# Antecedents and Consequences of Work Alienation – A Critical Review

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**Abstract:**

Purpose – In the past few decades, the antecedents of work alienation have been analyzed various times in several studies. The consequences of work alienation were also investigated in available literature. However, literature that is more recent seems to be incomprehensive, and does not incorporate both issues of antecedents and outcomes together simultaneously. Therefore, this study tends to focus on exploring the available extensive literature on theories of organizational antecedents and consequences of work alienation.

Design/methodology/approach – A systematic literature review of traditional and contemporary theoretical and empirical research studies is conducted to establish the interrelationship between organizational antecedents and consequences of work alienation. This review consolidates propositions, and develops a conceptual and theoretical research framework that interconnects several variables.

Findings – Organizational antecedents of work alienation are potentiallyclosely related to work alienation. More particularly, they have considerable potential to lead to work alienation and its consequences. More generally, the outcomes reflect the emerging discussion about the relationship of organizational antecedents of work alienation and creation consequences of work alienation.

Research limitations/implications – This paper significantly contributed to the body of knowledge in the areas of antecedents and consequences of work alienation through reviewing literature, which is important in the discussion of the relationship between the current research's variables antecedents and consequences of work alienation. The suggested model theoretically incorporates organizational antecedents and their effects on work alienation that will assist in identifying the general direction of future research.

Originality/value – The formative review presented in this work by underlying the notion of work alienation as a liaison point between its antecedents and consequences has been somewhat limited in available literature to date.

**Keywords:** Work alienation, organizational antecedents, consequences of work alienation.

## 1 Introduction

The Majority of employed professionals in production organizations and service occupations operate under constantly changing industrial trends. However, the deteriorating inter-organizational relations are becoming a destructive force for moral and human components of work, which may ultimately result in the work alienation (Bakker & Leiter, 2010). Employees suffering from work alienation are unable to remain truly dedicated to their work, have sudden mood fluctuations, and may not be as productive as they normally would. Work alienation can result, under extreme circumstances, in damaging affected employees' mental health. Moreover, alienation can affect an entire organization in a

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fairly short period of time (Rezapour & Mousavian, 2007). Work alienation is more common in organizations where short-term human resource management (HRM) practices are adopted. Such organizations usually implement quantifiable techniques, promote individualism within workers, or function based on the concept that employees have egocentric aims and goals. Such organizations tend to be incapable of mitigating alienation among its workforce (Shantz et al., 2015).

Employees affected by work alienation are unable to be productive in their organizations as they fail to satisfy and fulfil their main needs and expectations from work (Banai et al., 2004). Substantial research has been conducted on management problems linked to lack of satisfaction, work stress, and the need for engagement, commitment and empowerment in the workplace. Whereas, remarkably fewer work studies are available on the issues arising from work alienation (Bakker & Leiter, 2010).  Organizational studies have not dedicated enough attention to this area mostly because of its inexactness, which comes at a stark contrast with the prominent theories of commitment/identification, satisfaction, and engagement that emphasize the positive side of professional life, and in several occasion, have advocated against work alienation (Kelemen et al., 2012). This study focuses on the current literature linked to "work alienation," with special emphasis on covering major research gaps that may disambiguate the phenomenon. The key objective of this study is to explore and scrutinize the antecedents and consequences of work alienation.

## 1.  Work Alienation

The seminal work of Karl Marx on the effects of the capitalist economy on workers gave birth to the term "alienation," which has been thoroughly explained in numerous studies (Marx, 1932, 1988; Seeman, 1971). Marx maintained that alienation grows among workers as a condition in which the individual loses interest in his work, inhibits self-expression and loses control over his/her professional wellbeing. The employee acts unlike his/her normal self at the work place – a point shall be discussed later in detail. The complex phenomenon of work alienation observably emerges from various external changes linked to the industrialization process, which may include the construction of large factories with complex corporate and administrative hierarchies, sophisticated job specialization, and strict work supervision done by a formal authority. The intricate reciprocal interaction among the factors described above lead an employee's life goals and priorities away from those of his personal and family life.

