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**Correlates of work-alienation and positive job attitudes in high and low-status  
workers**

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## **Abstract**

**Purpose** - The concept of alienation boasts a long history in the academic literature. However, their empirical relations are not clear. The present study aimed at testing a model of correlates of alienation. Since occupational status plays a key role in alienation processes, such model was tested with high and low-status workers.

**Design/Methodology/Approach** – Participants were 340 workers holding high-status (N=98) and low-status (N=242) positions. Data was collected through a self-report questionnaire. We verified the hypothesized relationships by means of a structural equation modeling, simultaneously tested on high- and low-status workers.

**Findings** – Results showed that individual determinants of alienation, i.e. locus of control, appear to play a more relevant role for high-status professionals, whereas organizational dimensions, i.e. perception of decision making, have an impact only for low-status workers. Relational variables, i.e. work-family conflict, fostered alienation, regardless the status. Concerning outcomes, alienation decreased both job satisfaction and job involvement.

**Research limitations/implications** – The specificities of the cultural context have to be considered. Generalising our results to other cultural contexts requires caution.

**Practical implications** – Work alienation has a negative influence on work attitudes that can be better managed by the knowledge of alienation's correlates and peculiarities.

**Originality/Value** – The study confirms the relevance of alienation for workers' satisfaction and involvement highlighting the difference between high and low-status workers.

**Keywords:** Work alienation; Occupational status; Job satisfaction; Job involvement; Structural equations modelling.

## **Correlates of work-alienation and positive job attitudes in high and low-status workers**

### **Introduction**

The concept of alienation boasts a long history in the academic literature since the XVIII century. It was studied and discussed across several subjects such as theology, philosophy, sociology, psychology, and psychiatry (Nair & Vohra, 2009). Karl Marx (1844/1961) was the first author that developed the concept of *work alienation*. His thinking is a harsh criticism of the new era of capitalism and industrialization as he highlights the system of big factories and its consequences on the exploitation of workers. Following Marx, these organizations lead individuals to lose their own identity and autonomy by becoming exclusively workers, because of the strict hierarchy that completely controls them and their job. Therefore, Marx posits four forms of alienation: alienation from the product of work, alienation in the process of production, alienation from self, and alienation from others (Marx, 1844/1961).

Subsequently, alienation has been discussed as the mode of experience in which a person experiences him/herself alienated (Fromm, 1955) or estranged from the self (Nair & Vohra, 2009). Modern scholars – especially social and organizational psychologists – differ from Marx in one important aspect: While he looked at *work alienation* as an objective dimension, recent studies examine the subjective aspect of the construct, focusing on alienation as perceived by the worker (Kanungo, 1982). Seeman (1959) was the first author to present a contemporary explanation of *work alienation* proposing a multidimensional construct, composed of powerlessness (lack of control over environmental circumstances), meaninglessness (perception that work outputs are trivial), normlessness (conditions in which traditions or norms do not

apply), isolation (unsatisfied need to affiliate) and self-estrangement (unrewarding work conditions) (Chiaburu, Thundiyil, & Wang, 2014). Following this multidimensional definition, many empirical studies based their research on this model of *work alienation* (Blauner, 1964; Dean, 1961; Seeman, 1967; Shepard, 1977). Nonetheless, Seeman's (1959) conceptualization has been criticized for not adequately capturing alienation when operationalized and for a failure to delineate relations among the five dimensions (Overend, 1975). More recently, researchers (Banai, Reisel, & Probst, 2004; Hirschfeld & Feild, 2000) have tended to return to the unidimensional conceptualization of *work alienation* (Nair & Vohra, 2009).

In the present study, we relied on the unidimensional definition of alienation advanced by Nair and Vohra (2009), assuming *work alienation* as estrangement or disengagement from work role (Ashforth, 1989; Hirschfeld & Feild, 2000; Nair & Vohra, 2009).

### **Correlates of work alienation**

Despite its widespread conceptualization, the empirical relations of the work alienation with its hypothesized antecedents and with its consequences are not clear nor unambiguous (see Chiaburu et al., 2014). Typically, when investigating its causes, alienation is linked to individual differences and to structural predictors: Some researchers posited that alienation can result from low-self-esteem (Heaven & Bester, 1986), reduced self-efficacy (Marshall, Michaels, & Mulki, 2007) or need for achievement (Barrick, Mount, & Strauss, 1993). Others pointed out the role of structural predictors, such as role stressors (Michaels, Cron, Dubinsky, & Joachimsthaler, 1988), job characteristics (e.g. feedback or autonomy, Banai & Reisel, 2007; Hackman & Oldham, 1980) or work context (e.g. bureaucratization or organizational support, in Eisenberger, Fasolo, & Davis-LaMastro, 1990; autonomy,

task variety and identity, social support at work, in Shantz, Alfes, Bailey, & Soane, 2015).

