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Work Alienation and its Gravediggers: Social Class, Class Consciousness, and Activism

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Abstract

Work activity is central to human psychology. However, working conditions under capitalist socioeconomic relations have been posited as psychologically alienating. Given the negative impact of work alienation on well-being and mental health, we conducted two studies of the relations between social class, work conditions, and alienation. We also examined factors that might counteract alienation – class consciousness and activism. The utility of a Marxist measure of social class – based on objective work relations – was compared with that of SES and subjective class measures. Study 1 surveyed 240 U.S. adults from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds using Amazon’s Mechanical Turk; Study 2 was a replication with 717 adults recruited via a sampling company. Across studies, alienation was predicted by perceived work exploitation, poor work relationships, and lack of self-expression, meaningfulness, self-actualization, autonomy, and intrinsic motivation at work. Only the Marxist class measure – not SES or subjective class measures – predicted alienation and alienating work conditions across studies. Working-class participants experienced more alienating work conditions and greater alienation. Alienation was correlated with class consciousness, and class consciousness was associated with activism. While SES measures have dominated the psychological study of social class, results suggest benefits to integrating Marxist measures and conceptions of social class.

Keywords: work alienation, social class, class consciousness, activism, Marxist theory, Marxism, self-determination theory, labor, socioeconomic status

Resumen

La actividad laboral es central para la psicología humana. Sin embargo, se ha postulado que las condiciones de trabajo bajo las relaciones socioeconómicas capitalistas son alienantes psicológicamente. Dado el impacto negativo de la alienación laboral en el bienestar y la salud mental, realizamos dos estudios sobre las relaciones entre clase social, las condiciones laborales y la alienación. También examinamos factores que podrían contrarrestar la alienación: la conciencia de clase y el activismo. La utilidad de una medida marxista de clase social, basada en relaciones laborales objetivas, fue comparada con la del nivel socioeconómico (SES por su sigla en inglés) y las medidas de clase subjetivas. El estudio 1 encuestó a 240 adultos estadounidenses de diversos orígenes socioeconómicos utilizando el Mechanical Turk de Amazon; el estudio 2 fue una réplica con 717 adultos reclutados por una empresa de muestreo. En los dos estudios, la alienación fue predicha por la explotación laboral percibida, malas relaciones laborales, y por la falta de autoexpresión, significado, autorrealización, autonomía, y motivación intrínseca en el trabajo. Solo la medida de clase marxista, no la SES ni las medidas de clase subjetivas, predijeron la alienación y las condiciones de trabajo alienantes en los estudios. Los participantes de la clase trabajadora experimentaron condiciones de trabajo más alienantes y mayor alienación. La alienación se correlacionó con la conciencia de clase, y la conciencia de clase se asoció con el activismo. Si bien las medidas de SES han dominado el estudio psicológico de la clase social, los resultados implican que hay beneficios en integrar medidas y concepciones de clase social marxistas.

Palabras Clave: alienación laboral, clase social, conciencia de clase, activismo, teoría marxista, marxismo, teoría de la autodeterminación, trabajo, nivel socioeconómico

Resumo

A atividade laboral é central à psicologia humana. No entanto, as condições de trabalho sob as relações socioeconômicas capitalistas já foram postuladas como alienantes psicologicamente. Dado o impacto negativo da alienação do trabalho no bem-estar e na saúde mental, realizamos duas pesquisas sobre as relações entre classe social, as condições de trabalho e a alienação. Também examinamos fatores que podem se contrapor à alienação - a consciência de classe e o ativismo. A utilidade de uma medida marxista de classe social - baseada em relações objetivas de trabalho - foi comparada com a de SES e medidas subjetivas de classe. A primeira pesquisa envolveu 240 adultos americanos de diversas origens socioeconômicas usando o Mechanical Turk da Amazon; a segunda pesquisa foi uma réplica com 717 adultos recrutados por uma empresa de amostragem. Nas duas pesquisas, a alienação foi prevista pela percepção da exploração de trabalho, más relações de trabalho, e pela falta da auto-expressão, significado, auto-atualização, autonomia e motivação intrínseca no trabalho. Só a medida de classe marxista - não a de SES nem as medidas subjetivas de classe - previam a alienação e as condições de trabalho alienantes nas pesquisas. Os participantes da classe trabalhadora experimentaram condições de trabalho mais alienantes e maior alienação. A alienação foi correlacionada com a consciência de classe, e a consciência de classe foi associada com o ativismo. Embora as medidas de SES tenham dominado o estudo psicológico de classe social, os resultados insinuam benefícios em integrar as medidas e concepções de classe social marxistas.

Palavras-Chave: alienação do trabalho, classe social, consciência de classe, ativismo, teoria marxista, marxismo, teoria da autodeterminação, trabalho, status socioeconômico

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Productive labor, or work activity, is a hallmark of the human species and played a key role in the evolution of humans from our primate ancestors (Engels, 1876/1987; Tomasello, 2009). Work activity connects the individual to the social and physical world and is central to human psychology and development (Leontiev, 1978; Scribner, 1988/1997; Tobach, 1995). Under favorable conditions, work can allow creative expression of a range of human capacities. Within capitalist socioeconomic relations, however, work conditions have been argued to be psychologically *alienating* (Marx, 1844/1978). From the Marxist perspective adopted in this paper, the resulting experience of work alienation is defined as a psychological estrangement or disconnect that involves a negative emotional and cognitive separation from work (Nair & Vohra, 2012).

Drawing on Hegel, Marx used the concept of alienation to argue that workers (and humans more generally) cannot realize their full potential within capitalism because they are denied collective ownership over their own labor (Marx, 1844/1978, 1867/1983; Harvey, 2018). Because the capitalist class owns the sites where work is conducted and the technological tools used on the job, the working class experiences few aspects of work as being under its control. Workers possess only their own labor power, which they must sell to survive. Meanwhile, capitalists *exploit* workers by purchasing their labor power for less than the value that it produces, thus reaping surplus value and profits (Wolff & Resnick, 2012). Through these work relations, workers are separated socially and psychologically from the products they create, the process by which they are created, and from themselves and their fellow

coworkers. Put succinctly, the objective social separation of workers from the production process has a subjective corollary in the psychological experience of work alienation.

