Work As A Neurodivergent Experience

Research Project Report

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Alienation and Social Consciousness

Alienation—a Marxist concept first articulated by Hegel. While highly prominent in academic spaces, it is also a widely felt and understood sensation in everyday life. An extensive review of the literature, understandably, links alienation to capitalism, labor estrangement, globalized neoliberalism, and to racial, gender, and other social and cultural power dynamics and shifts. Other key terms include "bifurcation," powerlessness, cultural degradation, "non-existence," delegitimation, subsumption of self, devaluation, meaninglessness, scapegoating, estrangement, capitalist domination, play reductionism, loss of freedom, autonomy reduction, "othering," dehumanization, and the mechanization of self. At its core is the understanding that, whether economic or social, the current socioeconomic and political environment we live in forces an unnatural, dissonance-inducing fracture within social consciousness—disrupting our deeply social, anthropological roots. Every individual in society experiences alienation, even those with perceivable power advantages.

Importantly, there is a causal link between alienation and the onset of social anxiety and anger, and a correlational relationship between neurodivergence and alienating structures (e.g., work, patriarchal families, racialized spaces). That is, alienation affects those with pre-existing neurodivergence, can create new neurodivergence, and is also shaped by those with neurodivergence in unique ways (e.g., exacerbating the sense of alienation or providing unique experiences that influence the atmosphere of the environment).

Neurodivergence, Work, and Structural Implications

How neurodivergent people experience the workplace, and how the workplace creates, exacerbates, or addresses neurodivergence, is a pressing topic for social science research as new

pathways toward social cohesion are considered. Understanding, or "awakened consciousness," is the primary building block of meaningful shifts in societal structure, even when these shifts are gradual and span long periods of time. Marx grounds this notion in class consciousness; when people recognize alienation as structural rather than personal, it leads to revolutionary or reformist change (Marx 1844). Conditions must be understood. Gramsci echoes this with his concept of hegemony; people consent to it unconsciously, and social transformation requires a slow, cultural awakening—a "war of position" (Gramsci 1947). The Frankfurt School carries this forward with the idea of critical awareness and Marcuse's one-dimensional man. Other prominent sociological theorists who echo this sentiment include Foucault, Bourdieu, Du Bois, Dorothy Smith, and Paulo Freire.

Beyond meaning-making, though, is action-awakening. My annotated bibliography delves extensively into the literature on alienation, anxiety, and anger and their interrelationships. Of course, the most prominent vein of alienation is the workforce, but Embrick and Williams (2023), Falkof (2020), Sweet (2023), and Van Oort (2019) make important connections between alienation and race, gender, and other cultural forces and phenomena. So I want to spend time here focusing more on the action-awakening aspect of this topic.

Situating the Data

Large-scale survey and policy data indicate that the experiences described in the theoretical literature are neither marginal nor isolated but widespread across contemporary labor markets. Global workforce data show that only 21 percent of employees are engaged in their work, while 62 percent are not engaged and 17 percent are actively disengaged, reflecting a broad pattern of psychological detachment from work (Gallup 2005). Across regions,

approximately 40 percent of workers report experiencing stress for much of the previous workday, with rates approaching 50 percent in the United States, Canada, and comparable regions (Gallup 2005). These findings corroborate the overwhelming anecdotal evidence and the existing literature, confirming that stress and disengagement are normalized features of work rather than exceptional responses to extreme conditions.

More recent U.S.-based employer data mirror these global patterns. Survey data indicate that 39 percent of U.S. employees report feeling stressed, 35 percent report burnout, and 22 percent report depressive symptoms, alongside year-over-year declines in engagement, sense of belonging, and self-rated productivity (MetLife 2025). Younger workers report particularly sharp declines in holistic well-being, and even work arrangements often framed as protective—such as hybrid or remote work—show mixed effects, with some gains in engagement accompanied by elevated stress and deteriorating health outcomes over time.

Beyond prevalence, multiple policy analyses converge on the conclusion that mental health outcomes are strongly shaped by the organization and quality of work. Analyses from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development identify poor job quality as a primary driver of work-related mental ill-health, emphasizing psychosocial risks such as high workloads, limited participation in decision-making, unclear organizational objectives, and inadequate supervisory support (OECD 2012). A central structural mechanism identified across countries is "job strain," defined as the combination of high psychological demands and low decision latitude. Exposure to job strain significantly increases the likelihood of developing both moderate and severe mental disorders and has risen over time across many occupations, particularly among workers in lower-skilled or more precarious roles (OECD 2012).

Precarious employment further intensifies these risks. OECD and International Labour Organization analyses indicate that perceived job insecurity is strongly associated with anxiety, depression, and stress, and that the anticipation of job loss may be more detrimental to mental health than job loss itself (OECD 2012; International Labour Organization 2022). Workers on temporary contracts face wage penalties, reduced access to social protections, and substantially higher concerns about job security than those on indefinite contracts, functioning as "shock absorbers" during periods of economic instability (OECD 2012).

These structural risks are unevenly distributed. Data from the American Psychological Association indicate that workers with cognitive, emotional, learning, or mental disabilities are significantly more likely to report working in toxic environments and to work more hours than desired, suggesting persistent violations of work–life boundaries for this group (American Psychological Association 2024). Younger workers similarly report substantially worse self-rated mental health than older cohorts, and OECD data show that young people with mental health conditions face elevated risks of educational dropout and long-term labor market exclusion early in adulthood (OECD 2012).

