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Alienation: An old concept with contemporary relevance for human resource management

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to re-examine the concept of alienation, particularly from the perspective of existential psychology. While research interest continues to centre on links between human resource management (HRM) and organizational performance, such as in studies by Beer *et al.* (1984), Huselid (1995), Becker and Gerhart (1996) and Guest (2011), there is a growing interest in individual attributes such as employee well-being in addition to organizational performance, as mentioned in studies by Macky and Boxall (2007), Wood and de Menezes (2011) and Guest and Conway (2011). In this paper, we focus on issues related to the individual, and in doing so we suggest that HRM theory needs further development, as pointed out by Guest (2011).

Design/methodology/approach – This is a paper in the tradition of critical theory that draws on both classical and modern research in the business and psychology literature. It outlines the development of the concept of alienation from its classic articulation by Marx through to the perspective offered by existential psychologists such as Blauner (1964). How alienation, thus, defined might manifest in the workplace is then discussed, as are its links to other concepts associated in the literature with positive and negative work experiences is presented.

Findings – We argue that alienation needs to be addressed at two levels, namely, at the systemic level, in terms of factors external to the individual such as work and organizational systems and processes, and in terms of factors internal to the individual's "state of mind". We offer strategies for management to consider counterbalancing the negative effects of residual feelings of powerlessness, meaninglessness, isolation and self-estrangement that systemic change is unable to eliminate.

Originality/value – The paper refocuses attention on the individual within the context of HRM, the effects of alienation and other outcomes of positive and negative work experiences such as work engagement and job burnout.

Keywords Human resource management, Work engagement, Employee well-being, Alienation

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

Recently, the need to improve productivity and overall organizational performance has led to managers giving priority to managing the effectiveness of the employment relationship in organizations. However, an unintended consequence of many of the changes that have been wrought on the employment relationship in pursuit of increased productivity has been the emergence of a corresponding concern for employee well-being and mental health in the workplace. Given its social and economic impacts on business and the wider community, a burgeoning of research interest in this phenomenon is occurring across a wide range of academic disciplines, such as medicine, psychology, sociology and management. Much of this research is directed at both understanding issues in relation to the lack of mental well-being and exploring ways in which mental health might be improved. It has produced calls for organizations to increase their focus on preventive measures aimed at identifying and ameliorating negative aspects of work and to take a more proactive role in changing work environments and structures to better align people and the organization's economic goals (Waghorn and Lloyd, 2005; Dewa *et al.*, 2007; Dollard and Winefield, 2002; Turney, 2003).

In this paper, we present a perspective on negative experiences by revisiting the long-established but often overlooked issue of "alienation" (Geyer, 2001; Seeman, 2001). It is worth noting that organization researchers have long been criticized for overlooking the issue of alienation. In the 1980s, Frost pointed out that "organization science [...] does not adequately address the issue of organization alienation" (Frost, 1980, p. 502). He also suggested that organizations themselves can be a source of alienation, as they represent "a significant barrier that separates them [individuals] from their true natures" (Frost, 1980, p. 501). A decade later, Heinz (1991), p. 213 noted that "there seems to be much evidence for a fading romance with alienation in the social sciences". Given the decline in academic interest, it is, therefore, perhaps not surprising in contemporary management research (Bakker and Leiter, 2010) that problems associated with a lack of satisfaction, stress and the need for engagement, commitment and empowerment receive major attention, while comparatively little new work is published dealing with problems stemming from alienation.

In our reconsideration of the concept, we draw on both classical and modern research to discuss the concept itself along with various management initiatives designed to deal with the negative feelings experienced by workers. In doing so, we discuss links between alienation and other more recent concepts associated in the literature with both positive and negative work experiences, such as job satisfaction, work engagement, job involvement, disengagement and burnout.

Conceptualizing alienation

The term "alienation" originates from the work of Karl Marx on the effects on workers of the capitalist labor process and is well described in a number of studies going back many years (Bottomore and Rubel, 1961; Corlett, 1988; Fox, 1974; Hyman, 1975; Marx and Engels, 1968; Taylor, 1967). According to Marx, alienation is a condition in which the individual becomes isolated and cut-off from the product of his or her work, having given up the desire for self-expression and control over his or her own fate at work. The individual enacts a role estranged from the kind of life of which the individual is capable – this is an important aspect to which we return later. The genesis of this condition can be traced to changes external to the individual arising out of the industrialization process, with the creation of large factories characterized by organizational hierarchies, job specialization and work supervision reliant on formal authority and a shift in life focus away from the home and community to the organization.

