

# **Meaningful work for a meaningful life? Work alienation and its effects in the work and the family context**

Abstract for IRSPM 2012

Panel: HRM in Volatile Times: the paradoxical challenges facing Human Resources in Public Service Organisations (PSOs)

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## **Abstract**

The notion of work alienation and its consequences has fascinated scholars and practitioners for a long time. But most research focused on passive performance indicators (such as job satisfaction), while the effects on work alienation on active performance (work effort) and outside work are understudied. This paper therefore examines the impact of work alienation on passive performance (organizational commitment), active performance (work effort), and its impact outside work (work-family enrichment). Hypotheses are formulated based on two research streams: sociology of work and organization in relation to work alienation and work-family literature in relation to enrichment. Two dimensions of work alienation are considered: powerlessness and meaninglessness. Both literature streams expect a negative impact of work alienation on employee outcomes. Hypotheses are tested on survey data collected among a national sample of midwives in the Netherlands (respondents: 790, response rate 61%). Findings indicate that work alienation does not only have an impact on passive performance, but also on active performance and outside work. In particular work meaninglessness is relevant for outcomes. This underscores the importance of lowering the degree of work alienation, which has effects inside *and* outside the work context.

## **Key words**

Work alienation, work-family enrichment, organizational sociology, organizational commitment, work effort

## 1 Introduction

The notion of work alienation and its consequences has fascinated scholars and practitioners for a long time (see for instance Fromm, 1991 [1955]; Geyer, 1996; Giddens, 1971; Hegel, 2003 [1807]; Marx, 1961 [1844]; Seeman, 1983). Karl Marx (1961 [1844]) has written about work alienation in the context of the rise of capitalism and has argued that alienation occurs in an economic system in which workers no longer see the resulting product of their work. While Marx looked upon work alienation as an objective concept, contemporary scholars examine subjective work alienation, that is, the degree to which workers *feel* alienated from their work (Kanungo, 1982:19). Also in the public administration literature, alienation has been a topic of research (DeHart-Davis & Pandey, 2005; Tummers et al., 2009). For instance, Pandey and Kingsley (2000) studied subjective work alienation among public sector workers and show that work alienation is strongly related to the degree of red tape workers experience. In this study we will not only consider the impact of work alienation on work related issues but also its impact outside work; i.e. the impact on workers family life. In doing so we acknowledge that work and family are no longer separate life domains but increasingly related (Appelbaum et al., 2005).

The diversity of the workforce is increasing and the number of people who combine paid work with caring responsibilities is growing. Research shows that if combining work and family leads to problems, people function less effectively at work (Dikkers, 2008). To date, most scholarly literature has analyzed the relation between work and family from a rather pejorative perspective: work and family can conflict with each other, they are sometimes incompatible and their dual existence generates stress and exhaustion (Frone et al., 1992). The conflict approach is based on the 'scarcity hypothesis': the idea that people have a finite amount of time and energy and that work and family compete for these resources. Recent scholars however, emphasize that work and family can also be seen as complementary. Success at work can increase someone's self-worth, which can increase the quality of life in other life domains. This enrichment approach is more recent, and can deliver new insights to the way work and family impacts each other (Greenhaus & Powell, 2006).

In this study we follow the latter perspective and examine whether and to what extent work alienation impact passive and active work performance as well as work-family enrichment. While substantial research has focused on the effects of work alienation on passive performance (such as job satisfaction) (Bacharach & Aiken, 1979; Blauner, 1964; Kanungo, 1982; McKinlay & Marceau, 2011), its effects on active performance (such as pro-activity or work effort) and work-family enrichment are understudied. But passive performance indicators are only one aspect of performance. For instance, a passive performance indicator is job satisfaction. An employee can be very satisfied when he starts his workday at 10.00, has lunch from 12.00-14.00 and leaves at 15.00. But this can have negative consequences for the organization. Active performance indicators are therefore also important. These are "proactive behaviors which aim at changing and improving work procedures and organizational processes" (Sonnetag & Frese, 2002:7). In this study, we will examine the influence of work alienation on an active performance indicator: work effort. Furthermore, the focus of this paper on work alienation and work-family enrichment can be considered novel. While there is some research on the effects of work alienation outside work (such as political withdrawal) (Seeman, 1967), the relationship between work alienation and work-family enrichment remains unclear. By considering