While alienation as a psychological experience figured heavily in Marx's early writing (e.g., *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*), in later works like the *Grundrisse*, Marx grounded alienation in the historical and material dynamics of capitalism (Mészáros, 1970). Thus, Marx's labor theory of value – in which capitalists exploit workers' commodified labor power for surplus value – can be taken to explain the objective roots of workers' alienation under capitalism (Ollman, 1976). Marx's conception of alienation as based in the social relations of production differs from notions of alienation that see it as a result of high levels of technology on the job (Blauner, 1964) or *anomie* - a general breakdown of social solidarity in the modern world due to the diminished roles of morality and religion (Durkheim, 1951). As Harvey (2018) summarized the connection between objective and subjective forms of alienation:

Workers alienate their labour-power when they enter the factory to do whatever the capitalist commands... workers "freely give" of their labour but do so under conditions of coercion or consent that ensure the value they produce is not returned to them but appropriated by capital. The exchange is legal but there is something fraudulent about it... the response is a sense of loss and unfairness, of powerlessness and loss of dignity, which is prone to provoke resentment, anger and frustration. Capital produces alienation in both its objective and subjective garbs. (p. 426-427)

Work alienation has been found to harm workers' well-being (Shantz, Alfes, & Truss, 2014) and work performance (Nair & Vohra, 2010), and has been linked to emotional exhaustion, alcohol abuse (Greenberg & Grunberg, 1995), and negative mental health symptoms (Armstrong-Stassen, 2004). Given these consequences, it is important to study alienation in relation to social class and work-related factors that may predict alienation. Of special interest are phenomenon that could ameliorate or assist in overcoming alienation. Examining the relation between alienation and three phenomena of growing interest in social and political psychology – social class (Kraus, Piff, Mendoza-Denton, Rheinschmidt, & Keltner, 2012), class consciousness (Keefer, Goode, & Van Berkel, 2015), and activism (Klar & Kasser, 2009) – may illuminate pathways for counteracting alienation. This is because class consciousness involves understanding the class relations that produce alienation, and activism has the potential to challenge these relations. To investigate these possibilities, this study examined social class and work factors that might predict alienation, and the connection of work alienation to class consciousness and activism.

Research on Work Alienation

Over the past several decades, Marx's work on alienation has inspired studies within fields as diverse as sociology, political science, labor studies, industrial/organizational psychology, business, education, and human resource/personnel management. Recently, this international work has investigated alienation in individual work sites such as hospitals (Alomeroglu, Guney, Sundu, Yasar, & Akyurek, 2018; Amarat, Akbolat, Ünal, & Güneş Karakaya, 2019), schools (Akar, 2018; Korkmaz & Çevik, 2017; Morinaj et al., 2017), furniture chain stores (Sharma, 2018) and manufacturing facilities (Jiang & Zhao, 2017). Studies of alienation have focused chiefly on identifying its predictors, but they have also linked alienation to maladaptive consequences such as low job satisfaction, decreased organizational identification (Efraty, Sirgy, & Claiborne, 1991), low commitment (Sulu et al., 2010), emotional exhaustion (Shantz et al., 2014), and increased risk for psychosis and suicide (Dean, 1961). While much of this research has focused on individual workplaces, given the systemic nature of alienation, the present study used quantitative methods to take a wider, multi-occupational view of alienation in the U.S.

Before a recent uptick in interest, research on work alienation peaked in the 1970s and 1980s and declined in the following decades, likely due to both conservative political shifts and some conceptual ambiguity in distinguishing alienation from other work-related concepts (Nair & Vohra, 2012). However, recent work in psychology – drawing on Marxist theory – has more clearly defined work alienation as the negative psychological experience of estrangement, disconnection, or separation from one’s work, from oneself, and from humanity in general (Nair & Vohra, 2010; Shantz et al., 2014). Based on this theoretical clarification, Nair and Vohra (2010) developed the work alienation scale used in this study. Concepts that are related but distinct from alienation include job dissatisfaction, work disengagement, and burnout. Nair and Vohra (2012) offer a full discussion of how these concepts differ from alienation, with key points highlighted here.

Job Dissatisfaction

Job satisfaction ratings – which stood at only 50.8% satisfaction in the U.S. in 2017 (Conference Board, 2018) – depend primarily upon appraising a job (in terms of quality, pay, and status) in comparison to other attainable jobs on the market. In contrast, alienation focuses on workers’ direct experience of the work process itself. Thus, alienation is often not reflected in job dissatisfaction, as one can report being satisfied with a dull, unfulfilling job that carries relatively good pay (Watson, 2003).

Work Disengagement

Work engagement is the extent to which an individual is attentive in carrying out work roles (Saks, 2006), and thus is thought to be related to employee effectiveness. This clearly differs from alienation’s emphasis on the personal experience of cognitive and emotional estrangement or disconnection from work contexts. Also, in contrast to the primarily behavioral mode of engagement, the experience of alienation is typically referred to as “feeling alienated,” which highlights the importance of emotion and cognition in alienation (Nair & Vohra, 2012).

Burnout

Burnout is characterized as an extreme negative response to work involving emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and reduced professional efficacy (Maslach, 1993; Maslach & Jackson, 1984). As opposed to the psychological separation or estrangement that is central to alienation, most researchers working on burnout identify emotional exhaustion as its primary characteristic (Cordes & Dougherty, 1993; Jackson et al., 1986; Moore, 2000; Nair & Vohra, 2012). The concept of burnout was developed through studies of helping professions, and is thought to be caused by role overload, stressful interpersonal interactions, and excessive emotional demands (Cordes & Dougherty, 1993). Importantly, burnout-related factors are seen as pertaining to particular work environments, rather than to more fundamental features of capitalist society, such as workers’ lack of control over work processes.

From a psychological perspective, work alienation has been studied almost entirely within the subfields of industrial/organizational psychology and human resource/personnel management. These studies have focused on understanding the causes and consequences of alienation so that it might be diminished within the capitalist workplace, for instance by providing greater autonomy or employee ‘voice’ on the job (Shantz et al., 2014). Their stated aim is to modify work structures in the interest of creating more harmonious labor-management relations, with the goal of optimizing employee performance and eliminating workers’ behaviors that damage the work environment. In each instance, workplace reforms are assumed to come “from above” (i.e., led by management or human resource consultants) rather than from workers themselves. In essence, the goal is to minimize class

conflict to help work run more smoothly, rather than to directly challenge or overturn exploitation and associated alienation.

We suggest that work alienation should also be explored within social and political psychology, with an eye toward the possibility of “positive” ramifications of alienation. From the perspective of workers' collective resistance, class consciousness and activism represent constructive responses to alienation and exploitation. For example, if workers tend to develop class consciousness as a result of alienating work experiences that highlight class inequality and exploitation, they may be more likely to engage in activism that challenges these socioeconomic relations that underpin alienation. Alert to this possibility, the present study examined relations between social class, work factors, and alienation, as well as the class consciousness and activism that may arise in response. While these relations can also be explored with qualitative methods, our present goal was to analyze a U.S. sample that extended beyond individual workplaces, and which could help us to generalize about relations between social class, alienation, and forces that can challenge alienation. Therefore, a quantitative approach was employed. We treat each of our key constructs in turn.

