

The Relationship between Worker Alienation and Work-Related Behavior

THOMAS G. CUMMINGS

University of Southern California

AND

SUSAN L. MANRING

Case-Western Reserve University

This study examines the relationship between five dimensions of alienation from work—powerlessness, normlessness, meaninglessness, self-evaluative involvement, and instrumental work orientation—and the work-related behavior of effort, performance, absenteeism, and tardiness. A related issue is the distinctness or commonality of the dimensions of alienation. The results show that the five dimensions of alienation are empirically distinct. Significant associations between the dimensions of powerlessness, normlessness, and meaninglessness and the work behavior suggest that feelings of alienation may result in less effort and performance and more tardiness from work. The implication of the results for understanding workers' motivation to participate in and to perform the work of the organization are discussed.

The relationship between alienation and work is receiving increased attention among researchers and managers. Problems concerning worker alienation are currently popularized in the mass media and are the focus of numerous conferences and workshops. Alienating work is considered by its critics as an indictment of the industrial order. Alienation theory, derived from this industrial critique, suggests that certain structures result in experienced alienation which, in turn, affects behavior. Relatively little empirical work, however, has concentrated on the behavioral consequences of alienation. There is also an unresolved issue regarding the dimensionality of the concept of alienation itself. There is ambiguity in the literature about the empirical independence or commonality of certain variants of alienation, such as powerlessness, normlessness, meaninglessness, and self-estrangement. This study responds to these research needs by exploring two issues: (1) the relationships between different dimensions of alienation and the work-related behavior of effort, performance,

Send reprint requests to Dr. Thomas G. Cummings, Graduate School of Business Administration, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, CA 90007.

tardiness, and absenteeism; and (2) the empirical relationships among five dimensions of alienation that are relevant in the work place.

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ALIENATION AND WORK-RELATED BEHAVIOR

It is generally assumed that alienating work has negative behavioral consequences, e.g., work that provides for little self-control, meaning, and intrinsic satisfaction leads to reduced motivation in the work process and to various forms of withdrawal (Seeman, 1967). Some recent works, however, using broad social measures of alienation (e.g., powerlessness in relation to society) have questioned the existence of a relationship between the work situation and alienation (Form, 1973; Payne, 1974; Seeman, 1972a; Tudor, 1972). Other studies of worker alienation, which have found that work-specific forms of alienation are related to the work situation, have focused on the organizational antecedents of alienation, such as bureaucracy, structure, and technology (Aiken & Hage, 1966; Blauner, 1965; Bonjean & Grimes, 1970; Faunce, 1965; Miller, 1975; Shepard, 1971, 1973; Shepard & Panko, 1974), rather than on the behavioral consequences of alienation.

The research that does investigate work-related behavior focuses on the relation between one or two dimensions of alienation, such as powerlessness and self-estrangement, and such behavior as knowledge-seeking and information utilization, participation, and union membership (Clark, 1959; Neal & Seaman, 1964; Seeman, 1972b). These studies support the premise that alienating work has work-related consequences; however, the findings do not relate directly to behavior that is central to organizational membership and goal achievement. One important contribution of this study is that it does examine such behavior, specifically, effort, performance, absenteeism, and tardiness. Knowledge of such key behavioral effects is needed to extend our understanding of alienating work to those consequences that are critical to the organization's ability to achieve its goals and to the worker's success in the organization.

DISTINCTNESS OF FIVE TYPES OF WORKER ALIENATION

At this point in the research on alienation there is no consensus as to whether alienation is a unitary concept or a construct with multidimensional variations. Seeman (1972) postulates six key variants of alienation: powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, social isolation, self-estrangement, and cultural estrangement. Although he argues for the conceptual distinctness of these components, there is a diversity of viewpoints among those who have studied the empirical independence or commonality of the dimensions of alienation (Burbach, 1972; Dean, 1961; Middleton, 1963; Neal & Rettig, 1963, 1967; Simmons, 1966; Struening & Richardson, 1965; Wolfe, Note 1). Given this ambiguity, it appears advis-

able to test the applicability of multidimensional measures of alienation whenever such dimensional models are used in a particular study (Anderson, 1971). In addition, research using a multidimensional conception of alienation is likely to provide a greater understanding of the varieties of alienating work conditions than are studies which employ a unidimensional construct.