effects of work alienation on work outcomes and outside work, the paper contributes to two research fields: sociology of work and organization and the work-family research field. In this way, we explicitly focus on an interdisciplinary approach. Based on these two research fields, we develop a number of hypotheses. Next, we describe our method for testing these hypotheses. The study uses data of a national survey among 1278 midwives in the Netherlands (respondents: 790, response rate 61%). Finally, we discuss the findings and draw conclusions.

## 2 Theoretical framework

### 2.1 Background on work alienation

The alienation term has a long history. George Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel and Karl Marx can be considered the 'founding fathers' of alienation (Kanungo, 1982). The most important works of Hegel concerning alienation can be found in his Phenomenology of Mind / Phenomenology of Spirit (1807) and his Philosophy of History (1837) (Kain, 2005). In the work of Hegel, the alienation concept was very prominent. He writes in his Philosophy of History that (cited in Overend, 1975:306):

"The history of man was at the same time the history of man's alienation (Entfremdung) [...] What the mind really strives for, is the realization of its own notion; but in doing so it hides that goal from its own vision and is proud and well satisfied in this alienation from its 'own essence'."

In his study on alienation Hegel has been influenced by a number of important philosophers, such as Rousseau and Schiller (Tummers, 2012). He was influenced by Rousseau concerning the discussion of alienation as the total surrender of an individual's person and power to the collective general will. He also used Schiller's work, who retained the theological usage of alienation, alienation as a state of separation from God. These influences made Hegel use two distinct words for alienation: Entfremdung (a state of separation) and Entäusserung (surrender/divesture) to describe the different meanings of alienation (Kanungo, 1982).

Karl Marx intensively studied the works of Hegel on alienation, although he was also influenced by others, such as Moses Hess. As Marx studied the works of Hegel, there are similarities between the two authors. For instance, the two meanings of alienation as separation and surrender were the starting point for Marx in his interpretation of the alienation of labor (Kanungo, 1982:13). However, there are also a number of differences. An important difference is that Marx spoke of the alienation in an economic way (alienation of labor), rather than the more abstract spiritual alienation (Kanungo, 1982:13; Vincent, 1989:22). For Marx, all sources of alienation have their source in economic phenomena, such as wage labor and the division of labor. This was not the case for Hegel. Alienation, especially its positive form, could be found independently. Kain (1982:78) notes here that:

"If we had to point to the fundamental source of alienation for Hegel, we would point to the self-struggle and development of spirit; wage labor, exchange, the economic realm in general, can be seen as one expression of the struggle, but certainly not as the fundamental source of alienation and estrangement. For Marx, alienation and estrangement, even in religious or political spheres, have their source in the economic and social realm."

Marx developed his thoughts on alienation in his 'Manuskripte', originally from 1844, most notably in his essay 'Alienated Labor'. Marx did agree with the positive side of labor: it was a means to self-fulfillment of people. But in those new, industrial times, Marx notices that labor in itself has become alienated.

Building upon Hegel and Marx, sociologists, psychologists and other social scientists have used the alienation concept in various studies. As a result, a number of meanings have been attributed to the term (Kanungo, 1982:24). In an attempt to provide clarity, Seeman (1959) – in a landmark article - broke these meanings down into five alienation dimensions: powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, social isolation, and self-estrangement. Many scholars have used these dimensions to devise operational measures for alienation so that they can examine the concept in a range of settings. Mau (1992), for example, used four dimensions in examining student alienation. Rayce et al (2008), when investigating adolescent alienation, used three of the five dimensions. Tummers (2011) used the dimensions meaninglessness and powerlessness to study policy alienation. Further, many other researchers have used Seeman's classification in examining the concept of work alienation. An important study here is that of Blauner (1964), who devised operational measures for three of the dimensions: powerlessness, meaninglessness, and social isolation.

