Beyond Dis-identification: Towards a Theory of Self-alienation in Contemporary Organizations

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Abstract

Dis-identification has become a key research area in organization studies, demonstrating how employees subjectively distance themselves from managerial domination by protecting/constructing their more ‘authentic’ identities. But how should we understand situations where even these ‘real’ selves are experienced as alien and foreign? We revise the theory of self-alienation to explain cases beyond dis-identification, where even back-stage identities (‘who we really are’) are considered something polluted, objectified and foreign. Drawing on an illustrative empirical vignette of a consultant, we demonstrate how a revised version of self-alienation might usefully capture experiences of work where the back-stage/front-stage boundary breaks down. We tentatively posit three causes of this self-alienation in relation to contemporary organizations, and discuss their significance in the context of organizational dis-identification.

Key words: authenticity, culture management, dis-identification, imaginary, narrative, power, self-alienation