

## **Work Alienation Historical Backgrounds, Concepts, Reasons and Effects**

**Farzin Farahbod <sup>1</sup>; Mohammad Reza Azadehdel <sup>2</sup>; Mehrdad Goudarzvand Chegini <sup>3</sup>;  
\*Azam Noyan Ashraf <sup>4</sup>**

<sup>1,2</sup> Assistant Professor, Islamic Azad University, Rasht Branch, Iran

<sup>3</sup> Associate Professor, Islamic Azad University, Rasht Branch, Iran

<sup>4</sup> Master of Human Resource Management, Islamic Azad University, Rasht Branch, Iran

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### **ABSTRACT**

In the age of industry, most of people work in production organizations and service occupations. Interorganizational relations are in such a way that destroy moral and human aspects of work and result in work alienation. In this study, we investigate historical backgrounds, concepts, reasons and effects of work alienation. Our research type is descriptive-analytic. The research framework is based on library information and our findings are gathered by taking notes from different resources. The result of this study showed that human alienation is not restricted to past, present, and future and its type and amount change based on historical and social conditions. With the pass of time, alienation concept has compromised various ranges of concepts, such as individual alienation, alienation towards God, nature, society and work and even self-alienation. The most prominent type of individual and social alienation is work alienation. Work alienation was first represented by Karl Marx who used this concept for the purpose of criticizing capitalistic societies. The most common feathers of alienation are five variables, i.e. powerlessness, meaninglessness, social estrangement and selfhatred. A combination of organizational factors and efficiencies, social-cultural relations and psychological factors has dominant power on human being and work independently and make human being to be far from his/her normal essence and to become an element which is left without identity. The lack of productivity is the main indicator of work alienation. Therefore, this conscious study and research about the concepts of work alienation, its reasons and effects in particular, can be helpful and important in reducing individual contradictory behaviors in societies and organizations.

**KEY WORDS:** work alienation, concepts of alienation, theories of alienation, reasons of work alienation, and types of alienation.

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### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Today, we hear increasingly that there are many people who suffer from feeling unreal, i.e. they see themselves as a person with unreal character. They have lost their connection with themselves and they do not have the sense of self consciousness. They are powerless and unconscious and act under the influence of any forces which motivate them, and actually they are affected by work alienation (AdibiSadeand Moazzeni, 2003, p 39). Alienation and its dimensions like powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, self estrangement and social estrangement, are one of the social phenomenon which in the most of cultures is known as damage, crisis or a social problem in a vast range of issues, like theology, philosophy, sociology, psychology and psychiatry. Powerlessness is the absence of independence that leads to circumstances in which people have limited freedom for controlling their work activities. Meaninglessness is the lack of appropriate understanding of the relationship between the current works in which the person is participating, and more prominent and social purposes of the work. Abnormalities is a mental situation in which a person takes this probability as a granted that he/she get closer to his/her purposes only by doing actions which are not in accordance with society's approval. Social estrangement emerges when management rules and norms do not efficiently conduct one's behavior towards personal objects. Self estrangement causes work to be a channel for supplying simply external needs such as rewards and etc, rather than to be a means for expressing their potentials. Alienation was first introduced by Hegel and Marx (Banifatemeh and Rasouli, 2011, p 2) and with the pass of time, the concept of alienation has comprised a variety rang of concepts (Banai&Weisberg, 2000, p1). The most prominent type of individual and social alienation is work alienation. In employees who are affected by work alienation, we are more likely to observe their absence, delay and misconduct in their work (Rezapour and Mousavian, 2007, p51), The lack of productivity is the main indicator of work alienation. Undoubtedly it must be said that optimum efficiency (productivity) in organizations requires attention to the demands and needs of

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\*Corresponding Author : Azam Noyan Ashraf, Master of Human Resource Management, Islamic Azad University, Rasht Branch, Iran . Email: Noyan\_azam@yahoo.com

employees. Quantity and quality of human resources in organizations substantially will be affected on organizations productivity. Conscious investigations about work alienation can improve the staff role efficiency and interactions between supervisors and employees and create more spirit of cooperation and coordination and in resulting can help for productivity and greater satisfaction of employee (Mohseni Tabriz *et al.*, 2011). So in this research, researchers are trying to find answers for questions like “what are the historical backgrounds, concepts, effects and reasons of work alienation?”