Hence, work alienation is considered as a multidimensional concept (Blauner, 1964; Mau, 1992; Seeman, 1959). Generally, powerlessness and meaninglessness are considered as the two most important dimensions (DeHart-Davis & Pandey, 2005; Kanungo, 1982; Tummers et al., 2009). For instance, DeHart-Davis and Pandey (2005:133) consider powerlessness and meaninglessness "the key psychological ingredients of alienation".

In essence, powerlessness is a person's lack of control over events in their life. Regarding work alienation, Shepard (1971:13-14) defines powerlessness as "the perceived lack of freedom and control on the job". That is, workers feel themselves to be a thing, an object controlled and manipulated by others or an impersonal system. In general, Seeman (1959:786) notes that meaninglessness refers to the individual's sense of understanding of the events in which he or she is engaged. In the work setting, meaninglessness may occur "when workers are not able to understand the complex system of goals in the organization and its relationship to their own work" (Kanungo, 1982:26).

## 2.2 Effects of work alienation

We aim to study a number of important effects of work alienation. First, we examine effects in a work context. Studies on alienation have found that alienation negatively affects work level indicators, such as absenteeism and job satisfaction (Blauner, 1964; Kanungo, 1982). These studies focus primarily on so-called 'passive performance indicators'. Passive performance indicators aim primarily at the functioning of the organization as it is at the present moment (Sonnentag & Frese, 2002).

We will study the influence of work alienation on an important passive performance indicator: affective organizational commitment (Meyer & Allen, 1997). Affective organizational commitment is defined as an "employee's emotional attachment to, identification with, and involvement in the

organization” (Meyer & Allen, 1997:11). Employees who experience affective commitment, stay with an organization because they really want to, because they can identify with that organization. This is an important indicator, as this dimension of organizational commitment negatively influences intention to leave, positively influences job behavior (such as attendance and organizational citizenship behavior) and positively influences employee health and well-being (Meyer et al., 2002).

Next to this, we will analyze the influence of work alienation on an indicator of active job performance: work effort (Gould-Williams, 2004). Examining work effort, McAllister (1995:33) notes that employees need to exert extra effort if higher levels of performance are to be achieved: “organizations depend on the discretionary contributions of their members to maintain efficiency and coordination; one has only to witness the disruption that occurs when employees limit their contributions exclusively to what is specified in their job descriptions to realize that this is the case”. Hence, it seems that it is paramount for organizations that employees ‘go the extra mile’

How does work alienation influence (affective) organizational commitment and work effort? Based on existing research, we expect that the two dimensions of work alienation, powerlessness and meaningfulness, are negatively related to the degree of organizational commitment and the amount of effort employees put in their work. Cummings and Manring (1977) found that powerlessness and meaningfulness are negatively related to self-related effort and performance. Arnold and others (2007) noted a negative relation between meaningfulness and job satisfaction and work effort. Hackman and Oldham (1976), using their Job Characteristic Model, have argued that experienced meaningfulness of work is positively related to intrinsic work motivation, which is in turn positively related to work effort and organizational commitment.

The mechanism that explains the negative impact of powerlessness on work effort and organizational commitment can be traced back to the human relations movement (1960). Central argument in the human relations movement is the idea that employee’s participation in decisions taken in the organization has a positive impact on their motivation and work effort. Employees enjoy carrying out decisions to which they have contributed. Also, workers receive recognition when they are granted the opportunity to participate in decisions. Recognition is known for motivating employees and to increase organizational commitment (McGregor, 1960). Hence, when workers feel powerless, they feel they have no influence on relevant decisions at work; consequently this may lower their organizational commitment and work effort. More recently, studies show that a lack of job control, a concept closely related to powerlessness is negatively associated with various work outcomes. For instance, Deci and Ryan (2004) note having control or power over the way work is done is an important job resource that not only enables people to deal with work demands, but also fulfills a basic human need for autonomy. Hence, having control or power over the way work is done has both an intrinsic as an extrinsic motivational role which is likely to increase organizational commitment and work effort (Bakker & Demerouti, 2008).