Marx coined the term “labour process” to describe the interaction between labor and capital (Bottomore and Rubel, 1961; Taylor, 1967), in which employers (capital) acquire the right to *control* all aspects of labor for the purposes of organizing work for efficiency and minimizing costs so that a profit can be made. Because the labor process requires employees to relinquish the right to control their labor, alienation is, thus, an intrinsic part of the capitalist system and, therefore, unavoidable. According to Marx, the inequality inherent to the “labour process” causes workers to experience at least three forms of alienation (Corlett, 1988; Deery and Plowman, 1991):

- (1) alienation from the product of their labor (dispossessed of what they produce, which is owned by the capitalist);
- (2) alienation from oneself (only find extrinsic meaning in work and are separated from their true selves); and
- (3) alienation from others (the unique qualities of humankind are diminished and so workers are estranged from both their own humanity and others).

These three forms of alienation are in Marxian terms an objective reality (i.e. imposed as an external force) under capitalism, rather than a subjective state of mind (i.e. resulting from factors internal to the individual). Hence, it matters not that people might report that they do not feel alienated, as it is an objective state of capitalism: subjectivity is not part of the analysis. In other words, Marx’s concept of alienation and its causes was anchored in factors external to the individual.

The perspective on alienation taken, in this paper, is more from a psychological viewpoint, perhaps best encapsulated in the work of Blauner (1964), and other leading existential psychologists such as May (1961), Perls (1969) and Rogers (1969), writing a century or so after Marx and apropos of the development of psychology as a discipline. Reading Blauner (1964), alienation is conceptualized as a state of mind, a subjective feeling that can vary from individual to individual in terms of the following four dimensions:

(1) *Powerlessness (due to being controlled by others in an impersonal system)*. The individual’s feelings resulting from a lack of control, powerlessness and the absence of self-fulfillment are well-known, especially over important aspects of work spill over to affect the individual’s life more generally (Blauner, 1964; Sashkin, 1984) and have been described as an affront to human dignity (Kanungo, 1992, p. 414). Advocates of employee empowerment initiatives, including implementation of flat organizational structures and processes such as participative management in which decision-making authority is devolved across the organization, believe that they provide antidotes to the problem of powerlessness experienced by employees. However, many efforts to empower workers fail (Yukl and Becker, 2006; Varma *et al.*, 2001). Several studies contrast the rhetoric of employee empowerment with the reality of retention of control by management and cast doubt on whether empowering employees really delivers the promised benefits and ameliorates feelings of powerlessness (Gordon, 2005; Hales, 2000; Thompson and McHugh, 2002).

(2) *Meaninglessness (from lacking a sense of how their own work contributes to the whole)*. According to Blauner (1964), meaninglessness refers to an individual lacking a sense of how their own work contributes to the whole. For the existentialist, meaningfulness is tied up with feelings of autonomy, creativity and, most of all, individual choice to create a meaningful world. In a work setting, meaninglessness “refers to the immediate significance a work operation or product has for the worker” (Rose, 1988, p. 224); it thus follows that work can be intrinsically punishing to the point of becoming a source of despair. The idea of

meaningful work has been picked up by a number of organizational psychologists, particularly in the areas of job design and motivation. An example is the job characteristics model (JCM) of Hackman and Oldham (1980) in which core job dimensions are linked to the experienced meaningfulness of work. However, these hypothesized linkages have yet to be fully confirmed (Behson, 2010; Oldham and Hackman, 2010; Parker *et al.*, 2001). Other alternative work design approaches, such as the sociotechnical systems approach (Campion and Thayer, 1987; Morgeson and Campion, 2002), have been developed, but remain imperfect tools for dealing with the meaninglessness aspect of alienation.