The term work alienation refers to a sense of psychological detachment from not only oneself, but also from the social relationships existing within or outside of work environments (Banai & Reisel, 2007; Chiaburu, 2013). Work alienation is an integral element of the studies related to the sociological and psychological aspects of organizational effectiveness. These studies are conducted to find solutions to alienation so that the employees' environments within and outside their organizations are improved (Ceylan & Sulu, 2010). Employees affected by work alienation tend to lose interest in their jobs, and do not make much effort to provide a satisfactory performance, or make useful contribution to their organization (Michaels et al., 1988). One of the main reasons for work alienation is employees' dissatisfaction with organization's inability to fulfil their needs, appreciate their value and protect their welfare (Sarros et al., 2002). According to Sarros et al., (2002) and Temel et al. (2013), there are five dimensions for work alienation, which are powerlessness, normlessness, isolation, meaninglessness and self-estrangement. Powerlessness refers to the lack of job autonomy in which employees are unable to control their work processes (Sarros et al., 2002). Normlessness is "a situation where there is a high expectation that socially unapproved behaviors are required to achieve goals" (Seeman, 1959:787-788). The term isolation refers to being emotionally distant from the organization and other co-workers and colleagues (Ceylan & Sulu, 2011). Meaninglessness refers to employees' perception of their own work as worthless with reference to the strategic goals of the organization (Sarros et al., 2002). Self-estrangement is a dissociative state involving a cognitive sense of separation between one's self-image at work and one's ideal-self, which is experienced as unpleasant, distressful feelings toward one's work and its environment (Golden and Veiga, 2015)

## 2.  Antecedents of Work Alienation

DiPietro and Pizam (2008) consolidated the work of several researchers on the subject of work alienation, and based on their findings, employees fail to attain job autonomy, and lack interest in taking important decisions related to work due to several reason. These reasons include (a) centralized and formalized organizational structures; (b) control processes that are strict and centralized, requiring overwork from employees; (c) simple tasks that are repetitive, monotonous, and dull; (e) strict work rules and regulations; and (e) transactional leadership styles (leaders who stress on formalized procedures). Such work environments cause employees to feel helpless, useless, and alienated from their daily work tasks.

*2.1 Organizational Structure*

The organization structure is a framework of roles, responsibilities, authority and communication relationships that are deliberately designed to accomplish an organization's tasks and achieve its objectives (Agbim, 2013). Despite ample references in literature, the relationship between structural variables and work alienation is still a field of study that has not progressed. However, Kelemen et al. (2012) stated that Marx (1932) played a significant role in highlighting the basic factors that caused alienation and since then it has been an important topic for many researchers. Similarly, Blauner (1964) also pinpointed the various reasons within an industrial environment that caused alienation, like the type of technology used and the form organizational structure present. Kakabadse (1986) investigated the relationship between aspects of organizational structure and alienation as experienced by personnel employed in nine social services organizations. The results revealed that the organizational structure aspects; centralization and formalization were strongly related to the dimensions of work alienation; powerlessness and self-estrangement. Further empirical research has also proven similar outcomes with regards to the structural condition which is directly responsible for the work alienation, which includes the centralized decision making; formalized rules, policies and procedures implanted in the bureaucratic workplace (Sarros et al., 2002).

Therefore, the proposition stated here is:

*P$_1$:* There is a significant relationship between organizational structure and work alienation.

*2.2 Leadership*

According to to Banai, Reisel and Probst (2004), a body of research analyzed the leadership-style-based details for positive and negative organizational results. Many researches confirmed that the leader's attitude in an organization has a profound impact on forming the attitudes, and on individual performance. Such researches include transformational and transactional leadership research, leader–member exchange research, and studies of democratic leadership styles.
Sarros et al. (2002) analyzed the direct and indirect correlation between managers' leadership, including both transactional and transformational styles, and the various elements of work alienation, namely powerlessness, meaninglessness and self-estrangement. Their examination confirmed the negative effect of transformational leadership on work alienation, and the positive effect of transactional leadership on work alienation. The research studies conducted by Banai et al. (2004) and Banai and Reisel (2007) verified that a negative relationship is present between supportive leadership and work alienation. Leaders in an organization tend to have different relationships with each employee rather than having an overarching consistent leadership style  (Janssen & Van Yperen, 2004). These specific relationships with individual employees conveys a negative impression on the workforce, as a group of employees can be tagged as out-group members, which eventually leads them to experience one of the most extreme cases of work alienation Madlock and Martin (2011).  Further empirical research has also proven similar outcomes with regards to leader-employee exchanges, which have negative correlation with work alienation (Muttar, Ahmad, & Siron, 2015; Siron, Muttar, Ahmad, & Tarsipan, 2016). Therefore, it is proposed that:

*P$_2$:* There is a significant relationship between leadership and work alienation.

