

## An Empirical Research on Construct and Dimensions of Work Alienation

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**Abstract:** Work alienation is not only an increasingly common phenomenon in enterprises, but also a hot topic in western academic. However, compared with the western countries, there are relatively few studies on work alienation in China, especially the empirical research on the construct and dimensions of the work alienation for the employees. Therefore, combining with qualitative and quantitative research, this paper discusses and explores the construct and dimension of work alienation. The matched questionnaires from 1372 employees and their immediate managers in 8 cities of China are collected, and the results showed that: There are obvious differences in the dimension structure of work alienation between western employees and Chinese employees, whose alienation are mainly composed of three dimensions: alienation from work task, alienation from interpersonal and alienation from working environment, highlighting the particularity of the working situation of Chinese enterprises. Finally, specific management recommendations are provided for enterprises to control work alienation of employees.

### 1. Introduction

The incident that a spate of Foxconn workers suicides took place has drawn attention of researchers around the world. The internal reasons that cause employees to take such an extreme way to end their life are the main focus. In retrospect of the underlying causes of the events above, some scholars pointed out that what employees experience has changed, from the familiar rural environment to an entirely strange city. Such changes have caused the separation from previous relations. Be faced with repeated boring work and extremely harsh internal supervision, they are so over-depressed and over-stressed that they feel powerlessness and senselessness during the work time easily. Even more, workers may be doubt of their value and feel hopeless about life. Such negative emotions being isolated is the essence of work alienation, which is much likely to be the important reason triggering an extremely negative deviation in work.

Most of existing theoretical explanations of work alienation and corrective management practices have been developed in the Western countries. The study on work alienation in option construction in China is based on the translation of relevant foreign scale. Thus lacks of the systematic analysis in the intrinsic relationship between different social & cultural backgrounds of East and West and the sense of alienation from work. It also lacks of basic theory to sort out the questionnaire, hence cannot get the results of Chinese characteristics. It requires researchers to take the difference between East-West culture background and social reality as the theoretical basis and logical starting point of the study. Qualitative and quantitative methods are combined to clarify the construct and dimensional structure of work alienation in China.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 The Concept and Content of Work Alienation.**

“Alienation” derived from the Latin word “Alienatio” and “Alienare” (transfer, dissimulation, separation, and alien force domination, letting others dominate). The Oxford Dictionary explains “alienation” as “the estrangement of action and the isolation of condition”. Banai, Reisel & Probs (2004) define alienation as a state of psychological separation from work insofar as work is perceived to lack the potentiality for satisfying one’s salient needs and expectations”[1]. In short, work alienation represents an attitude or affect toward the work domain. In particular, Work alienation represents disaffection toward the work role that reflects a tendency to be psychologically disengaged and detached from work activities and work settings (Hirschfeld, & Hubert, 2000; Hirschfeld, & Feild, 2000) [2,3].

### **2.2 Dimension Structure of Work Alienation.**

By synthesizing relevant literatures, we find that western researchers divide the work alienation into different dimensions mainly by its specific performance. The main focus of the debate is on whether work alienation is a multidimensional concept or a one-dimensional structure. Following Mills (1956) and Josephson & Josephson (1962), Korman, Wittig-Berman, & Lang (1981) proposed that the general concept of worker' alienation could be divided into two factors: personal alienation and social alienation [4,5]. Personal alienation involves a sense of separation from personal identity and it is a result of a person’s high feelings of anxiety. Social alienation is a feeling of a sense of separation from social life. This feeling is a result of high level of anxiety towards the social world that engulfs the individual. Maddi, Kobasa, & Hoover (1979) developed a reliable and valid measure of alienation questionnaire items [6]. The types as following: powerlessness; nihilism; and vegetativeness. These types can be expressed are the person's relationship to work, social institutions, family, other persons, and self.