(3) *Isolation (no sense of belonging)*. Existentialists note the phenomena of loneliness, isolation and of apartness which, in turn, are associated with anxiety (Bugental, 1965; Wiesman, 1965). This loss of a sense of community membership materializes as isolation and loneliness, resulting in anxiety, undermining a sense of belonging and threatening well-being. This sense of isolation can be exacerbated by being excluded from a work group or performing work that requires little or no contact with work colleagues and/or working in a geographically isolated situation (Blauner, 1964). Social identity theory holds that social affiliation (Sarbin and Allen, 1968; Walker *et al.*, 1989) provides a sense of personal identity and is a source of self-esteem and motivation (Tajfel *et al.*, 1971; Turner *et al.*, 1979). For these reasons, many management initiatives incorporate team-based work design and organization, which have social identity theory at their core. Indeed, the current popularity of teamwork in organizations is based on research which shows productivity, job satisfaction and high performance positively associated with effective teams (Guzzo and Dickson, 1996; Richardson and Dentor, 2005; Romig, 1996). Here, individuals are required to subordinate their own will, creativity and individuality to the needs of the collective, a task for some that is psychologically challenging and fraught with peril in terms of mental health. Indeed, for such individuals, teamwork can provide a context in which feelings of isolation and powerlessness may be heightened.

(4) *Self-estrangement (detachment, no sense of identity or personal fulfillment)*. The effects of loneliness and isolation may culminate in estrangement in respect to both personal and social identities. Blauner (1964) views self-estrangement in terms of feelings of detachment and no sense of identity or personal fulfillment. The prison of estrangement prevents us from relating to and being with other people in the world:

Estrangement is the experience of being imprisoned in glass, seeing the world in which others move but forever blocked from joining them, pantomiming communication but never really speaking with another person (Bugental, 1965 p. 311).

Within organizational settings, self-estrangement is felt when the labor process prevents individuals from feeling a sense of completeness and identity. While this could be interpreted as the culmination of powerlessness, meaninglessness and isolation, Rose (1988, p. 224) believes that estrangement occurs when work is not an integral part of man as a social being, "that is, when it is not a central personal, social or religious value, but merely a resented means to other ends". Existential psychologists see self estrangement as a condition in which the individual loses touch with the inner self and perceives that they are acting contrary to that central, valued and salient self (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993). Thus, the individual experiences a rupture between the inner self and the artificial self, created by work and organizational life.

It is argued that these four dimensions can also be seen in light of Marx's second and third forms of alienation outlined above. In particular, the notion of self-estrangement (May, 1961; Perls, 1969; Rogers, 1969) can be seen as the separation of the individual from the real- or deeper-self, arising from internal pressures and other external pressures which may be found in organizations.

The significant point about the existential view of self-estrangement for our discussion is that the individual's personal growth, self-actualization and meaningful interpersonal relationships are seen to be blocked by separation from the inner self that results from the demands of modern organizational life which, in turn, lead to a crisis of personal identity. Thompson and McHugh (2002), for example, describe several responses to problems of identity loss at work and the limitations on freedom of choice inherent in the labor process, of which one, some or all may be displayed by an individual:

- contradictory consciousness, resulting in deviant behavior;
- unconscious resistance which may give rise to mental disorders;
- development of individual capacities and interests outside of work; and
- participation in collective action through unions or other coalitions.

Hence, as individual employees attempt to reconcile their "true" selves with their "artificial" selves imposed by organizational life, a range of dysfunctional psychological outcomes can emerge, with debilitating consequences for the individual's work performance and state of mental health. As the existential view construes alienation as a subjective feeling, it follows that it should, therefore, be possible to develop strategies for shaping employee behavior and dealing with the effects of negative experiences and alienation in the workplace. In this paper, we use Blauner's (1964) psychology-based four-dimensional conceptualization of alienation to frame our discussion of alienation as an issue in organizations. We argue that the four dimensions of alienation are relevant to our understanding of a range of negative consequences, including poor mental health, in today's organizations.

Alienation in organizations

The organizational context in which alienation has been most studied is bureaucracy (Matheson, 2007). The defining characteristics of the bureaucratic form of organization – job specialization, authority hierarchy, merit appointment, record keeping, rules and impersonality (Weber, 1947) – have been found in combination to produce a depersonalizing effect on the individual and a loss of self or personal identity, with accompanying feelings of being a mere cog in a dehumanizing machine, outcomes reiterated in recent years (Matheson, 2007; Sanders, 1997). The stifling effect of bureaucracies has long been a concern, as pointed out by Adler (1999, p. 36), with the result that a large part of scholarly research has been aimed at trying to overcome feelings of powerlessness, meaninglessness, isolation and self-estrangement that bureaucracies produce in individuals.