Considering its outcomes, literature considers both the effects of work alienation on individual well-being, and on job attitudes and behaviours. Examples of the former are the increase of strain, burnout and health symptoms in alienated workers (Armstrong-Stassen, 2004; Maslach & Jackson, 1981). On the other side, work alienation can affect important job attitudes (e.g. organizational commitment or job insecurity, Armstrong-Stassen, 2004; O'Reilly & Chatman, 1986) and lead to counterproductive behaviours (e.g. intentional avoidance, Sackett, 2002) or – lastly – can produce negative side effects (e.g. alcohol or drug abuse, Erickson, 1987; Gupta & Jenkins, 1984).

The current study aimed at testing a model involving correlates of work alienation.

Because of the evidence that correlates of alienation can refer to individual differences, to social environment, and to work context, we focused on three antecedents of work alienation: one at the individual level, i.e., locus of control; one at the relational level, i.e., work-family conflict, and one related to the characteristics of work, i.e., decision making. Moreover, we investigated the relation of work alienation with two outcomes, namely job satisfaction and job involvement, particularly relevant in linking job attitudes, job performances and well-being.

#### *Alienation and locus of control*

The locus of control is the extent to which individuals believe that they can influence events that affect them (Rotter, 1966). The perception of personal control has been shown related to well-being at work, both directly (Spector, 2002) and indirectly, giving employees the possibility to manipulate aspects of their job environment, which, in turn, have positive effects for their well-being (Warr, 2007). Several researchers

consider the locus of control as a predictor of work alienation, postulating that individuals with an external locus of control have higher probability to experience alienation in their work place than persons with an internal locus of control (Banai et al., 2004; Nair & Vohra, 2012). Chiaburu and colleagues (2014) found a negative correlation confirming that the individual aspect of external locus of control can predict self-estrangement and disconnection from one's job activity (Seeman, 1967).

#### *Alienation and work – family conflict*

The balance between work and family life has become an important issue in human resource management since the modern literature associated it with better employee performance, greater commitment and job satisfaction (Carlson, Grzywacz, & Zivnuska 2009; Mauno et al., 2015; for a review, Duong, Tuckey, Hayward, & Boyd, 2015). Work-family conflict is generally defined as “a form of interrole conflict in which the demands of work and family role are incompatible in some respect, so that participation in one role is more difficult because of participation in the other role” (Proost, De Witte, De Witte, & Schreurs, 2010, p.616). Scholars recognize that the conflict between the two domains of work and family can be seen in a bidirectional manner: work can interfere with family and vice versa (Frone, 2003; Hall, Dollard, Tuckey, Winefield, & Thompson, 2010). Given an unavoidable level of conflict among diverse roles in people's life, balance can be defined as “a state reflecting satisfaction or fulfilment in several important domains with little or no negative affect in other domains” (Sirgy & Wu, 2007, p.185): the need to set priorities and the stress of meeting all expectations may have an impact on the perception of alienation in the work context.



### *Alienation and decision making*

Since Marx's conceptualization, scholars linked alienation to lack of discretion over the design and production of people's work (Shantz et al., 2015). Autonomy in decision processes has been variously operationalized as the degree of bureaucracy, of bureaucratic control, work formalization and work centralization, or decision latitude (Billing et al., 2014; Hage e Aiken, 1967; Hall, 1991; Matherly, 1985). Research results are ambiguous: Neither Nair and Vohra (2010) nor Shantz et al. (2015) did find a significant relation between job autonomy and work alienation, whereas Banai and colleagues (Banai & Reisel, 2007; Banai et al., 2004) found that autonomy was inversely related to alienation. As Kanungo's (1982, p. 30) highlighted, we can reasonably consider "the presence of individual autonomy, control and power over the work environment as basic preconditions for removing the state of alienation at work". In this sense, the decision participation fosters employees' opportunity to take ownership of their projects, which in turn increases their engagement in the organization and their task (Chiaburu, Diaz, & De Vos, 2013).

