a job that is better than expected (employee skills not enough for high performance requirements of a job). In that case, the employee is job alienated due to mismatch but feels organizationally inclined (i.e. not alienated at all, rather employee is thankful to organization for the opportunity). Since, the employee is short of skill, individual performance would see an immediate fall. In this case too, employee may show a greater acceptance for additional roles and would want to prove her worth in every other activity including group activities to make up for her lack of performance elsewhere. Based on this we propose,

Proposition 2: In the short to medium run, presence of job alienation alone (in the absence of organizational alienation) would lead to a positive effect on group level employee performance outcomes.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

We have argued a conceptual difference between job-related alienation and organizational alienation building on pre-existing literature. However, our mapping cannot be classified as purely linear as it allows for the existence of overlapping alienation as well as differing temporal stages of alienation. Therefore, we can conclude that our conceptualization of alienation is sufficiently broad and inclusive, whereas our mapping may be classified as non-linear in nature. Our intent has been to trace the confluences between silence and alienation, both in terms of affective outcomes as well as their impact on work performance, and the hypotheses developed can be tested in a variety of settings. A future study is needed to establish the recommended conceptual framework empirically and validating it across different types of organizations.

We anticipate that a ballooning effect may emerge because of a strong relationship between OA and JA resulting in rebellion or ultimate exit for the employee. Conversely, if the effect is downward, it would lead to accommodation and ultimate acceptance.

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