## 2. METHOD OF RESEARCH

Our method of research is descriptive-analytic. In this study, we investigate historical backgrounds, Reasons and applications of work alienation through using existing concepts and theories. The research framework is based on library information and our findings are gathered by taking notes from different resources.

### 3. Historical Backgrounds of Alienation

While the term “alienation” is a prominent word in the history of social thought, but thinkers are in dispute with each other about the history and age of this concept. Some thinkers like Adorno, Etzioni, Lukas and Mill believe that alienation is a phenomenon which belongs to post-modern and industrial societies. On the other hand, some of the other thinkers such as Feuer, Fromm, Mezarous, Marcuse, Papenheim and Kaufmann have considered alienation not as a novel term and innovation, but as an old and historical concept (Mohseni Tabriz, 1991, p27). Therefore, human alienation is not restricted to past, present and future, but it has been alongside human being since the beginning of his creation; of course, the type and amount of alienation change with respect to social and historical conditions (Bakhti, 2009, p2). Although, “alienation” as an anti social phenomenon, has increasing growth for human societies along with industrialization of Western societies, but it was not a new phenomenon which has been emerged unexpectedly (AghaHosseini and Robbani, 2005, p165). In the beginning of Christianity, Christians would think of alienation as separation of human from his deity, i.e. God. We can also find such a description of abandoned human from God’s doorway, in other religions and sects such as Judaism, Islam and Mysticism. Arish Fromm believes that the history of alienation dated at the period of ancient prophets, a period in which people were used to worship idols. Idolaters would bow down before something which was made by them (Mohseni Tabriz, 1991, p27). In periods after Renaissance, i.e. since 14<sup>th</sup> century, many of philosophers, social thinkers, authors, poets, writers and intellectuals paid attention to the word alienation. Perhaps, the broadest application of this word has been by founders of social contract school, i.e. Hobe, Locke and Rousseau. John Locke defined alienation as “the fraud of human” in social contract. The legal meaning of alienation has been introduced in the same direction and it means conveying of right, from someone to someone else (Talebi, 1993, p3). But, Rousseau pointed out to good nature and purity of human essence in normal situations, and tried to show destructive and weakening factors and effects of society, civilization and personal ownership. Since Hegel period of time, i.e. 18<sup>th</sup> century, almost in all domains of the humanities, such as sociology, psychology, management, philosophy and even psychiatry, the concept of alienation has been applied as damage and crisis that has aimed human identity and not only makes him to be far from the course of success, but also threatens his health (SadaghatiFard and AbdollahZadeh, 2009, p 12). Alienation began with Hegel’s philosophy and became a common concept by Marx. Hegel applied alienation in respect to the soul and essence of human being and following him, Marx added material dimensions to alienation and suggested that human being is affected by self alienation in the capitalistic society (Mohseni Tabriz, 1991, p30). During years of 1970s, the number of researches about alienation reached to its peak point, but had decreasing trend in recent years.

### 4. Concepts of Alienation

During history, sometimes alienation has had positive value and there were moment when it has had negative value. What is important here and in cultural and scientific conferences is the negative application of alienation. Alienation in its positive sense means: the state of being relieved from yourself or being unconscious of yourself. So, it has a sense of ecstasy and mystical rapture. In fact, alienation is a mystical manner for reaching to real knowledge, if we consider this word in this sense. It is the reason why in Iranian mystics we find many themes in praising unconsciousness and blaming wisdom and consciousness. Since many years ago, there has also been such a manner of thinking in West and both in ancient religions and in comments of some of the oldest philosophers in the west of Greece (Mohseni Tabriz, 1991, p27).

It is said that alienation is one of the most difficult and complicated words in language, and for a long time it has been used in three domains of meaning, i.e. legal meaning, psychological meaning, and sociological meaning. In legal sense, it implies convey and transfer of rights and properties. In sociology, it means to have a sense of hatred and separation towards oneself, society, work and so on. In psychological sense, it implies ecstasy, delight and bliss.