### *Alienation and job satisfaction*

Several studies were conducted focusing on the relation between work alienation and job satisfaction in order to better understand whether job satisfaction may be considered the opposite of alienation or as an outcome representing an "employee attitude" (Chiaburu et al., 2014). Moreover, some research was focused on the ways to boost job satisfaction in order to cope with emotional exhaustion at work in particular job (e.g. in call centre workers, Lewig & Dollard, 2003).

### *Alienation and job involvement*

The concept of job involvement refers to the psychological state of identification with work (Kanungo, 1981; 1982), ‘a relatively stable job attitude that might influence the investment of resources’ in work (Kühnel, Sonnentag, & Westman, 2009, p.578). Several studies examined how the construct of job involvement may be related to work alienation. Many authors (Argyris, 1964; Johnson, 1973; Kanungo, 1979; 1982) have proposed that job involvement is the opposite of work alienation. Chiaburu and colleagues (2014) consider job involvement as a potential employee attitude outcome, and found a negative correlation between job involvement and work alienation.

### **Work alienation and occupational status**

Differences in psychological well-being have often been linked to different occupational groups (Batinic, Selenko, Stiglbauer, & Paul, 2010; Masuda et al., 2012). If some organizational and task related characteristics (e.g. assembly lines or continuous-process production) can directly influence decision-making and work alienation (McKinlay & Marceau, 2011), low-status workers can experience alienation even for the perceived lack of significant contribution to the organizational functions (Halbesleben & Clark, 2010). Symmetrically, higher levels of job engagement and autonomy should protect high-status workers from work alienation: some empirical results (e.g., Banai & Reisel, 2003; Chiaburu et al., 2013; Rollero, Fedi, & De Piccoli, 2016) show lower levels of work alienation among professional and managerial workers than among employers, sales and call-centre personnel.

### **Aims and hypotheses**

The current study aimed at testing a model involving correlates of work alienation and their interaction effects. Following Chiaburu and colleagues (2014), individual (i.e. the

perception of control in the work domain), social (i.e., work-family conflict), and contextual (i.e., perception of decision making) variables are supposed to influence work-alienation, which, in turn, is expected to affect job satisfaction and job involvement.

Moreover, since we supposed that occupational status plays a key role in alienation processes, first we verified whether status influences the perception of work alienation and then we tested the above described model for both high and low status workers.

## **Method**

### ***Participants***

Participants were 340 adults (54.4% females) living in Italy. Their mean age was 37.17 ( $SD = 12.71$ , age range: 20-70). Most participants were high school (43.8%) or college graduated (34.7%), whereas the others (21.5%) had a lower level of education. Concerning the occupational status, the low-status workers were 242 subjects (40.5% males) working as salespersons in superstores and call-center personnel, whereas 98 participants (58.2% males) were considered high-status workers as they occupied a top management level in their organizations (e.g., banks, schools, hotels, hospitals) or at least they managed or supervised at least three other workers.

### ***Measures***

Participants completed a self-reported questionnaire. Their anonymity was assured.

The questionnaire assessed the following variables:

*Work alienation.* The Work Alienation Scale (Nair & Vohra, 2009) was used. It comprises eight items (i.e. “I do not feel connected to the daily events in my workplace”; “Facing my daily tasks is a painful and boring experience”) scored on a

seven-point scale from (1) strongly disagree to (7) strongly agree. (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .85$ ).

*Work locus of control.* Locus of control was assessed using the Work Locus of Control Scale 8-item shortform (Spector, 1988). Items were scored on a six-point scale from (1) strongly disagree to (6) strongly agree (i. e. "People who perform their jobs well generally get rewarded" "The main difference between people who make a lot of money and people who make a little money is luck"). (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .78$ ).

*Work-family conflict.* The Work To Family subscale of the Work-Family Conflict Scale (Matthews, Kath, & Barnes-Farrell, 2010) was used. It comprises three items (i.e. "I have to miss family activities due to the amount of time I must spend on work responsibilities"; "I am often so emotionally drained when I get home from work that it prevents me from contributing to my family"; "The behaviors I perform that make me effective at work do not help me to be a better parent and spouse") scored on a five-point scale from (1) strongly disagree to (5) strongly agree. The Cronbach's  $\alpha$  is quite low (.60) but acceptable (Loewenthal, 2004).