Alienation and the Psychology of Social Class

In the wake of the 2008 economic crisis, there has been a resurgence of interest in social class, including psychological differences among classes (Kraus et al., 2012) and perceived inequality of wealth distribution (Norton & Ariely, 2011). These studies have typically measured class via socioeconomic status (SES), using some combination of objective measures like income, education, or job status (e.g., Stephens, Markus, & Townsend, 2007; Kraus, Piff, & Keltner, 2009; Kraus, Tan, & Tannenbaum, 2013). Social class has also been measured subjectively in terms of perceived SES status or rank (Piff et al., 2010). As discussed in Keefer et al. (2015), this research has improved our understanding of the impact of social class on individual psychology, revealing that individuals of higher (subjective and objective) SES behave less ethically (Piff et al., 2012), less prosocially (Piff et al., 2010), and tend to downplay situational causes of behavior (Kraus, Piff, & Keltner, 2009).

A psychology of social class must pay careful theoretical attention to the measures of social class that it employs. While the predominant SES-based conceptions of class have contributed to psychological research, they are limited in several ways. Because SES measures are gradational scales, any boundaries between “upper,” “middle,” or “lower” classes must be marked by relatively arbitrary numerical cutoffs. In contrast, Marxism considers social class to be an objective and relational phenomenon that is based upon the social relations of work. These distinct approaches embody what Wright (2015) refers to as gradational (SES) versus relational (Marxist) notions of social class. In the Marxist view, social class is not defined by personal income, education, or job prestige, but by one's objective social relationship to the production process. According to this account, a tiny class of capitalists own the means of production, a large working class sells its labor power to the capitalists, and a relatively small middle class exists between capitalists and workers, including small business owners, middle managers, or highly paid professionals (e.g., engineers, lawyers). Because capitalists directly exploit and depend upon the labor of workers to make profits, these two classes are in social conflict, which is played out in class struggle over the economic and political conditions of society. As Marx and Engels (1848/2000) wrote, by creating the working class, “What the bourgeoisie therefore produces, above all, are its own gravediggers” (p. 255). Workers – given their pivotal role in production – are regarded as a potentially revolutionary force for social transformation. By contrast, SES is typically presented as a purely descriptive, apolitical concept.

These discrepant definitions of social class raise the question as to the relative merits of each in predicting alienation and work factors associated with alienation. Based on Marxist theory, we expect the work conditions of working-class individuals to be more alienating than the working conditions of the middle class, thus resulting in greater alienation among workers. However, some studies have found that higher-SES individuals have a greater psychological demand for fulfilling work (Rosner & Putterman, 1991), and thus may report greater alienation than lower-SES/ individuals when they feel unfulfilled at work (Lang, 1985). To evaluate the relative utility of Marxist and other conceptualizations of class, relations between social class and work alienation were examined using four different measures: subjective SES, objective SES, subjective social class, and objective (Marxist) social class.

Work Factors That Predict Alienation

Using their work alienation scale, Nair and Vohra (2010) found that 19% of knowledge workers in India that they surveyed were alienated (defined as a mean score above the scale's midpoint). The knowledge workers were highly educated with a high level of esoteric, non-substitutable knowledge, and included financial consultants, research and development engineers, computer programmers, and information technology analysts. The study found that work alienation was predicted by work factors that included a lack of *meaningfulness* in work, a lack of room for *self-expression* through work, and poor-quality work *relationships*. The present study tested whether these work factors would also predict alienation among U.S. participants in a more diverse set of professions. *Autonomy* at work is another empirically supported factor in predicting alienation. Shantz et al. (2014) found that greater employee autonomy or 'voice' at work predicted reduced alienation in a U.K. manufacturing workplace. Self-determination theory (SDT; Ryan & Deci, 2000) considers autonomy – feeling volitional and experiencing psychological freedom in choices and actions – to be a core human need that must be satisfied to achieve positive psychological functioning. A thwarting of our need for autonomy, by contrast, is associated with psychopathology (Deci & Ryan, 2008) and amotivational syndromes that bear some resemblance to alienation. Therefore, *autonomy* was also investigated as a work factor.

A lack of self-determination connects to another central idea of Marx's about alienation: "[alienated] labor is not voluntary, but coerced; it is... not the satisfaction of a need; it is merely a means to satisfy needs external to it... it does not belong to his *intrinsic nature*" (Marx, 1844/1978, p. 74). According to SDT, in contrast to intrinsic motivation, in which one's actions and motivations are fully endorsed and freely chosen, external control and reward/punishment contingencies promote extrinsic motivation. Like alienation, extrinsic motivation has been linked to poor well-being, negative psychological states, and a lack of motivated persistence (Vallerand, Fortier, & Guay, 1997). Furthermore, it has been argued that individuals with an external locus of control experience greater alienation than those with an internal locus (Banai et al., 2004; Seeman, 1967), and research finds that individuals of lower social class tend to have a more external locus of control (Kraus, Piff, & Keltner, 2009). This suggests that workers' external locus of control may derive in part from feeling controlled by external forces at work, with resulting feelings of alienation. Thus, *intrinsic motivation* at work was also hypothesized to predict alienation.

In Marx's account, another key aspect of alienation is that workers under capitalism are unable to fully develop their abilities in a well-rounded fashion. Because labor is coerced and externally controlled, a worker "does not affirm himself but denies himself, does not feel content but unhappy, does not develop freely his physical and mental energy but mortifies his body and ruins his mind" (Marx, 1844/1978, p. 74). By comparison, something akin to the opposite of alienation is captured by the humanistic concept of *self-actualization*, a process by which humans develop, activate, and express all the potentialities of their being (Maslow, 1950; Rogers, 1961). Based

on this theory, we created a measure of *self-actualization* as a work factor. Finally, because Marxists hold the exploitation of labor to be the objective underpinning of alienation, we created a work factor called *perceived exploitation*, which taps participants' perceptions of the degree to which their labor is exploited.

