

Seeman M. On the meaning of alienation. *Amer. Sociol. Rev.* 24:783-91, 1959.
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Alienation is examined as a pervasive theme in classical and modern sociology. An organized view of alternative meanings of alienation is presented, in a form oriented toward their modern empirical use. Five varieties of alienation are identified: powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, isolation, and self-estrangement. [The *Social Sciences Citation Index*[®] (SSCI)[®] indicates that this paper has been cited in over 350 publications since 1966.]

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"Three personal aspects of this work might be of interest: (1) it documents the often-praised interplay between teaching and research; (2) it was a successful example (rarer than one might think) of interdisciplinary collaboration; and (3) it illustrates how a work's success can bring irritation as well as pride.

"My concern for clarifying the meaning of alienation began when I taught a course on 'prejudice and personality.' My text was the then new *The Authoritarian Personality*,¹ and I soon recognized the cloudiness of both the text and my teaching when it came to explicating the section on alienation as a source of anti-Semitism. My dissatisfaction led me to struggle with an idea which was, at that time, essentially being 'rediscovered' (not only through the long-lost Marxian Paris manuscripts, but also in Durkheim, de Tocqueville, Weber, and others).

"Since a key element in my developing schema involved the sense of powerlessness, I readily found a congenial parallel in Julian Rotter's embryonic concern about 'internal vs. external control' (I-E). Rotter, the late Shephard Liverant, and I constituted ourselves as a team at the Second Interdisciplinary Conference at the University of New Mexico, and it was there that much of the conceptual work was accomplished on

what was eventually to appear as the well-known I-E scale.² My parallel work on the alienation concept profited more than is commonly appreciated from this collaborative work (e.g., though there is a good deal more to 'alienation' than powerlessness, my conception of the latter is thoroughly consistent with the distinction between inter-nality and externality).

"Though I am naturally pleased that this paper has been influential, I confess to a certain irritation when (not too rarely) this paper, now two decades old, is cited in splendid isolation as though it is the late word on alienation, ignoring subsequent conceptual refinements and empirical applications. My purpose in elaborating the varieties of alienation as I did was, above all, to make the classic idea more useful in empirical studies of contemporary society. Hence, for me, the publications that followed the 1959 piece—e.g., the studies of social learning in hospitals, prisons, and politics; or the studies of alienation in work—are as important as the original conceptualization (if not more so). The recent summary reviews of research in this field are equally cases in point,^{3,4} since they clarify some issues that were not aptly treated in the original work (e.g., how to deal with the dimension of 'social isolation').

"Finally, why has the paper been so frequently cited? Perhaps because it really didn't settle anything. It dealt with a concept that was central to the then reemerging Marxist perspective in the social sciences, and it appeared at a time of discontent and transition that suited the idea of alienation (the turbulent 1960s). That it didn't settle anything helped in that the paper became a counterfoil for those who opposed its empiricism and its separation of social critique from demonstration. I certainly can't say that it was successful because of its immediately recognizable excellence: indeed, it drew an unenthusiastic evaluation from an important referee for *American Sociological Review*. Perhaps there is a message there of sorts for critics who would judge too harshly: the unimpressed reviewer finally decided that perhaps others would find the analysis useful and (wisely in retrospect?) recommended its publication despite his doubts."

1. Adorno T W, Frenkel-Brunswick E, Levinson D J & Sanford R N. *The authoritarian personality*. New York: Harper & Row, 1950. 990 p.
2. Rotter J B, Seeman M & Liverant S. Internal versus external control of reinforcement: a major variable in behavior theory. (Washburne N F, ed.) *Decisions, values and groups*. London: Pergamon Press, 1962. Vol. 2. p. 473-516.
3. Seeman M. Alienation studies. *Annu. Rev. Sociol.* 1:91-123, 1975.
4. ----- Alienation and engagement. (Campbell A & Converse P E, eds.) *The human meaning of social change*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1972. p. 467-527.