Driven by the practical imperative of control, many scholars have emphasized the predominance of the unitary needs of the organization over the plurality of the needs of individuals, thus providing the basis for notions of management control and prerogative. Moreover, "fit" concepts such as "person-job fit" and "person-organization fit" treat work and the organization and its values and objectives as the independent variables and the individual as the controllable dependent variable (Kristof-Brown *et al.*, 2005). The primacy of the organization's needs is inherent to the "attraction-selection-attrition" model of recruiting for "fit" developed by Schneider (2001). Under this model, the organization selects individuals whose values are most similar to the organization and manages lack of "fit" for existing employees through the process of attrition or separation from the

organization. We suggest that even the concept of employee assistance, involving the provision of psychological counseling services to assist individual mental health in the workplace, is arguably underpinned by the idea that it is the workers who have to change and subordinate their interests to those of the organization. The increasing level of stress-induced mental health problems in the workplace, and the consequent impact on productivity, clearly raise questions about the effectiveness of management practices which ignore the needs of the individual.

Some management practices can exacerbate the issue of stress with dysfunctional consequences in terms of alienation, workplace stress and employee well-being, including:

- *Downsizing and passive downsizing (hiring freezes)*. As a reaction to forces such as global competition, organizations have pushed to lower both overheads and labor costs and operate with fewer employees. However, dysfunctional consequences have plagued such efforts, not the least of which has been problems of “survivor syndrome” (Applebaum *et al.*, 1997; Cummings and Worley, 2001; Gomez-Meja *et al.*, 2004; Bozionelos, 2001).
- *Computerization and technology-driven processes*. Utilization of increasingly sophisticated technology accompanied by technology-driven work processes, often in a form harking back to the scientific management era, has, in many cases, led to task specialization and deskilling, with the potential for some individuals of negative alienating outcomes (Foley, 2004; Liker *et al.*, 1999; Schuler and Jackson, 1999; Upton, 1995).
- *Casualization, part-time and changing patterns of employment*. Due to a range of competitive pressures and the need to lower production costs, organizations have become increasingly reliant on a contingent workforce. The use of contingent workers, who in comparison to workers in traditional employment have lesser rights and benefits, fewer training and development opportunities and can be dismissed more easily, offers the possibility of enhanced control to management (Sheehan *et al.*, 2002; Legge, 2005). The negative impacts of contingent employment arrangements on individuals in terms of employment stability, career development and well-being have been well-documented (Feldman, 2006).
- *Outsourcing*. Ostensibly, to improve numerical, financial and functional flexibility, organizations commonly use non-organizational people to perform activities formerly undertaken in-house. Although this is popular with organizations and increases managerial prerogative, for employees there are negative consequences such as inequitable pay and conditions, together with degraded trust and commitment (Pinnington and Lafferty, 2003; Brewster, *et al.*, 2000).
- *Design and redesign of work*. Various movements such as the “quality of work life” of the 1970s, total quality management and the “Job Characteristics Model” of Hackman and Oldham (1980) may have showed early promise, but each has failed over time to yield evidence of efficacy and deliver associated benefits to the individual (Keeble-Ramsay and Armitage, 2010; Oldham and Hackman, 2010).

A common characteristic of these human resource management (HRM) practices is the lack of control employees have over their work situation, which has been identified as the single most telling issue in relation to stress (Arnold, 2005; Hellriegel and Slocum, 2009). While the deleterious effects of stress and alienation may be superficially masked for a time, sooner or later ongoing organizational needs will constrain, overpower and dominate the individual’s freedom to self-realize, thus producing a sense of self-estrangement that affects the individual’s work performance adversely.

Other problematic HRM issues include work disengagement and questions over satisfaction at work (Hallberg and Schaufeli, 2006; Korman and Wittig-Berman, 1981; Trist, 1977; Vecchio, 1980; Westley, 1979), cynicism, burnout and depersonalization (Andersson, 1996; Lee and Ashforth, 1993; Maslach *et al.*, 2001; Sanders, 1997), work stress and alcohol use (Frone, 1999), powerlessness and a lack of control (Kanungo, 1992) and emotional labor (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993). These are, in turn, often attributed to external factors such as mass production technologies, oppressive work of one sort or another, poor management and organizational leadership problems (Ashforth, 1994; Blauner, 1964; Sarros *et al.*, 2002). Viewed in this light, far from being an out-moded concept, alienation becomes a useful tool with which to analyze organizational health.

