

# IS ALIENATION ONLY A PROBLEM FOR THE BLUE-COLLAR WORKERS? A RESEARCH ON THE ALIENATION OF THE WHITE-COLLAR WORKERS IN THE AGE OF INFORMATION AND IN THE BANKING SECTOR

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## ABSTRACT

Alienation, which is generally defined as “the decrease in one’s adaptation to the social, cultural and natural environment; one’s loss of control over his/her surroundings and being gradually marginalized,” is a theme that has been of utmost importance in almost every human and social sciences, philosophy and literature for about two hundred years. The main question of this paper is about the validity of aspects of alienation in today’s highly educated information workers, which we can call white-collar workers and the strength of the factors on alienation. The research has been carried out in banking sector which constitutes an appropriate platform for our research with well educated employees who usually perform some computer based tasks within generally non-flexible organizational structures.

**Keywords:** Alienation, Banking Sector, White Collar Workers, Organizational Structures

## Research Questions

Do the highly-educated information workers of today’s businesses encounter a problem of alienation (powerlessness, meaninglessness, self-alienation and social alienation) like the blue-collar workers of 150 years ago despite the changing production conditions?

What factors (work-related, technical, human, organizational factors) and to what extent have an effect on alienation?

What kind of changes has occurred so far about the alienation of the blue-collar workers? Does the perception of social benefit about the workplace have an effect on the alienation of the white-collar workers?

## The Significance of the Issue and the Theoretical Framework

Alienation, which is generally defined as “the decrease in one’s adaptation to the social, cultural and natural environment; one’s loss of control over his/her surroundings and being gradually marginalized,” is a theme that has been of utmost importance in almost every human and social sciences, philosophy and literature for about two hundred years.

The concept of alienation, which has been derived from the pronoun “alienatio” and verb “alienarer” in Latin, was first defined and used in the area of economics by Karl Marx (Kanungo, 1992:414). According to Marx, alienation is a process that causes the workers to be alienated from their work, efforts, environment, self-nature and the other people since the effort is out of the hands and self of the workers and they deny their efforts and production. Marx points out that alienation may occur in various forms and the concept of alienation is dealt with in four parts including the alienation of labor, alienation of work process, alienation of human nature, and individual alienation (Ferguson and Lavalette, 2004:300–302; Tolan, 1981:145–156; Overend, 1975:308–309).

Melvin Seeman (1959), who has added a new dimension to the researches on alienation, discusses the issue of alienation in five dimensions. For Seeman, who regards the concept of

alienation as a socio-psychological one, the five dimensions of alienation are powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, social estrangement (isolation), and self-estrangement.

In *Alienation and Freedom* (1964), Robert Blauner puts forth a taxonomy with four levels about the dimensions of alienation in work life based on the fundamentals of the alienation dimensions:

- **Powerlessness:** For Blauner, powerlessness means that the work processes are under the control of the non-individual factors such as the other individuals or technology and that the individuals lack any kind of work freedom. Powerless individuals give reaction instead of taking action and fail to arrange their own conditions in workplace. (Blauner, 1964: 18).
- **Meaninglessness:** Meaninglessness, the second dimension of alienation, occurs when the individuals fail to see the relation between their work activities and the final product. Meaninglessness increases when the individuals see themselves only as a tiny part of a whole (Blauner, 1964: 23).
- **Isolation:** Isolation occurs when individuals fail to establish satisfactory social relationships in workplace. Forbidding individuals to communicate with the others during work and the factors like bureaucratic structure causes a feeling of isolation in individuals (Blauner, 1964: 25).
- **Self-Estrangement:** Self-estrangement refers to the loss of one's relation with himself/herself depending on the work that he/she performs and the work processes (Blauner, 1964: 26).

That the phenomenon of alienation has changed in form and quality as a result of the changes in technology and social life has led to the discussion of the reasons and validity of the concept from different points of view. For example; there are several views on whether the alienation phenomenon that is one of the most salient features of the Industrial Society has decreased in efficiency following the transformation into an Information Society. Daniel Bell suggests in *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society* (1973) that the quality of work life has increased as the information became the core source of the society and the economy has changed from a capital-intensive nature into an information-intensive one and inter-personal relations have gained importance rather than the people-machine relation and the social interaction has become the most significant part of the work; in this context, the workplace has become more cooperative, the white-collar workers work more independently, the level of satisfaction has increased and the effect of the alienation phenomenon has increased. On the other hand, Harry Braverman puts forward in *Labor and Monopoly Capital* (1974) that there has been a change from blue-collar workers towards white-collar workers in labor market; however, the actual relations between the employees and employers or the employees and their work have not changed to a great extent. According to Braverman (1974), the fundamental values of the capitalist societies cited by Marx in the beginning of the century still have an effect in identifying the working conditions of the employees. Whether the information technologies that require standard abilities and trainings and the technological advancements increase business profits as well as improving the working conditions of workers is disputable. Although the reason of using machines has not changed to a radical extent for the workers of the blue-collar industrial society and the workers of the white-collar information society, the nature of the interaction between the machine and worker has not changed a lot.