The classic five compositions should be included in alienation measure:(1)powerlessness;(2)meaninglessness;(3)normlessness: lack of clear rules to guide employee' behavior to accomplish work and achieve individual goals; or not by social means of praise to achieve the goal to achieve personal goals in the workplace;(4)self-estrangement, lack of self-compensated from his own activities(Seeman,1983) [7], or emphasizing on the negative evaluation of self-worth and the feeling of separation from self(Kohn & Schoole, 1983) [8];(5)social isolation. Moreover, some researchers have integrated the research on the dimensions and work scenarios of work alienation. Hirschfeld conducted the empirical study on three dimensions: powerlessness, nihilism, and vegetativeness, and thought that these three dimensions are highly correlated, therefore can be considered as a unified whole. Nair & Vohra (2010) also took work alienation as a one-dimensional unit [9].

As show in Table 1, we insist that each dimension of job alienation points to a certain object, which can be roughly summarized in three aspects: “related to work tasks, “related to other people” and “self-related”. The study on the dimension structure of work alienation can be divided into two categories: one is the narrow sense of work alienation which mainly deals with the relationship between employee and job itself, that is, the alienation between job and individual; The other type of study explores the general sense of work alienation, involving the work itself and other people in the workplace (colleagues, superiors, subordinates), and ego.

By combing the relevant literatures on the construct and dimension structure of work alienation, it is found that most of existing researches are based on the western cultural background with obvious western scene embedded. With regard to the construct and dimensions of the work alienation among Chinese employees, it is necessary to carry out pioneering research with the combination of the localization via combining quality method with quantification.

Table 1. The summary of work alienation's dimensions

Related to work tasks	Related to other people	Self-related	Representative researchers
Powerlessness, meaninglessness	—	self-estrangement	Mottaz(1981)[10]
Powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness	social isolation	self-estrangement	Seeman(1983)[7]
—	social isolation	personal alienation	Josephson & Josephson(1962)[4]
Powerlessness, nihilism, and vegetativeness	—	—	Hirschfeld & Feild(2002)[11]
Work alienation	—	—	Nair & Vohra(2010)[9]

(Source: sorted by relevant literature)

### 3. Research Methods and Questionnaires

#### 3.1 Research Methods.

A combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods are adopted in this study. Qualitative research is mainly used in pioneering research on the dimension structure of work alienation, including interviews, open questionnaires, qualitative coding techniques, content validity test, multidimensional scaling analysis and so on. Quantitative research is mainly applied into the dimension structure of work alienation, the influence of the positive and negative working behaviors of employees. The specific methods include structural questionnaire survey, exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis, reliability analysis, Pearson correlation analysis, and structural equation model. The survey data are analyzed using SPSS and AMOS statistical software.

#### 3.2 Questionnaires.

The questionnaires are conducted according to two phases. The purpose of the first phase of the survey is to analyze and test the dimension structure of work alienation. Self-report method is mainly used, that is, all the questions are directly answered by respondents. In the first phase, a total of 992 valid questionnaires are collected. During the second phase, the questionnaire is used to explore the mechanism of the impact of work alienation on positive and negative work behavior of employees, mainly by matching questionnaires to avoid homologous errors on the research results. While in the investigation, a set of questionnaires matched with coding will be sent to the respondent. The employees will fill out the questions of work alienation and the direct supervisor of the employee will fill in the evaluation of the employees' work behavior. They mail back to the researcher after completing the questionnaire and sealing independently. The collected questionnaires are matched via numbers, and the unpaired questionnaires and rejected papers are excluded. 380 valid matching questionnaires are obtained in the second phrase.

The questionnaires are mainly collected in three ways: (1) Classroom surveys, which are mainly conducted in business management courses, MBA classes, and adult-based and specialist management programs; (2) Business surveys, which are dealed primarily in-house by random sampling surveys and recycling on-cite; (3) Commissioned survey, mostly commissioned by the graduates working in enterprises, who will be trained before the implementation.