While powerlessness is widely researched in terms of job control or autonomy, the dimension meaningfulness has received less attention in contemporary literature, although the Job Characteristics model does pay attention to this aspect (Hackman & Oldham, 1976). This is remarkable since work is an important source of meaning in people’s lives.

H1: Work alienation will be negatively related to passive performance at work (organizational commitment).

H2: Work alienation will be negatively related to active performance at work (work effort).

We will also examine whether work alienation is influential outside the work context. More specifically, we relate the degree of work alienation to work-family enrichment. There is a substantial body of research investigating the interdependencies between work and family life, emphasizing that work influences family life and vice versa. Scholars have examined both negative and positive relationships between work and family life. At the beginning work-family conflict was the main focus, more recently positive relations between work and family are emphasized: work-family enrichment (Greenhaus & Powell, 2006).

Work-family enrichment occurs when resources from one role improve performance or positive affect in the other role. With respect to work-to-family enrichment two types of resources at work can be distinguished which can enrich family life: enabling resources (instrumental) and psychological rewards (affective) (Greenhaus & Powell, 2006; Voydanoff, 2004). Enabling resources are for instance skills and abilities learned at work while psychological rewards are associated with feelings of esteemed and valued or meaningful work. Within this study we focus on the affect dimension of work-family enrichment: “when involvement in work results in a positive emotional state or attitude which helps the individual to be a better family member” (Carlson et al., 2006:140). Work alienation may create a negative emotional state and consequently decreases the likelihood that work-to-family enrichment occurs (Hackman & Oldham, 1980).

H3: Work alienation will be negatively related to life outside work (work-to-life enrichment).

### **3 Method**

#### **3.1 Testing the proposed model using a survey of Dutch midwives**

To test the impact of work alienation on these three effects (organizational commitment, work effort and work-family enrichment), we undertook a survey of Dutch midwives. Midwives offer care to childbearing women during pregnancy, labor and birth, and during the postpartum period. Midwives also care for the newborn children. A practitioner of midwifery is known as a midwife, a term used in reference to both women and men, although the majority is female.

We used a sample of 1,278 midwives, based on the databases of the nationwide associations for midwives (KNOV) and midwife ultrasound specialists (BEN). We asked the organizations and individual employees to respond to the survey, using an introductory email and two reminders. Furthermore, our student-assistant contacted organizations via telephone and asked them to stimulate filling in the survey in their organization. Based on these efforts, we received 790 returns of our questionnaire, a response of 61%.

We asked midwives who did not complete the survey for reasons (a non-response research). The most important reasons were current workload (no priority) and the fact that they did already fill out a number of surveys.

Of the valid respondents, 22 (2,8%) were men and 768 (97,2%) women. This balance is consistent with Dutch averages for midwives, which can be considered as a traditional female occupation. According to a yearly national survey of the research institution Nivel, 98% of the workforce in this profession are women (Nivel, 2010). The respondents' average age was 40, which is comparable to the Dutch national average for this group, which is 37 (Nivel, 2010). The large number of respondents, their characteristics in terms of gender and age and the results of the non-response research indicate that our respondents are quite a good representation of the population. Nevertheless, we cannot completely rule out a non-response bias since the non-respondents may differ from the respondents in terms of numerous other (unexamined) characteristics.

### 3.2 Measures

All items use five point Likert-scales, ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree, unless stated otherwise.

#### *Work alienation – Powerlessness*

We used the often-applied scale of Mottaz (1981) to measure work powerlessness (see for example Sarros et al., 2002). Sample items were “My daily tasks are largely determined by others” and “I have a good deal of freedom in the performance of my daily task” (R). In our study, the Cronbach alpha was adequate (.77).

#### *Work alienation – Meaninglessness*

We also used the work of Mottaz to measure work meaninglessness. Sample items were “Sometimes I am not sure I completely understand the purpose of what I’m doing”, “I often wonder what the importance of my job really is” and “My work is really important and worthwhile” (R). In the current study, the Cronbach alpha for this scale was .85.