*2.3 Organizational Justice*

The term organizational justice refers to the idea of equal allocation of resource within an organization (Greenberg, 1987). Equal or fair allocation is pertinent to the concept of justice that is derived from religion or law, and that dictates decisions and actions that conforms to ethical standards. Justice can be achieved in an organization through financial and non-financial incentives like bonuses, fair pay, and equal opportunities for promotion and performance examination procedures. Hence, organizational justice defines the employees' perception of the degree to which the management's decisions and actions are fair and equal for all workforce. This viewpoint, then, affects the behavior and attitude of employees towards their management (Yean, 2016). The  Equity Theory (1963) states that employees tend to be more motivated and actively involved when they are fairly treated by their line managers, and this motivation in work results in positive work behavior and attitude. However, in case the employee is not satisfied with this work environment and feels that he/she receives unfair treatment, he is more likely to be de-motivated, and may show a tendency to exhibit negative work behavior and attitude. In this scenario, organizational justice directly causes the negative or positive feelings perceived by the employees regarding their organization (Ari and Çağlayan, 2017).

The employees develop their own perceptions related to the work instructions they receives on daily basis. Such relationship is crucial in itself because fairness and unfairness of those orders may have a significant effect on the employee's behavior towards the organization. The subsequent behavior could include resignation, or job satisfaction, commitment and engagement, which could have an immense influence on the successful execution of the tasks assigned to employees. Management fairness is assessed by an employee through the comparison between the rewards received by him/her against the rewards received by other peers and colleagues. The resulting responses of management Employees may also estimate whether their work contributions such as time, effort and skill are fairly rewarded. It is obvious that such measures could be strongly biased since employees are measuring against their own standards rather than predefined key performance indicators, which is why it is not always possible to have all of their expectations met. The rewards criteria is setup by the management, and is often not in hand of the employees to demand specific rewards. Hence, employees usually have the tendency to compare themselves with other colleagues to measure the degree of fairness achieved by the management. The employees perform according to the way they believe they are treated by their direct managers. Therefore, for a successful operation for an organization, it is essential to build and maintain a strong bond of trust between the management and staff, improved teamwork, enhancing the degree of employees' citizenship behavior and minimizing conflict between the employer and employees. According to the Adam's Equity Theory (1963), several factors like leadership style, development opportunities, and availability of resources play a key role on building an employee's perception regarding the justice in an organization. The theory states that employees would be dissatisfied with their management if they feel they are being unjustly rewarded for their professional contributions, and this dissatisfaction would result in behavioral changes of employees, such as low commitment level, increased absenteeism and occasional insubordinate behavior (Adams, 1963).

The principles of organizational justice are not difficult to apply. However, due to the unethical and intentional actions by certain individuals (e.g., immediate supervisor, head of department, etc.), some interventions (e.g., equal employment program) may not be well implemented in certain contexts. If such interventions are well implemented, it can make a significant contribution to promoting employees' satisfaction, commitment and engagement and preserving dignity and humanity (Yean, 2016).

According to Kelemen et al. (2012), the experience of alienation was negatively linked to the ability to use judgment and take responsibility. The conclusion of research study conducted by Ceylan and Sulu (2010) showed that work alienation partly intervenes between the relationship of procedural injustice and job stress. Therefore, it is proposed that:

*P₃:* There is a significant relationship between organizational justice and work alienation.