#### 3.3 The Overview of Questionnaires.

A total of 2,032 questionnaires are conducted in eight cities across the country. Taking the completeness of the answer and whether there is a regular answer as the criterion for excluding invalid questionnaires, finally 1372 valid questionnaires are remained after two-stage questionnaire. Then the overall recovery rate of the questionnaires is 67.52%. The final sample was 53.2% male, 46.8% female. In terms of work level: 58.7% first-line staff, 35.6% grass-roots manager, 5.7% middle manager. They worked in varied industries, including IT/communications/high tech/finance industry (26.1%), service industry (24.1%), traditional manufacturing/construction/real estate (30.8%), and others (19.0%).

## **4. The Study on the Dimension Structure of Work Alienation**

### **4.1 The Analysis of Social Culture Background and Reality that are used in Distinguishing Work Alienation's Dimension in China.**

Owing to the fact that there is little mature research on the construct and structure of the work alienation in China so far, therefore, it is very important to carry out such research. This study figured out that work alienation always refers to some certain objects by sorting out the literature about the definition and structure of the work alienation in western countries. The objects can be specific and material items like job itself, work condition, and interpersonal relationships; and also can be abstract spiritual aspects like self and culture. Hence, we think that the specific objects employees associate with themselves in the work include three categories: job tasks, interpersonal and work environment, which may form three types of: work alienation from work tasks, interpersonal relationship, and working environment. All three types are deeply rooted in the Chinese culture and corporate practice.

For work alienation of tasks, western scholars did research mainly based on the individualism oriented western culture background, focusing more on individual independence, achievement and autonomy(Hofstede,1980)<sup>[12]</sup>. The sense of accomplishment, self-actualization, autonomy, control and are the most important needs in Western. When these needs are deprived of their work assignment, they may easily suffer from work alienation. In China, these will also be an important part of the work alienation. However, Chinese companies over-emphasize the division of labor and specialization in the design of work to improve productivity and reduce costs. Highly-repetitive and standardized rigid features in the front line of production may easily cause employees' feeling of baldness, pressure and laboriousness, loss the meaning and purpose of work, thus limiting the development of individuals. Work becomes the shackles imposed on the individuals, even more a kind of means and tool of survival, which will directly result in the alienation of the work tasks.

Work alienation is not addressed much in the individualism-oriented western culture background. In western countries, the interpersonal relationship during the work emphasizes largely on social interpersonal relationship and structure that are formal, personal-goal oriented and loose. It emphasized more on competition than interpersonal collaboration. In contrast, Chinese traditional cultural are deeply rooted in Confucianism and Taoism. The traditional ideology of clansmen clan-centered family determines that Chinese attach special importance to the interpersonal atmosphere. They pay attention to cooperation at work, emphasize the close connection with others, cultivate the concept of "big self", and show more altruism. This reflects the Chinese's intrinsic need for "belonging and love". While modern enterprises are confronted with the conflict between maximizing efficiency and humanity in management. Excessive pursuit of efficiency ignores the individual's emotional needs and leads employees to be isolated and alienated from others.

Work alienation from the work environment stems from the unbalanced distribution of the global industrial chain. Most western countries are developed countries. Corporates in these countries mostly are from knowledge-intensive and technology-intensive industries. By contrast, most of Chinese enterprises are labour-intensive enterprises, which rely mainly on cheap labor costs to promote industrialization and economic growth. Employees have to deal with noisy and even polluted working conditions, narrow working spaces, frequent job changes, long overtime job and intense competition for survival. Harsh environment would lead to strong concern about the working environment for workers.

Based on the above differences between the cultural background and the reality of the enterprises, it is indicated that the dimensions and structures of work alienation of China's employees are different from those in western researches. Transferring the research frame from the western culture to Chinese companies simply, many problems such as culture mismatch would inevitably appear.