## Methodology

In this research, Blauner's (1964) alienation model has been used. The research examines the hypotheses on how the four dimensions of alienation included in the model (powerlessness, meaninglessness, social alienation, self- alienation) are affected by the demographic features and the four factors which are found in the recent studies conducted thereabout: *factors related to the organizational structure* (number of workers, working hours, the amount of work taken home, working conditions, personal development and promotion opportunities, payment equity, awarding, etc.); *work-related factors* (the role of the task within the whole, the extent of self-management, task variety, task's level of importance, etc.); *technical factors* (time spent on computer, the complicacy level of the work, the importance of machines in work routine, changing speed of technology, etc.) and *human factors* (managerial support, peer support, type of leadership, the social class that one feels himself/herself affiliated, etc.).

Furthermore, since we believe that the white-collar workers' perception of social benefit about the business (ethical responsibility, social responsibility, etc.) must not be disregarded in any research to be conducted on alienation we tried to present the relationship between the "the perception of social benefit" factor borrowed from the organizational dependence literature and the alienation.

The research has been carried out in banking sector which constitutes an appropriate platform for our research with its well-educated employees who usually perform some computer based tasks within generally non-flexible organizational structures.

Since the hypotheses of the research are mostly about perception and feelings, no survey research has been administered. Marmara University Survey System has been used for the research, thus the employees could fill in the surveys by clicking on the link sent to their computers.

The core constituents of the research are the white-collar employees (assistant executive/assistant specialist, executive/specialist, assistant manager/assistant director, manager/director) who work in the headquarters of 5 leading banks in Turkey that operate in Istanbul and have the highest giro according to the stock exchange data. The research has been attended by 165 white-collar bank employees.

## Results of the Research

58,93% of the respondents are women, and 41.07% of them are men. 69.64% of the respondents are aged under 30; 62.5% of them are single. 69.64% of the respondents have an undergraduate degree and 30.36% of them have a graduate degree. 41.07% of the respondents have a 1000-2000TL of monthly income and 32.14% of them have a 2000-3000TL monthly income. 64.28% of the respondents have an experience of less than 5 years and 25% of them have an experience of 5-10 years.

The employees' level of powerlessness (G) is 5 over 2,89; their level of meaninglessness (A) is 2,48; the level of social alienation (SY) is 2,50; and the level of self-alienation (KY) is 2,30. The organizations' level of being mechanical (ÖMEK) is 3,53; the level of work routine (İŞ) is 3,03; the simplicity level of work (TKARM) is 3,29; the level of managerial support and peer support (BEŞ) is 3,19; the degree of being work-centered among the employees (İŞMERK) is 3,03; the perception of social benefit about the company (TOPFAY) is 3,21; and the degree of organizational commitment (ÖB) is 2,84. Please see the table indicating the correlation values among the factors below.

