



Alienation and its correlates: A meta-analysis

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ABSTRACT

We provide a meta-analysis of alienation, outlining the extent to which it is predicted by individual differences (need for achievement), role stressors (role conflict), leader dimensions (initiating structure), and aspects of the work context (formalization). We also examine its relationship with outcomes such as employee attitudes (job satisfaction), performance (task performance), withdrawal (absenteeism), and side effects (drinking). We examined these relationships based on data from 45 primary studies and 227 statistically independent relationships. Our meta-analysis provides cumulative evidence for effect sizes across multiple settings and respondents, clarifies ambiguous aspects of the construct, and presents more information on the extent to which alienation can be seen as the opposite of job involvement.

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“Alienation as we find it in modern society is almost total; it pervades the relationship of man to his work, to the things he consumes, to the state, to his fellow man, and to himself.” (Fromm, 1955, p. 124)

“... there is no philosophy or ideology that does not think that we live in alienation” (Ionesco, 1968, p. 158).

Introduction

For over sixty years, alienation has been a topic of interest in organizational sciences (e.g., Argyris, 1964; Fromm, 1955; Podsakoff, Williams, & Todor, 1986; Seeman, 1959; Shantz, Alfes, & Truss, accepted for publication). For the most part, researchers have provided theoretical and empirical arguments for a negative relationship between alienation and important outcomes, including task performance (Banai & Reisel, 2003; Chisholm & Cummings, 1979), citizenship behaviors (Suarez-Mendoza & Zoghbi-Manrique-de-Lara, 2007), absenteeism (Hirschfeld, Feild, & Bedeian, 2000), and a positive relationship with health problems (Armstrong-Stassen, 2006). Despite some of some clear-cut examples of alienation's negative influence in organizations, several unresolved remain to be addressed. First, alienation has been measured in a number of different ways. In addition to providing a review of various measures used to operationalize alienation, we meta-analytically examine the extent to which the five dimensions proposed by Seeman (1959) – meaninglessness, powerlessness, self-estrangement, social isolation, and normlessness – are correlated with one another.

Second, researchers have long proposed that alienation is the obverse of job involvement (Argyris, 1964; Johnson, 1973; Kanungo, 1979; Kanungo, 1982) and have focused on examining the importance of job involvement, as opposed to alienation. However, while scholars have called into question this assumption, this claim has not been empirically examined (Brown, 1996). We address this issue and, for completeness, we also compare alienation and job satisfaction.

Third, alienation's nomological network is still somewhat unclear. We link alienation to both individual differences (e.g., achievement, work ethic) and structural predictors such as role stressors, leader dimensions (e.g., supportive leadership), job design (e.g., task variety), and work context (e.g., formalization, centralization). Researchers posit that alienation results from individual characteristics such as low self-esteem (Heaven & Bester, 1986) and reduced self-efficacy (Marshall, Michaels, and Mulki, 2007). Conversely, traditional theories use structural predictors, such as role ambiguity (Michaels, Cron, Dubinsky, & Joachimsthaler, 1988) and bureaucratization (Kohn, 1976). We examine these relationships to offer more precise estimates for effect sizes, and to address inconsistencies. While some studies theoretically support a negative relationship between organizational identification and alienation (Organ & Greene, 1981), in others the theorized relationship is positive (Efraty & Wolfe, 1988). Also, despite theory and data suggesting that formalization increases alienation (Markowitz, 1987; Organ & Greene, 1981), researchers also found a negative relationship (Podsakoff et al., 1986). Other inconsistencies relate to relationships between alienation and supportive leadership (Bacharach, Bamberger, & Sonnenstuhl, 2002 vs. Banai & Reisel, 2003) or job codification (Allen & Lafollette, 1977 vs. Kakabadse, 1986).

To address these issues, we develop a model to capture the nomological network around the alienation construct. The predictor categories cover individual levels, including both (1)

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the individual him or herself and (2) his or her role, and structural aspects, including (3) objective work characteristics and the job itself and (4) social work characteristics (i.e., the leader). The predictor and outcome categories we refer to in our meta-analysis are built off influential management theories and can be seen in Fig. 1.

Alienation: a literature review

Alienation has a long history in the academic literature. Early research has focused on alienation from religious and health standpoints. In religion, on one hand, alienation referred to an individual's separation from worldly existence, a sign that they are moving toward a higher state of being. On the other hand, alienation has also been considered from the standpoint of being separated from God and the faithful, which draws its links to the notion of estrangement. In a health context, the term was used to connote mental alienation (Regis, 1895). More recently, Hegel (1977) popularized the concept of alienation amongst scholars, and amongst his students, two camps formed. One emphasized the religious roots of the term and the other focused on the material side of the concept. Marx, who rejected the spiritual aspects in Hegel's work, is credited for the widespread conceptualization of alienation, particularly in social and work contexts (Marx, 1844/1961).

Following Marx, influential studies by Fromm (1955) and Seeman (1959) stimulated researchers to examine alienation through different disciplinary lenses, including sociology (Blauner, 1964; Dean, 1961), social psychology (Maadi, Kobasa, & Hoover, 1979), and organization science (Kanungo, 1979; Korman, Wittig-Berman, & Lang, 1981; Podsakoff et al., 1986). From a definitional standpoint, Seeman's work was seminal. His conceptualization of alienation focused on deprivation conditions such as powerlessness (lack of control over environmental circumstances), meaninglessness

(perception that work outputs are trivial), normlessness (conditions in which traditions or norms do not apply), isolation (unsatisfied need to affiliate), and self-estrangement (unrewarding work conditions).

