

ALIENATION: A THEORETICAL OVERVIEW[#]

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Alienation, although an abstruse concept, has ever been a phenomenon of central concern in the sociological analysis. Initially, in theological writings, it denoted separation from the God. The social-contract theorists considered alienation as propitious to inception of a new social order. To Hegel (1949) it was a disastrous social phenomenon while to Marx (1963) alienation was a destructive socio-psychological dilemma of the capitalist society. Durkheim (1976) and Merton (1957) termed it anomie relating it with objective social conditions. Seeman (1991) developed an analytical model for apprehension of alienation identifying six variants of the phenomenon on the basis of their genesis and consequences.

The word alienation, originated from a Latin noun *alienatio* which in turn is derived from a Latin verb *alienare* meaning to 'take away', 'remove', or 'cause a separation to occur', was initially popularized in theological writings. In Bible, Paul characterized the gentiles as 'darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God' (Ephesians 4:18). While commenting on the spiritual death, Calvin (1854, p. 219) wrote 'spiritual death is nothing else than alienation of the soul from God'. Not only the Christianity but also the Hinduism and the Buddhism had interpreted alienation in terms of separation or dissolution from God (Kanungo 1982, p. 9). The main cause of alienation to most of the theologians was worldly (material and sensuous) involvement and in order to avoid spiritual alienation they encouraged alienation from the physical and social world. The primitive Christianity preached that the world belonged to the devil, nature was the enemy, and the body was a prison (Kanungo 1982, p. 9). According to Kaufmann (1970, p. liv), 'the sages of the Upanishads sought to estrange their disciples from nature, from society, from their own bodies, and from whatever they might consider their own selves'. Work alienation was desirable if work was a means to satisfy personal material (physical), social, or

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ego needs. In Hindu scripture *Bhagavad Gita*, *karma* (work) was considered desirable only when it was performed as a pure sense of duty without any attachment to its outcomes or without any desire for personal gain (Kanungo 1982, pp. 9-10). In Muslim *Sufism*, the state of *Maraqba* resembles to estrangement from the outer world and, even, from the individual himself.

German Idealistic Approach

The German idealistic philosophy introduced the notion of alienation, in to the modern sociological literature. Although some social-contract theorists like Grotius (1853), Hobbes (1950), Locke (1947), and especially Rousseau (1947) have also used the concept to explain man's surrender of his personal rights, liberty, powers, and control to the general will of the community or organization, but they assumed alienation as desirable. It was Hegel (1949) who put the concept of alienation on an analytic footing and laid the intellectual foundation for understanding the problem of alienation in modern society (Fromm 1941, 1966). He was much influenced by Rousseau's discussion of alienation as a surrender of personal self and control and also by Schiller's (1954) theological use of the term as a state of separation. That was the reason that Hegel used two distinct German words *entausserung* (surrender or divestiture) and *entfremdung* (a state of separation) for describing the dual nature of alienation (Kanungo 1982, p. 11). In his book *Phenomenology of Mind* (1949), he has used these two words interchangeably as different types of alienation. According to Hegel (1949), alienation is of two types. In the first form, the individual experiences a state of separation. He ceases to identify with the 'social substance' or the social, political and cultural institutions. It is neither intention nor the deliberate action of the individual to be alienated. It is rather imposed alienation. In the second form of alienation, the individual himself surrender or transfer his rights to someone else. 'It involves a conscious relinquishment or surrender with the intention of securing a desired end: namely, unity with the social substance' (Schacht 1970, p. 36). Hegel suggested that first type of alienation is undesirable for the individual while the other one is desirable; thus, in order to avoid imposed alienation, the individual should surrender himself for a unity with the social system which results in the self-fulfillment of mankind. In this way the 'universal essence of man' is realized.

Marxist Perspective

Marx (1963) was much influenced by Hegel's notion of the 'universal essence of man' in his thinking on human nature but most part of his belief in the universal nature of human being was referred to the productive activity or labor. 'Labor, according to Marx (1932), represents 'existential activity of man, his free conscious activity – not as a means for maintaining life but for developing his universal nature' (Kanungo 1982, p. 13). 'For Marx, man's essential characteristics are those of individuality, sociality, and sensuousness' (Schacht 1970, p. 74). To Marx, alienation means,

That man does not experience himself as the acting agent in his grasp of the world, but that the world (nature, others, and himself) remain alien to him. They stand above and against him as objects, even though they may be objects of his own creation. Alienation is essentially experiencing the world and oneself passively, receptively, as the subject separated from the object (Fromm 1966, p. 44).

