

ALIENATION VERSUS STUDENT
PARTICIPATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

by 6791

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

In the decade of the sixties, colleges and universities across the country witnessed a general rise in student protest and student unrest. Though much of the activism was concerned with social and political problems, according to a 1969 Gallup Poll (Robinson and Shoenfeld, 1971: 5, 15 B), at least 42% of 1030 youths in 55 colleges believed that student protestors biggest complaint was concerned directly with university problems and policies. Students complained about the irrelevance of many of their educational endeavors. They challenged and questioned the validity of their educational experiences to the modern world and its problems. They decried the depersonalization they experienced as a number known only to a computer and resented their isolation from and powerlessness in the decision-making process. Protestors subsequently cried out for student power to correct these "evils" and a few, in fact, did temporarily assume control of the administrations of several universities by force.

From the literature it seemed that many educators in seeking to understand this phenomena have related it to the problem of alienation; they have viewed student unrest as a reaction to an underlying problem of student alienation. Thus, many concerned educators have acknowledged the need of greater understanding of alienation and have been searching for a possible solution for it.

The Problem

The purpose of this study was to investigate the problem of student alienation in higher education. This investigation was focused on three central questions: what is alienation; how did it come about in higher education; how can it be reduced?

Importance of the study. Since alienation is such an abstract term, one which implies different meanings when used in different senses, it seemed important to define it, to establish a definite meaning of the term for use in this study. By first defining this term and then by relating this definition to the organizational structure of higher education, a greater understanding of the problem of alienation was facilitated and a perspective from which to evaluate institutions of higher education was presented.

To understand how a problem came about is important not only for the sake of finding a solution for it but also for preventing its reoccurrence in the future. Thus, to meet these needs, the rise of alienation within institutions of higher education during the past decade and a half was traced and the possible factors which contributed to this condition were analyzed.

Alienation as defined and analyzed in this report was presented as an undesirable condition. The proposal of some possible means of reducing the problem was therefore important, not only from the viewpoint of student unrest but also from the perspective of the quality of life within institutions of higher education.

Limitations of the study. The limitations of this study arising from the nature of the problem and from the nature of the research were as follows:

1. Because alienation is an abstract term it was necessary to assume a definition of it and a frame of reference from which to examine it. This

was intended as a means of approaching an abstract term. It is acknowledged that this did not negate or deny other definitions or other points of view.

2. Almost all of what was written in educational literature left the term alienation undefined. It was therefore assumed that the term did correspond to the general phenomenon defined in this study.

3. The study of alienation as defined in this report focused on the "objective situation" of alienation, on the institutional factors which might elicit alienation as opposed to the "subjective situation" of the individual person.

4. This study was based strictly on library research, therefore, what was concluded was derived from a theoretical basis.

5. The term "higher education" was used in general. It is acknowledged that not all schools became alienating, but as the literature presented it, there was a trend toward alienation in higher education. It was this general trend in higher education which was discussed.

6. Alienation was presented as a complex problem. It is therefore acknowledged that no single solution will absolutely "cure" it. Thus, student participation was proposed as a possible means of reducing alienation.

Chapter 2

ALIENATION: A PERSPECTIVE FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

In recent years amidst cries of student protestors for "student power" and for "relevance" in education, there has been a new application for the meaning of "alienation." That ambiguous term which has been used to decry the condition of the laboring industrial man as well as to philosophically define man's existence on earth is now being applied to students in their educational experience.

It was the purpose of this chapter to examine the phenomenon of alienation and to study its relationship to the organizational structure of higher education. By first defining alienation and then by attempting to understand it within an organizational context, this chapter should provide a new perspective for evaluating or reorganizing institutions of higher education.

Frame of Reference

From the literature on alienation it became evident that there was great diversity in the meanings of the term and even in the senses in which it was used. Keniston (1965), in his detailed description of alienated youth, claimed that there are two traditions of studying alienation: as a personal problem and as a social problem. Epperson (1966), in preparing a long-range study of alienation in a community college, likewise maintained that alienation is a function of the character a person brings to a situation and of the nature of the environment itself. Thus in studying alienation one could focus on the person himself, on the psychological or philosophical factors in his

makeup which he brings to the situation. One could investigate, for example, why one man in a certain situation would be alienated while another man in that same situation would not be. In focusing on the person one could also look at the characteristics he possessed after he became alienated, as does Keniston.