Correlations

		G	A	SY	KY	ÖMEK	İŞ	TKARM	BEŞ	İŞMERK	TOPFAY	ÖB
G	Pearson Correlation	1	,652**	,360**	,432**	,366**	,410**	,373**	-,483**	-,175*	-,410**	-,483**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.	,000	,000	,000	,000	,000	,000	,000	,024	,000	,000
	N	165	165	165	165	165	165	165	165	165	165	165
A	Pearson Correlation	,652**	1	,531**	,425**	,197*	,420**	,172*	-,419**	-,171*	-,470**	-,461**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,000	.	,000	,000	,011	,000	,027	,000	,028	,000	,000
	N	165	165	165	165	165	165	165	165	165	165	165
SY	Pearson Correlation	,360**	,531**	1	,607**	,241**	,229**	-,005	-,362**	,161*	-,348**	-,126
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,000	,000	.	,000	,002	,003	,952	,000	,039	,000	,106
	N	165	165	165	165	165	165	165	165	165	165	165
KY	Pearson Correlation	,432**	,425**	,607**	1	,107	,250**	,286**	-,335**	-,055	-,295**	-,302**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,000	,000	,000	.	,173	,001	,000	,000	,482	,000	,000
	N	165	165	165	165	165	165	165	165	165	165	165
ÖMEK	Pearson Correlation	,366**	,197*	,241**	,107	1	,433**	,052	,005	,359**	-,045	-,095
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,000	,011	,002	,173	.	,000	,503	,951	,000	,567	,226
	N	165	165	165	165	165	165	165	165	165	165	165
İŞ	Pearson Correlation	,410**	,420**	,229**	,250**	,433**	1	,039	-,121	,067	-,310**	-,166*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,000	,000	,003	,001	,000	.	,615	,121	,394	,000	,033
	N	165	165	165	165	165	165	165	165	165	165	165
TKARM	Pearson Correlation	,373**	,172*	-,005	,286**	,052	,039	1	-,300**	-,115	-,202**	-,239**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,000	,027	,952	,000	,503	,615	.	,000	,143	,009	,002
	N	165	165	165	165	165	165	165	165	165	165	165
BEŞ	Pearson Correlation	-,483**	-,419**	-,362**	-,335**	,005	-,121	-,300**	1	-,041	,503**	,466**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,000	,000	,000	,000	,951	,121	,000	.	,598	,000	,000
	N	165	165	165	165	165	165	165	165	165	165	165
İŞMERK	Pearson Correlation	-,175*	-,171*	,161*	-,055	,359**	,067	-,115	-,041	1	-,080	,073
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,024	,028	,039	,482	,000	,394	,143	,598	.	,310	,350
	N	165	165	165	165	165	165	165	165	165	165	165
TOPFAY	Pearson Correlation	-,410**	-,470**	-,348**	-,295**	-,045	-,310**	-,202**	,503**	-,080	1	,550**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,000	,000	,000	,000	,567	,000	,009	,000	,310	.	,000
	N	165	165	165	165	165	165	165	165	165	165	165
ÖB	Pearson Correlation	-,483**	-,461**	-,126	-,302**	-,095	-,166*	-,239**	,466**	,073	,550**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,000	,000	,106	,000	,226	,033	,002	,000	,350	,000	.
	N	165	165	165	165	165	165	165	165	165	165	165

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

As indicated on the table, there is a significant relation between organizations' level of being mechanical and the three dimensions of alienation (powerlessness, meaninglessness, social alienation); but there is no relationship with the fourth dimension self- alienation. The table clearly indicates that the perception of social benefit about these organizations and the organizational commitment are inversely correlated.

The work routine is related with each dimension of alienation. Like the level of being mechanical, this factor is inversely correlated with the perception of social benefit and organizational commitment.

While it has been observed that the simplicity level of the work does not have an impact on social alienation, it is related with the other three dimensions. The factor is inversely correlated with the perception of social benefit and the organizational commitment.

The table demonstrates that the managerial support and peer support are quite important alternatives to avoid alienation. The factor has a significant effect on the perception of social benefit and organizational commitment.

The extent to which the employees are work-centered is inversely correlated with only the meaninglessness and social alienation dimensions of alienation. This factor has a significant effect on the perception of social benefit and organizational commitment.

As estimated, the perception of social benefit about the company seems to be a factor that decreases alienation for the white-collar workers. In addition, this factor is positively related with the managerial support and peer support.

The level of organizational commitment among the employees has a significant negative relation with all the alienation factors except for the social alienation.

After the multi regression analysis the rankings of the importance of 6 independent variables on alienation is;

1. The quality of human relations: ( $\beta=-0,354^{**}$ )
2. The organization's level of being mechanical: ( $\beta=0,268^{**}$ )
3. The perception of social benefit about the company: ( $\beta=-0,235^{**}$ )
4. The degree of being work-centered: ( $\beta=-0,220^{**}$ )
5. The simplicity level of work: ( $\beta=0,199^{**}$ )
6. Technical factors: ( $\beta=0,068$ ) (not significant)

**\*\*Significant at the 0,05 level**

( $R^2=0,49$ )

The results of the research proved that the white-collar employees experience a medium-level alienation, which is a significantly high level for a sector in which highly-educated people work and are paid well when compared to the market. The primarily triggering factors of the result are the banks' level of being mechanical, work routine, work simplicity and the human relations in the workplace. These same factors have also an important effect on the alienation of the blue-collar workers. It has been seen that the personal relationships-based implementations such as job enrichment, purposeful management, and total quality management do not solve the problem completely particularly in the banking sector. However, the effect of the perception of social benefit on the alienation which is considered to be important for the white-collar employees is no less than the other factors, which is the point that the research is intended to attract attention and pave the way for more researches. Today's educated people question how the businesses where they work for a certain amount of payment benefit the community. The positive opinion that they have about the business as a result has a positive effect on the employees' level of organizational commitment and a negative effect on their level of alienation.

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