For centuries, alienation was used in sense of mental alienation. Till 1940s, alienation was applied in all three mentioned meanings, but since World War II, its meaning, concept and application underwent some changes in such a way that was taken into account as a basic concept by philosophers, authors, poets, sociologists, psychologists and social critics; and it was defined and interpreted in different methods (Adibi Sade, and Moazeni, 2003, p 41). With exception of separation of oneself, alienation always refer to the relation between one subject and some concrete or abstract aspects of another issues, like environment, essence, God, work, work outputs, production means, colleagues, different social structures, processes and organizations (Geyer, 1994, p202). In Oxford Dictionary, alienation is defined as the state of isolation. Fromm (1955), discussed alienation as an experience in which the person consider himself as an alien creature, or in other word he hates himself. Horowitz (1966) has described three meaning for alienation: first, alienation as intense separation from world; second, alienation as separation from people; and third, alienation as separation from others' ideas toward the world. Kanungo (1979) believes that the main meaning of alienation is the separation of a person from other components of his environment. Overend (1975) has classified alienation as separation and hatred of a person towards citizens, nature, productions, other people and finally, towards himself (Nair & Vohra, 2010, p 601). In general, based on fields and domains of research, we can classify the concepts and theories of alienation into two theoretical domains of sociology and psychology (Mohseni Tabriz, 1991). There's not a complete agreement and unanimity between sociologists about the meaning of alienation, but it is obvious that they have complete agreement about the role of social external factors in emergence of alienation (Mohseni Tabriz, 1991, p 2). While alienation comprises a variety of issues, sociologists are mainly willing to investigate social alienation, political alienation, and work alienation. Self alienation, however, has been the concern of some of sociologists like Marx, Weber, Manheim and Mills (Mohseni Tabriz, 1991, p 33). In domain of psychoanalysis, self alienation has been seen as a type of psychological diseases, which would emerge as a result of some disorders in one of the three layers of individual's character, or in relations between them (Zaki, 2009, p 32).

## **5. Types of Alienation**

In relevance to the types of alienation, we can say that the most of authors have distinguished between different types of alienation. For example, "Shoaff" refers to two basic types of alienation: one is objective alienation or pure alienation and the other is subjective alienation or self alienation. "Shakhtel" has identified four types of alienation: human's alienation towards nature, alienation towards other people, alienation toward the products and results of his hand labor and mental labor, and alienation towards self. In general, if in a broad and general definition we consider alienation as a sense of individual's separation from surrounding realities and the lack of his cognitive-subjective and active-objective relation with some forms of socio-cultural relations, then there will be a great variety of issues under the domain of alienation. Therefore, the subjects of alienation can be individuals, nature, labor or production, society and dependent institutions like policy and family. Social alienation, political alienation, and work alienation are the concerns of sociologists. Psychologists also have paid attention to self alienation or human's alienation towards self (Bakhti, 2009, p.1).

## **5. Work Alienation**

"Karl Marx" has presented work alienation for the first time in order to criticize capitalistic societies. Marx believes the history of human being has dual dimension. It means, on one hand history has observed the creative role of human in nature, and on the other hand history has shown that human is getting alienated from his work more and more (Coser, 1999, p 84). In a more precise word, human essence changes in process of creating his environment and then trying to reach coordination with it and then would recreate it and with the pass of time a state would emerge in which this environment would gain a real solidarity and would appear unchangeable. It seems as if the system which we have created, has taken us under its control and thereby has made us to be alienated from collective essence of our surrounding world (Kribe, 1999, p 23). Marx believes this situation is a result of capitalistic system. Marx has called work as "manifestation of life". Such life manifestation may lead to "life alienation". This problem emerges when motivation of work is "external needs" rather than "inner needs". It means sometimes human has no choice but to sell his labor and himself like a goods, in order to be able to continue his life. Marx cited some types of alienation which exist in capitalistic system and particularly in process of production: self alienation, alienation from others (colleagues and other humans) and alienation from society that each of these varieties has a directed or undirected relation with "work alienation" (Sedaghatifard and Abdallahzadeh, 2009, p 12). When work alienation dominates, human would be alienated from outside environment and from other humans, and when faces himself, it seems as if he has faced a strange person and would have a sense of alienation towards himself (Shahrokni, 2003, p 377). The sense of Abnormalities, powerlessness, meaninglessness, social isolation and self alienation are forms of alienation. If an individual considers his labor as an alien affair, this labor is literally a factor of alienation emergence (Gharehdaghi Tanurlouee, 2010, p 2). Organizational relationships, particularly in the third world are in such