On the other side of the coin, one could explore alienation as the result of some social arrangement. One could look at the organization of the environment and try to determine what factors are inherently alienating. Both Warner and Hansen (1970), who as counselors researched alienation in education, and Minear (1969), while admitting the personal factors and internal workings involved in alienation, urged an examination of the problems arising from the structure of the social system itself. This emphasis on the qualities of the objective situation of alienation was the orientation of this study. While it seems obvious that each particular case of alienation is the result of the interaction of the person and the situation, it seemed reasonable to focus one's attention on the latter if, as Etzioni (1968:870) said:

Most of the alienation, however, seems to result from sources which are reducible, most directly from socio-cultural patterns which can be made much more responsive to basic human needs than they are. . .

Before one can reduce these alienating socio-cultural patterns, one must know what they are. Alienation is a feeling. If that feeling is not based on an objective situation one must deal with the person. But if that feeling is in response to some objective situation, an organizational or social structure which embodies the very thing the person feels or which by its nature tends to give rise to alienation and perpetuate it, one can change the structure.

Alienation

To analyze what it means to say of someone that "he is alienated" is primarily to observe how those who have introduced the term into contemporary discussion have used it (Schacht, 1970:LXI).

Alienation has already been introduced as a feeling. But in this discussion it was assumed that this feeling does correspond to reality. So, for example, if a person experiences himself as powerless it is because in fact he is powerless.

What then is alienation? Trying to comprehend and define this word is like trying to define love. One may have experienced it and reflected upon its many aspects, but any one definition that could be conjured up would seem to fall short of truly expressing what it is. So rather than a single explanation, various aspects of the "syndrome" of alienation have been examined with the hope that a fuller picture of the meaning would be attained.

As powerlessness. Fromm (1964:69) claimed that man in the state of alienation ". . .does not experience himself as the active bearer of his own powers and richness, but as an impoverished 'thing' dependent upon powers outside of himself." "A person is powerless when he is an object controlled and manipulated by other persons or by an impersonal system. . .and when he cannot assert himself as a subject to change or modify this domination" (Blauwer, 1964:16). Blauwer, who conducted a sociological study of the relationship between technology, social structure and the personal experiences of factory workers, continued saying that like an object a person reacts rather than acts, is directed and dominated rather than self-directing. Thus the alienated person would be unable to direct his own behavior, to seek his own goals or rewards, or to make his own decisions. He would not be free to decide what he

wanted to do and then do what he decided nor would he have the power to alter this dominating situation.

As meaninglessness. In such a powerless situation where man finds himself acting and doing what someone or something else dictates, where he could not define his own goals but had to accept the external goals handed down to him, man would tend to see his own behavior as meaningless. ". . . [H]is individual acts seem to have no relation to a broader life program" (Blauer, 1964:32). Since his goals are set by someone else and do not belong to him they are unrelated to him. Their meaning is extrinsic to him and since he has not chosen to accept them but rather since they have been imposed on him he finds them and his subsequent actions to fulfill them meaningless. In such a situation he would be functioning as an object and as such his actions would have no significance for himself.

As isolation. The person who feels no sense of belonging to or identity with an organization or group and its goals would experience the alienation of isolation. As an isolated person he would lack membership in the institutional or organizational community and would feel separate and apart from it.

If the person also found himself in the powerless and meaningless situations described above, functioning as an object at the "mercy" of someone else's goals, someone whom he is powerless to influence or relate to, then he would also find himself completely isolated from and lacking connection with that person. This isolation from the person or organization which directs him is another facet of alienation.