Class Consciousness

Although social psychologists have examined some psychological effects of social class, less consideration has been given to individuals' understanding of class and their experience of class conflict as a feature of society (Keefer et al., 2015). For Marx, *class consciousness* (and associated activism) is an achievement of workers, who come to realize their shared social status and mutual interest in changing society (Marx, 1847/1995), including its alienating social relations of production. For Lukács (1971), who further developed Marx's ideas, gaining class consciousness involves realizing that social relations are neither natural nor inevitable, but instead are social and ideological constructions of the ruling capitalist class. Class consciousness involves awareness of one's position as a worker within capitalism and the exploitative relations in which one is enmeshed. For the working class, class consciousness involves the notion that the workers as a group have shared interests, and that these interests conflict with the interests of capitalist employers (Keefer et al., 2015). As class consciousness grows, workers may come to feel that they should collectively organize and struggle for greater control over their workplaces, work processes, and the economic and political levers of society in general (Wright, 1997). Ultimately, class consciousness may also entail strategic analysis of the class struggle and envisioning a post-capitalist society in which no hierarchy of social classes exists.

Considering the intimate connection of social class with alienation and class consciousness raises the question of whether the experience of alienation may promote (or hinder) the development of class consciousness. On the one hand, there are reasons to think that alienation might obstruct or divert the potential development of class consciousness. Marcuse (1972), for instance, discusses the growth of consumerism as the product of an alienated labor force that works for purely instrumental, extrinsic goals, and which substitutes consumption for a lack of fulfilment through work. Moreover, Seeman (1967) argues that with the mounting frustration connected with alienation, prejudiced attitudes and outright antagonism towards minorities are likely consequences; this can divide workers and prevent them from recognizing common class interests. However, we contend that the overall net effect of alienation may spur workers toward greater class consciousness, for instance by prompting them to question the exploitative class relations behind alienating work conditions. To shed light on these possibilities, we examined the relation between alienation and class consciousness and how this relation differed among participants from different social classes.

Activism

For Marxists, class consciousness alone is insufficient to alleviate alienation (Lukács, 1971), which ultimately requires activist organizing to transform the social and working conditions that generate alienation. Historically, reforms of working conditions under capitalism have been linked to activism within the labor movement and other social movements. For Marxists, a workers' revolution would herald the most thoroughgoing transformation of alienating conditions. For example, Marxist psychologist Lev Vygotsky argued that a socialist society could overcome alienation and the one-sided, distorted human development that takes place under capitalism by unlocking the "*endless possibilities for the development of the human personality*" contained within labor (1930/1994, p. 179).

Because growing class consciousness among working people would be expected to predict greater activism, we explored the relation between these two factors, as well as their relation to alienation. In addition to changing societal structures, social movements may change individuals' attitudes and psychological experiences (Sawyer & Gampa, 2018). Political activity has been suggested to engender well-being, self-esteem, self-actualization, vitality, life-satisfaction, and other aspects of psychological health (Klar & Kasser, 2009). Moreover, activism may entail a greater sense of control over the social world, beneficial social connections, or a meaningful life project to dedicate oneself to (Stetsenko, 2012). This raises the issue of whether activism may help to mitigate the experience of alienation. We therefore explored the relations between work alienation and its potential 'gravediggers': class consciousness and activism.

Research Questions

Our research questions and hypotheses were as follows:

1. How high is work alienation among U.S. participants, and how does this compare to Nair and Vohra's (2010) sample of Indian knowledge workers? Because the knowledge workers were presumed to have higher levels of education and occupational status than the more occupationally diverse U.S. sample, we expected that work conditions for the U.S. sample would be more alienating (e.g., allowing for less autonomy, self-expression, etc.), resulting in greater work alienation.
2. What are the relative merits of SES and social class in predicting alienation? Based on Marxist theory, we expected the objective (Marxist) class measure to be the strongest predictor of work alienation, and for working-class individuals to be more alienated than middle-class individuals.
3. How well do work factors predict alienation? We hypothesized that the work factors identified by Nair and Vohra (2010) would also predict alienation in our U.S. sample, along with the work factors that we derived from SDT and Marxist theory. Finally, are these work factors predicted by SES and/or social class? Based on Marxist theory, we expected the objective (Marxist) class measure to have particular predictive utility.
4. How do alienation, class consciousness, and activism interrelate? We tentatively anticipated that alienation would be linked to class consciousness, and class consciousness linked to activism. We expected activism to be negatively related to alienation.
5. How might relations between alienation, class consciousness, and activism differ by social class? We anticipated that these links would be stronger among working-class/lower-class participants than middle-class/upper-class participants.

Method

In light of concerns about the replicability of results in psychology (Open Science Collaboration, 2015), we conducted two studies - the second an exact replication of the first - with different sets of participants. In each study, participants received the same 64-item online survey (see Supplemental Information S1 for survey), and results were analyzed in the same manner.

SES and Social Class

The survey collected two measures of SES (subjective and objective) and two measures of social class (subjective and objective). *Objective SES* was a composite of participants' reported income and education levels (both z-scored and averaged). *Subjective SES* was the MacArthur Scale of Subjective Social Status (Adler, Epel, Castellazzo, & Ickovics, 2000), in which participants were asked to select the rung of a ladder that symbolizes their socioeconomic status relative to the rest of the U.S. *Subjective social class* asked participants to choose their class from the following categories: poor, working poor, working class, middle class, upper middle class, and rich. In contrast, our *objective (Marxist) social class* measure asked participants to identify their precise position at work from the choices: worker, freelancer, self-employed professional, middle manager, small business owner, or large business owner (no one selected the last category). This work position was then reclassified using Marxist theory that defines social class by the social relations of production. Thus, the first two categories (worker, freelancer) were classified as working class, and the latter three categories (self-employed professional, middle manager, small business owner) as middle class, creating a dummy-coded variable for middle class/working class.

Study 1 – Participants

Two-hundred forty adult participants in the U.S. (96 women; $M_{\text{Age}} = 35.2$, $SD = 11.1$; 72% White, 14% Asian, 11% Black, <1% Latino, 3% other ethnicities) were recruited through Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk), through which researchers can offer financial compensation for participation in research studies. The participant pool originally included 250 participants, but 10 participants were removed from the sample for failing one or both attention checks that were built into the online survey. With 240 participants, bivariate correlations of $r = .18$ and larger could be reliably detected. MTurk was chosen as a recruitment site based on the need for participants with more work experience and greater socioeconomic diversity than typical college student convenience samples (Casler, Bickel, & Hackett, 2013). Participants were paid \$0.50 for their engagement with the survey, which was described as research on attitudes toward work-related issues. Participants reported a wide variety of jobs within a diverse set of industries (for a summary see S2). Both SES variables were normally distributed (objective SES, $M = 0.0$, $SD = 0.8$; subjective SES, $M = 5.3$, $SD = 1.8$). No participants identified as rich, and subjective class distribution was: poor (5.0%), working poor (14.6%), working class (29.6%), middle class (42.9%), and upper middle class (7.9%). By the Marxist operationalization, the sample was 68.9% working class, and 31.1% middle class.