#### *Organizational commitment*

Allen and Meyer have developed a number of items to measure organizational commitment (Allen & Meyer, 1990). We used the validated Dutch translation of De Gilder et al. (1997) to measure affective commitment, using 8 items. Example items are “I would be happy to spend the rest of my career at my organization” and “I really feel as if this organization’s problems are my own.”. In this study, the Cronbach alpha was .85.

#### *Work effort*

In order to study work effort, we used the scale as developed by Gould-Williams (2004), who developed an eight-item measure to capture employee discretionary effort. Sample items are ‘I stay late if necessary to help out’ and ‘I volunteer for things that are not part of the job’. The scale’s Cronbach’s alpha was .76 in this study.

### *Work-to-family enrichment*

Work-to-family enrichment is a multi-dimensional construct and in this study we included the affect dimension, “defined as when involvement in work results in a positive emotional state which helps the individual to be a better family member” (Carlson et al., 2006:140). The dimension was measured by three items: 1) my involvement in my work puts me in a good mood and this helps me be a better family member, 2) helps me feel happy and this helps me be a better family member, and 3) makes me cheerful and this helps me be a better family member (Carlson et al., 2006). The Cronbach alpha was acceptable: .74.

### *Control variables*

Alongside the variables described above, we included commonly used control variables in our regression: gender, age, children at home (yes/no), and management position (yes/no) and level of education, where 1=elementary school, 2=secondary education, 3= intermediate vocational training (Dutch: MBO), 4= higher professional education (Dutch: HBO), 5=academic education (Dutch: WO) and 6=post academic education (PhD or specialization). That is, any differences due to these variables are controlled for in the analyses.

Furthermore, we controlled for work pressure, as this can be very influential on the proposed outcome variables and could be related to work alienation (Landeweerd & Boumans, 1994). Furthermore, more work pressure can negatively influence work-family relationships (Demerouti et al., 2004). By taking these variables into account, we can be more confident that the effects of work alienation are really caused by work alienation.

Work pressure was measured using the short, ‘Swedish’, version of the Demand Control Support model of Karasek and Theorell (Karasek & Theorell, 2000). More specifically, it concerns the demands dimension of the “job content questionnaire” (Karasek et al., 1998). The demands dimension in this instrument consisted of five items (work fast, work hard, excessive work, enough time, conflicting demands). Sample items were “Do you have to work very hard?” and “Do you have enough time for your work tasks?”. These items were measured with response scales that ranged from 1 (never), via 2 (sometimes) and 3 (often) to 4 (always). The Cronbach alpha for this scale was .72.

## **4 Results**

### **4.1 Descriptive statistics and correlations**

Descriptive statistics and correlations of the variables are presented in Table 1:

**Table 1 Descriptive statistics and correlations for the variables in the study**

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>6</i>	<i>7</i>	<i>8</i>	<i>9</i>	<i>10</i>	<i>11</i>
1. Female (male=ref.cat)	.97	NA	1.00										
2. Age	4.10	1.92	<b>-.14**</b>	1.00									
3. Education	4.14	NA	.02	<b>.07*</b>	1.00								
4. Managing position (non-managing = ref. cat)	.20	NA	-.01	<b>.08*</b>	.07	1.00							
5. Children at home n/y (no=ref.cat.)	.64	NA	-.02	.01	.06	.02	1.00						
6. Work pressure	5.84	1.36	-.01	<b>-.11**</b>	-.01	<b>.13**</b>	-.01	1.00					
7. Work Powerlessness	3.54	1.16	-.02	<b>.13**</b>	.08*	<b>-.16**</b>	.04	<b>.16**</b>	1.00				
8. Work Meaninglessness	2.70	.92	.00	<b>.15**</b>	-.02	<b>-.16**</b>	-.02	.03	<b>.42**</b>	1.00			
9. Organizational commitment	6.87	1.61	-.05	-.03	.00	<b>.12**</b>	-.07	-.06	<b>-.33**</b>	<b>-.45**</b>	1.00		
10. Work effort	8.10	1.00	.01	.00	.05	<b>.23**</b>	-.05	.07	<b>-.26**</b>	<b>-.34**</b>	<b>.33**</b>	1.00	
11. Work-life enrichment	7.27	1.39	.04	-.06	.02	.04	<b>.10*</b>	<b>-.23**</b>	<b>-.13**</b>	<b>-.26**</b>	<b>.22**</b>	<b>.16**</b>	1.00

Note. \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ . The means for variables 6 to 11 are adjusted to an equivalent ten-point scale to ease interpretation. NA = Not applicable.

