

## **Alienation, Psychology and Human Resource Management**

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# **Alienation, Psychology and Human Resource Management**

## **ABSTRACT**

This paper revisits the issue of alienation and work. Although Marx saw alienation as an objective reality, others argue that it is a subjective experience of powerlessness, meaninglessness, isolation and self-estrangement. Feelings of alienation are also a central construct of existential psychologists, who focus on separation of the individual from the presumed 'real' or 'deeper' self. The question arising from self-estrangement in the workplace is whether modern management techniques have been able to alleviate such feelings. The effects of work structures, various management strategies and the adoption of human resource management as a set of unitarist principles are examined. It is argued that a number of approaches by management have failed to provide any respite from feelings of alienation and, further, that human resource management has tended to produce practices that have also failed. At the same time, the 'soft' version of human resource management model with its unitarist ideals has the potential to assuage feelings of alienation.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Of the many reactions to work discussed in current literature, alienation is often overlooked. Many contemporary textbooks in management and organisational science do not refer to the issue, and even over twenty-five years ago it was noted by Katz and Kahn (1978:384) that interest appeared to have shifted to job satisfaction, organisational commitment and related topics. We see, for example, burgeoning research into problems associated with a lack of satisfaction, stress and the need for commitment and empowerment, but little new work on alienation, which has an established pedigree. In a word, the issue has become unfashionable. However, existentialists regard alienation as a central construct in their psychology, pointing to a separation of the individual from the real or deeper self due to factors of conformity and pressures found, for example, in organisations. In this sense, alienation can be seen as a crisis of personal identity in which there is tension between the inner or 'true' self and the demands of modern organisational life. Thompson and McHugh (2002) for example describe several responses to problems of identity loss at work:

- Contradictory consciousness, resulting in deviant behaviour;
- Unconscious resistance which may give rise to mental disorders;
- Development of individual capacities and interests outside of work;
- Participation in collective action through unions or other coalitions.

With the emergence of models of human resource management (Beer, Spector, Lawrence, Mills & Walton, 1984; Fombrun, Tichy & Devanna, 1984) it might have been thought that a unitarist style of managing people could provide a remedy for the effects of alienation; however, these models have been disappointing and largely discredited (see for example, Legge, 1995, 2001; Guest, 1999). In this paper alienation is revisited in terms of the feelings it evokes in workers, its connections with existential psychology and the influence of

contemporary management, in seeking to deal with the problem of worker alienation. Specifically, the aim is to suggest where human resource management might be more usefully directed in order to remedy feelings of alienation.

## **ALIENATION**

The term alienation originates from the work of Karl Marx (Bottomore and Rubel, 1961; Taylor, 1967; Lawrence and Wishart, 1968; Fox, 1974; Hyman, 1975; Corlett, 1988; Deery and Plowman, 1991) on the effects on workers of the capitalist labour process and is well described in a number of studies. To Marx, alienation is a condition in which man becomes isolated and cut off from the product of his work, having given up his desire for self-expression and control over his own fate at work. He finds that he enacts a role in which he is estranged from the kind of life of which he is capable.

The genesis of this phenomenon can be traced to changes wrought by industrialisation, with the creation of large factories, characterised by organisational hierarchies, job specialisation and new patterns of work supervision and a shift in life focus away from the home and community to the organisation. These large factories needed an influx of considerable sums of capital for their construction, equipping them with machines and then to purchase the labour. By contrast, before the factory system work processes were not characterised by an extensive division of labour or coercive hierarchical authority.

The technical term for all this is known as the 'labour process'. The term labour process may sound complicated but the essential ingredients are easy to understand. It is the process through which labour power (work) is transformed into labour (product). In simple terms, workers (employees) produce a commodity that can be sold in the marketplace. It is the task of capital (employers) to so organise labour that a profit can be made. Inherent with this task

is the *control* of all aspects of the process, such as holding down costs, increasing the use of machines (for example, automation and job deskilling) and organising work for efficiency. A consequence of this new form of factory work reduced the freedom and autonomy of workers to complete tasks as they saw fit.