As self-estrangement. Finding himself powerless in a meaningless and isolated situation in which he still functions, a person may find that a large part of his being, of his life and activity is estranged from what is real and meaningful to him. Speaking of this condition among factory workers, Blauner (1964:26) stated, "Self-estrangement refers to the fact that the worker may become alienated from his inner self in the activity of work, particularly when an individual lacks control over the work process and has a sense of purposeful detachment rather than an immediate involvement or engrossment in the job tasks." In a very real sense he is out of touch with himself for many of his actions are not his own (Fromm, 1964). In this sense the alienated self-estranged person fits easily into Fromm's "marketing orientation." "Clearly, his sense of his own value always depends on factors extraneous to himself, on the fickle judgment of the market, which decides about his values as it decides about the value of commodities" (Fromm, 1964:81). He is Riesman's "other-directed" person who in his alienated state has lost contact with his "fundamental self."

This self-estrangement has several consequences which become part of the alienation syndrome. When a person is not immediately involved with what he is doing, when he is working towards somebody else's goals and not his own, the situation may be boring and monotonous to him. Blauner elaborated on this by saying that:

Self-estrangement is experienced as a heightened awareness of time; as a split between present activity and future consideration. Non-alienated activity consists of immersion in the present; it is involvement. Alienated activity is not free, spontaneous activity but is compulsive and driven by necessity. In non-alienating activity the rewards are in the activity itself; in alienated states they are largely extrinsic to the activity which has become primarily a means to an end (1964:29).

To clarify this one only has to think of the "clock-watching" factory worker or the "diploma-minded" college student to get Blauner's point. Both seem to exemplify the type of uninvolved, unsatisfying functioning which typifies the self-estranged individual.

Alienation. There are many aspects of alienation which have not been presented. Even what has been written only begins to hint at the complexity which the word embodies. But, if E. Shaffer's (1970) statement that a method of social science is to impose thought on reality to abstract an ordered view of phenomenon is true, then perhaps the goal of presenting a working understanding of alienation has been accomplished.

Alienation and Organizational Structure

After examining alienation, the next step was to discern what in an organizational structure might be alienating.

How does an organization render a person powerless? Both Etzioni (1968) and Aiken (1966) looked to the decision-making process for an answer. The former asked how much and what part of the decision-making is shared with lower ranking men. The latter, who studied various aspects of alienation at 16 welfare agencies, examined two aspects of the term "Centralization" to seek the answer. Centralization includes the degree to which staff members participate in setting goals and policies of the entire organization (the degree of participation in decision-making). It also includes the extent to which members are assigned tasks and then provided the freedom to implement them without interruption from their supervisors (Aiken, 1966:498).

The findings of a number of studies suggest that highly centralized organizations - those with little autonomy over individually assigned

tasks and little participation in agency-wide decisions - are likely to have high rates of work alienation (Aiken, 1966:498).

If the powers of participating in decision-making and of substantially controlling the worker's own tasks are withheld this would seem to render the individual powerless within the organization. It was not surprising then that there was high alienation among such highly centralized organizations. The powerlessness of the individual was not only a feeling but a fact.

Aiken found similar results in studying the degree of alienation associated with what he termed "Formalization." Formalization is the degree of work standardization and the amount of deviation that is allowed from standards. In organizations with a high degree of Formalization, with numerous rules defining jobs and specifying what is to be done and the enforcement of those rules, Aiken also found a high degree of work alienation. Once again it seemed that the powerlessness actually experienced in a rigidly codified and monitored organization was associated with a high level of alienation.

Studies in the sphere of higher education provided examples of how an organization can promote the condition of meaninglessness. Warner and Hansen (1970) referred to the culturally defined goals which a school imposes on its students. They claimed that for many students these goals appeared to have no relation to what is relevant to their lives and are therefore meaningless. R. Shaffer (1967), from his experience as Dean of Students at Indiana University, echoed this view stating that many students complain that the college experience, especially curriculum, is irrelevant to the concerns which are important to them. He continued saying that the conflict stems from conflicting views of the educational process. The students who enter the educational system encounter goals and processes set down and defined by educators, which for many students are very different from what they

themselves would define. Depending on how different the educators' goals are from their own the students will experience a relative degree of meaninglessness.