a way that ignore or destroy human and moral aspects of labor, and result in work alienation (Sabridashti, 2001, p 107). Self creating and social creating human, would be affected by the products of his labor which have been realized in form of organizations and socio-economic structures. After the creation of these external factors they comprise human as an iron cage, they limit him like a chain and reduce the human's dignity as if he is like insignificant and little gears of a machine. In other word, as Right Mills has said, they change human into a "cheerful robot" and take human life under the limitations of their influence. In this situation human will finally go under "alienation" (Aghajani and Javadi, 2003). Among knowledgeable employees such as university professors and school's teachers, work alienation is like a syndrome that would emerges in form of indifference, hatred, disappointment and frustration in university or school; negative attitude towards working and educating at relevant university or in school; the absence of interest towards them; the absence of considering characters of colleagues, university students and school students; carelessness about education and social relationships (kumar, 2010).

## 6. The Most Common Reasons for Work Alienation

Negligence, conflict, dissatisfaction from labor and finally quitting job are some of features that we can observe among employees in many organizations and managers are always looking for causes of these phenomenon and they want to know what factors result in employees' frustration and alienation from organization. There are many arguments and theories which explain reasons of work alienation emergence. Among researches (Mohseni Tabriz *et al.*, 2011; Nair & Vohra, 2010; Chisholm & Cummings, 1979; Korman, 1981; Ceylan, 2011; Aiken & Hage, 1966; Adibi Sadeh & Moazzeni, 2003; Sedaghati Fard & Abdollahzadeh, 2009; Tavassoli, 2001; Gharedaghi, 2010 and *etc*) which have been done so far, the following cases are the most common factors which alienate people from labor and organization and also in most cases result into "work alienation" among employees (Shahrokni, 2000, p 1).

1. Every individual has potentials that if they have been applied appropriately, they will enhance the one's motivation for working, but unfortunately in many organizations, individuals would not be assigned in accordance with their potentials and competences. It would result in a situation in which the individual has no interest in his labor.
2. All people who engage to a labor, their preliminary goal is to supply material needs of their life. If the benefits and incomes which an individual receives, do not supply his material needs, and employers do not pay enough wages and benefits, the individual will be frustrated from his labor, especially if in an organization, distribution of benefits and wages be based on discrimination, rather than justice.
3. With respect to social dignity, every individual has respectable character. If individuals be have to just mark time in their job, gradually their work will change to routine and the organization will become a nightmarish place for them.
4. Dominance of a widespread bureaucracy results in a situation when board of directors would keep a distance between themselves and other employees, in such an extent that hurt employees' sense of sympathy and compassion and leads to development of two opposite poles in organization.
5. Intense use of superiority symbols such as luxurious rooms, precious automobiles, enormous salaries, unlimited entertainments and so on, in a situation where other employees have no access to these advantages, make them to be sensitive and pessimistic about management, in such a way that they will imagine that the results of their efforts are plundered by the board of directors.
6. Controlling individuals by direct and domineering supervision, make employees to consider their work environment as a prison which the end of work time would be time of their freedom.
7. Long work time (beyond what is accepted in law), makes employees to have a sense of overwhelming tiredness and discourages them from their job.
8. The lack of employees' participation in process of decision taking and imposing decisions by superiors, especially when a decision is in relevance to them.
9. When organizations do not provide a proper apace for employees to "make wrong and learn from their mistakes", they will lose their power of risk, innovation and realizing their potentials, and leads them into a sense of conservation.
10. The lack of proper selecting of supervisors and assigning unreasonable persons for supervisory roles may result in a situation where such supervisors cause individuals to have a sense of encouragement.
11. When organizations conceal their employees' abilities, in a way that all their prominent works would be brought up in name of "manager", and when they never encourage individuals because of their effective activities, these individuals would be frustrated from offering innovations and doing significant works.
12. When organizations do not pay attention to proposals which are presented by employees for purpose of improving organizational activities, it will refrain employees from offering some proposals and they will be disappointed from having a role in organization's improvement.