An important aspect of Marx is his concept of dialectic, the doctrine of opposites, referring to the struggle between opposing forces for control. He tried to explain history in terms of a struggle in which change takes place as a result of a dialectic: a dominant force (thesis) develops an opposition (antithesis) and a conflict ensues which is resolved by an outcome (synthesis) of what is of most value in each. Historically, for example, kings and slaves synthesised into feudalism, lords and serfs into capitalism, and now the dialectic between employers and employees. Therefore employees, for their part, seek to pursue their own interests such as job security, higher rewards, more satisfying work and attempt to counter the aims of employers, especially relating to control, by engaging in certain activities such as restricting work output and organising themselves industrially in unions and occupational, including professional, associations. According to Hyman (1975), modern industrial relations, in fact, centres on the issue of control.

Marx held the view that alienation is an intrinsic part of the labour process and therefore unavoidable. This is because in selling their labour power (work) employees relinquish the right to control their own labour (product). Thus for Marx employers, not workers, have discretion over how and when work should be undertaken. This subordination of workers to their employers makes the activity of work a dehumanising and degrading experience. To quote Marx (cited by Fox 1974: 224):

[Under capitalism] all the means for developing production are transformed into means of domination over and exploitation of the producer; that they

mutilate the worker into a fragment of a human being, degrade him to become a mere appurtenance, make his work such a torment that its essential meaning is destroyed.

As a result of this destructive relationship Marx said that workers experience at least three forms of alienation:

- Alienation from the product of their labour (dispossessed of what they produce, which is owned by the capitalist)
- Alienation from oneself (only find extrinsic meaning in work and are separated from their true selves)
- Alienation from others (the unique qualities of humankind are diminished and so workers are estranged from both their own humanity and others)

(Adapted from Corlett, 1988 and Deery & Plowman, 1991)

Marx regarded alienation as an objective reality (i.e. imposed as an external force) under capitalism, rather than simply a subjective state of mind. Hence it matters not that people might report that they do not feel alienated, since it is an objective state of capitalism: subjectivity is not part of the analysis. People who do claim to be satisfied and fulfilled are therefore really only expressing what he termed 'false consciousness'.

It is one of history's ironies that the dialectical principle that shaped Marx's analysis can be used to explain the subsequent development of a contrary view on alienation. Writing a century after Marx and apropos of the development of psychology as a discipline, Blauner (1964) argues that alienation is a subjective experience. The feeling that may be experienced can vary from individual to individual. Alienation as a state of mind is thus by definition not inevitable under capitalism. Blauner goes on to describe four dimensions of alienation:

- Powerlessness (due to being controlled by others in an impersonal system); the remedy is to increase autonomy and empowerment.
- Meaninglessness (from lacking a sense of how their own work contributes to the whole); the remedy is to ensure a sense of purposefulness.
- Isolation (no sense of belonging); remedied by giving a sense of belonging and identifying with the organisation.
- Self-estrangement (detachment, no sense of identity or personal fulfilment): the remedy is to allow self-expression.

(Blauner, 1964: 15-34)

The conflicting views as to whether alienation is an objective state of capitalism, or solely a subjective experience, is pivotal in the present context. Should it be the former, then no amount of management intervention can provide a remedy under capitalism. But if, on the other hand, alienation is regarded a subjective feeling then it should be possible to suggest remedies at least to alleviate it, and hopefully go beyond that, to its complete elimination for some if not all employees. At the same time, however, if alienation is interpreted as a form of detachment or dislocation from the inner or 'true' self, then the various remedies listed above appear superficial, failing to strike at the heart of the problem.

## **EXISTENTIAL PSYCHOLOGY AND ALIENATION**

Following on from the discussion above, the question emerges as to whether talk of alienation is simply outdated rhetoric stemming initially from Marx, or whether it has something more substantial to offer. It is a matter of some interest that the notion of alienation as constructed by existential psychologists can be seen as the separation of the individual from the presumed 'real' or 'deeper' self. Moving on from Sartre's idea that man is free – endless freedom of choice, rather than the notion of a fixed or determined self in which psychologists such as Freud would classify people into neat compartments – existential

psychology is basically ideographic. It professes to complement not replace other orientations in psychology and “deals not with generalities applicable to any human person, but with problems peculiar to this or that individual person” (Misiak & Sexton, 1966: 442).