Since Seeman's (1959) effort to provide a systematic definition, the alienation construct has taken discipline-specific definitions that "have created more confusion than clarity" (Kanungo, 1979, p. 119). For example, in organization studies, alienation refers to a perception that work is external to the individual and employees do not internalize their work tasks (Dubin, 1956; Organ & Greene, 1981). In contrast, psychologists have examined alienation by focusing on its proposed obverse, job involvement, which refers to the psychological state of identification with work (Lodahl & Kejner, 1965). From this perspective, alienation refers to a psychological state of estrangement from work (Kanungo, 1979). Even though an agreed-upon definition remains elusive, at a fundamental level, alienation refers to distancing or detachment from others or things. For the purposes of this paper, we refer to alienation as a state of estrangement whereby individuals dissociate from work (Miller, 1967; Organ & Greene, 1981).

We note that although Marx had developed the concept of alienation as a normative and ethically grounded instrument that offered a critique of society, the concept changed depending on the disciplinary focus. At about the same time, Fromm (1955) focused on alienation as a social phenomenon, while Seeman (1959) examined it from a psychological standpoint. Researchers can thus take at least two positions, studying alienation as a *social* symptom (i.e., individuals en masse are alienated; Fromm, 1955) or as a psychological syndrome (where alienation is conceptualized as an individual psychological state; Seeman, 1959). As Geyer (1996) notes in his postmodern take on alienation, such distinctions remain present in contemporary theorizing. For exam-

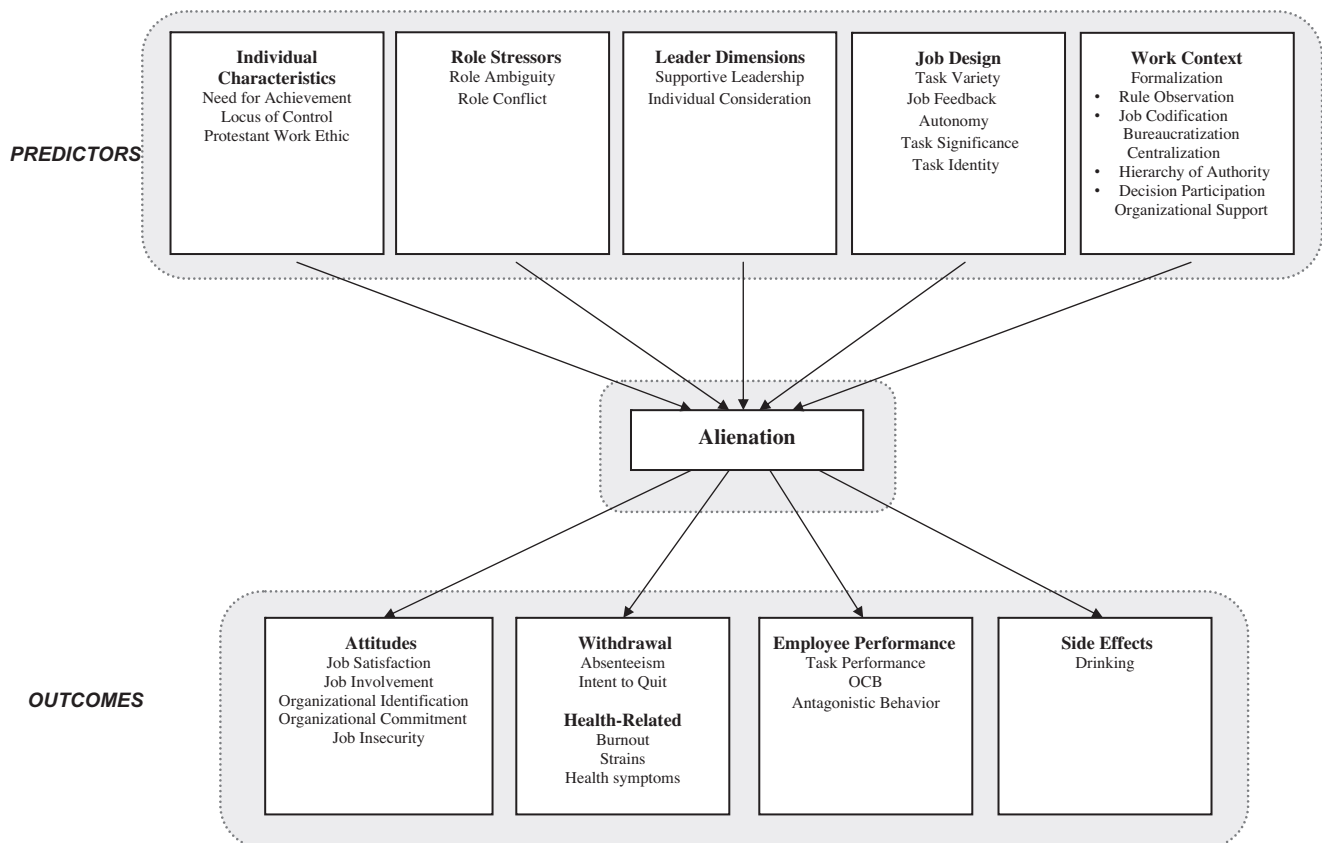


Fig. 1. Theoretical model.

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