### **4.2 Source and Arrangement of Questionnaire Items.**

The following steps are used to collect the questionnaire items of work alienation: (1) Organize, analyze, summarize literature on work alienation and collect items [2,4,7]. (2) In-depth interviews and open questionnaires. The 42 employees randomly sampled by Foxconn in Chengdu, which are

mainly related to the work alienation. Combined with the alienation characteristics in the Chinese context, we focus on the individual's feelings about the tasks, interpersonal relationships (between colleagues and superiors) and the surrounding physical environment. Moreover, we have five people to deal with the recordings, and transcribe the recorded data exactly into computerized texts. Based on the documentary sources and the textual data collected from the open questionnaires, we get 483 original statements by using the declarative sentence as the unit to conduct coding through the contents analysis method. After discussion, five undergraduates delete 13 sentences that clearly do not fit with the meaning of work alienation and 24 ambiguous statements. (3) The frequency statistics of in-depth interviews. We sort out 446 statements according to the independent efforts from three Ph.D. of management, who merge statements that have similar contents but explain in different way and make identification. After discussing, 86 options are extracted for measuring the work alienation. Then we code and classify these options, delete items that have too much difference to form a coherent option in the same way that is used before. Finally 48 options for work alienation are retained. The whole process for this step is shown in following table 2.

Table 2. Example of coding process formed by work alienation

Pointed object	Declarative sentence	Key words	Occurrence frequency	Options for work alienation items
Work task	The work is very simple, be in accordance with the requirements of the assembly line is ok; we only need to repeat the simple mechanical operation; do not need any thinking in the production line.	Monotonous, simple, single	178	My work is tedious and insipid.
Interpersonal relationship	Line leader is mainly concerned about the work tasks, and do not communicate with us; what group leader do is to give order, you would be fine if you do what he said, while you would be in trouble if not; we do not have time to talk with people around while working, since we are not from the same place and are not familiar with each other.	Lack of communication and understanding	145	In work, there is a lack of communication and understanding among people.
Work environment	The workshop is full of strong noise and pollution; it is often uncomfortable and sometimes nauseous in the workshop; the workshop is always bad-smelling and the ground is dirty.	Damage to physical and mental health	167	I am worried that the working environment will damage my physical and mental health.

(4) 10 employees are invited to discuss the 48 items, and what matters most is to see whether the descriptions is clear, whether it have different meanings, whether it express exactly the details, then 40 items are reserved. (5) 10 business managers are invited to assess the contents they wished to measure by using the Lawshe  $CVR = (n_i - N/2) / (N/2)$  as a criterion. And the average CVR of 40 items is 0.74, which is higher than the criteria standard 0.62. (6) The research gives out 300 pre-test questionnaires that contain 40 options of work alienation, and 245 valid questionnaires are collected. First of all, the top 27% and the bottom 27% of the total score were used as the high and low groups. 40 items all pasted the independent sample T-test on average scores of each option for two groups. Second, calculate the correlation between each item and the total score; delete those items with correlation coefficient less than 0.4 and the items that Cronbach's  $\alpha$  value would increase if we delete it. Finally, exploratory factor analysis is conducted to delete items with factor loading lower than 0.4 or cross-loading values higher than 0.35. Meanwhile, the number of items with less than 3 is excluded, and the final 24 items of work alienation questionnaire is finally determined. (7) By using these 24 work alienation items and structured questionnaire that derives from options with work deviate from behaviors, a survey across the country occurs, and a total of 992 valid questionnaires are recovered.

### 4.3 Exploratory Factor Analysis.

992 valid questionnaires obtained in the first phase are separated equally according to odd and even numbers of questionnaires. Questionnaires with odd number are used for exploratory factor analysis. First, delete two items with insignificant results in the project analysis and the independent sample T-test, and then delete the items with factor loading lower than 0.4 or cross-loading higher than 0.35 by exploratory factor analysis or the factor with items less than 3, thus a sum of 16 items are excluded. The final exploratory factor analysis showed that the questionnaire contains three dimensions and 18 items, the results are shown in table 3.