Because existential psychologists believe that past experience does not determine people’s lives, they therefore believe people have the power to choose their own destinies.

Existentialist psychologists focus on mental processes that interpret current experiences, enabling individuals to cope with or be overwhelmed by the challenge of existence, all of which is a far cry from Freudian approaches, hinging on reviving painful memories of the past that may well be left repressed. This approach generally falls within the humanistic group of theories such as client-centred therapy of Carl Rogers (1969), and Gestalt therapy of Fritz Perls (1969), as well as the existential perspective of Rollo May (1961).

Existential psychology therefore provides an interesting framework for analysing the effects of work and organisations on the individual because it focuses on the estrangement from one’s inner or ‘true’ self, thus blocking growth, self-actualisation and meaningful interpersonal relationships. The significant point about the existential view of alienation and work is the rupture between this inner self and the ‘created’ or artificial self, resulting from choice – insofar as this is possible, given capitalistic organisations – which frustrate self-realisation. Hence we see a range of dysfunctional psychological outcomes emerge as employees attempt to reconcile their inner and artificial selves. Among these are depersonalisation, self-estrangement and loss of personal identity, which in turn can have debilitating consequences for the individual. Marx himself was aware of the denial of inner self when, in the context of the labour process, he remarks that man “must subordinate his will to it” (Marx, 1976: 284). Alienation and problems in connection with the individual’s adjustment to the demands of work organisations is well recognised; as Hunt (1986: 21)

observes in reviewing research since the 1950s, “In summary, the literature proposed that something was dramatically wrong in the individual-organisation relationship.”

## **WORK STRUCTURES AND ALIENATION**

Organisation science has been criticised for overlooking the issue of alienation, in some cases going back a number of years, “organization science ... does not adequately address the issue of organization alienation” (Frost, 1980: 502). In particular, Frost points out that the organisation “is a significant barrier that separates them [individuals] from their true natures” (1980: 501). Organisations themselves can therefore be a source of alienation. Cognition by the employee of separation from the inner self can in turn lead to a reduction in organisational attachment and a deterioration in the individual-organisation relationship.

Probably the most pervasive structure is the bureaucratic, characterised by job specialisation, authority hierarchy, merit appointment, record keeping, rules and impersonality (Weber, 1947), a cumulative effect of which is depersonalisation. Impersonal administration may be more desirable than management by whim, by separating the bureaucratic person from the office held; however, it results in the individual feeling a loss of self or personal identity, so becoming a mere cog in a dehumanising machine, an outcome also noted by Sanders (1997).

The stifling effect of bureaucracies has been long known about, as Adler (1999: 36) remarks in respect of bureaucratic red tape, over-controlling bosses and apathetic employees, there is a need to “set free the creative energy of employees by attacking the bureaucratic features of the organization.” This is not to deny that bureaucratic structures, or assembly lines for that matter, have given much to the world by way of increased efficiency and productivity; but the fact remains that a large part of scholarly research is aimed at trying to redress the

malfunctions of these structures in an effort to engage employees with organisational goals and overcome their alienating effect.

In the following analysis the work of Blauner (1964) is employed as a framework to discuss specific issues related to the four dimensions of alienation - powerlessness, meaninglessness, isolation and self-estrangement.

### **Powerlessness**

The individual's feelings of a lack of control and powerlessness, especially over important aspects of work spill over to affect the individual's life more generally (Seeman, 1959; Blauner, 1964; Sashkin, 1984). This form of alienation can be interpreted in psychological terms as feeling unable to achieve self-realisation and satisfy ego-esteem needs. Kanungo (1992: 414) argues that "conditions leading to the loss of individuality deprives the workers of self-fulfilment or the realization of who they are or what their essential nature is" and thus is an affront to human dignity. Advocates of empowerment believe that it, along with related forms of power sharing, provide antidotes to the problem of powerlessness experienced by employees (Kanungo, 1992; Varma, Stroh, & Schmitt, 2001; Spreitzer, 1996; Hodgetts, 1996).