Overall, respondents reported a low level of work meaningfulness and powerlessness, suggesting that midwives in our sample experience on average little work alienation. They reported relatively high levels of work-to-family enrichment and work effort and moderate levels of organizational commitment and work pressure.

#### 4.2 Results – The effects of work alienation

Multiple regression analyses were conducted to examine the hypotheses 1-3, see Table 2. Hypothesis 1 argues that work alienation will be negatively related to passive performance at work (organizational commitment). Work powerlessness and meaningfulness have both a significant negative influence on organizational commitment of employees ( $\beta = -.18, p < .01$ ,  $\beta = -.38, p < .01$ ). This means that, when employees feel that their work is meaningless and have no power over their work, they will be less committed to the organization.

Hypothesis 2 argues that the dimensions of work alienation influence the degree of work effort. Our empirical data indeed shows that this is the case for both dimensions. When midwives feel that their work has no meaning, they are less inclined to put effort in their work ( $\beta = -.27, p < .01$ ). In addition, when midwives feel powerless at work, they are also less inclined to put effort in their work ( $\beta = -.15, p < .01$ ).

The third and last hypothesis examines the effects of work alienation on work-to-family enrichment. We expected that more work alienation negatively influences work-to-family enrichment. This proved to be the case for work meaningfulness. The more the midwives felt that their work had no value for society or for their clients, the less they experienced possible external effects from work to their life outside work ( $\beta = -.28, p < .01$ ). We did not find an effect of work powerlessness.

Next to the influence of work alienation on active and passive work performance and work-to-family enrichment, other striking results were found. First, having a managerial position impacts the effort midwives put in their work. Secondly, work pressure positively impacts work effort. Hence this suggests that the more work pressure midwives experience the more effort they put into their work (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). Also in relation to work-to-family enrichment work pressure is a relevant factor: the more work-pressure midwives experience the less work-to-family enrichment they report (see also Valcour, 2007).

**Table 2 Regression analyses for effects of work alienation on organizational commitment, work effort and work-life enrichment (n=790)**

	Effect 1 – Organizational commitment	Effect 2 – Work effort	Effect 3 – Work-to-family enrichment
<u>Control variables</u>			
Female (male=ref.cat.)	-.07	.03	.03
Age	.00	.07	-.03
Education	.00	-.05	.02
Managing position (non-managing = ref. cat.)	.03	<b>.16**</b>	.06
Children at home (no=ref.cat.)	-.07	-.04	.09
Work pressure	-.04	<b>.12**</b>	<b>-.19**</b>
<u>Work alienation</u>			
Work alienation – Powerlessness	<b>-.18**</b>	<b>-.15**</b>	.06
Work alienation – Meaninglessness	<b>-.38**</b>	<b>-.27**</b>	<b>-.28**</b>
Overall R <sup>2</sup>	<b>.25**</b>	<b>.18**</b>	<b>.12**</b>

The following criteria are met for all three regression analyses (see Field, 2005):

Criterion of independent residuals (Durbin-Watson 1.8/2.1/1.7, 1<critereon<3). Criterion of no multicollinearity (no VIF values above 10 and average close to 1, for all regressions). No exclusion of influential outlying cases was required (using case wise diagnostics: 3,2%/ 2,4%/3,7% above standardized residual >|2|, Cook's distance max. .06/.13/.03 (criterion < 1). Criteria of homoscedasticity and normality met for all regressions.

Note: Standardized beta coefficients are presented. \* p < .05 \*\* p < .01.