We believe that an emphasis on external factors overlooks one of alienation's important fundamental dimensions, as viewed from the existential perspective, that is the notion of self-estrangement from the "true", self-arising from factors internal to the individual. The management practices outlined above focus primarily on work and organizational factors external to the individual as the source of feelings of stress and alienation experienced by the individual in relation to their work. By recognizing the dysfunctional psychological outcomes that have been linked to factors internal to the individual as a source of alienation, we suggest that the key to understanding the problem of managing alienation, particularly in terms of the self-estrangement dimension, but also across its other three dimensions, rests in recognizing the dialectic that operates between the individual and the organization. In other words, the struggle over and the conflict between the individual's need for freedom and the organizational need for control is a root cause of alienation.

A further example of the negative affects of organizations on individual freedoms and employee well-being can be seen in the unitarist models of HRM (Beer *et al.*, 1984; Fombrun *et al.*, 1984) in which it was theorized that such a style of managing people could provide an array of benefits not the least being a remedy for the effects of alienation (Becker and Huselid, 2006; Boselie *et al.*, 2009); however, these models have been disappointing and have been strongly critiqued (Legge, 1995, 2001; Guest, 1989, 1990; Keenoy, 1990). Critics have targeted the linking of the organization's interests with those of management that underpins unitarist models and decried the consequent marginalizing of the pluralist perspective, in which other forms of possibly divergent interests, such as those of the individual employee, might have a legitimate place (Boselie *et al.*, 2009). Clearly, marginalization and exclusion of employees are unlikely to be conducive to a reduction in alienation in such circumstances.

The conflict between the individual and the collective is not new, having existed since humans discovered the power of organization. Its fundamental importance as a potential source of alienation was apparently understood long ago by Whyte (1960). He perceived a growing and malign emphasis on anti-individual collectivism in American business, foreseeing the dreary collectivism personified by organizational life. Whyte's views, about who should bear responsibility for the damage caused, is clear:

"Management has tried to adjust the [individual] to The Organization rather than The Organization to the [individual]. It can do this with the mediocre and still have a harmonious group. It cannot do it with the brilliant; only freedom will make them harmonious." (Whyte, 1960, p. 197)

Couched in these terms, the dilemma for management is twofold: first, it is individuals who generate competitive advantage in which the creativity and innovation of the "brilliant" are essential; second, how to enable individual freedom in such a way that harmony rather than disharmony within the organization is the outcome. However, to focus solely on management as the source of alienation is

misleading because agency theory, and Marx too for that matter, portray managers as the agents merely carrying out the wishes of capitalist principals. As such, managers and even professionals can experience alienation like other workers (Greene, 1978; Hunt, 1986; Korman and Wittig-Berman, 1981; Lee and Ashforth, 1993; Whyte, 1960).

Managing the impact of alienation

We have argued so far that, *inter alia*, alienation and stress are viewed as stemming from negative work experiences. With respect to Blauner's (1964) framework, all four dimensions are present for many workers: powerlessness, meaninglessness, isolation and self-estrangement. We hold that these issues (Figure 1) must be addressed to overcome feelings of alienation.