However, although worker empowerment may be theorised as a solution to powerlessness, the empirical evidence is equivocal. Whilst the idea of empowerment might be admirable and seem to make sense, this appears to be more rhetoric than reality, for several studies cast doubt on whether it really works (Belasco & Stayer, 1994; Fulford & Enz, 1995; Waterman, 1988; Hales, 2000). To be more exact, the problem appears to be whether any real transfer of power takes place. We might speculate, therefore, whether empowerment is pseudo power or simply

an underhand way of increasing responsibilities whilst actually maintaining power in the hands of managers (see, for example, Randolph, 1995; Thompson & McHugh, 2002).

### **Meaninglessness**

For Marx, meaninglessness refers to the significance of the work and its product, since the worker “feels at home only during his leisure, whereas at work he feels homeless. His work is not voluntary but imposed, *forced labour*. It is not the satisfaction of a need, but only a *means* for satisfying other needs” (Bottomore & Rubel, 1961: 177). For the existentialist, a meaningless world presents psychological dangers for the individual; meaningfulness is tied up with feelings of autonomy, creativity and, most of all, individual choice in order to create a meaningful world. A world that is meaninglessness, however, thrusts the individual into the realm of insanity (Bugental, 1965). Within work settings, meaninglessness “refers to the immediate significance a work operation or product has for the worker” (Rose, 1988: 224). It follows from this that work can be intrinsically punishing to the point of becoming a source of despair.

Meaningful work is a point that has been picked up by a number of organisational psychologists, reflected in the areas of job design and motivation. An example is the job characteristics model of Hackman and Oldham (1980) in which core job dimensions of skill variety, task identity and task significance are linked to the experienced *meaningfulness* of work. This is clearly an attempt to objectify a subjective experience and an appeal to the intrinsic, rather than extrinsic, aspects of work, which can be traced back to the work of Marx and the perspective of existential psychology.

## **Isolation and identity**

Existentialists note the phenomena of loneliness, isolation, and of apartness which, in turn, are associated with anxiety (Bugental, 1965; Wiesman, 1965). The issue is twofold, the first is that we can never have direct knowledge of others, due to apartness and being isolated, wherein the individual feels separate from, but always in relation to others, which Bugental (1965: 309) argues is the paradox of man's being. Our sense of uniqueness and apartness materialises as isolation and loneliness, resulting in anxiety, threatening our well-being. To this problem can be added that of being psychologically or physically isolated. On the one hand, being ostracised from a work group or performing work that requires little or no contact with work colleagues and, on the other hand, working in a geographically isolated situation. In either case isolation can be said to be the "absence of a sense of membership in an industrial community" (Blauner, 1965: 24).

Social identity theory holds that the self-concept is comprised of a personal identity having idiosyncratic traits, abilities and characteristics together with a social identity comprised of group membership, such as might be found in religious affiliations, sporting teams and so on (Sarbin & Allen, 1968; Walker, Burnham & Borland, 1989). These social affiliations, apart from providing a sense of personal identity, are a source of self-esteem and motivation (Tajfel, Flament, Billig & Bundy, 1971; Turner, Brown & Tajfel, 1979). It might reasonably be assumed that, to some extent at least, employees may identify with their work group or organisation. An obvious question is whether, on changing employment and organisations, workers also experience a change in their social identity; presumably this happens, its significance depending on just how central this is to their personal identity. Thus the real question is whether the social identity derived from work and belonging to an organisation fits comfortably with the inner or true self.

## **Self-estrangement**

The effects of loneliness and isolation may culminate in feelings of the individual being unable to confront his apartness leading to estrangement in respect to both personal and social identities. The prison of estrangement prevents us from relating to and being with other people in the world. Bugental puts it this way, “Estrangement is the experience of being imprisoned in glass, seeing the world in which others move but forever blocked from joining them, pantomiming communication but never really speaking with another person” (1965: 311).