Study 2 – Participants

The replication study was conducted with 717 participants in the U.S. (498 women; $M_{\text{Age}} = 41.0$, $SD = 12.3$; 80.1% White, 11.9% Black, 1.5% multiracial, 2.0% other ethnicities, 10.9% Hispanic/Latino,) who were recruited by a sampling company. All participants passed both attention checks built into the study. The participant pool originally included 750 participants (achieving .80 power for a small effect size of $r = .1$), but 33 participants who were under age 18 were removed from the sample. As in the first study, participants reported a wide variety of jobs within a diverse set of industries. SES variables were again normally distributed, and the social class makeup of the sample was quite similar. Subjective class identification was: poor (6.7%), working poor (12.6%), working class (37.8%), middle class (35.4%), upper middle class (6.7%), and rich (0.8%). By the Marxist definition, the sample was 72.9% working class and 27.1% middle class.

Measures

Alienation and Work Factors Predicting Alienation

As part of the online survey, participants completed the eight-item Work Alienation Scale ($\alpha = .95$) (Nair & Vohra, 2010). Participants also completed clusters of items tapping aspects of work experience that predicted alienation in Nair and Vohra (2010): *meaningfulness* of work ($\alpha = .70$), opportunity for *self-expression* at work ($\alpha = .93$), and the quality of *work relationships* ($\alpha = .81$). Item clusters based on SDT applied to work contexts were also administered: perceived *autonomy* at work ($\alpha = .64$) (from the Basic Psychological Needs at Work Scale, BPN-W; Brien et al., 2012), and *intrinsic motivation* for work ($\alpha = .71$). Finally, two clusters developed by the authors were included: *self-actualization* through work ($\alpha = .79$) and *perceived exploitation* at work ($\alpha = .88$) (based on Marx, 1867/1983). In total, 16 survey items assessed work factors predicting alienation ($\alpha = .90$).

Class Consciousness

To measure class consciousness, we used a shortened, 13-item version of the Multidimensional Class Consciousness Scale ($\alpha = .77$) (MCCS; Keefer et al., 2015). The MCCS aims to measure a psychological model of class consciousness composed of five factors: *awareness* of social class; perceptions of *class conflict*; beliefs about the *impermeability* of class groups; *identification* with a social class; and personal *experience* of being treated unfairly due to one's social class. The study also employed the Class Consciousness Scale ($\alpha = .61$) (CCS; Wright, 1997). The five-item CCS is more overtly political than the MCCS, measuring the extent to which participants identify with political struggles of the working class, and their willingness to endorse a worker-run workplace. The two scales were later combined into a composite variable ($\alpha = .80$) that measured overall class consciousness.

Activism

To assess activism, the eight-item Activist Identity and Commitment Scale ($\alpha = .98$) (AICS; Klar & Kasser, 2009) was used. Activist identity was measured because activist participation is associated with one's social identity (Stryker, 2000) and because self-identification with activism may be the most direct way to assess it. Commitment to activism was also measured, as commitment features heavily in social movements (e.g., Klandermans, 1997) and is a strong predictor of activist behavior (Stryker, 2000). Similar to Klar and Kasser (2009), we defined activism broadly as advocating for a political cause using a wide variety of means (e.g., letter writing, civil disobedience).

Demographics and Political Orientation

Demographic data was collected on participants' age, gender, race/ethnicity, and status of English as a first language. Two items assessed participants' political orientation (from very liberal to very conservative) on social and economic issues.

Analysis

Analysis proceeded in five stages:

1. Overall levels of alienation in the U.S. samples were compared to Nair and Vohra's (2010) sample of knowledge workers.
2. Relations between the four measures of SES/social class and alienation were examined.
3. The effectiveness of various work factors to predict work alienation was investigated, along with the efficacy of social class variables to predict alienating work factors.

4. Relations between alienation, class consciousness, and activism were examined.
5. Moderation analyses were conducted to determine whether relations between alienation, class consciousness, and activism differed by social class.

Results

Alienation was measured on a 7-point Likert scale, with higher scores indicating greater alienation. Because Nair and Vohra (2010) did not report their sample's mean alienation, we compared our U.S. sample with the knowledge workers in India that they assessed by following their convention of classifying participants with an average score above the scale's midpoint (4) as alienated. In Study 1, mean alienation in the U.S. sample was 3.63 ($SD = 1.62$), with 40.4% of participants ($n = 240$) classified as alienated, significantly higher than the 19.9% rate of alienation among Indian knowledge workers ($n = 1142$), $z = 6.83$, $p < .001$, $d = .55$. In Study 2, 26.9% of participants were alienated, also significantly higher than the sample of Indian knowledge workers, $z = 3.53$, $p < .001$, $d = .22$.

In Study 1, all demographic factors were unrelated to alienation. In Study 2, alienation was significantly but weakly correlated with political orientation on social ($r = .17$, $p = .007$) and economic issues ($r = .17$, $p = .008$). In both cases, the more liberal the participant, the higher their alienation. For all subsequent analyses, alienation was treated as a continuous variable.

Social Class and Alienation

To examine the relative strength of social class and SES measures to predict work alienation, linear regression models were fit with alienation as the dependent variable and the four measures of social class and SES as predictors. Multicollinearity was not an issue in either study, as all tolerance statistics were greater than .6 and all VIF measures less than 1.5. In Study 1, the model revealed significant overall predictive power, $F(4, 233) = 10.38$, $p < .001$, Adj. $R^2 = .14$ (medium effect size). In Study 2, again these combined SES and class measures significantly predicted alienation, $F(4, 712) = 14.15$, $p < .001$, Adj. $R^2 = .07$ (small effect size). Results for both studies are displayed in Table 1.

Table 1

Regression of Alienation on Measures of Social Class and SES

Measures of Social Class / SES	Study 1		Study 2	
	Beta (SE)	<i>p</i>	Beta (SE)	<i>p</i>
Subjective SES	-0.07 (0.06)	.292	-0.23 (0.04)	< .001
Objective SES	0.08 (0.15)	.264	-0.04 (0.09)	.241
Subjective Social Class	-0.26 (0.12)	< .001	0.04 (0.07)	.399
Objective (Marxist) Social Class	-0.25 (0.22)	< .001	-0.14 (0.12)	< .001

Across both studies, objective (Marxist) social class was the only consistently significant predictor of alienation. In Study 1, working-class participants ($M = 3.96$; $SD = 1.59$) were significantly more alienated than middle class participants ($M = 2.89$; $SD = 1.44$), $t(236) = 4.96$, $p < .001$, $d = .69$. In Study 2, again working-class participants ($M = 3.36$, $SD = 1.24$) reported higher levels of alienation than middle-class participants ($M = 2.78$; $SD = 1.41$),

$t(715) = 5.09, p < .001, d = .43$. For both studies combined, weighted $d = .50$, 95% CI [.36, .64], medium effect size.