### 2.4 Locus of Control

The term locus of control relates to the people who have an internal locus of control and they tend to take it as their own responsibility to perform independent actions. Whereas, the external locus of control refers to individuals who are dependent on external factors like the policies, rules, and formal or informal practices, to guide their actions (Spector, 1982). The researcher  Spector (1988 p.335) further stated that the general expectations of employees regarding the rewards, reinforcement, or results in life are either controlled their own actions (internality) or by other factors (externality). The psychological definition of locus of control is related to a person's belief about what causes the positive or negative outcomes in his or her life, they can either be in general or some specific area such as health or academics (Vijayashreea and Jagdischchandrab, 2011).  Individuals who have an external locus of control develop work alienation more quickly than the ones with an internal locus of control (Banai et al., 2004; Nair and Vohra, 2012). Apart from the studies mentioned above, other researchers like Fedi, Pucci, Tartaglia and Rollero (2016) also confirmed that the locus of control is mainly linked to work alienation among experienced workers. Therefore, it is proposed that:

*P₄:* There is a significant relationship between Locus of Control and work alienation.

### 2.5 Job Characteristics

The precise definition of job characteristics is the efficient factors that play a key role in motivating the intrinsic work of employees through the utilization of crucial psychological states. The five basic job dimensions include; skill variety, task identity, task significance, task autonomy and feedback (Hackman and Oldham, 1976). The job characteristics model created by Hackman and Oldham (1976) depicts five dimensions of job characteristics that affect three psychological

states: 1) Experienced meaningfulness of the work: the extent to which the individual understands the importance, worth and value of the job. 2) Experienced responsibility for work outcomes: the extent to which an employee feels personally responsible for the outcomes of his tasks. 3) Knowledge of results: the extent to which the individual has the knowledge about and understanding of the effectiveness of his job performance (Hackman and Oldham, 1975; Schuurman, 2011). The five job attributes that are task identity, job feedback, job autonomy, task variety, and task significance have been strongly linked to alienation (Banai and Reisel, 2007). Therefore, the following proposition is suggested:

*P5:* There is a significant relationship between job characteristics and work alienation.

*2.6 Job Stress*

There are different factors that make jobs stressful; these are known as job stressors (Mansoor, Jinnah, et al., 2011). Job stressors include lack of social support, autonomy (Chen et al., 2011), they suffer role conflict (Azman et al., 2013) role ambiguity (Rehman et al., 2012), lack of job satisfaction (Mansoor, Fida, et al., 2011) and adherence to organizational policies (Zhang et al., 2011). Moreover, several other factors like time pressure, unfair rewarding, responsibility for others without shared accountability, aggressive leadership styles, and too complex organizational structure can also cause job stress for the employee (Hsieh and Wang, 2012). The standard description of job stress involves the situation in which the individual is faced with an opportunity for or a limitation on what he or she wants whose results are deemed important and uncertain (Chen et al., 2011).

The condition of job stress is directly connected to the indications of absenteeism, turnover, work aggression and employee fatigue (Ramasundaram and Ramasundaram, 2011), cynicism (Tükeltürk et al., 2012) and work alienation (Michaels et al., 1988). According to Koçoglu (2014), there is a medium level of positive connection between job stress and work alienation; meaning the work alienation is directly proportional to the stress level. On a similar note, Erkilic (2012) and Egin (2015) discovered that there is a remarkable connection between job stress and work alienation. This was further confirmed by other researchers like Santas, Isik, and Demir (2016) who also approved with the study of Yadav and Nagle (2012) about the presence of statistically significant and positive relationship between job stress and work alienation. This can also be seen in the study of Erkilic (2012), which proves that the organizational alienation is positively affected by work stress. It can be safely concluded that the employees who are alienated from their work places where they spent a large part of their career is due to increased job stress. Therefore, the following relationship is proposed by this paper:

*P6:* There is a significant relationship between job stress and work alienation.

## 3.  Consequences of Work Alienation

An alienated employee suffers several adverse ramifications. An alienated employee particularly suffers from low quality of work, production, cooperation, motivation, and organizational commitment. He/she would suffer deficiencies in organizational identification and job involvement. He/she would liable to excessive absenteeism, feeling of purposelessness, disruption of work activities, changes in job designation, more indulgence in immoral activities. He/she would suffer a sense of fatigue along with other health issues; they would feel distant from colleagues, they would have lack of interest in achieving organizational targets and unable to shoulder their responsibilities (Ceylan and Sulu, 2010; Valadbigi and Ghobadi, 2011).