Table 3. Work alienation exploratory factor analysis (N=496)

Items	Commonality	Factor loading		
		Factor1	Factor2	Factor3
WA1. Most of my time is wasted on pointless work.	0.54	0.64		
WA4. I lost my enthusiasm for my work, and I just work to get paid.	0.67	0.71		
WA7. For me, work is more like a kind of drudgery or burden.	0.70	0.69		
WA10. My work is tedious and insipid.	0.75	0.79		
WA13. My work lacks room for growth and there is no prospect for development.	0.69	0.77		
WA16. No matter how hard I work, it seems to be in vain.	0.65	0.64		
WA2. In the work, it is difficult to establish mutual trust in the organization.	0.66		0.72	
WA8. The relationship between colleagues is not as good as I imagine.	0.55		0.73	
WA11. When I encounter with problems, my colleagues seldom offer me psychological support.	0.67		0.70	
WA14. I feel lonely, and I am lacking in emotional connection with other people at work.	0.69		0.69	
WA15. In work, there is a lack of mutual communication and understanding between people.	0.68		0.68	
WA17. When I am in trouble, it is difficult to get practical help from my colleagues.	0.72		0.74	
WA3. The current working environment let me experience a sense of repression.	0.59			0.63
WA5. I am worried that the working environment will damage my physical and mental health.	0.69			0.62
WA6. Work environment let me have the idea of staying away temporarily.	0.65			0.59
WA9. I feel I cannot well integrate into the current working environment.	0.74			0.75
WA12. The working environment made me feel irritable.	0.76			0.82
WA18. My working environment lacks of comfort.	0.69			0.75
Characteristic root		9.70	1.30	1.06
Explain 66.98% of the total variance		53.87	7.20	5.51

According to the theoretical analysis of the dimension of work alienation in China, and the analysis results of the items loaded by factors in the formal questionnaire, this study is based on the analysis of the specific objects that directly point to the work alienation. Three kinds of factors are named separately: (1) Work alienation from working tasks mainly describes employees' feelings of lack of control over the process and the results, as well as feelings that are meaningless and dull when they are engaged in work. (2) Interpersonal work alienation mainly describes a feeling of being independent and isolated that is created further when it is difficult to obtain the care and assistance of others as employees are faced with difficulties in work. (3) Work alienation from working environment primarily point to the working environment that may make staff feel nervous, irritable, and worried.

#### 4.4 Confirmatory Factor Analysis.

Even-numbered questionnaires are picked for confirmatory factor analysis to test whether the three-factor model formed by exploratory factor analysis is the optimal model. The results are shown in Table 4. In Table 4, three two-factor models are constructed on a virtual basis. M2 combines work alienation from tasks and interpersonal alienation into one factor; M3 combines task alienation and work environment alienation into one factor; M4 combines interpersonal work alienation and work alienation from environment into a factor. M5 is used to discuss whether the work alienation is a whole concept since western scholars consider it as a whole concept so that we don't make factor distinction for 18 items.

Table 4. The results of confirmatory factor analysis for working alienation (N= 496)

Fitting indicators Competition model	$\chi^2$	df	$\chi^2/df$	RMSEA	GFI	IFI	CFI	NFI	NNFI
Null model M0	5957.38	153	38.94						
One-factor model M1	1355.38	135	10.04	0.12	0.77	0.79	0.79	0.77	0.76
Two-factor model M2	992.54	134	7.41	0.10	0.82	0.85	0.85	0.83	0.83
Two-factor model M3	891.45	134	6.65	0.09	0.84	0.87	0.87	0.85	0.85
Two-factor model M4	953.78	134	7.12	0.10	0.83	0.86	0.86	0.84	0.84
Three-factor model M5	474.84	132	3.60	0.06	0.93	0.94	0.94	0.92	0.93

Table 4 shows that the indicators of the three-factor model are superior to other competition models and reached the ideal level. The correlation between each item and the dimension is between 0.654\*\* and 0.832\*\*, indicating that the internal homogeneity of the three factors is better and the work alienation questionnaire has better validity. Reliability test of work alienation questionnaire indicates that Cronbach's  $\alpha$  reliability coefficient of three dimensions is between 0.867-0.872, while for the overall questionnaire it is 0.932, which is higher than the criterion of 0.70, showing that questionnaire has high reliability.