Work Factors and Alienation

To examine the strength of various work factors to predict alienation, linear regression models were fit with alienation as the dependent variable and all seven work factors as predictors. In Study 1, the model revealed strong overall predictive power, $F(7, 232) = 95.20, p < .001, \text{Adj. } R^2 = .73$ (large effect size), with a very similar pattern in Study 2, $F(7, 709) = 253.53, p < .001, \text{Adj. } R^2 = .71$ (large effect size). Results for each study are displayed in Table 2.

Table 2

Regression of Alienation on Work Factors

Work Factors	Study 1				Study 2			
	Beta (SE)	<i>p</i>	Correlation with Alienation (<i>r</i>)	<i>p</i>	Beta (SE)	<i>p</i>	Correlation with Alienation (<i>r</i>)	<i>p</i>
Self-expression	-0.30 (0.05)	< .001	-.77	< .001	-0.04 (0.03)	.910	-.64	< .001
Work relationships	-0.17 (0.05)	< .001	-.63	< .001	-0.15 (0.03)	< .001	-.56	< .001
Meaningfulness	0.08 (0.06)	.132	-.50	< .001	-0.25 (0.04)	< .001	-.77	< .001
Self-actualization	-0.25 (0.05)	< .001	-.75	< .001	-0.06 (0.03)	.044	-.63	< .001
Autonomy	-0.13 (0.06)	.021	-.66	< .001	-0.21 (0.03)	< .001	-.72	< .001
Intrinsic motivation	-0.18 (0.06)	< .001	-.60	< .001	-0.27 (0.03)	< .001	-.75	< .001
Perceived exploitation	0.13 (0.04)	.002	.51	< .001	0.07 (0.02)	.003	.49	< .001

All work factors showed strong and significant bivariate correlations with alienation, in expected directions. Self-expression, quality of relationships, meaningfulness, self-actualization, autonomy, and intrinsic motivation at work were all negatively related to alienation, while perceived exploitation was positively correlated with alienation.

Social Class and Work Factors

To compare the relative strength of social class and SES measures to predict work factors held to be precursors of alienation, linear regression models were fit. Because the seven work factors were strongly correlated ($ICC = .88$), a composite work factor variable was created, which was then regressed on the four social class and SES predictors. In Study 1, the model revealed significant overall predictive power, $F(4, 233) = 17.42, p < .001, \text{Adj. } R^2 = .22$ (medium effect size), and again in Study 2 composite work factors were significantly predicted by these social class and SES measures, $F(4, 712) = 19.85, p < .001, \text{Adj. } R^2 = .10$ (small effect size). Results for both studies are displayed in Table 3.

Across studies, subjective SES and objective (Marxist) social class were consistently significant predictors, such that working-class participants and subjectively lower-class participants experienced more alienating work factors. For both studies combined, objective (Marxist) social class had a weighted effect size of $d = .50$, 95% CI [.36, .64], (medium effect); and subjective SES had weighted $r = .26$, 95% CI [.20, .32], (small effect).

Table 3

Regression of Composite Work Factors on Measures of Social Class and SES

Measures of Social Class / SES	Study 1		Study 2	
	Beta (SE)	<i>p</i>	Beta (SE)	<i>p</i>
Subjective SES	0.12 (0.04)	.043	0.28 (0.03)	< .001
Objective SES	-0.08 (0.10)	.235	0.02 (0.08)	.665
Subjective Social Class	0.32 (0.08)	< .001	-0.03 (0.06)	.547
Objective (Marxist) Social Class	0.29 (0.15)	< .001	0.14 (0.10)	< .001

Work Alienation, Class Consciousness, and Activism

To examine the relation between class consciousness, activism, and work alienation, a correlation table was created using the CCS and MCCS (and subscales) to measure class consciousness, along with activism (AICS) and work alienation scales. Because the two class consciousness scales were strongly correlated ($r = .52$, $p < .001$), an overall class consciousness composite was created by z-scoring and averaging the two scales. As Table 4 shows, in both studies, overall class consciousness was related to both alienation and activism.

Table 4

Pearson Correlations Between Class Consciousness, Alienation, and Activism

Measure	Study 1				Study 2			
	Alienation	<i>p</i>	Activism	<i>p</i>	Alienation	<i>p</i>	Activism	<i>p</i>
Class Consciousness Composite	.29	< .001	.28	< .001	.21	< .001	.22	< .001
Activism (AICS)	-.02	.740	–	–	-.08	.037	–	–

Across both studies, the total weighted correlations were: alienation—class consciousness ($r = .23$, 95% CI [.17, .29], small effect size); class consciousness—activism ($r = .24$, 95% CI [.18, .30], small effect size); and activism—alienation ($r = -.07$, 95% CI [-.13, -.01], trivial effect). For an exploratory analysis involving the work factors' efficacy in predicting class consciousness and activism, please see S3.

Moderation Analyses

To explore whether relations between alienation, class consciousness, and activism differed by social class, we conducted moderator analyses with the four social-class/SES measures, using Hayes' PROCESS module 3.3 for SPSS (Hayes, 2013). Because of the trivial correlation between alienation and activism, this relation was excluded from analysis.

Alienation – Class Consciousness Relation

In Study 1, all four measures of social class/SES significantly moderated the relation between alienation and class consciousness. In all cases, this relation was stronger among lower-class/SES participants than higher-class/SES participants: objective (Marxist) social class, $\Delta R^2 = .015$, $\Delta F(1, 234) = 3.90$, $p = .050$, $b = -0.15$; subjective social class, $\Delta R^2 = .016$, $\Delta F(1, 236) = 4.38$, $p = .037$, $b = -0.06$; objective SES, $\Delta R^2 = .017$, $\Delta F(1, 236) = 4.38$, $p = .037$,

$b = -0.08$; and subjective SES, $\Delta R^2 = .013$, $\Delta F(1, 236) = 3.91$, $p = .049$, $b = -0.03$. These moderating effects are depicted in Figure 1.