In this study, five measures of alienation are used: powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, instrumental work orientation, and self-evaluative involvement. These measures were developed by Shepard (1971, 1972, 1973) to study the alienating effects of different kinds of work. Shepard's variants of alienation are cast in a social-psychological framework in which alienation is said to exist "to the extent that there is a discrepancy between the criteria for status recognition within a status structure of which one is a member and the criteria one uses for self-evaluation" (Shepard, 1972, p. 171). Although others have argued that alienation is an attribute of the social system rather than a perceptual variable (Israel, 1971; Schacht, 1970), the present study uses subjective measures of alienation because they are likely to be linked more directly to behavior than are objective measures of the work context (Hackman & Lawler, 1971).

Shepard's dimensions include:

1. *Powerlessness*—the feeling that an individual is an object, dominated and controlled by other people or a technical system of production. This dimension is similar to Rotter's (1966) concept of "internal vs. external control," and DeCharms' (1968) "origin vs. pawn."

2. *Meaninglessness*—"the inability to understand the events in which one is engaged" (Shepard, 1971, p. 14). This form of alienation results when work roles are seen as lacking integration into other work roles as well as into the goals of the organization.

3. *Normlessness*—the feeling that the attainment of culturally prescribed goals demands illegitimate means. Here the primary concern is the extent to which a worker perceives that upward mobility in the organization requires illegitimate means as opposed to advancement on the basis of merit.

4. *Instrumental work orientation*—the feeling that work is "valued primarily as a means to nonwork ends rather than valued for its intrinsic rewards" (Shepard, 1971, p. 16). This dimension is similar to Seeman's (1972) notion of "self-estrangement" in which work becomes an instrumentalized means rather than an end in itself.

5. *Self-evaluative involvement*—the degree to which a worker feels his role is a more important referent for evaluating self than his nonwork activity. This variant of alienation is similar to Lodahl and Kejner's (1965) concept of "job involvement" or the extent to which the job situation is central to a person's identity, and Wilensky's (1964) "prized self-image."

Shepard's variants of alienation are conceptually distinct with reference to work. He shows that the items used to measure each dimension of alienation are internally consistent; however, he does not examine the empirical independence of the five measures. In one study, Shepard (1972) indicates that while the dimensions of alienation are conceptually distinct, they may have theoretical relationships. He concludes that powerlessness, meaninglessness, and normlessness contribute to variations in self-evaluative involvement in work and instrumental work orientation, although the three independent variables may not be regarded as the necessary sufficient factors. A first step of this study is to test whether Shepard's dimensions of alienation are independent of each other. Then, the relationships between each of these measures and the work-related behavior of effort, performance, tardiness, and absenteeism are considered.

METHOD

Sample

The study was conducted at a large forging works located in an industrial city in the Midwestern part of the United States. Subjects were 96 male, blue-collar workers involved in a variety of forging jobs. The average age of the Subjects was 41.2 years, and their average seniority in the organization was 16.4 years. The average length of residency in the city was 23.5 years, and the educational level averaged 10.7 years.

Variables Measured

Variants of alienation. Each employee was asked to complete a questionnaire. One part of the questionnaire included Shepard's measures of alienation. (Table 1 presents the questionnaire items for each dimension of alienation). Powerlessness, meaninglessness, and normlessness items each contained a characteristic of work. For each characteristic, respondents were to rate to what extent it existed on their job. Responses ranged from 1 (minimum) to 7 (maximum). Self-evaluative involvement and instrumental work orientation were measured with 7-point, Likert-type scales, which were used to obtain responses to a number of items concerning these dimensions of alienation.

Work-related behavior. Another part of the questionnaire was designed to measure employees' perceptions about their job effort and performance. Workers were asked to rate their job performance and effort on a 7-point scale. Another source of effort and performance data was obtained by asking each worker's supervisor to rate the worker on a similar 7-point scale. Absence and tardiness data were obtained from company records for a 9-month period.