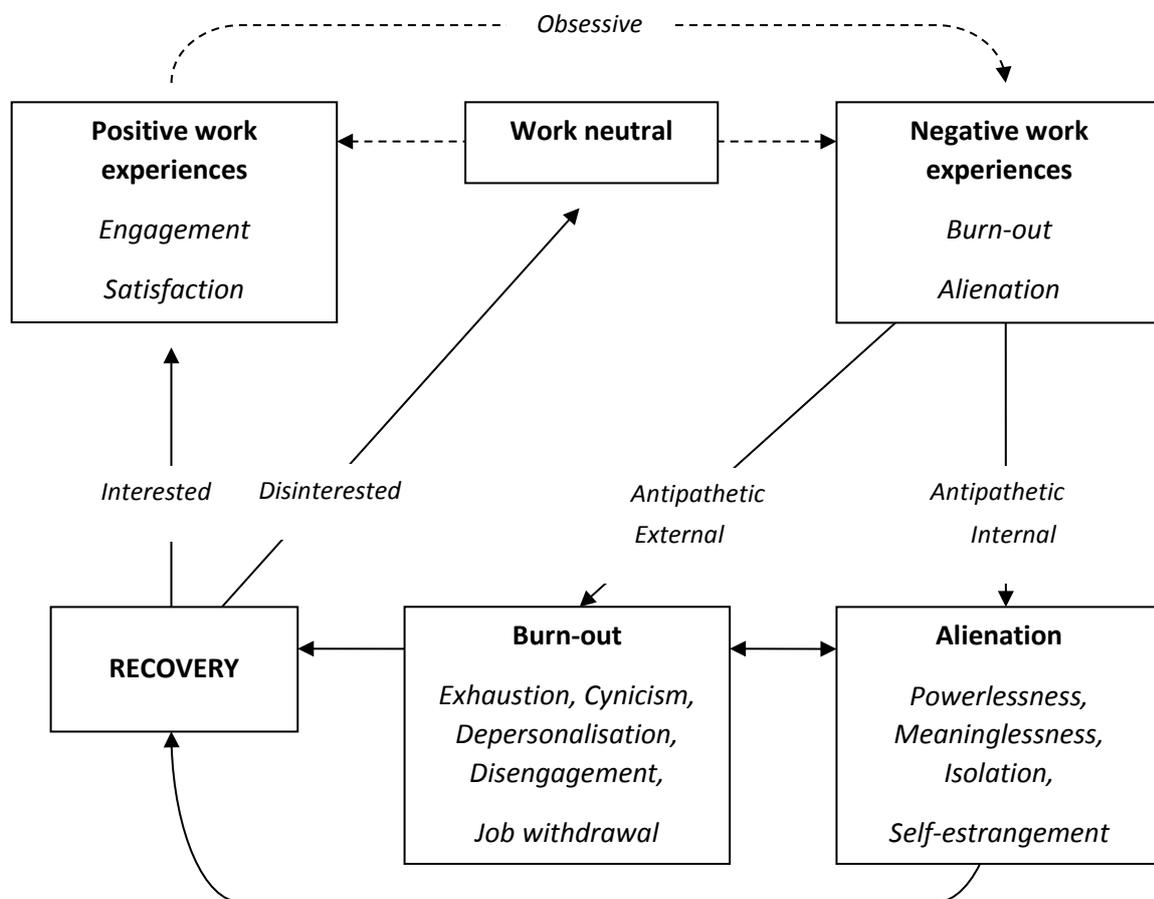


Figure 1: Positive and negative work experiences

In so saying, we recognize that attempting to remedy the deleterious effects of alienation is, indeed, challenging, particularly when the desire to improve productivity and organizational output remains dominant, notwithstanding that so much research into management practices has been and is directed at the improving the well-being of individuals.

According to Blauner (1964), powerlessness follows when individual discretion and decision-making is removed from a work role. Marx might, of course, identify assembly lines as a prime example, but

there are other more subtle instances found in contemporary work environments. Employees at call centers, for example, rely on computerized work routines and technology to respond to customer enquiries, others have their work monitored electronically through CCTV and computerized tracking of keystrokes (Deery and Kinnie, 2002; Holman, 2003). No doubt such innovations increase the level of technical efficiency and supervisory decision-making but they erode the ability of people to exercise discretion. Here is the dilemma: we give recognition to Weber (1947) for pointing out the deleterious effects of “rule by whim”; but paradoxically, the processes for eliminating “whim” from organizational decision-making have led to the creation of complex bureaucratic systems and routines which strangle individual freedom.

There are many contradictions arising from bureaucratic control, as discussed by Thompson and McHugh (2002, p. 38-41), especially in the context of the emergence of large-scale organizations. Admittedly, some have called for a move away from such stultifying work environments, advocating more democratic organizations with fewer pernicious rules and regulations (for example, Semler, 1995); however, for the most part, the merits of such change remain under debate (Conner and Douglas, 2005). Nevertheless, the aim for organizations seeking to address alienation should be to allow employees to have discretion over their immediate work environment while, at the same time, retaining managerial strategic direction. This is not rocket science so to speak; however, in a world where new forms of bureaucratic organizations based on trust and empowerment are emerging, the inability of management to forego power derived from traditional bureaucratic control systems (which in itself may have alienating effects for individual managers) remains a major stumbling block (McKenna *et al.*, 2010).