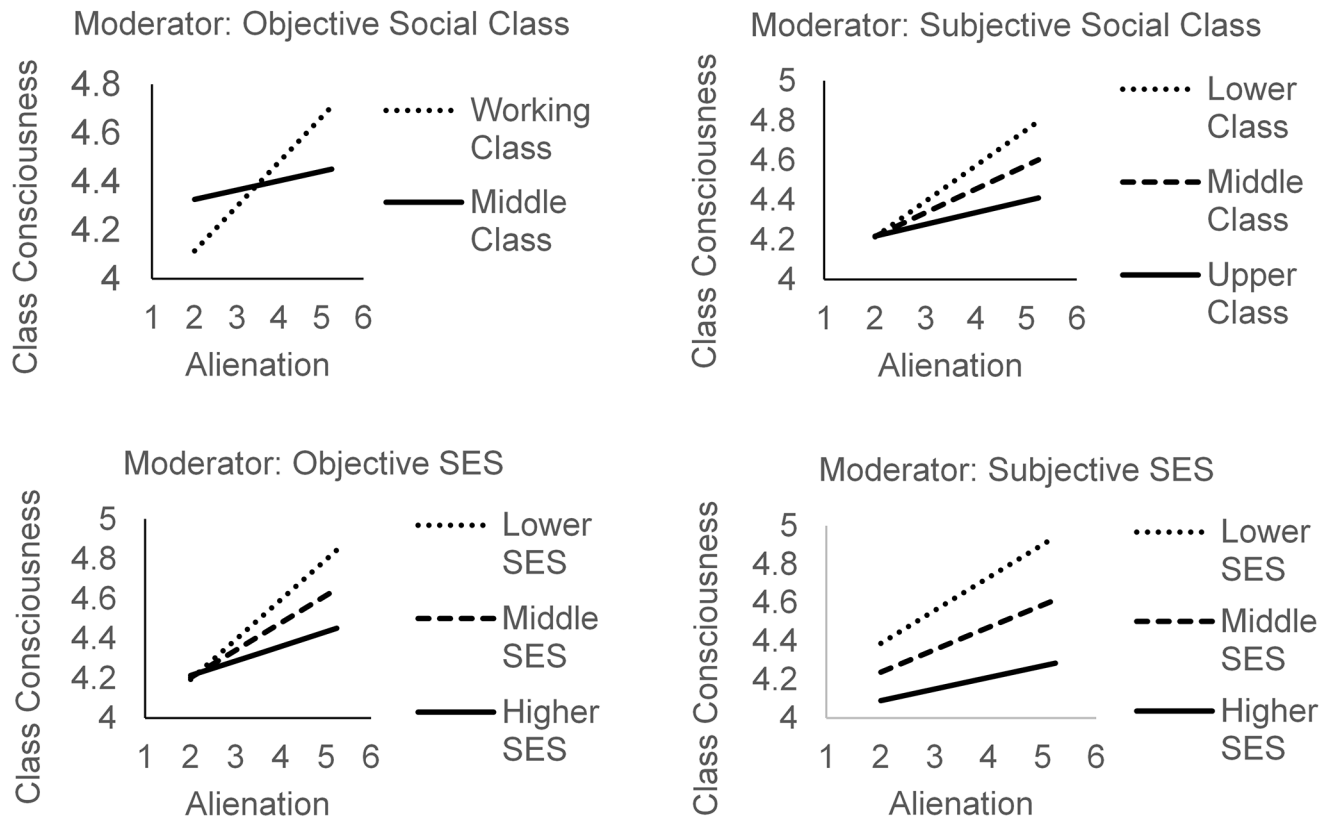


Figure 1. In Study 1, the relation between alienation and class consciousness was stronger among lower-class/lower-SES participants.

In Study 2, by contrast, no measure of social class/SES significantly moderated the relation between alienation and class consciousness (ΔR^2 ranged from .001 to .004, p values from .075 to .683).

Class Consciousness – Activism Relation

In Study 1, none of the measures of social class or SES significantly moderated the relation between class consciousness and activism (ΔR^2 ranged from .002 to .011, p values from .091 to .408). In Study 2, subjective social class, $\Delta R^2 = .008$, $\Delta F(1, 713) = 6.55$, $p = .011$, $b = 0.17$, and objective (Marxist) social class, $\Delta R^2 = .007$, $\Delta F(1, 713) = 5.80$, $p = .016$, $b = 0.40$, were significant moderators, such that the relation between class consciousness was stronger among participants with higher subjective or objective social class.

Summary of Moderation Across Studies

Weighted-average effect sizes for moderation of alienation – class consciousness and class consciousness – activism relations across studies are summarized in Table 5.

Table 5

Effect Sizes for Moderation by Social Class/SES Measures Across Studies

Measures of Social Class / SES	Alienation—Class Consciousness		Class Consciousness—Activism	
	ΔR^2 [95% CI]	Effect size	ΔR^2 [95% CI]	Effect size
Objective (Marxist) social class	.005 [.001, .009]	Small	.005 [.001, .009]	Small
Subjective social class	.007 [.003, .011]	Small	.009 [.005, .013]	Small
Objective SES	.005 [.001, .009]	Small	.001 [-.003, .005]	--
Subjective SES	.003 [-.001, .007]	Trivial	.003 [-.001, .007]	--

For both relations, effect sizes were consistently significant and nontrivial for moderation by social class (subjective and Marxist), but not by SES (objective or subjective). Participants who were subjectively lower-class or objectively working-class had a stronger link between alienation and class consciousness, but a weaker relation between class consciousness and activism.

Discussion

Work is vital to human existence and central to human psychology. As a result, “the circumstances under which we work...have deep implications for intellectual and personal development” (Scribner, 1988/1997, p. 368). Building on Marxist theory suggesting widespread alienation under capitalism, this paper makes the case for applying Marxist theory to the study of work alienation within social and political psychology. In addition to examining how well various measures of social class and working conditions predicted alienation, we also investigated the link between alienation and psychological factors that may contribute to its alleviation: class consciousness and activism. In view of concern over replicability of psychological findings, two identical studies were conducted with different participant pools.

Results from the five analyses are summarized below for both studies. First, the overall level of alienation in our U.S. sample of diverse occupations was significantly higher than the level among Nair and Vohra’s (2010) knowledge workers in both our initial study and its replication. We speculate that this may be partly due to poorer working conditions associated with overall lower occupational status and more working-class makeup of the U.S. sample, in comparison with relatively higher-status Indian knowledge workers, who may have been more middle class. For instance, if lower-status U.S. workers experienced less opportunity for self-actualization, self-expression, and autonomy, along with greater perceived exploitation at work, we would expect this to be reflected in greater work alienation, which is what this study found among the U.S. sample. Although Nair and Vohra (2010) did not report descriptive data on work factors, future comparative research (across cultures, workplaces, or political systems) would benefit from considering such data.