A look at the bureaucratic structure of an organization can give some estimate of the degree of isolation a person within the structure actually experiences. If, as in a highly centralized structure, the person is excluded from the decision-making process, he is in fact isolated from those involved in the process. If there are no channels through which he can voice his opinions or if those channels are only hollow token gestures, then he is unable to really communicate with significant others in the structure. This inability to relate to them renders the individual isolated from them. This lack of connection with them and inability to influence or even communicate with them does seem to really leave the individual isolated from those "in power." It was interesting to note the lack of cohesion that Aiken and Hage (1966) found among staff members themselves in highly centralized organizations. This seemed to imply a degree of isolation from co-workers as well as from those "in power" among alienated staff members.

What of self-estrangement? Can an organization through its structure give rise to this also? Blauner stated:

Self-estrangement is absent in two main situations: When the work activity, satisfying such felt needs as those for control, meaning and social connection, is inherently fulfilling in itself; or when the work activity is highly integrated into the totality of an individual's social commitments (1964:26).

The converse of this, presenting a situation in which self-estrangement would be present, seemed to answer this question. While an organization cannot directly make a person self-estranged, as it can make him powerless, it can be arranged in such a way as to make self-estrangement a likely

possibility. If it fails to meet the needs which Blauner mentioned, thereby leaving the work activity unfulfilling, it sows a fertile seedbed for self-estrangement. Without any control, meaning, or connection the person is functioning not as a subject but as an object on behalf of someone else. When the activity is unrelated to what is real and meaningful to him, when it is completely separate from the individual's social commitments, again the individual is functioning in a self-estranged manner. The organization which creates a situation in which the person's activities are really not his own may very likely give rise to self-estrangement as part of the "alienation syndrome."

A Perspective for Higher Education

"To the extent that personal social malaise is the result of something called alienation, any effort towards understanding it seems justified" (Harkins, 1965:78). It is with this view in mind that institutions of higher education should take a good look at their organizational structures. E. Shaffer (1970) warned, however, that institutions can assume a reality of their own if the awareness of their human authorship is lost. This is perhaps true of many organizations which are reluctant to change and which take their own structures for granted as ends in themselves. But if an organization cares about its members and truly wishes to meet their needs, then it must be willing to assess its structures and to evaluate the impact they have on its members.

With all the talk of student alienation and the cry for relevance it seemed obvious that many students' needs are not being met. If the university really cares about its students it should be concerned not only with aiding the individual in solving his personal problems but with evaluating and perhaps restructuring its own organization so that it does not by its nature

create or elicit an alienating situation.

What then, were some of the guidelines which could be gleaned from this study?

Though each aspect of the alienation syndrome (powerlessness, meaninglessness, isolation, self-estrangement) is different, it is obvious they they all interrelate. From an organizational point of view, then, it seemed reasonable to agree with Clark (1959), that there is an isolable feature in all of them: man's lack of means (power) to eliminate or change the alienating circumstances. Clark said, for example, that those who feel that their actions are meaningless would make them meaningful if they could. In other words, those who are alienated because of the organization are also powerless to alter their situation because of the organization. The key, then seemed to be power or control.

"Studies. . . have shown that students who feel they have some control or say in events that affect them will not become alienated but will be full participants in the school structure" (Warner and Hanson, 1970:447). They did emphasize, however, not full student control but student participation. R. Shaffer (1967:261) also advocated ". . . extensive student involvement in university policy formation and decision-making as a means of reducing alienation from the educational community and the consequent feeling of the irrelevance of the traditional educational experience." It seemed important to mention here that just mere tokenism or student participation without any real influence over outcomes may not be sufficient to ward off alienation. Clark (1959), studying the relationship between alienation and power, participation and knowledge, found that merely participating in or obtaining knowledge about an organization would not lessen alienation. The relationship between power

and alienation was much more direct (Clark, 1959:851). What this seemed to say was that merely discussing with students while actually ignoring them or failing to take into account what they say would not greatly reduce their state of powerlessness, hence alienation.