TABLE 1
Results of a Factor Analysis of Shepard's Measures of Alienation

Item	Factor				
	1	2	3	4	5
<i>Powerlessness</i>					
1. To what extent can you increase or decrease the speed at which you work?	.77	-.07	.01	.22	.03
2. To what extent can you vary the steps involved in your job?	.60	.37	.08	.26	-.17
3. To what extent can you control how much work you produce?	.54	.20	-.02	.18	.03
4. To what extent do you have influence over the things that happen to you at work?	.47	.30	.07	.44	-.12
5. To what extent can you decide on methods and procedures used in your job?	.43	.56	.09	.27	.06
6. To what extent can you work ahead and take a short rest break during work hours?	.42	-.01	-.14	.41	.14
7. To what extent are you free from close supervision while doing your job?	.39	.16	.25	.15	.10
8. To what extent can you move from your immediate working area during work hours?	.12	-.06	.05	.37	.05
<i>Normlessness</i>					
9. To what extent is getting ahead in the company based on ability?	.18	.84	.13	.03	.09
10. To what extent do you feel that people who get ahead in the company deserve it?	.24	.67	.23	.08	.13
11. To what extent do you feel that it is pull and connection that gets a person ahead in the company?	-.04	.38	.11	.01	.22
<i>Instrumental Work Orientation</i>					
12. Money is the most rewarding reason for working.	.11	.03	.65	.12	.07
13. Working is a necessary evil to provide things your family and you want.	-.08	.20	.53	.17	.02
14. You are living for the day you can collect your retirement and do the things that are important to you.	-.08	.06	.49	-.14	-.01
15. Your job is something you have to do to earn a living; most of your interests are connected outside your job.	.02	.17	.48	.10	.42

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Item	Factor				
	1	2	3	4	5
<i>Meaninglessness</i>					
16. To what extent do you know how your job fits into the total operation of the company?	.26	.20	.16	.80	-.05
17. To what extent do you know how your job fits in with the work of other departments in the company?	.20	.11	.04	.73	-.08
18. To what extent do you know how your work relates to the work of others who work with you?	.42	.28	.00	.46	-.20
<i>Self-Evaluative Involvement</i>					
19. Success in things you do away from the job is more important to your opinion of yourself than success in your work career.	.00	.27	.17	-.12	.90
20. To you, your work is only a small part of who you are.	.15	.19	.50	.03	.31

RESULTS

Factor Analysis of Dimensions of Alienation

A factor analysis was performed to test whether Shepard's dimensions of alienation are empirically independent of each other. Table 1 presents the results of a principal component's analysis with rotation to a Varimax criterion (Kaiser, 1968) done on the 20 items that were designed to measure powerlessness, normlessness, meaninglessness, instrumental work orientation, and self-evaluative involvement. First, items are arranged according to the dimension of alienation they were intended to measure, then grouped by order of factor loading. The solution shown is a 5-factor solution that accounts for 61% of the variance. A 5-factor solution was chosen to test whether the items loaded on the five alienation dimensions which Shepard intended.

The first factor is clearly a powerlessness factor with seven of the eight powerlessness items loading on it and only one other item (Item 18) showing any appreciable loading. The second factor appears to be a normlessness factor. All of the normlessness items load on it, while only one other item (Item 5) demonstrates any sizeable loading. All the items designed to measure instrumental work orientation load on Factor 3 and only one other item (Item 20) loads strongly on this factor. Factor 4 seems to be a meaninglessness factor. All the items designed to measure meaninglessness load on it, although three other items (Items 4, 6, and 8)

show moderate loadings on this factor. Both of the items intended to measure self-evaluative involvement load on Factor 5, but one of these items (Item 20) does not load highly; one other item (Item 15) also loads relatively high on this factor.

The factor analysis generally indicates that Shepard's dimensions of alienation are factorially independent and relatively distinct variables. Most of the items designed to measure a particular dimension of alienation loaded on the designated factor, however, some of these items also loaded on other factors (Items 4, 5, 6, 15, 18, and 20). Although this latter finding suggests that Shepard's dimensions of alienation are not as empirically independent as they are conceptually, the factor analysis provides sufficient evidence to warrant treating them as distinct variables in this study.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ALIENATION FACTORS AND WORK-RELATED BEHAVIOR

Table 2 presents Pearson product-moment correlations between the alienation factors and the measures of behavior. The factor score for each alienation measure consists of the mean of those items intended to measure it, and includes only those items with loadings of greater than .50 (Table 2 lists these items for each factor). It may be noted that out of the 20 items designed to measure the five variants of alienation, only 10 loaded greater than .50 on their intended dimensions of alienation; this rather strict criterion for inclusion in the factor scores was used to maintain as much as possible the independence of Shepard's dimensions of alienation.