*Decision making.* The Decision Making Scale (Hage & Aiken, 1967) was administered. It is made up of four items (i.e. "Employees in this organization are not encouraged to involve in decision making "; "Management in this organization does not seek inputs and feedbacks from employees in the process of making important decisions") on a seven-point scale ranging from (1) strongly disagree to (7) strongly agree (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .82$ ).

*Job satisfaction.* The widely used Job Satisfaction Blank (McNichols, Stahl, & Manley, 1978) was administered. The four items of this scale (i.e. "I feel satisfied with my job"; "I would quit this job") were scored from (1) never, to (7) always (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .84$ ).

*Job involvement.* Job involvement was measured by the 10-item Job Involvement Questionnaire (Kanungo, 1982) (i.e. “The most important things that happen to me involve my present job”; “I consider my job to be very central to my existence”). Answers were scored on a 5-point scale ranging from “strongly disagree” (1) to “strongly agree” (5). For the current study Cronbach’s alpha was .73.

*Socio-demographic items.* We investigated age, gender, educational level, and employment status of each participant.

## **Data analysis**

First, we performed correlations and descriptive statistics for all the variables. Then we compared mean scores of high- and low-status workers on all the variables. After preliminary analyses, we verified the hypothesized relationships between the variables by means of a structural equation modeling, simultaneously tested on high- and low-status workers.

## **Results**

### *Descriptive statistics*

Table 1 shows correlations between scales, means and standard deviations for each scale. Table 2 reports descriptive statistics and t tests of the scales separated by workers’ status. As expected, low-status workers reported higher work alienation. Moreover, high-status workers showed higher perception of control, more job involvement and job satisfaction than low-status participants. To control the influence of demographics (age, gender, and years of education) on work alienation we tested two regression models on the low- and high-status workers. The models were not significant.

### *Testing the model*

To verify our hypotheses, we tested a multi group structural equations model assuming the influence of work locus of control, work-family conflict, and decision making on work alienation and the influence of work alienation on job involvement and job satisfaction. We tested the model simultaneously on both low- and high-status participants. Because of the high number of items of all the scales, we used a partial disaggregating approach (Bagozzi, 1993; Bagozzi & Edwards, 1998) examining groups of aggregated rather than single items as indicators of each construct. The advantage of this approach is that it reduces the number of variables in the model that may lead to a significant worsening of the fit, while still allowing for an estimation of the measurement error of the latent variables. We randomly aggregated the items of the scales reducing the number of indicators for each latent construct to two indicators, except for the work-family conflict scale that has only three items. For this last variable, we used the three items as indicators. The model fit was tested using four different fit indexes to attenuate the limits of each index (Hu & Bentler, 1998): the  $\chi^2$ , the comparative fit index ([CFI] Bentler, 1990), the Tucker-Lewis index ([TLI] Tucker & Lewis, 1973), and the root mean square error of approximation ([RMSEA] Steiger, 1990). For the CFI and TLI, values higher than 0.90 are considered satisfactory, as indicated by Bentler (1990). For RMSEA, values lower than 0.08 are satisfactory (Browne, 1990). The first model we tested was promising but not acceptable:  $\chi^2 (114) = 295.33$ ,  $p < .01$ , CFI = .88, TLI = .83, RMSEA = .069 (90% CL = .059, .078). Therefore, we slightly modified the model on the ground of the correlations among scales and the modification indexes. We introduced two paths: the influence of work locus of control on job satisfaction and the influence of work-

family conflict on job involvement. The second model we tested was satisfactory according to all the indexes but  $\chi^2$ :  $\chi^2 (110) = 211.72$ ,  $p < .01$ , CFI = .93, TLI = .90, RMSEA = .052 (90% CL = .042, .063). Given that the significance of  $\chi^2$  depends on the sample size and that our sample was quite large ( $N = 340$ ), we considered this model to be satisfactory. Figure 1 shows the model with the estimated parameters on the low-status group. All the parameters were significant except the path linking work locus of control and work alienation.

Figure 2 shows the estimated parameters on the high-status group. Two parameters were not significant: the influence of work locus of control on job satisfaction and the influence of decision making on work alienation.

## **Discussion**

The aim of the present study was testing a model including correlates of work alienation, with a specific focus on the role played by the occupational status, being the status particularly relevant for workers' engagement and well-being (Chiaburu et al., 2014; Rollero et al., 2016). In line with literature, high-status subjects show lower alienation, as they are more engaged and autonomous in their job (Banai & Reisel, 2003; Chiaburu et al., 2013). On the contrary, specific work conditions, which are typical of low-status occupations, can increase the perception of alienation (McKinlay & Marcaeu, 2011).