Marx perceived the 'process of alienation expressed most forcefully in work and in the division of labor, but he also speaks of religious alienation, of political alienation, and of alienation from one's fellow men' (Coser and Rosenberg 1976, p. 395). While explaining alienation of labor he wrote:

First, that the work is external to the worker, that it is not a part of his nature, that consequently he does not fulfill himself in his work but denies himself, has a feeling of misery, not of well-being, does not develop freely a physical and mental energy, but is physically exhausted and mentally debased.... His work is not voluntary but imposed, *forced labor*.... Finally, the alienated character of work for the worker appears in the fact that it is not his work but work for someone else, that in work he does not belong to himself but to another person (Marx 1976, p. 398).

Marxian view of alienation, if critically analyzed, gives rise to some questions. 'The Marxian concept of alienation not only implies a lack of control, autonomy, and ownership over one's job, it also implies submission of labor to the direction of another person' (Kanungo 1982, p. 15). But facts do not support this assumption. If someone works under the supervision of some senior group member (e.g., in a research organization) it may not necessarily be alienating

the individual. That individual may have complete self-fulfillment. 'Schacht (1970) pointed out that such conceptualization suffers from the problems of both over and under inclusiveness' (Kanungo 1982, p. 15). Moreover, Marx has that much over-emphasized the productive activity and the alienation of labor that 'the role of other human needs, such as the physical and the social ones, has been completely disregarded' (Kanungo 1982, p. 16). But still Marxian notions play a fundamental role in the contemporary theorizing regarding alienation.

Weberian Thought

After Marx, Weber (1930) and Durkheim (1976) added a lot to the concept of alienation. Weber treated the concept of alienation very much similar to the Marx. As Gerth and Mills (1946, p. 50) put it, 'Marx's emphasis upon the wage worker as being "separated" from the means of production becomes in Weber's perspective, merely one special case of a universal trend. The modern soldier is equally 'separated' from the means of violence, the scientist from the means of inquiry, and the civil servant from the means of administration'.

Both of them were convinced that workers' individuality or personal worth is determined by their labor and the working conditions which deny an expression of individuality, result in alienation. But contrary to Marx, Weber asserted that Protestantism provided the basis for capitalism by increasing the work involvement of entrepreneurs thus 'the spirit of the Protestant work ethics is the key to the realization of man's potentialities to the fullest extent' (Kanungo 1982, p. 20). In his view, capitalism was helpful in reducing alienation rather than increasing as it was assumed by Marx. For Weber, an involved worker is 'a type of man, bred by free associations in which the individual have to prove himself before his equals, where no authoritative commands, but autonomous decisions, good sense, and responsible conduct train for citizenship' (Gerth and Mills 1946, p. 18). Weber advocated the freedom to make decisions, assuming personal responsibility, and worthiness of the individual on the basis of his achievement at work. On the whole, he perceived alienation as a function of the work setup which 'cannot provide an environment that satisfies the needs of entrepreneurs for individual autonomy, responsibility, and achievement, it will create a state of alienation in them' (Kanungo 1982, p. 20).

Anomie

Durkheim (1976) viewed alienation as the consequence of a condition of *anomie*, or 'the perceived lack of socially approved means and norms to guide one's behavior for the purpose of achieving culturally prescribed goals' (Durkheim 1976; Blauner 1964; Shepard 1971). It was rather a new explanation of alienation, quite contrary to the previous ones. Durkheim (1976) asserted that if human needs are not proportionate to the available means, no individual can be happy. But usually human needs are unlimited because all these needs are not bio-genic which may not exceed the physical demands of a body. Most of the human needs are social, and in a competitive society, these needs are ever increasing. 'the more one has, the more one wants, since satisfactions received only stimulate instead of filling needs' (Durkheim 1976, p. 416). In order to live a happy life, the human passions first must be limited. As 'the individual has no way of limiting them, this must be done by some force exterior to him.... the force can only be moral' (Durkheim 1976, p. 416). But the passions can only be halted to the limits considered as just. Beyond these limits, it is very difficult to control human desires by means of coercive force or just the social norms. Therefore in the dysfunctioning of these social norms (a state of *anomie* or normlessness), the individual cannot adjust himself in the changing social order and, consequently gets alienated. Elaborating this point, Durkheim (1976, pp. 419-422) says,