Powerlessness shows a significant relationship to the self-rated measures of effort and performance, the supervisor-rated measure of effort, and tardiness. The less power the job holder feels in his job, the lower his effort and performance and the more his tardiness from work. The same behavior is also significantly associated with normlessness. Thus, the more an individual feels that upward mobility in the organization requires illegitimate means, the lower his effort and performance and the more his tardiness from work.

Meaninglessness shows significant relationships to self-rated measures of effort and performance, and tardiness. The more the job holder feels that his work role is not integrated into related work roles and into the goals of the organization, the lower his effort and performance and the more his tardiness from work.

Self-evaluative involvement is significantly associated with supervisor-rated measures of effort and performance. Surprisingly, the more an individual regards his work role as the referent for evaluating himself, the lower his effort and performance.

Instrumental work orientation shows a significant relationship to the

TABLE 2
Correlations between the Alienation Factors and the Measures of Work-Related Behavior

Measures of behavior	Alienation factors				
	Powerlessness (Items 1,2,&3)	Normlessness (Items 9&10)	Meaninglessness (Items 16&17)	Self- evaluative involvement (Item 19)	Instrumental work orientation (Items 12&13)
Self-rated effort	-.26**	-.37**	-.28**	-.16	-.15
Self-rated performance	-.34**	-.28**	-.41**	-.05	-.18*
Supervisor-rated effort	-.20*	-.20*	-.11	-.17*	-.09
Supervisor-rated performance	-.12	-.10	-.06	-.20*	-.05
Tardiness	.36**	.17*	.25**	.12	-.03
Absenteeism	-.03	.01	-.01	.03	-.03

Note. $n = 96$. Self-evaluative involvement is the only alienation factor for which a higher score signifies a less alienating condition; see Table 1 for elaboration of items.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

measure of self-rated performance. The more a person feels that his work is primarily a means to nonwork ends, the lower his performance.

DISCUSSION

The data generally support the view that in research on worker alienation it is important to distinguish between powerlessness, normlessness, meaninglessness, instrumental work orientation, and self-evaluative involvement. Items designed to measure each of these dimensions loaded on different factors when a factor analysis was done. This indicates that these variables are relatively independent and distinct dimensions of alienation from work. Since some items loaded sizeably on more than one factor, the analysis suggests that Shepard's instrument needs further refinement, especially in the wording of items intended to measure a specific dimension of alienation. This is particularly evident for the meaninglessness factor which shared several items with the powerlessness factor. The factor analysis does not support Shepard's (1972) finding that powerlessness, meaninglessness, and normlessness may contribute to variation in self-evaluative involvement in work and instrumental work orientation. Further research along the lines reported here is required to develop valid measures of multidimensional constructs of alienation.

Before the discussion turns to a consideration of the relationships between the alienation factors and the behavioral measures, a few comments need to be made about the level of the relationships found among these variables. First, it is possible that the strength of the associations between the alienation factors and the self-rated measures of effort and performance may, in part, be attributed to the common method of measurement—respondent's self-reports. To test for this possible artifact, the separate measures of effort and performance, supervisors' ratings, were examined. The results in Table 2 show that in eight of the ten associations considered, the relationships between the alienation factors and supervisor-rated effort and performance are considerably lower than the associations which share a common method of measurement. This suggests that the strength of the relationships between the alienation dimensions and self-rated effort and performance are due partially to shared method variance. Thus, these results should be considered with a degree of caution. Furthermore, this finding calls into question many industrial studies that do not use independent measures for related variables. Second, the associations between the alienation factors and absenteeism were negligible. This could be due to the fact that the phenomena being studied are not strong, but it could also be attributed to measurement problems. The latter explanation seems to be particularly credible, since the distribution of the absentee data was extremely skewed to the right; that is, many respondents had few, if any, absences. This has the effect of restricting the range of the absentee data that entered into the

correlation coefficients. This restriction could have seriously reduced the size of the correlation coefficients found between absenteeism and the alienation factors.