Emerging technological and organizational shifts appear to compound existing anxieties rather than alleviate them. Research from the Pew Research Center indicates that a majority of U.S. workers are worried about the future use of artificial intelligence in the workplace, particularly regarding job obsolescence and electronic surveillance (Pew Research Center 2025). Nearly half of U.S. workers report being electronically monitored at work, a practice linked to higher stress, feelings of micromanagement, and greater intent to leave one's job (American Psychological Association 2024). Anxiety about AI and surveillance is most pronounced in workplaces with low psychological safety, suggesting that technological change interacts with

existing organizational climates rather than operating independently. I think back here to Van Oort (2019) and her ethnographic work on exploring the impact of technology and surveillance in fast fashion.

Institutional responses to these trends increasingly emphasize prevention, early intervention, and accommodation. Policy guidance from the World Health Organization and the ILO prioritizes organizational interventions, manager training, and reasonable accommodations, with the stated aim of enabling people with mental health conditions to remain engaged in the labor market (World Health Organization 2013; World Health Organization and International Labour Organization 2022). While these approaches represent a shift away from purely reactive treatment models, they largely operate within existing workplace structures and assume the continued centrality of paid work as the primary site of social participation and well-being.

Lived Experience, Performance, and the Cost of Coping

In a Reddit subthread r/bipolar, those struggling with bipolar disorder and coping with work shared some damning remarks that, frankly, resonate with even those considered "neurotypical":

> *[deleted]*
>
> • 2y ago
>
> It takes a lot of energy to put on a facade. Go home and feel completely drained scrambling to find enough energy level for self care. The edges begin to fray and the facade begins to wear down.

In my experience, we are also not a good group for superficial things and interactions. I spent/spend a lot of time wondering about existentialism. The people, because of the need to disassociate after a while, begin to seem like Sims. Also, of course, we are not a monolith, but in uncreative jobs it does/did feel like my soul was slowly being drained. I think about not existing enough as it is and it's hard to find any meaning in most jobs to make it worth it.

Ru_rehtaeh

•2y ago

I've never managed to keep a job for a year. Eventually my facade cracked and the parts of me that I didn't want others to see would spill out and I couldnt plug up the holes. I also have ADHD and between that and my bipolar disorder and ocd I get frustrated when my routine is interrupted. It wasn't usually myself but the actions of those around me that would have me worn out.

It is so very hard to pretend like there's nothing wrong, especially when you're dealing with mania or depression. Being able to do that takes so much energy and definitely doesn't make you inept. It ultimately comes down to hopefully finding a job that works with your strengths. But you are not inept, and you are not failing. We're just works in progress.

Erving Goffman's dramaturgical theory presents the idea of the "masks" we wear in different social settings, and I think many people would resonate with the idea that one of the most uncomfortable, tightest masks we wear is at work. It's often the most coercive

dramaturgical site because exit costs are real, a reality that stems from a sense of alienation. That is, we "put on a façade," as the Redditor articulated, burying our true feelings and performing as subsumed, mechanized beings to produce a good or service for someone else.

How do we combat this? Can we? Do we cope with it without the system as it is? Do we transform it? Do we sit with the discomfort to catalyze change?

If we ameliorate symptoms, do we diminish the critical awareness needed for reform? What is the cost to those suffering if we don't combat this (i.e., the "reform vs revolt dilemma")? Sociologically, this is a debate—using tools such as occupational therapy to address life "as is" rather than change the circumstances one is coping with.

There's a loop here. Work and alienation produce exhaustion, numbness, and internalization. Teaching someone to cope without changing conditions can serve as social pacification, but withholding coping is also violent. Doing so effectively asks already-precarious people to bear the cost of transformation on their bodies.

Where To? – Alienation

At its core, the only way to truly eradicate alienation and its byproducts is to strip away the core alienating mechanism in whatever space that may be. In the workplace, one theory of doing this has been cooperative work, where workers more democratically participate in their workplaces and own them. There is a great deal of literature suggesting that worker self-determination and worker cooperatives would indeed reduce alienation, or at minimum, target its symptomatology in a correlative manner. Yet something we are confronted with that might change this entire conversation completely is AI and the new technological revolution.

With the rapid rise of technology and the ever-approaching reality that productivity and tasks will be heavily outsourced to non-human entities, the very nature of work and its

justification for existing will be increasingly challenged and altered. There will be a need to shift the conversation away from work itself and toward how to benefit from the profits of technology and how to adequately distribute resources to a newly "work-lite" population.

Conclusion

What emerges from this analysis is not a simple call for better coping strategies, nor a singular policy prescription, but a recognition of the structural limits of work as it is currently organized. Neurodivergent distress in the workplace is not an aberration to be accommodated at the margins; it is a diagnostic signal of deeper contradictions within contemporary political-economic arrangements. As technological change accelerates and the necessity of human labor is increasingly questioned, the persistence of alienating work structures becomes harder to justify. If work no longer functions as a reliable source of meaning, security, or social integration, then continuing to organize social life around it risks intensifying precisely the anxiety, anger, and alienation this project documents. The question is not merely how neurodivergent people can survive work, but whether work—as a dominant institution—can survive its own conditions of possibility.