13. When employees have no share in organization's benefits and successes, it make them to be indifferent about organization's profits and losses and as a result it is not important for them that their organization be successful or not.
14. When individuals do their routine work and have no clear perspective about goals and programs of relevant organization, they would be flustered from the organization's future.
15. The existence of constant stress and tension in work environment would weaken their power and morale.
16. The absence of job security and constant threatening by officials, occurrence of quitting job in many cases, would make organizational environment to be an unsafe place and would reduce employees' efficiencies and hope towards their job future.
17. Restricting individuals in doing monotonous and tedious activities and repeating them routinely, make them to have a sense of indolence and boredom and prevent them from having a dynamic trend.
18. When officials do not accomplish their commitments towards employees, it results in a condition where they feel they have been cheated and as a result would lose their loyalty towards organization .

In an effort for understanding what causes alienation, (Allen&LaFollette, 1977; Aiken &Hage, 1966; Blauner, 1944' Green, 1978; and Organ & Green, 1981),they have investigated some variables in literature, which have been mainly structural features of centralization and formalization. Jobs that give less independence to worker are influential factors in work alienation(Blauner,1944; and Mottaz, 1981). Based on Mottaz remarks (1981), meaningless work conditions are effective factors that lead to work alienation. Therefore, when employees understand that their work can be meaningful and can potential basis for applying it as a means of expressing themselves, it can be a factor in emergence of work alienation in them. Lee &Joblin (1995) pointed out that in addition to the relationship that exist between an individual and his manager, he has some relations with other individuals in organization such as colleagues, subordinates, customers. Therefore, it is thought that superior-subordinate relation is a main and necessary factor in performing job tasks in organization. Kormanet *al* (1981), points out that there is a significant correlation between work alienation and unfulfilled expectations, and also there's a correlation between alienation and dissatisfaction of belonging to work group. Aquino, 1999; Colbert *et al* 2004; and Scarlicki and Folger, 1997 found that poor organizational justice may lead to organizational retaliatory behavior or aggression. Blauner (1964) indicated that routine tasks which give less independence to worker would result in work alienation. Drucker (1999) also argued that innovation or providing a space for presenting individual creativity should be a part of workers' labor (Nair &Vohra, 2010, p 602). Generally, based on authors' opinions, emergence of frustration and alienation in employees, and lack of proper effort are not as a result of their indolence, but it is resulted from poor management and organizational structure. In such organizations, employees have no control on their work environment and will be encouraged to be dependent, inferior, and obedient (Tavasoli and Ghadimi, 2001, p 111).

## **7. Effects of Work Alienation and its Applications**

One of the main applications and benefits of studying about work alienation is to prevent from damaging and destructive effects of work alienation which may decreases individuals' productivity and performance. In following paragraph we will point to some of these effects:

Alienation is a main factor which may prepare an atmosphere in which employees would lose their mental health. Alienation may affect the whole organization during a short period of time. In employees who are affected by work alienation, we are more likely to observe their absence, delay and misconduct in their work ,finally the lack of productivity is the main indicator of work alienation emergence (Rezapour and Mousavian, 2007, p51). In organizations with alienated employees, we can observe noticeably different mental illnesses such as anxiety, depression and so on. In such situations employee will have a sense of homelessness and alienationand has no control over his labor, but he is a means for satisfying others' needs. With the end of obligatory work time, he escapes from the work like a person who is affected by pestilence and is trying to escape from death. In such a world, he has been reduced to the level of a beast(Rezapour and Mousavian, 2007, p 46). In first step, mechanical work would restrain an individual's identity, independence, freedom and feedback, and put human along with the speed of technology and consider him as a machine with expiry date. It can underpin the basis of mental illnesses and ultimately results in decrease in individual's performance (Rezapour and Mousavian, 2007, p 52)In their broad studies, industrial and organizational psychologists have attributed sabotage activities of workers in industries and organizations to a concept called "self alienation" which is a harmful factor that hurts mental health and has been studied as a mental disorder. Alienation is the source of stress in organization. A person, who is alienated from organization, would not understand the concept of concentrating on time and place and this is a obstacle in coming growth in all important organizational activities. The sense of alienation will result in decrease in functions, inferior performance and increase in tardiness in doing organizational tasks. Kungo (1982) suggested that the tensions and