The data strongly suggest that certain kinds of alienation from work are related to important work-related behavior. The premise that experienced alienation results in less effort and performance and more withdrawal from work is partially supported by the data. Powerlessness, normlessness, and meaninglessness are significantly related to self-rated effort and performance, and to tardiness in the expected direction. This finding suggests that an individual's feelings about certain alienating conditions at work can directly influence his performance and attendance.

The associations between the behavioral variables and the alienation factors of self-evaluative involvement and instrumental work orientation do not generally support the premise that experienced alienation is related to behavior. The strength of these relationships tends to be lower than the strength of the associations previously discussed. Also, two of the three significant relations, between self-evaluative involvement and supervisor-rated effort and performance, are in a direction opposite to that predicted in this study. The lower strength of these relationships could be due to the fact that alienation is not strongly related to behavior, but it could also be attributed to the possibility that these factors are not really direct measures of alienation from work but rather, are personal orientations to work. This latter explanation seems feasible in light of the wording of items designed to measure these factors. Each item asks the respondent to agree or disagree, on a 7-point scale, with a general statement concerning his personal orientation to work. Responses to those items seem to be more a function of the person than of the job. If these factors are personality attributes or indicators of withdrawal from the work role, there is no reason to believe that they will be related to workers' behavior in a way that is predicted by treating them like the other alienation measures, e.g., powerlessness, meaninglessness, and normlessness.

Low self-evaluative involvement, for example, may derive from a fear-of-failure motive rather than a dimension of alienation from work. If so, this provides a plausible explanation for the negative relations between this factor and supervisor-rated effort and performance. Literature related to fear-of-failure motivation suggests that this motive is primarily a fear of social devaluation; and, the anxiety that emanates from this fear may lead to avoidance in achievement situations (Birney, Burdick, & Teehan, 1969). Furthermore, loss in social value is likely to have its greatest affect upon the fears of the person if the loss takes place in the eyes of others for whom the individual has high regard. Given this fear-of-failure phenomenon, it seems plausible that individuals who evaluate themselves in regard to their work roles may fear social devaluation of

this identity in the work place. Such fears are likely to lead to considerable anxiety and hence task avoidance in those situations where significant others, such as supervisors, evaluate performance. The results seem to support this explanation, since individuals who score higher on this variable are rated lower in effort and performance by their supervisors. Further research concerning the constructs that underlie self-evaluative involvement and instrumental work orientation is needed to explain these results.

In conclusion, the findings from this study suggest that certain dimensions of alienation from work are not only theoretically distinct but empirically independent. The results strengthen the construct validity of Shepard's powerlessness, normlessness, and meaninglessness measures of alienation and suggest areas for further refinement of his instrument. The findings also support the premise that alienating work is significantly related to self-rated effort and performance, and to tardiness. The relationships with supervisor-rated effort and performance were generally lower. Though we cannot determine direction of causation from this correlational data, the results point to the likelihood that certain forms of alienating work may directly affect workers' decisions to participate in and to perform the work of the organization. Specifically, three dimensions of alienation appear to affect workers' behavior: powerlessness, normlessness, and meaninglessness. Given the relatively small sample size of this study, it must be treated as a first exploration of the consequences of alienation on effort, performance, and withdrawal. Further, the organizational context and research sample of the present study—96 forging workers—make generalizations to other settings, such as service-oriented, white-collar workers questionable. Additional research using larger sample sizes, more diverse populations and settings, and longitudinal research designs is needed to provide more definitive knowledge on the organizational impacts of alienating work.

REFERENCES

- Aiken, M., & Hage, J. Organizational alienation: A comparative analysis. *American Sociological Review*, 1966, 31, 497-507.
- Anderson, B. Reactions to a study of bureaucracy and alienation. *Social Forces*, 1971, 49, 614-621.
- Birney, R. C., Burdick, H., & Techan, R. C. *Fear of failure*. New York: Van Nostrand-Reinhold, 1969.
- Blauner, R. *Alienation and freedom: The factory worker and his industry*. Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 1964.
- Bonjean, C., & Grimes, M. Bureaucracy and alienation: A dimensional approach. *Social Forces*, 1970, 48, 365-373.
- Burbach, H. The development of a contextual measure of alienation. *Pacific Sociological Review*, 1972, 15, 225-234.
- Clark, J. Measuring alienation within a social system. *American Sociological Review*, 1959, 24, 849-852.