*3.1    Organizational Commitment*

The employees' connection with, and attitude towards the organization is linked to the organizational commitment and its three dimensions that include affective, normative and continuance commitment (Salahudin et al., 2016). Work alienation is one of the key factors that has a major foremost effect on the commitment towards organization. Despite being a significant relationship in this scenario, the body of available research on this topic is quite limited. However, a research study was conducted in Istanbul's in health care context shows that work alienation acts as a mediator between organizational injustice and organizational commitment. According to the research results, among 383 healthcare professionals in public and private hospitals, the organizational commitment was found to be greatly affected by work alienation (Sulu et al., 2010). Similarly, the outcomes of research done by  Tummers and Den Dulk (2013) showed that among the 790 of the national samples of midwives in the Netherlands, work alienation acted as the most important factor of organizational commitment.  Therefore, it is proposed that:

*P7:* There is a significant relationship between work alienation and organizational commitment.

## 3.2    Job Satisfaction

The term job satisfaction describes the general emotions an employee has towards his or her job, which can be either positive or negative in nature (Robbins, 2005; Spector, 1997). According to Locke (1976, p. 1300) "job satisfaction is a pleasurable or positive emotional state resulting from the appraisal of one's job or job experiences". Cook and Heptworth (1981) perceive job satisfaction as the extent to which people enjoy their jobs. It is an effective response based upon the degree to which a job caters to various factors, both intrinsic and extrinsic, as valued by the individual employee (Henne and Locke, 1985). Intrinsic work values refer to the degree to which employees value immaterial aspects of their jobs that allow for self-expression as important (Taris and Feij, 2001). Extrinsic work values refer to the degree to which employees value material or instrumental work aspects, such as salary and opportunity for promotion, as important (Taris and Feij, 2001).  In recent literature, a considerable negative relationship has been found between job satisfaction and the phenomenon of work alienation (Siron et al., 2016b). This relationship between work alienation and job satisfaction has also been analyzed by several other researchers like Siron, Muttar, and Ahmad (2015). The study results of these researchers have proven the presence of a major negative relationship between work alienation and both intrinsic and extrinsic job satisfaction. Sirin et al. (2011) has also confirmed the significance of negative relationship between work alienation and job satisfaction. Similarly, in their study, Fedi et al. (2016) proved the substantial link between work alienation and job satisfaction. Moreover, they also argued that work alienation affect job satisfaction. Therefore, the proposition applicable here is:

$P_8$: There is a significant relationship between work alienation and job satisfaction.

## 3.3    Organizational Citizenship Behavior

Organizational citizenship behaviors (OCBs) are defined as the individual and open actions conducted by employees that are excluded from their formal job description (Campbell Pickford and Joy, 2016). Work alienation acts as a mediator variable in the relationship between employees' views of person-organization fit and organizational citizenship behavior. According to the findings, three dimensions of work alienation that are powerlessness, meaninglessness, and self-estrangement act as mediators between the person-organization fit and organizational citizenship behavior. This affirms that the organizational citizenship behavior is negatively affected by work alienation. Therefore, the proposition states that:

$P_9$: There is a significant relationship between work alienation and organizational citizenship behavior.

## 3.4    Job Performance

Yozgat et al. (2013) argues that due to global advancements, the economic and work environments are also changing rapidly and this has consequently resulted in an enhancement in the job performance of employees, and organizational performance has become more critical. Moreover, one of the most sought after organizational goals at managerial positions has been a high level of work performance given by the employees (Siron et al., 2015b). Identification of accurate metrics and indicators of performance is the main goal of various business organizations in today's times. This is done by providing accurate results that assist all employees in performing their roles that are helpful in the success of the organization. There are extremely competitive business environments present today with leaders requiring reliable information to lead their companies with a clear vision (Aldulaimi and Obeidat, 2016).

Shantz et al. (2015) has argued that a negative relationship is present between job performance and work alienation, which can be better explained by the affective events theory (Weiss and Cropanzano, 1996). According to this theory, negative emotions developed by an employee makes him less dedicated to his work; thus resulting in low performance. Marx stated that work alienation results in the emergence of negative emotions because he does not feel any inspiration to work for the organization and has a sense of misery along with physical exhaustion and mental violation at work, as he feels out of place (Marx, 1932).