For what concerns antecedents of alienation, the hypothesis about the individual level, i.e. locus of control, is only partially confirmed. Indeed, whereas the perception of control actually decrease high-status workers' alienation, this does not happen in low-status occupations, where locus of control directly affects job satisfaction and alienation is affected by work-family conflict and decision making. Although our study was based on only a specific sample, we may argue that in the case of low-status occupations

individual characteristics seem to be not so relevant in determining work alienation, compared to relational and contextual aspects. Nevertheless, they play an important role in terms of job satisfaction.

Considering the impact of the relation level, i.e. work-family conflict, findings are similar across occupational status. As supposed, the conflict between the domains of work and family fosters the experience of alienation, regardless the specificities of the occupation. Surprisingly, such conflict exerts also a positive influence on job involvement. A possible interpretation may involve a process of cognitive dissonance between the two commitments, i.e. work and family: the more individuals experience conflict, the more they can emphasise their commitment to work (see also De Piccoli & Rollero, 2010).

The contextual dimension, i.e. the perception of decision making, is relevant only for alienation of low-status workers. We can argue that among professionals this variable does not play any relevant role because it is *intrinsically* part of a high-status occupation, whereas in low positions the perception of participation to decisions may be a sort of protective factor against the experience of alienation (Chiaburu et al., 2013). Concerning the outcomes of work alienation, we confirmed the hypothesized relationships. Indeed, alienation decreases both job satisfaction and job involvement, regardless the status of the occupation. In line with Chiaburu and colleagues (2014), we can consider job satisfaction and job involvement as potential attitudes outcomes that stem from low levels of perceived alienation.

To the best of our knowledge, this study represents the first attempt to test the same pattern of variables related to work alienation for both high- and low-status occupations. Taken together, the present findings highlight a core point: When the construct of work alienation is considered, the occupational status of the worker should



not be neglected. Indeed, not only low-status workers show higher alienation than high-status, but the patterns of correlates vary with job status. Specifically, individual characteristics appear to play a more relevant role for high-status workers, whereas organizational dimensions seem to have an impact only for low-status workers. In sum, alienation seems to be mainly a status issue (Rollero et al., 2016).

#### *Limitations and implications for future research*

This study has some limitations which suggest directions for future research. First, we used a cross-sectional, self-reported research design. Other research with different methodologies is necessary to strengthen our findings. Second, since we obtained some unexpected result and could only suppose potential explanation, further studies should investigate whether the suggested considerations are meaningful. For example, the positive influence of work-family conflict on job involvement deserves further attention: a qualitative study focused on this issue can contribute to a better understanding of this unexpected finding. Moreover, the specificities of the cultural context and of the sample have to be considered. Our research was carried out in Italy and generalising our results to other cultural contexts requires caution. Rather, future research should investigate the replicability of these findings in different countries. The operationalization of status as a simple binary variable is another problematic point of this study. Future research should treat status as a continuous variable. Finally, future studies should consider other relevant correlates of work alienation. As described above, literature has theorised a variety of antecedents and consequences (see Chiaburu et al., 2014) that should be tested placing a specific focus on the occupational status. To sum up, the present study confirms the relevance of alienation for workers' satisfaction and involvement. Organizations need to address the issue of alienation

because of its negative influence on work attitudes. However, practitioners should not neglect the specificities connected to the occupational status.

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Table 1. Correlations between scales, mean and standard deviation.

	1	2	3	4	5	Mean (SD)
1. Locus of Control						3.88 (.74)
2. Work-family conflict	-.20**					2.30 (.90)
3. Decision making	.34**	-.07				3.73 (1.66)
4. Work alienation	-.33**	.34**	-.33**			4.27 (1.23)
5. Job involvement	.14*	.22**	.20**	-.24**		2.51 (.69)
6. Job satisfaction	.41**	-.13*	.30**	-.53**	.44**	4.12 (1.34)