- Dean, D. Alienation: Its meaning and measurement. *American Sociological Review*, 1961, **26**, 753-758.
- DeCharms, R. *Personal causation*. New York: Academic Press, 1968.
- Dubin, R. Industrial workers' worlds. *Social Problems*, 1956, **3**, 131-142.
- Faunce, W. Automation and the division of labor. *Social Problems*, 1965, **13**, 149-160.
- Form, W. Technology and social behavior of workers in four countries: A sociotechnical perspective. *American Sociological Review*, 1973, **37**, 727-738.
- Hackman, J. R., & Lawler, L. E. Employee reactions to job characteristics. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 1971, **55**, 259-286.
- Israel, J. *Alienation: From Marx to modern sociology*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1971.
- Kaiser, H. The varimax criterion for analytic rotation in factor analysis. *Psychometrika*, 1968, **69**, 41-55.
- Lodahl, T., & Kejner, M. The definition and measurement of job involvement. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 1965, **49**, 24-33.
- Middleton, R. Alienation, race and education. *American Sociological Review*, 1963, **22**, 670-677.
- Miller, J. Isolation in organizations: Alienation from authority, control, and expressive relations. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 1975, **20**, 260-271.
- Neal, A., & Rettig, S. Dimensions of alienation among manual and non-manual workers. *American Sociological Review*, 1963, **28**, 599-608.
- Neal, A., & Rettig, S. On the multidimensionality of alienation. *American Sociological Review*, 1967, **32**, 54-64.
- Neal, A., & Seeman, M. Organizations and powerlessness: A test of the mediation hypothesis. *American Sociological Review*, 1964, **29**, 216-226.
- Payne, D. Alienation: An organizational-societal comparison. *Social Forces*, 1974, **53**, 274-282.
- Rotter, J. Generalized expectancies for internal vs. external control of reinforcements. *Psychological Monographs*, 1966, **80**, 1-28 (Whole No. 609).
- Schacht, R. *Alienation*. Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday, 1970.
- Seeman, M. Alienation and social learning in a reformatory. *American Journal of Sociology*, 1963, **69**, 270-284.
- Seeman, M. On the personal consequences of alienation in work. *American Sociological Review*, 1967, **32**, 273-285.
- Seeman, M. The signals of '68: Alienation in pre-crisis France. *American Sociological Review*, 1972, **37**, 385-402. (a)
- Seeman, M. Alienation and knowledge-seeking: A note on alienation and action. *Social Problems*, 1972, **20**, 3-17. (b)
- Seeman, M., & Evans, J. Alienation and learning in a hospital setting. *American Sociological Review*, 1962, **27**, 772-782.
- Shepard, J. *Automation and alienation*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1971.
- Shepard, J. Alienation as a process: Work as a case in point. *The Sociological Quarterly*, 1972, **13**, 161-173.
- Shepard, J. Technology, division of labor, and alienation. *Pacific Sociological Review*, 1973, **16**, 61-87.
- Shepard, J., & Panko, T. Alienation and social referents. *Sociology and Social Research*, 1974, **59**, 55-60.
- Simmons, J. Some intercorrelations among alienation measures. *Social Forces*, 1966, **44**, 370-372.
- Struening, E., & Richardson, A. A factor analytic exploration of the alienation, anomie, and authoritarianism domain. *American Sociological Review*, 1965, **30**, 768-776.
- Tudor, B. A specification of relationships between job complexity and powerlessness. *American Sociological Review*, 1972, **37**, 596-604.

Wilensky, H. Varieties of work experience. In H. Borow (Ed.), *Man in a world of work*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1964, pp. 125, 154.

REFERENCE NOTE

1. Wolfe, R. *Problems and methods of investigating alienation as a psychological concept*. Paper presented before the VIII World Congress of the International Sociological Association, 1974.

Received: May 8, 1976.