Man's characteristic privilege is that the bond he accepts is not physical but moral; that is, social.... But when the society is disturbed by some painful crises or by beneficent but abrupt transition, it is momentarily incapable of exercising this influence.... In the case of economic disaster, indeed, something like a declassification occurs which suddenly casts certain individuals into a lower state than their previous one.... It is the same if the source of the crisis is in abrupt growth of power and wealth. Then, truly, as the conditions of life are changed, the standard according to which needs were regulated can no longer remain the same; for it varies with social resources, since it largely determines the share of each class of producers.... The limits are unknown between the possible and the impossible, what is just and what is unjust, legitimate claims and hopes and those which are immoderate. Consequently, there is no constraint upon aspirations.... Ultimately, this liberation of desires has been

made worse by the very development of industry and the almost infinite extension of the market.

To Durkheim (1976), this process leads to a state where social norms may be present but the individual feels unable to help him in achieving culturally defined goals. He conceptualized this state as *anomie* which necessarily results in alienation. *Anomie* is often considered a post-industrial phenomenon. As Blauner (1964, p. 24) observed, industrialization and urbanization of modern society have 'destroyed the normative structure of a more traditional society up-rooted people from the local groups and institutions which had provided stability and security'. When people feel themselves unstable and insecure, they become socially isolated. 'In social-psychological terms, this variant of isolation seems to stem from the frustration of social and security needs, the need to belong to groups for social approval and social comparison' (Festinger 1954; Maslow 1954).

Durkheim's concept of *anomie* was further refined by Merton (1976). He described *anomie* as 'breakdown in the social structure, occurring particularly when there is an acute disjunction between the cultural ... goals and the socially structured capacities of members of the group to act in accord with them' (Merton 1957, p. 162). He identified five modes of individual adaptation to this ends-means dilemma: conformity, innovation, ritualism, retreatism, and rebellion. The ultimate resultant of innovation, ritualism, retreatism, and rebellion is more likely to be the alienation. Innovation and rebellion lead to establishment of a new normative system and, consequently, to social isolation. Similarly, ritualism and retreatism results in self-estrangement.

In the contemporary sociological thought on the subject of alienation, there is a long list of social scientists who have made very precious contributions to various aspects of the concept, theoretically as well as empirically. For example, Miller (1967) conceived of alienation in terms of 'the lack of intrinsic pride or meaning in work'. Likewise Blauner (1964, p. 15) suggested that 'alienation exists when workers are unable to control their immediate work processes, to develop a sense of purpose and function which connects their jobs to the overall organization of production, to belong to integrated industrial communities, and when they fail to become involved in the of work as a mode of personal self-expression'.

As the alienation is a multi-dimensional phenomenon, the need for disentanglement of its varied meanings has always been craved. To fulfill this need, Seeman (1991) proposed six major variants of alienation (powerlessness, normlessness, meaninglessness, self-estrangement, social isolation, and cultural estrangement) in order to integrate various meanings of the concept.

Variants of Alienation by Seeman (1991)

1. Powerlessness

This phenomenon was at first discussed by Marx in terms of 'lack of control'. Seeman (1976, p. 403) developed it as 'the expectancy or probability held by the individual that his own behavior cannot determine the occurrence of the outcomes, or reinforcements, he seeks'. He asserted that powerlessness is a socio-psychological phenomenon rather than an objective condition in society. Although the social conditions are important from causal standpoint in the explanation of powerlessness but 'the objective features of the situations are to be handled like any other situational aspect of behavior -- to be analyzed, measured, ignored, experimentally controlled or varied, as the research question demands' (Seeman 1976, p. 403). This definition of powerlessness resembles Rotter's (1966) conception of the 'externals'. As Kanungo (1982, p. 25) pointed out,

Rotter distinguishes two types of people, internal and external, on the basis of their differential learning history. Early socialization experiences condition the externals to perceive themselves as pawns controlled by external forces. Internals, on the other hand, are conditioned to perceive themselves as capable of controlling their own environment. Thus, externals would very much resemble people experiencing the powerlessness variant of alienation.