Second, across both studies, our objective (Marxist) measure of social class was the only consistently significant predictor of alienation (while subjective social class, subjective SES, and objective SES were not). Using the Marxist definition of social class, based upon the relations of production, working-class participants were significantly more alienated than their middle-class counterparts across studies. This supports the Marxist notion that psychological alienation is premised upon an objective separation of workers from the means of production, an effect that may be somewhat mitigated among the self-employed professionals, middle managers, and small

business owners that comprise the middle class. The relative strength of the Marxist measure of class to predict alienation suggests that it was more effective than subjective social class or SES measures in capturing the ways that class dynamics impact psychological alienation.

Third, across both studies, all work factors that we included showed strong and significant bivariate correlations with alienation. As expected, self-expression, quality of relationships, meaningfulness, self-actualization, autonomy, and intrinsic motivation at work were all negatively related to alienation, while perceived exploitation was positively correlated with alienation. Thus, the work factors that predicted alienation in [Nair and Vohra's \(2010\)](#) sample – poor work relationships, lack of self-expression, and low meaningfulness of work – were also strongly related to alienation in our U.S. sample. This provides cross-cultural support for these authors' alienation scale – based in Marxist theory – and the work factors predicting alienation in both cultural contexts. In addition, the new work factors that we developed based on SDT (lack of autonomy and low intrinsic motivation at work) and Marxist theory (absence of self-actualization and high perceived exploitation) were also strong predictors of alienation. Across studies, subjective SES and objective (Marxist) social class were the only consistently significant predictors of alienating work factors, such that working-class and subjectively lower-class participants experienced more alienating working conditions.

Fourth, across both studies, alienation was significantly related to class consciousness, and class consciousness in turn was significantly related to activism. Unexpectedly, however, activism was essentially unrelated to alienation. One possible interpretation is that although experiencing alienation may be associated with greater class consciousness, and class consciousness linked to increased activism, activism is not sufficient to decrease alienation, despite its reported psychological benefits. It remains to be seen what types of activism may lessen alienation, or if activism that wins workplace reforms could ameliorate alienation.

Finally, moderation analyses yielded mixed results and substantial variation across studies. Summarizing alienation—class consciousness and class consciousness—activism relations for both studies, combined effect sizes were consistently significant and nontrivial only for the two social class measures (subjective and Marxist). In each case, subjectively lower-class and working-class participants displayed a stronger link between alienation and class consciousness, but a weaker relation between class consciousness and activism than subjectively higher-class and middle-class participants. While needing further substantiation, results raise the possibility that subjectively lower-class and working-class participants may be more likely to develop class consciousness in tandem with alienation, but less likely to translate class consciousness into activism.

Of the four social class measures, only the objective (Marxist) measure consistently predicted both alienating working conditions and work alienation across studies. Working-class participants by the Marxist definition experienced greater alienation, more alienating work factors, and a stronger link between alienation and class consciousness than middle-class participants. Considering these consistent relations to alienation and related variables of interest, it appears that the Marxist operationalization of social class was the most illuminating of the class measures employed in this study. While subjective and objective SES measures have been the dominant means for assessing social class within psychology, this study suggests that the field would benefit from integrating Marxist conceptions of class. In addition to the utility of Marxist measures in studying alienation, there is reason to think this objective, relational class measure may reveal other important differences in the psychology of social classes, or perhaps reveal them more sharply than gradational SES measures. Class boundaries are relatively arbitrary in the continuous scales of objective and subjective SES measures, but relational understandings of

class (Wright, 2015) have the potential advantage of defining classes according to their meaningful relations and dynamics of interaction and conflict with other classes. For Marxism, classes are interrelated through the social relations of production, theorized as the source of both alienation and the class consciousness that can arise to challenge class exploitation. Future work in social and political psychology could gain by employing Marxist conceptions of social class and comparing the utility of Marxist class measures with more common SES constructs.

Taken as a whole, results suggest the utility of applying Marxist theory and constructs to the psychological study of alienation and class consciousness. Marxist ideas such as false consciousness have made contributions to social and political psychology in the form of system justification theory (e.g., Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004), and we believe similar promise is held by Marxist notions of social class, alienation, and class consciousness. This study is the first to our knowledge to explore links between psychological alienation and factors like class consciousness and activism that could potentially challenge it. As an initial foray, the present study is limited in assessing the directionality of influence between alienation, class consciousness, and activism. For instance, rather than alienation leading to class consciousness, higher class consciousness could also lead to greater felt alienation. Although directionality is uncertain, the linear regressions, correlations, and moderation analyses conducted here lay the ground for future work that could test structural equation models or incorporate experimental evidence to help clarify the directionality of influence between key factors.

One of the aims of this work was to understand how alienation and class consciousness might relate to worker activism. For members of all social classes, greater class consciousness was linked to stronger activist identity and commitment. While identity and commitment to activism both strongly predict activist behavior, future work could directly assess participants' activist behavior or their willingness to participate in activism that is specific to the workplace. In addition, while catalyzing class consciousness and activism is one way that alienation might contribute to its own undoing, other possibilities should be explored. For instance, might the experience of alienation not only impact workers' *explicit* class attitudes (i.e. class consciousness), but also their *implicit* attitudes toward capitalists or fellow workers? How might implicit class attitudes relate to class consciousness or workplace activism? Future research may also explore factors that impede or encourage class consciousness and activism among alienated workers and investigate these links in the context of current workplace struggles.

Considering the larger political picture, U.S. workers have experienced stagnant wages for more than three decades while the capitalist class has seen explosive growth in compensation and profit margins. Many workers are forced to work low-wage jobs that they dislike. In such a climate, research into subjective experiences of alienation, class consciousness, and ways that workers mobilize against alienation and exploitation is urgently needed. The 2008 economic crash and intervening years have seen the return of Marxist analyses to political and scientific consideration, including in social and political psychology. We suggest that Marxist theory applied to psychology can be a useful tool for illuminating the dynamics of social class, work conditions, alienation, and the class consciousness and activism that can contest inequitable conditions.

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Competing Interests

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Supplementary Materials

The Supplemental Information for this article contains: 1) our complete online survey, with its various constructs and instruments labeled; 2) A summary of the variety of jobs and diverse set of industries reported by participants; and 3) an exploratory analysis of the work factors' efficacy in predicting class consciousness and activism (for access, see Index of [Supplementary Materials](#) below).

Index of Supplementary Materials

Sawyer, J. E., & Gampa, A. (2020). *Supplementary materials to "Work alienation and its gravediggers: Social class, class consciousness, and activism"*. PsychOpen. <https://doi.org/10.23668/psycharchives.2744>

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