With many employees confined to their workstations and having only computers for company, isolation and a lack of social interaction have increased. Moreover, in the corporate field, it seems to be the age of company take-overs and the resulting emergence of very large organizations – the banking, mining and manufacturing industries provide many examples. Little wonder then, that individuals come to perceive themselves to be little more than cogs in gigantic non-social machine-like organizations, performing meaningless tasks. In offices, the seemingly indispensable e-mail and its emergence as the dominant business communication form has significantly contributed to a reduction in personal contact between workers, thus contributing to feelings of isolation. Coffee and tea breaks no longer present the opportunity to gather in small social groups; instead, employees must visit the ubiquitous dispensing machine and then return to their workstation. Powerlessness, meaninglessness and isolation are separate but related issues in this context. As jobs become ever more fragmented within behemoth organizations and supervisory systems become more stealth-like through deployment of technology, it is little wonder that employees feel their work to be meaningless and themselves to be powerless and disconnected from the end product (Ashman and Gibson, 2010). In addition, minimal social interaction with colleagues heightens feelings of estrangement and isolation.

Also, it is ironic that the lessons from Trist and Bamforth’s (1951) long ago observations, about the psychological benefits for the individual that could result from the integration of the social and technical aspects of work (the so-called sociotechnical systems approach), have been ignored over the intervening years (Pasmore, 1995). It is surely not too difficult for managers and frontline supervisors to pay heed to the need for integration and foster camaraderie and social connection among workers. On the other hand, it is perhaps not quite so easy to overcome feelings of meaninglessness; however, simple strategies such as giving regular feedback to members of frontline work groups as to their performance and contribution to total output can address the issue. In a study by Nelson (2005), factory management engaged workers by connecting with them

at primary supervisory levels and providing regular objective information on group performance, thus giving meaningfulness to their work and, at the same time, minimizing feelings of isolation. Moreover, often overlooked work design strategies such as job enhancement, job sharing and job rotation can assist in overcoming feelings of meaninglessness and isolation by providing individuals with the opportunity to see the “big picture” so to speak.

Finally, feelings of self-estrangement can arise due to poor job – person fit. Many studies in this area have examined, for example, values, culture and personality, often additionally focusing on person – organization fit (Kristof, 2006; Arthur *et al.*, 2006; Cable and Judge, 1996; Holland, 1997). This work highlights two problems in addressing issues of poor “fit” – first ensuring that selection processes take into account what existential psychologists proclaim as the real or deeper self, as outlined earlier in this paper; and, second, management having sufficient flexibility to adjust work roles compatible with that inner self. Unfortunately, conventional selection methods often only focus on comparing measures of individual abilities, skills, personality tests and so forth, with job-specific requirements. These can be supplemented, of course, with references and work samples, all of which seem, however, to fall short of revealing the relevant underlying nature of a person. However, a reasonable period of a work trial might enable a prospective employee to assess whether there is indeed a good personal fit with the job and organization.

Here, we suggest that improved vocational fit, as revealed by relevant psychological testing, may have an important role in minimizing potential feelings of self-estrangement. Development of sensitive valid and reliable selection methods that avoid potential problems of discrimination and go beyond simple assessment of technical job-related skills and allow candidates sufficient opportunity to reveal their inner or true self may be one likely way to achieve a breakthrough. Organizations often take a rigid view of positions; however, with even modest changes it may be possible to align and fit a role more closely to the individual. This is plausible apropos work teams where minor changes to duties or positions can be effected. For example, working on the front desk of a hotel, someone may feel more comfortable handling bookings rather than dealing with customers face-to-face. Such nuances may provide more meaningful and satisfying work and avoid “ripple” problems associated with major reconfigurations of a work role.

Conclusion

The growing research interest in the significance of mental health in the workplace has produced calls for organizations to take a more proactive role in changing work environments and structures to make the workplace more conducive to good mental health and enhance productivity. In this paper, we have presented an alternative perspective on how organizations and management might respond by revisiting the often overlooked concept of “alienation” and considering its connection with other negative work experiences. In conclusion, we believe that the key to unraveling the problem of organizational alienation lies in management that recognizes alienation needs to be addressed at two levels: first, at the systemic level in terms of factors external to the individual such as work and organizational systems and processes, and second, in terms of internal factors such as the individual’s state of mind. To these ends, managers, at all levels but particularly at the frontline, need to find means by which work can be transformed to deal with problems of powerlessness, isolation, meaninglessness and self-estrangement.

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