Seeman (1976) recognized this resemblance as useful in creating a closer bond between the learning theory and the theory of alienation; but he also indicated a problem that 'these two constructs, though intimately related, are not generally used to understand the same things' (p. 404). Although Seeman's conception of powerlessness seems applicable to all the events but he himself restricted its implication to the socio-political events only. Seeman (1976, p. 404) said, 'I would limit the applicability of the concept of expectancies that have to do with the individual's sense of influence over socio-political events (control over the political system, the

industrial economy, international affairs, and the like)'. Powerlessness, in other words, might be said to be a sensed inability to control events and their consequences.

2. Normlessness

This variant of alienation has its roots in the concept of *anomie* as conceived by Durkheim (1976) and Merton (1957). Traditionally, 'anomie denotes a situation in which the social norms regulating individual conduct have broken down or are no longer effective as rules for behavior' (Seeman 1976, p. 406). Merton (1957) asserted that *anomie* is a failure of institutionally prescribed means or conduct to achieve culturally prescribed goals. In such a situation 'the technically most effective procedure, whether culturally legitimate or not, becomes typically preferred to institutionally prescribed conduct. As this process of attenuation continues, the society becomes unstable and there develops what Durkheim called 'anomie' or normlessness' (Merton 1976, p. 427). Following Merton's analysis, Seeman (1976) assumed that the anomic situation may lead to low predictability in behavior (meaninglessness) as well as the belief in luck (powerlessness). The idea of normlessness has been used in both the sociological as well as psychological contexts like personal disorganization, cultural breakdown, reciprocal distrust, and so on. Seeman (1976), while following Merton's lead, defined the anomic situation for an individual as 'one in which there is a high expectancy that socially unapproved behaviors are required to achieve given goals' (p. 407). According to Seeman this version of alienation is independent of the other two (i.e., powerlessness and meaninglessness). In short, normlessness is a situation in which the individual feels the previously approved social norms no longer effective in guiding his behavior for the achievement of culturally defined or personal goals.

According to social-influence theory, the individuals depends upon group norms for self-evaluation and for evaluating their abilities and opinions (Festinger 1954). Group norms usually provide information regarding behavioral standards. When these useful information for self-evaluation are not provided by the group, the individuals perceive themselves separate from the group as well as its norms. As a result, they experience a state of normlessness.

3. Meaninglessness

This category of alienation indicates a cognitive phenomenon when 'the individual is unclear as to what he ought to believe --

when the individual's minimal standards for clarity in decision-making are not met' (Seeman 1976, p. 405). According to Seeman (1976) this type of alienation refers to the individual's sense of understanding the events in which he is engaged. In the state of meaninglessness, individual's ability to predict about social situations and the outcomes of their own and others' behavior is diminished.

Meaninglessness is independent of the first category, i.e., powerlessness because the expectancy for personal control over some events, sometimes, may not necessarily coincide with the cognitive clarity of these events. Some other sociologists have viewed the meaninglessness as individual's failure to understand 'the very events upon which life and happiness are known to stand' (Dean 1961, p. 754) or what is going on in the world today (Middleton 1963). Indicating towards the use of the concept by other social scientists, Seeman (1976) wrote,

The post-war German situation described by Adorno was 'meaningless' in the sense that the individual could not choose with confidence among alternative explanations of the inflationary disaster of the time.... In Mannheim's depiction, the individual cannot choose appropriately among alternative interpretations (cannot 'act intelligently' or 'with insight') because the increase in functional rationality, with its emphasis on specialization and production, makes such choice impossible (p. 405).

For Seeman, these alternatives may involve either the simply descriptive beliefs (interpretations) or the beliefs involving moral standards (norms for behavior). In either of the case, the 'meaningless' individual is likely to have a low level of confidence in predicting the consequences of acting on his belief. This aspect of alienation may be characterized by 'a low expectancy that satisfactory predictions about future outcomes of behavior can be made' (Seeman 1976, p. 405). In simple words, meaninglessness is sensed inability to predict behavior outcomes. Kanungo (1982, p. 26) suggested that meaninglessness may also be termed as incomprehensibility or inability to understand one's complex environment or goals. It may also 'represent purposelessness or the lack of any goal or goal clarity (not because of goal complexity, but because of an unstructured goal or the simple absence of any goal)' (Kanungo 1982, p. 26).