Within organisational settings self-estrangement is felt when the labour process prevents individuals from feeling a sense of completeness and identity. Whilst this could be interpreted as the culmination of powerlessness, meaninglessness and isolation, Rose (1988: 224) believes that estrangement occurs when work is not an integral part of man as a social being, “that is, when it is not a central personal, social or religious value, but merely a resented means to other ends”. In particular, various forms of automation and machine tending by workers combine with other technologies to produce repetitive, monotonous activities dominated by autocratic supervision and mechanisms of control.

However, our present interest is in self-estrangement as seen by the existential psychologists and what Ashforth & Humphrey (1993: 99) call self-alienation, in which the individual loses touch with the authentic self and perceives that they are acting contrary to a central, valued and salient self. Thus the individual experiences a rupture between the inner self and the artificial self, created by their perceptions of organisational life. Attention to extrinsic aspects of work may superficially mask for a time the deleterious effects of alienation but sooner or later a range of symptoms, due to this rupture, emerge to adversely affect work performance.

Whilst attempts to overcome the deleterious effects of Blauner's (1964) four dimensions may not be superficial, as suggested earlier, we are left with the fact that problems of work structures remain unresolved.

## **MANAGEMENT AND ALIENATION**

Since its appearance as a concept in management theory, exemplified in the 1950s with the work of Argyris, (1957) and Merton (1957), alienation has been variously linked to, even conflated with, a range of conditions such as: satisfaction at work (Korman & Wittig-Berman 1981; Trist, 1977; Vecchio, 1980; Westley, 1979) cynicism, burnout and depersonalisation (Andersson, 1996; Lee & Ashforth, 1993; Sanders, 1997), work stress and alcohol use (Frone, 1999), powerlessness and a lack of control (Kanungo, 1992) and emotional labour (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993). These are in turn often attributed to, for example, factors of mass production technologies (Blauner, 1964), petty tyrants (Ashforth, 1994), poor management (Flannery, 2004), oppressive work of one sort or another (Freeperson, 1991) or organisational leadership problems (Sarros, Tanewski, Winter & Santora, 2002). To focus on managers as a cause may be misleading, however, since they are in fact the agents of capitalist principals. Both Marx and agency theory (Eisenhardt, 1989) would regard managers as akin to puppets, merely carrying out the wishes of the owners. As such, managers and even professionals can experience alienation as do other workers (Greene, 1978; Korman & Wittig-Berman, 1981; Lee & Ashforth, 1993; Hunt, 1986).

It seems, therefore, that a key to unravelling the problem of organisational alienation lies in understanding the intrinsic relationship between the authentic or inner self and the nature of the labour process itself. Attempts to redesign work appear to have only met with partial success. Efforts to increase autonomy, participation and involvement in decisions, self-managing teams and efforts generally to enrich jobs, have all been tried but with mixed

outcomes. Programs such as the quality of work life movement of the 1970s and present strategies involved with high-performance work systems reveal conflicting evidence of their efficacy, see for example Claydon and Doyle (1996), Mullins (2005). A crucial issue is that of control – are these efforts really aimed at giving workers more control over their work situation, or are they best described as pseudo arrangements? A continuing issue stems from the fact that managers, especially at lower levels, are often unwilling to relinquish control over subordinates. Hellriegel and Slocum (1978) report on a number of less obvious methods of control, including budgets, structure, policies, recruitment, training, reward/punishment systems and technology including computers.

Today we see ways of achieving control being promoted that build upon these early strategies. Selection and training together with efforts to secure high commitment and culture change stand out as prime candidates. They can be best described as covert mechanisms of control. Rather than overt methods such as autocratic supervision and bureaucratic structures, they operate psychologically to convince individuals that their inner self is aligned with their work self. This is attempted at three levels: firstly by only selecting persons who appear to be compatible with the organisation, its goals, structural arrangements and methods of operating. Secondly by exposing new appointees to a training regime that inculcates them with the organisation's philosophies and beliefs. More subtle, however, is the third level, which embraces culture change for high commitment. Here, strategies are directed to the construction or reconstruction of individuals so that they will commit to the organisation, that is to say, accept organisational values as their own and who define themselves in terms of the changing requirements of the organisation (Salaman, 2001: 193).