stresses which we can observe in self alienated employees, are in fact a threatening factor for organization by decreasing productivity, efficiency and giving a rise in absence from work. Authors have found in their studies that alienation has a negative relation with control of activities, self regulation about functions, job participation and effective organizational commitment. Alienation may increase poverty and finally decrease job satisfaction and it has also a negative relation with job participation and organizational prestige (BrendelLan, 2011, p 1-2). Therefore, today, with regard to emergence of work alienation, the process of work has gone under difficulties and people think that they are not able to control their environment and products of their labor, and they also feel that they have been neglected by officials. They feel that they have no role in managing affairs and should work exactly based on others' planning, and they think there is no criteria or competence to be effective in their job raise. Thus, they do not use sources appropriately and their personal efficiency will decrease. In such situation, employees feel themselves under the control of regulations and based on Mills' saying would be changed into a "cheerful robot" (Lackadi and Fahimipour, 2002, p 152).

## 9. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

From the findings of this study we can conclude that human alienation is not restricted to past, present, and future, but it's something that has been along with human being since his creation; of course, its type and amount change based on historical and social conditions. During years of 1970s, the number of researches about alienation reached to its peak point, but had decreasing trend in recent years. Unfortunately, many current text books in area of management and organizational sciences even have not point to this subject. The subjects of alienation can be individuals, nature, labor or production, society and dependent institutions like policy and family. Social alienation, political alienation, and work alienation are the concerns of sociologists. Psychologists also have paid attention to self alienation or human's alienation towards self. Therefore, with exception of separation of oneself, alienation always refer to the relation between one subject and some concrete or abstract aspects of another issues, like environment, essence, God, work, work outputs, production means, colleagues, different social structures, processes and organizations. Among theories of alienation, it seems that Seeman (1959) has presents more up-to-date interpretation about work alienation which is consisting of: a sense of powerlessness, meaninglessness, Abnormalities, social estrangement and self estrangement. Work alienation was first represented by Karl Marx who used this concept for the purpose of criticizing capitalistic societies. When work alienation dominates, human would be alienated from outside environment and from other humans, and when faces himself, it seems as if he has faced a strange person and would have a sense of alienation towards himself. It results in emergence of some emotions and trends which their signs are the absence of interest towards labor, hatred from environment, the sense of vanity, powerlessness and generally dissatisfaction from work. Today, the presence of employees in their work environment is not qualitative and concrete; in other word, this represents the existence of a kind of obligation for continuing a job which the only reason that justifies it is the pass of life. Alienation is a main factor which may prepare an atmosphere in which employees would lose their mental health. Alienation may affect the whole organization during a short period of time. In employees who are affected by work alienation, we are more likely to observe their absence, delay and misconduct in their work and...and finally the lack of productivity is the main indicator of work alienation emergence that threaten permanence of society's life and development. Consequently, conscious study about the types of alienation and specially work alienation is essential. When we study theories of alienation, an important question would be brought up: whether, as sociologists believe, alienation is a reflection of social facts, or as psychologists imagine, social alienation is driven from psychological and inner facts? It's obvious that both social and psychological perspectives will response to this question based on considering facts and realities, but their responses have some limitations: sociologists ignore the roe of individual's character, mental damages, individual's primary experiences in childhood and psychological powers in emergence of alienation. Psychologists with emphasis on this assumption that alienation has psychological basis, attribute alienation to character, tastes and inner stubborn powers, and thus do not pay attention so much to social facts and realities. Perhaps, this Ian Tailors' saying is true that the essence and nature of alienation, as a consistent set need to be investigated with respect to both social and psychological factors. We should pay attention to this fact that on one hand human is creator of society and history, and on the other hand he is under the influence of his own products. Hence, human has a dialectic relation with the products of his labor and it would be better for us to consider this issue in all phases of alienation. In general we can say that a combination of organizational factors and efficiencies, social-cultural relations and psychological factors has dominant power on human being and work independently and make human being to be far from his/her normal essence and to become an element which is left without identity.

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