4. Self-Estrangement

The fourth variant of alienation, self-estrangement was most extensively used by Fromm (1955, p. 120) in *The Sane Society*, 'By alienation is meant a mode of experience in which the person experiences himself as an alien. He has become, one might say, estranged from himself'. Similar was the description by Mills (1951, pp. 184-188) that 'in the normal course of her work, because her personality becomes the instrument of an alien purpose, the salesgirl becomes self-alienated.... Men are estranged from one another as each secretly tries to make an instrument of the other, and in time a full circle is made. One makes an instrument of himself and is estranged from it also'.

Seeman (1971, p. 136) himself admits that self-estrangement is an 'elusive idea' but he goes on to operationalize the concept. 'According to Seeman, a person is self-estranged when engaged in an activity that is not rewarding in itself but is instrumental in satisfying extrinsic needs, such as the need for money and security' (Kanungo 1982, p. 28). For Seeman (1976), as for Marx also, self-estrangement is generally 'the loss of intrinsic meaning or pride in work' (p. 410). Making the concept more manageable, he poses,

One way to state such a meaning is to see alienation as the degree of dependence of the given behavior upon anticipated future rewards, that is upon rewards that lie outside the activity itself. In these terms, the worker who works merely for his salary, the housewife who cooks simply to get it over with, or the other-directed type who acts 'only for its effect on others' -- all these (at different levels, again) are instances of self-estrangement. In this view, what has been called self-estrangement refers essentially to the 'inability of the individual to find self-rewarding — or in Dewey's phrase, self-consummatory — activities that engage him' (Seeman 1976, pp. 410-411).

Marx has used this idea of self-estrangement as an important element in his analysis of alienation. Following his tradition, many sociologists placed self-estrangement at a central position in the phenomenon of alienation as all the other variants seem to end in self-estrangement. Attesting this belief, Blauner (1964, p. 3) writes, 'When work activity does not permit control (powerlessness), evoke a sense of purpose (meaninglessness), or encourage larger identification (isolation), employment becomes simply a means to

the end of making a living'. Likewise, Faunce (1981, p. 135) says, 'The worker who feels powerless and who sees the work place as meaningless and normless is unlikely to be very concerned with the goals of the work organization and is therefore isolated or alienated from it.... A person who is isolated ... in any social situation is necessarily self-estranged in that situation'.

In motivational terms, Blauner (1964) observed that whenever individuals find their environment (either the work place or the whole society) unable to provide opportunities for the satisfaction of self-actualization needs through the expression of their potentialities, they become self-estranged.

5. Social Isolation

When an individual finds that he can no longer share the normative system for the attainment of his goals due to its ineffectiveness, he may develop norms of his own to guide his behavior ('Innovation' in Merton's model). Having his own normative system, different from others, the individual feels himself separate from the society and its normative system. His dissociation from others and overall social system leads to a perception of social isolation ('rebellion' in Merton's model). This concept is more commonly used in the intellectual context 'where writers refer to the detachment of the intellectual from popular cultural standards' (Seaman 1976, p. 408). According to the reward values perspective, socially isolated individuals 'assign low reward value to goals or beliefs that are typically highly valued in the given society' (Seaman 1976, p. 408).

From the standpoint of social-influence theories, every individual fulfills his need to belong, to love, and to be loved by others by adhering to the group norms as a member of that group (Jones and Gerard 1967). If the group norms are too restrictive and in conflict with the individual's personal goals (i.e., need affiliation), the group loses its normative influence on the individual and, as a consequence, the individual becomes isolated from the group. Social isolation, like self-estrangement, stems from normlessness and by a cyclic process results in normlessness again.

6. Cultural Estrangement

This final variant of alienation is characterized by 'the individual's rejection of, or sense of removal from, dominant social values' (Seaman 1991, p. 351). The culturally estranged individual feels that his ideas and opinions about the important as well as

everyday affairs are different from those of people in his primary and secondary groups. He feels himself maladjusted hence unable to actively participate in the community life. When he finds his ideas inconsistent with those of the masses, either he becomes retreatist or innovator. Cultural estrangement is a little bit different from the remaining types of alienation. Powerlessness, self-estrangement, and normlessness represents a negative judgment of self while cultural estrangement does not necessarily represent a negative judgment of self, but often means quite the opposite, that the individual is sufficiently secure in his judgment of self to be independent of his values (Kohn and Schooler 1983, p. 90).