Organisational commitment refers to an employee's emotional attachment to, identification with and involvement in, a particular organisation (Mowday, Porter and Steers (1982). As

such it is generally considered to represent an individual's attitude towards the organisation, which influences workplace behaviours such as turnover and performance in that highly committed employees are less likely to leave, will support organisational goals and work harder (Mowday et al, 1982; Brown, 1996; Matthew & Zajac, 1990). As Legge (1995: 179) observes from the literature on commitment, "it is assumed that the intention is to develop a strong, unitary, corporate culture, whereby organisational members share a commitment to values, beliefs, taken-for-granted assumptions that direct or reinforce behaviours considered conducive to organisational success."

Building on this, the normative literature holds that the behavioural component of commitment as an attitude is linked to better performance and one way of achieving this is by way of culture management. Legge (1995) regards this as a shift from one of forced compliance to one of commitment, in the sense that employees identifying with the organisation's goals and so to organisational success. The way this is achieved is through influencing organisational culture.

There is, however, some debate between the managerial and social science views of culture (see Salaman, 2001; Buchanan & Huczynski, 2004). Where the managerial view holds that culture is something that organisations *have* and so has an objective reality that managers can create and use; the social science view is that culture is merely a subjective reality and just *is*, meaning that, although it can be studied, the notion that it can be managed or manipulated is rejected. At the same time, however, the latter view does not completely deny that leaders may have some influence, since they are also involved in interactions which help shape the organisation's culture. Having said this, there is little doubt that organisations exert considerable effort to influence, manage and change culture aimed at increasing organisational performance. In so doing, it is argued that in essence the aim is to create a

perception for the individual of an alignment between the inner and organisational self. The fact that these efforts are at best only partially successful (Legge, 1995; Salaman, 2001; Guest, 1990; Wood, 1989) bears out the point that, even if it is possible to influence culture, there are extreme difficulties in achieving the alignment mentioned. Extensive management research in areas of commitment, control and culture has therefore only met with limited success in terms of dealing with alienation. Indeed, Noon and Blyton (2002: 236) speak of various ways employees survive alienation: making out (their informal regulation of work), fiddling, joking, sabotage and escaping.

## **HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT AND ALIENATION**

The factors outlined above fit snugly with the thrust of human resource management (HRM) models over the past twenty years, (Beer et al, 1984; Fombrun, et al, 1984; Guest. 1989), which emphasise, *inter alia*, outcomes of commitment, performance and strategic integration. These models represented a new approach to managing employees and the term HRM gradually replaced that of personnel management. There followed debate as to the meaning of HRM, which has persisted over the years due to inherent ambiguities and contradictions (Storey, 2001: 5). This debate focussed on whether HRM should be seen as a system designed to develop employees (the 'soft' version) or, alternatively, to ensure full utilisation of employees (the 'hard' version) (Keenoy, 1990; Storey, 1992). Given the psychological consequences of alienation already described, particularly revolving around self-alienation, a major question is whether HRM can really satisfy the needs of both the organisation and individual employees. Under the HRM model outcomes are equally beneficial for the organisation and all individual employees.

Within the present context HRM is also of interest due to its unitarist perspective and emphasis upon a culture of commitment. Under unitarism, conflict is de-emphasised (Storey,

1992) to the point where it is attributed either to troublemakers or unwanted third parties interfering with the employer-employee relationship. Within the unitarist HRM model genuine conflict is not possible because there is a conjunction of interests between employer and employee. The other significant characteristic of the unitarist HRM model is the strategic link between top management and practising HR managers. Here, HRM with its emphasis on a culture of commitment is the vehicle for achieving management's goals, so that there is little scope for HR managers to represent the needs of workers. Indeed, in most cases day-to-day HR functions are delegated to line managers, releasing HR managers to concentrate on strategy (Purcell, 2001).

Notionally, at least, HRM with its unitarist underpinnings could have provided a solution to problems of organisational alienation and estrangement. It idealistically saw the natural state of employer-employee relations as one of agreement in which there was a confluence of interests. Clearly, this would have represented a return to situations in which employees no longer suffered feelings of isolation and could experience self-expression and control over their work. However, the claims of HRM proponents that it can engineer such outcomes, together with its flawed unitarist assumptions, have been questioned and criticised for a number of years (Guest & Hoque, 1994; Legge, 1995; Guest, 1999; Sisson, 2001; Storey, 2001).