\*\* p<.01; \* p<.05

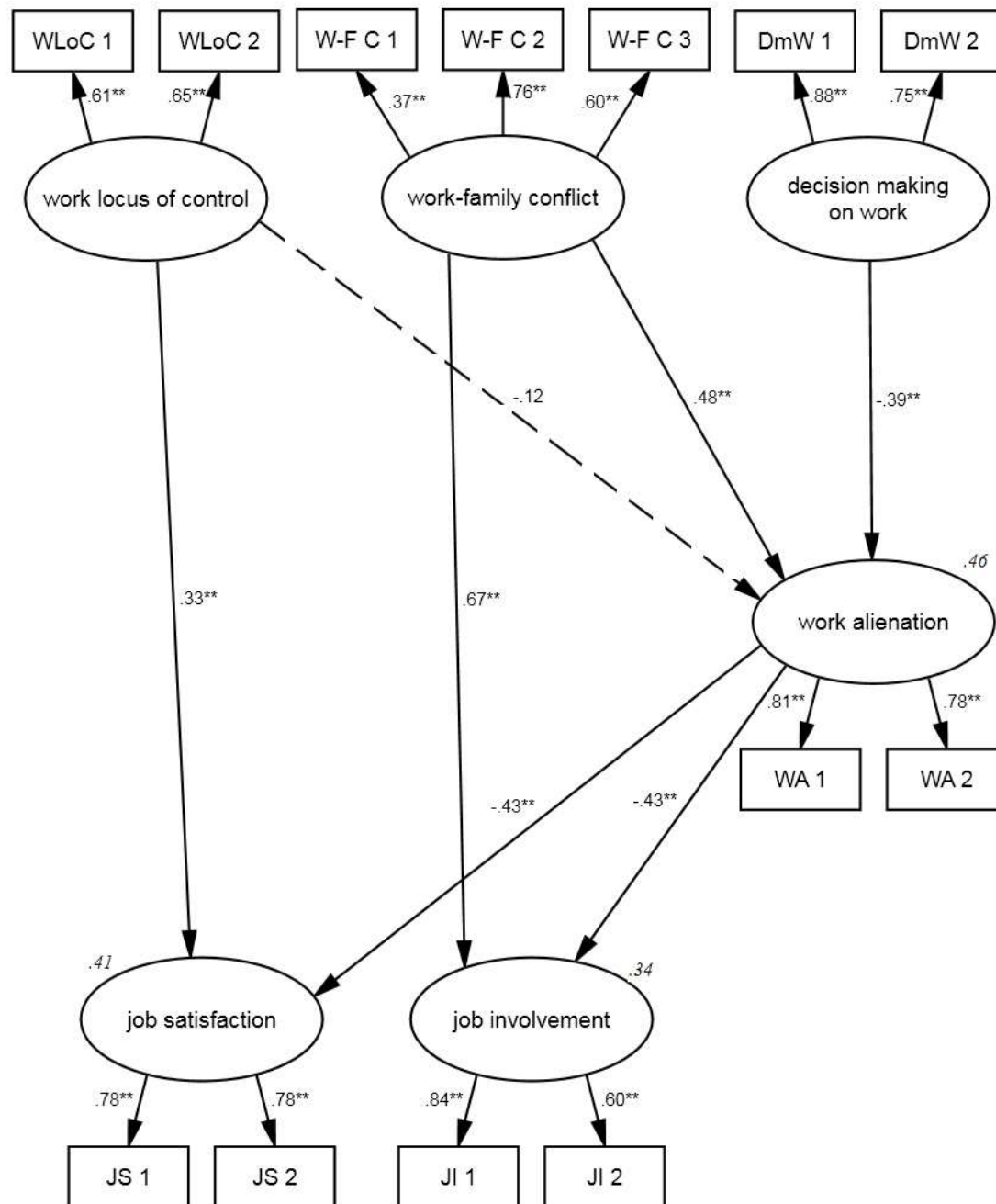
Table 2. Scale descriptive statistics for high-status (N=98) and low-status (N=242)

workers: mean, standard deviation, and t values.

	Mean (SD)		t
	Low-status	High-status	
Work Locus of Control	3.82 (.72)	4.03 (.76)	2.42*
Work-family conflict	2.35 (.93)	2.20 (.80)	-1.35
Decision making	4.18 (1.67)	4.49 (1.61)	1.60
Work alienation	3.40 (1.23)	2.76 (1.10)	-4.49**
Job involvement	2.45 (.66)	2.67 (.75)	2.69**
Job satisfaction	3.88 (1.37)	4.72 (1.05)	5.52**