While keeping in view Diaz-Guerrero's work on socio-cultural premises (SCPs) and active-passive dichotomy, cultural estrangement seems characteristic of active endurers of stress (AEsS) as 'one would expect a far greater number of majority shared SCPs and more organic SCP systems in PES (passive endurer of stress) societies than in AES societies' (Diaz-Guerrero 1967 a, p. 86). Passive endurers of stress try to 'agree with others, enduring their actual disagreement to avoid active interpersonal stress' as obedience and authority is considered far more important in PES societies (Diaz-Guerrero 1967 a, p. 86).

The Epilogue

Although these all variants of alienation seem conceptually independent of one another but actually they are inter-related in one or the other way. According to Faunce (1981, p. 135)

They may form a causal chain in which one or more types of alienation tend to produce another. The combination of powerlessness, meaninglessness, and normlessness is very likely to result in isolation: People who have little control over the factors that affect the achievement of a goal, who are unclear about what the goal should be, and who feel that whatever the goal is it cannot be achieved through approved means frequently respond by placing a low value upon achievement of that goal and are consequently alienated from a society in which it is typically highly valued.

From motivational standpoint, the frustration of basic needs may result in alienation. For example, frustration of need for belongingness may lead to social isolation while frustration of need evaluation may end in feeling of normlessness. Social-influence theories also support the idea that absence of two basic social influences (i.e.,

normative and informational) may determine isolation and normlessness forms of alienation respectively. In the framework of active-passive syndrome typology, the items used to measure 'views of life' (Diaz-Guerrero 1973, pp. 199-203) can also be interpreted in terms of alienation. All the variants, except cultural estrangement, represent various sub-syndromes of passivity while activity can be translated in terms of cultural estrangement.

Seeman (1991) developed alienation as a phenomenon in which the individual perceives himself as: unable to control socio-political events occurring around him; unclear about his beliefs (either interpretations or norms) and the world around, unable to make decisions, and thus unable to predict consequences of his own behavior; facing disjunction between his personal goals and socially approved means to attain those goals; different from others and the normative system in the society, hence separated from others and the society at large; and, as a consequence, estranged from himself.

CONCLUSION

The preceding discussion reviews theoretical development in conceptualization of alienation. The early theological use of the concept denotes alienation as a state of separation from the God and alienation from the physical world was appreciable behavior. The German Idealistic school of thought introduced a new dimension to the concept. Alienation was analyzed in terms of a catalyst to change in social order. Early Social Contract theorists like Grotius, Hobbes, Locke, and especially Rousseau supported this version. Hegel, much influenced by German Idealistic Philosophy in his thought, tried to put the concept as analytical tool to society. He perceived alienation as a consequence of social disruption. Marx also promoted the same view but he perceived capitalism as a prime factor to the genesis of alienation. To him non-satiation of individual's intrinsic needs may lead to estrangement from work, from the product, from the fellow workers and even from himself. In other works individuals get alienated. Contrary to Marx, Weber perceived capitalism as a remedy to alienation.

Durkheim (1976) termed normlessness (a form of alienation) as *anomie*. To him presence of too many norms to follow and not a single one that individual can relate to his subjective conditions can result in anomic feelings. Merton used the concept of *anomie* in a different perspective. To him, this condition stems from disharmony between culturally defined goals and institutionalized means to attain those goals. Both of them were of the opinion that social

conditions can give rise to individual feelings of normlessness, i.e., *anomie*.

Seeman elaborated the concept of alienation by fragmentation of the phenomenon into six variants named powerlessness, normlessness, meaninglessness, self-estrangement, social isolation, and cultural estrangement. His analytical scheme provides a model for understanding the genesis of alienation by precisely defining its variants and distinguishing them on the basis of factors which cause these feelings. He has incorporated various theories given by his predecessors, in order to explain his typology of alienation. There is a great need for identification of factors behind individuals' sense of alienation in order to reveal factors to under-utilization of human potential which consequently affects human development. Seeman's model may be a viable scheme of analysis for the understanding of this potentially disastrous or ennobling socio-psychological dilemma of humans called alienation.

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