Besides reducing the student's state of powerlessness, what were some other results of "student control?" For one thing it would allow the student to work with counselors, teachers and administrators to determine, understand and act on their needs. They would have an opportunity to express their own wants and expectations rather than just have the administrators tell them what students want. With whatever influence they had, students could then work in conjunction with counselors, faculty and administrators to establish goals which would aim at meeting their real needs and priorities. They could work together to formulate a broadened concept of higher education experiences and options necessary for those who reject the traditional educational process (Dobbins, 1970). In short, their education, as a process of moving towards goals which they helped establish, could really be meaningful and relevant to them. Both Heath (1970) and White (1967), in opposing authoritarian teachers and domination in the classroom, seemed to agree that this same type of student involvement on a lower organizational level, the classroom, is necessary and beneficial also.

The same student involvement which gives the students control and meaning would also give them a genuine connection with the university and its staff. Being included is the opposite of being isolated. By working together and communicating with the staff the students could feel a part of the organization because they would, in fact, be a vital part.

In providing the students the control, meaning and connection that have been outlined above, the organization would also decrease the possibility

of self-estrangement among students. If the student is working towards his own goals through activities which are relevant and meaningful to him then he is not acting as an object functioning for someone else. As a person who can influence the direction and course of his education, the student's activities can be fulfilling and integrated into his self. If he is not working solely to fulfill someone else's goals or to meet someone else's expectations for him then he can grow as a whole person.

In summary, the organization, by providing a certain degree of student control, can greatly reduce the alienating organizational conditions of powerlessness, meaninglessness, isolation and self-estrangement. While "All power to the students" was not urged, an evaluation of the organizational structures of higher education was encouraged with the perspective that a certain amount of student participation and control can help to alleviate an alienating situation.

Chapter 3

THE RISE OF ALIENATION IN INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION

How does an organizational structure become alienating? Perhaps a look at history can provide some insight.

Prior to the industrial revolution there was relatively little of what could be termed "work alienation." There was no mass production, no huge impersonal factories and there were few bureaucratic organizations handing down dictates to the workers on exactly what they should do and how they should do it. Rather, man felt more connected with his work, took pride in it and found it intrinsically meaningful.

It was the onset of technology with its new "more efficient" ways of doing things that brought about the organizational and technological structures which elicited the sense and actuality of worker alienation and the resulting philosophical and sociological studies of it.

It was interesting to note that in the educational index there was no listing of the category "alienation" prior to 1966. Certainly universities had been less than perfect for quite a while and there had been books and studies written on student alienation prior to that year, so why did discussion of alienation become so voluminous within the years following that date? Had there been something akin to an "educational revolution" which too had changed structures rendering them more alienating?

Though there were some aspects of this notion which appeared true, the rise of alienation within institutions of higher education seemed too complex to explain so simply. Through discussion in this chapter an attempt was made

to analyze some of the possible factors which contributed to the upsurge of alienation; to provide a more concrete picture of alienation in higher education than was presented in the first more theoretical chapter.

Organizational Factors

As mentioned above, there were some aspects of the "educational revolution" notion which did appear tenable. Technology played an obviously important role in the "industrial revolution." In looking at the history of education during the past decade and a half, technology seemed to have indirectly had a major influence in that realm as well. Heath (1970), in his discussion on student alienation based on his previous experiences with students and teachers throughout the country and on his research on student development, saw the advent of Sputnik as having a major impact on education. The drive to improve education sparked by the Russian satellite in 1957 brought about tremendous improvements in educational facilities. Schools expanded their pupil personnel services, "modernized" their curriculums, featured enrichment courses and advanced placement and fostered an expanding educational technology (Heath, 1970). The more material improvements and educational innovations a school could provide, the better it was thought to be. Subsequently, the quest for excellence seemed to require an enlargement of institutions of education. Large schools, with their potentials for a more comprehensive educational experience, providing more diversity and more specialized courses, were thought to be the way to "excellence." This "excellence," however, was defined by narrow academic considerations which ". . . may have improved the academic preparation of some students, but may also have narrowed their sense of competence, limited their self-esteem and made increasing numbers of them closed to subsequent intellectual growth" (Heath, 1970:527).