Very few researchers like Clark et al. (2010) conducted experimental studies regarding to the assessment of this relationship. Moreover, there has been a lack of accurate empirical studies that are related to the direct relationship present between the work alienation and job performance as has been stated by Muttar, Ahmad and Siron (2015a). The empirical studies conducted lately have confirmed the important negative relationship present between work alienation and job performance (Muttar et al., 2015; Siron et al., 2016b). Additionally, alienation shows a positive relationship with unusual performance and a negative relationship with performance that has been rated by the supervisors (Shantz et al., 2015). Therefore, the proposition applied here is:

$P_{10}$: There is a significant relationship between work alienation and job performance.

## 4.  Proposed Model

The literature reviewed above shows that a comprehensive framework of work alienation's antecedents and consequences could be established. Hence, a model of work alienation involving the studied variables of antecedences and consequences is proposed as illustrated below.
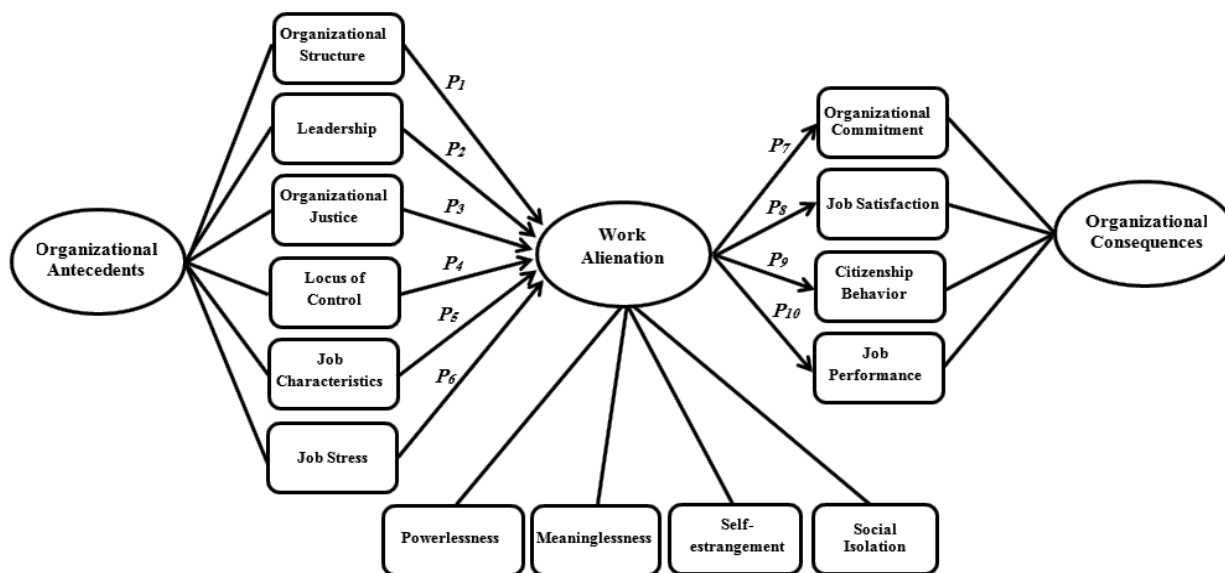


Figure 1. The proposed model

## 5.  Conclusion

The present study aimed to review relevant literature that involves the phenomenon of work alienation, and to build a conceptual model that consolidates all variables causing the phenomenon, or resulting from it. After explaining their rationales and relevance, several propositions related to ten work alienation variables were suggested. The variables involved organizational structure, leadership, locus of control, job characteristics, job stress and organizational justice as antecedents of work alienation, while the outcomes of work alienation included organizational commitment, job satisfaction, job performance and citizenship behaviour. In this respect, several propositions were developed to test these predictive relationships (see Figure 1). A new line of thought offered by the present study is providing a balanced and comprehensive theoretical framework for both antecedents and consequences of work alienation. Moreover, it has also been concluded that work alienation can act as a mediator between the endogenous and exogenous variables using structural equational modelling (SEM) method. Future research on this topic can study the results of implementing and operationalizing the proposed model presented in this study in within privately owned corporations.

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