## 5 Conclusions and discussion

We started this paper with the assertion that the alienation of employees has been intriguing scholars and practitioners for a long time. One important concept here is the notion of (subjective) work alienation, which can be considered as a general cognitive state of psychological disconnection from work. In this paper, our main goal was to study the effects of work alienation on a) passive job performance (organizational commitment), b) active job performance (work effort) and c) outside work (work-family enrichment). While doing this, we combined literature streams concerning sociology of work and organization (work alienation) and work-family literature. In this way, we could determine whether work alienation had strong effects on different levels and thereby underscore (or nuance) the usefulness of the work alienation concept.

Based on scholarly literature, a number of hypotheses were constructed for examining the effects of work alienation. These hypotheses were tested in a survey of 790 Dutch midwives. We showed that especially work meaninglessness had a strong influence on organizational commitment, work effort and work-to-family enrichment.

Hence, our first conclusion is that work alienation is still a useful concept, especially given the strong effects of the meaninglessness dimensions on different outcome indicators. When professionals feel alienated from their work, this negatively influences the effort they put in their work,

their commitment to the organization and their work-to-family enrichment. Given the outcomes of this study, we therefore feel that the concept of alienation remains an important concept in organization studies. While alienation was a widely studied topic until the end of the 1980s, it seems to attract far less attention nowadays. McKinlay and Marceau (2011) reiterate the importance of using the alienation framework. They analyzed the discontent of physicians, in a recent study titled “New wine in an old bottle: does alienation provide an explanation of the origins of physician discontent?”. They conclude that:

“The classic concept of alienation may build upon valuable earlier work and provide a new, coherent explanation of the workplace origins of physician discontent. Alienation theory combines both structural and psychological components associated with workplace discontent and has the potential to explain the changing position of knowledge workers (such as physicians) in the new economy.”

We can agree with such a statement. Apart from highlighting the usefulness of the alienation concept, we also urge scholars to conceptualize and measure different dimension of alienation, as we found that the different dimensions can have different impacts (cf. Pandey & Scott, 2002).

Secondly, we want to highlight the importance of work *meaninglessness*. In this study, we examined the dimensions powerlessness and meaninglessness. In the results section, we showed that, for every effect, the meaninglessness dimensions were more important than the powerlessness dimensions. For instance, when a professional experiences that his work becomes more meaningless, this will have a far greater effect on his work than when he or she experiences more powerlessness (given that their standard deviations are approximately equal, which is the case). Many studies in HRM, organization studies and change management look at the degree of powerlessness, or influence, in general decision making or during organizational changes (Bouma, 2009; Jackson, 1983; Judson, 1991). However, given the results of this study, we urge practitioners and scholars to centre their attention on the perceived meaninglessness of work, rather than to restrict their focus on powerlessness aspects. For instance, managers could think about ways to improve the perceived added value of the work professionals do. The issue of Public Service Motivation (PSM) (Perry, 1996) is related to this, as Brewer and Selden (1998:417) describe PSM as “the motivational force that induces individuals to perform meaningful public service”.

As all studies, this study has a number of limitations. Firstly, the results of this study, and the implications outlined, should be interpreted in light of the study’s limited context and sample. We analyzed Dutch midwives, which is a dominantly female occupation. On the other hand, the study’s generalizability was improved by the fact that the sample included a large number of employees, working in different positions and places. The results of this study, and the implications outlined, should be interpreted in light of this limited context and sample. An area for further research would be to test the proposed model in other sectors. Here, a comparative approach might work adequately, examining different sectors in various countries.

A second limitation concerns the chosen method. In this study, we used quantitative analyses to examine the degree of work alienation, and its effects. A qualitative approach could also be applied here, to increase the understanding of the context in which these public professionals work. This can

be very beneficial when examining sociological/psychological phenomena such as subjective alienation. Hence, a sequential strategy can be used, where we started with a quantitative approach, which is followed by a qualitative approach to further understand and contextualize the feelings and perceptions of the employees (see also Holloway & Wheeler, 2009:19).

In sum, this study shows that work alienation has important effects, and that the concept can be very useful for analyzing the experiences of employees with their work. Embracing and further researching work alienation, including ways to reduce it, should prove to be a *meaningful* endeavor for both researchers and practitioners alike.

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