#### 4.5 Robustness Test Based on Multidimensional Scaling.

The research process of multidimensional scaling method is as follows: Taking 50 undergraduate and master students in enterprise management major as the survey subjects. The respondents all have more than six months of working or internship experience in business. They are asked to classify these 18 items for questionnaire according to their own understanding, and then  $18 \times 18$  matrix table are sorted out from the classification results. If two items of questionnaire are divided into one category, they are classified as "0" and "1" if they are not, and a total of 50 valid matrix tables are established. Then the Proxscale program of multidimensional scaling analysis is adopted to classify and try to fit with two-dimensional, three-dimensional and four-dimensional separately. Finally, the fitness index of two-dimensional classification has a Normalized Raw Stress value of 0.156, which is less than the judging criteria 0.2; Its Dispersion accounted for value is 0.875 that is greater than the criteria 0.6. Work alienation for the multi-dimensional scale space map shows that the work alienation is divided into three categories, and the result of the division is same as that of the exploratory factor analysis, indicating that the three-factor structure of work alienation has the stability and effectiveness of cross-sample and cross-method.

#### 4.6 The Dimension Structure Characteristics of Chinese Employees' Work Alienation.

The above findings show that work alienation in China is mainly manifested in three aspects: work alienation from task, interpersonal relationship and working environment, which shows both similar and different aspects with western researches. Chinese employees' work alienation has the following characteristics: (1) it is basically the same in meaning of the expression of powerlessness, meaningless sense of emptiness and other dimensions in China and West. (2) Work dimensions from interpersonal relationship are a typical example of Chinese employees' work alienation. In the West, only a small amount of research involves in interpersonal alienation, and there are differences in construct and extension. The "sense of social isolation" and "sense of social alienation" proposed by western scholars mainly refer to the individual's estrangement and isolation in social relations,

rather than the separation and isolation of the interpersonal relationships in the work scenarios. Work alienation from interpersonal relationship of Chinese employees in our study refers to the latter. (3) Work alienation of working environment is the unique finding of this study.

## **5. Summary**

This study lies in the use of a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods to construct the dimension structure and the related measurement scale of employees' work alienation in China. Based on the socio-cultural background of China and the reality of the enterprises, this study systematically combs three kinds of different work alienation that Chinese employees may experience in the workplace. We develop the scale of employees' work alienation in China. The statistical test results show that: the scale has good reliability and validity, three-dimensional structure is of good stability and reliability with cross-sample & cross-method. This study found that the performance of Chinese employees' work alienation has something common with western scholars' findings, while also shows some differences. The same point is that both emphasize the sense of monotony and senselessness from their work tasks. The difference is that Chinese employees show more alienation on the interpersonal estrangement and isolation, and a sense of repression and disharmony from the work environment.

Although the research shows that the three-dimensional structure of employee alienation in China has good stability and predictability in different groups and methods, the sampling method may affect the results due to some constraints like time and energy. Future research should broaden the sampling channels and regions as far as possible, and overcome the synoptic tendency resulting from the questionnaire by adopting other methods such as the scenario experiment and the longitudinal study. The work alienation from work environment in this study focuses on the physical work environment; but it is difficult to distinguish the physical environment from the psychological environment effectively when respondents answer questions. While the psychological environment is affected by the work tasks and interpersonal relationship in a large scale, this may further disturb the accuracy of the research conclusion.

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