Legge (2001), for example, examines the evidence that culture management can deliver the double benefits of commitment and high performance, but finds that there are serious doubts about the validity of research that purports to demonstrate such a linkage. In particular she notes the lack of longitudinal data that might support the HRM-performance linkage. Guest (2001: 111) observes that, "One of the important and persistent findings from research is the low adoption of 'high commitment' or progressive human resource practices" and in doing so

casts doubt on the efficacy of HRM. The questions raised earlier about the problematic issue of whether it is possible to change organisational culture – taking the managerial view - remain unanswered.

A further matter concerns the much lauded swing away from collectivism to individualism under HRM (Purcell, 1987; Storey & Bacon, 1993). Whilst this shift might suit employers for a variety of reasons such as de-unionisation and the striking of individual agreements, contrary to the rhetoric it arguably serves only to reinforce the manager's power and control; it hardly fits with notions of joint consultation and stimulating identification with organisational culture.

Two approaches that may offer a solution to the problems of alienation, can be found in remnants of past practices but which have not been fully exploited. Firstly, HRM may be contrasted with the tenets of personnel management, which it is considered to have replaced. Where, formerly, personnel management recognised pluralist values and goals, and saw negotiation as a method of resolving conflict, HRM's unitarist position regards conflict as an aberration from the norm. In practice, personnel managers were able to use their negotiating skills in resolving problems between line managers and employees. As such, workers regarded them as an in-house 'umpire' who would treat their complaints both fairly and dispassionately. The old pluralist-based personnel management is therefore an approach that could be employed to recognise the individual's inner or 'true' self. Taken beyond the need to resolve conflict in the workplace, HRM could also tailor work to the individual. This is, of course, a return to one of the central themes of ergonomics, but this time around could be specifically directed to matching work to the true inner self.

Secondly, and following on from this point, more could be done to vocationally match individuals to work, Although directive vocational guidance has been discarded in favour of individual choices in selecting work, such an approach makes enormous assumptions about the ability of potential employees to make meaningful decisions. This means going beyond merely assessing skills and aptitudes, to investigating the underlying psychological makeup of the inner or 'true' self. The present focus on job 'interests' rather than job 'fit' may well need to be modified. This in turn demands additional work in the area of personality testing and employment selection which, as already implied, appears to stop at assessing skills and abilities.

## **CONCLUSION**

It has been argued in this paper that worker alienation is a much-neglected issue, particularly in respect of the effect it has on producing feelings of powerlessness, isolation and loss of self-identity. The importance of these feelings to well-being at work can be traced to Marx and existential psychology, the central feature of which is estrangement from one's inner or true self. Various management ploys, intended to provide long-term solutions, have largely been unsuccessful. The HRM model appeared at first to provide some hope of alleviating the symptoms. However, rather than helping to overcome these feelings, HRM seems to exacerbate the problem by leaving social needs unmet through its emphasis on individualism and making unitary assumptions about the goals and interests of employers and workers. This seems particularly at odds in pluralistic societies and the current emphasis in management circles on diversity.

HRM is flawed because it cannot deal with alienation. It attempts to subvert workers from their inner or true selves by overt or covert means, particularly through seeking to establish a culture of commitment. But the classic problems of alienation refuse to go away because the

nature of the employer – employee relationship is such that no amount of benign HRM can fundamentally alter. This is not to deny that HRM seeks to achieve outcomes that would bring with it individual well-being, organisational effectiveness and societal well-being (Beer et al 1984). However, the point remains that the unitarist HRM model has serious shortcomings in helping to overcome feelings of alienation; indeed, it appears probable that feelings of alienation may be exacerbated due to the dysfunctional consequences of HRM. A more productive approach to dealing with alienation appears to be to invest more in selection processes that emphasise matching work to the inner or ‘true’ self and by fitting the work to the psychological makeup and personalities of job applicants.

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