\*\* p<.01; \* p<.05

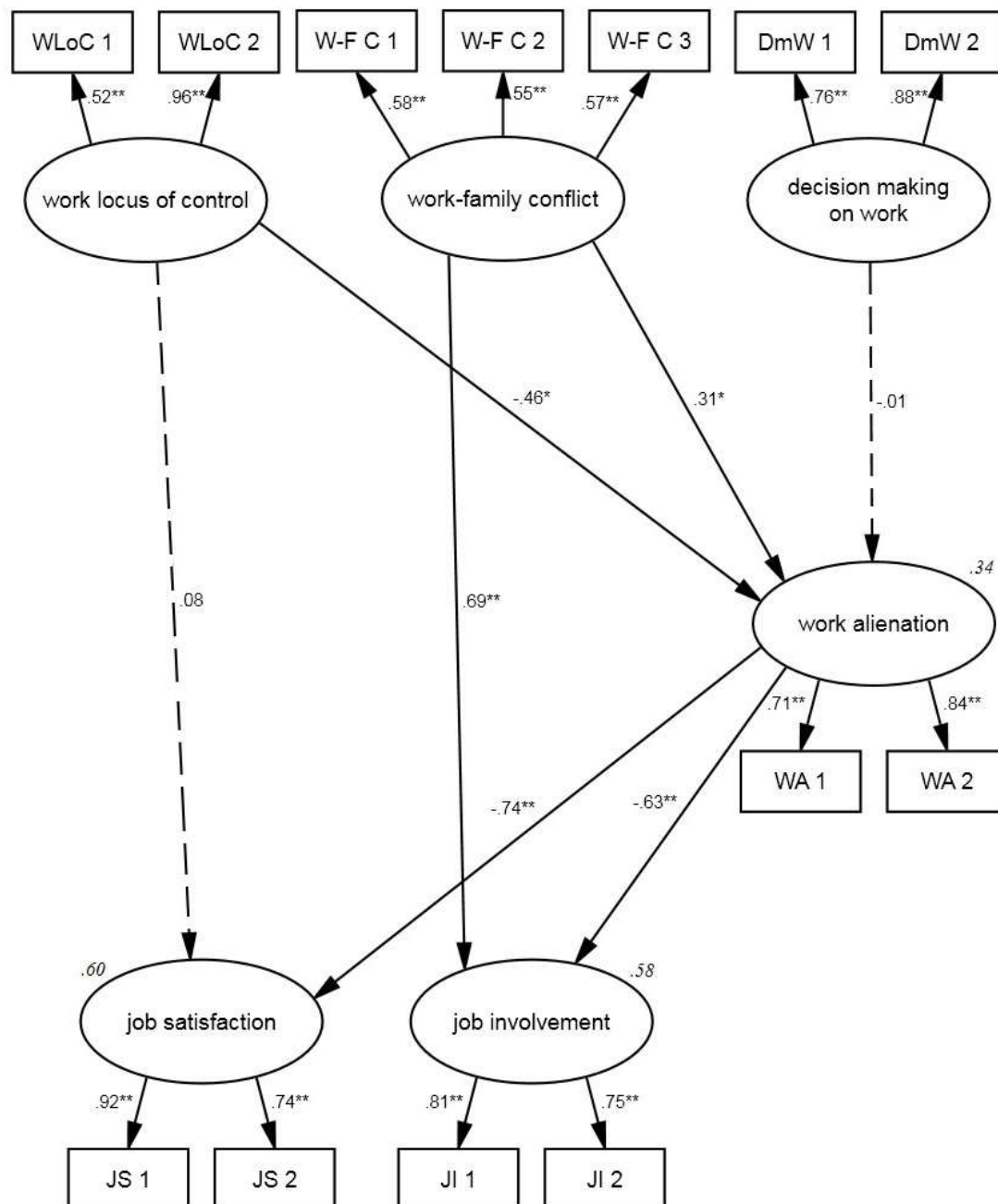
Figure 1. Estimated parameters on low-status group: standardized regression weights and variances.



\*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*  $p < .05$ .

Work locus of control was correlated with work-family conflict ( $r = -.33$ ) and decision making ( $r = .36$ ). Job satisfaction and job involvement were correlated ( $r = .51$ ). Errors of the indicators and latent variables were omitted from the figure in order to make it easier to view.

Figure 2. Estimated parameters on high-status group: standardized regression weights and variances.



\*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*  $p < .05$ .

Work locus of control was correlated with decision making on work ( $r = .64$ ). Job satisfaction and job involvement were correlated ( $r = .81$ ). Errors of the indicators and latent variables were omitted from the figure in order to make it easier to view.