Alienation – a long-overlooked concept of relevance to social work?

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Introduction

Searching by the term "alienation" in various research libraries will result in many hits, but it is striking that most of them are published from the 1960s to the beginning of the 1990s. These results seem to correspond with the claims of authors such as Yuill (2011) and Skempton (2010), namely that alienation is one of the terms from earlier Marxism whose usage has been rejected in postmodern approaches to "grand stories". During the rise of anti-psychiatry in the middle of the 20th century, critical sociology found its way into psychology and psychiatry on the basis of Marxist and existentialist thought and became associated with the mental and physical suffering of western citizens in general and psychiatric patients in particular. Disciplines like psychology and psychiatry have always been strongly related to social work with vulnerable people and are therefore of central interest to social work, not least when dealing with people with mental problems. However, anti-psychiatry has had less impact on psychiatry since then (Nasser, 1995), and similarly, within sociology, postmodern approaches to inequality have seemingly distanced themselves from alienation as a core concept of marginalization. As Skempton points out:

> The concept of alienation initially appears to encapsulate what 'postmodern' and deconstructive thought claims to have laid to rest. With its theological origins and its use in Marxist social theory, the term suggests a teleological and eschatological grand 'meta-narrative' of fall and redemption (…) that would actually amount to a dangerous totalitarian form of metaphysical closure where difference and otherness are suppressed (Skempton, 2010, p.1).

> Some authors point to a reduced interest in Marxist sociology in general and relate it to a corresponding reduced interest in post-communist countries after the cold war and, particularly, a revolt among French intellectuals against the scientific and structural Marxism of Althusser (Benton, 1984; Best and Kellner, 1997) and traditional Marxists concepts like class (Chilcote, 1990 and 1902). According to these authors, French radicals prepared the ground for poststructuralist alternatives to Marxist theories of inequality and oppression:

> "(…) numerous French radicals came to associate Marxism with communism and sought new theories and politics (…) so a generation of new French theorists attacked both Marxism and structuralism to develop "poststructuralist" theories that replaced core tenets of modern theory with strong emphases on difference and multiplicity themes, later advocated by postmodern theorists. (…) They subsequently rejected modern visions of revolution and emancipation as dangerous and totalizing and turned to individualist programs of liberated subjectivity and nomadic desire (Best and Kellner, 1997, p. 5).

According to Yuill (2011), the exact course of the decline in usage of alienation theory may be discussed, but nonetheless, he finds the decline evident:

> The decline of alienation theory within sociology was all too evident from the 1980s onwards, its demise prompted by a variety of events both internal and external to the academy. Whether due to the waning of 1960s radicalism, the wider failings of the Marxist project in the 1980s, or a relocation and reordering of where and how work was studied by sociologists, alienation theory's intellectual stock undoubtedly fell. (Yuill, 211, p. 104)

Taken together, the declining use of alienation theory presents a paradox to the social worker. On the one hand, alienation seems to be observable under daily circumstances. Alienation in the sense of being forced into positions where one feels alien to oneself, society or large groups of people seems a trivial trait of any kind of discrimination, marginalization or oppression in society. On the other hand, explicit references to the concept in social research has declined, apparently due to its former association with a political programme. Thus, the question is whether this decline in concrete references to alienation misses important features of social inequality and exclusion, which are not compensated for in alternative concepts. While this paradox is of concern for social research in general, it becomes particularly interesting to fields of social work that include the concrete mental suffering of vulnerable groups. These groups may include traumatized refugees, homeless people, disabled people, drug addicts, prostitutes, criminals, psychiatric patients, children with ADHD and Autism Spectrum Disorder. People who apart from struggling with sheer physical survival, have fewer options to achieve a legitimate identity and feelings of belonging in society than anyone else. These groups are some of the main targets of Social Pedagogy and Special Needs Education because their psychological and psychiatric issues enhance the risk of exclusion from mainstream society. However, given the ambivalent status of alienation theory, not least its fate within anti-psychiatry, the newcomer to social work, the professional practitioner, is left with a seemingly ambiguous term embedded in historical controversies. Thus, the term may be associated with a particular political programme and rejected or favoured as such, and has seemingly been "trapped" within a historical dispute about Marxism in general, which at best leaves its contributions to social work ambivalent. What the article at hand offers, is not another dispute focused on Marx in particular. I shall not try to solve any historical disputes between Marx, his followers or critics. Instead, I am going to ally myself with a hypothetical newcomer to social work and ask how he/she may benefit from the concept of alienation in daily work with vulnerable groups. To this end, my point of departure will not be Marx's concept of alienation but Rousseau's, because I find its status as predecessor to Marx and Hegel's theories equally important to modern approaches to alienation. The more exact reasons for using Rousseau will be further revealed later in the article when I take Rousseau's example of an alienated European minister into consideration. What the article offers instead of another Marx dispute is a restructured historical analysis of the history of alienation theory and, particularly, its relevance to practitioners who deals with vulnerable groups, for instance typical target groups of Social Pedagogy and Special Needs Education. To understand the particular relevance, one should note that fields Social Pedagogy and Special Need Education are primarily concerned with the well-being vulnerable groups rather than people in general. Especially if their concrete suffering prevents control over their own material life circumstances, options to achieve a positive social identity, evolve equal relationships with other people, avoid isolation, and related issues, as we shall see them unfold in the following sections. The overall question to be explored in this article will be:

What does alienation theory offer to practitioners whose social work concerns vulnerable groups of society?

To deal with this question, it will be of crucial importance to distinguish between two dominant approaches to alienation theory that focus on each their aspects of alienation. One that concerns an analytic usage of the term to characterize oppressing features of society in general, and one in which the concept, more or less related to such generalizations, is used to target particular experiential consequences of alienation that are closely related to social exclusion and mental suffering, which is of specific interest to social work with vulnerable groups. Further, the associations between alienation as a general characteristic of society and the phenomenology of alienation have been an implied debate among theoreticians, from which alienation theory has been modified and reformulated throughout history. Therefore, this relatively categorical distinction provides both a historical and an analytical framework from which the status and controversies of alienation theory can be investigated. Accordingly, the analytical focus concerns the origin of alienation theory in critical sociology, in which the term is used to signify general features of human society and thus everyone living in it. In other words, it concerns alienation as a universal or "omnipresent" feature of society. The other focus concerned with the phenomenology of alienation in particular local contexts and/or how it can be accessed empirically. As such, another distinction is implied between the analytical and phenomenological concept of alienation, namely to which extent alienation is a traceable empirical phenomenon or solely a theoretically grounded term. Accordingly, I will examine some classical theories in which alienation is considered omnipresent. These may differ in the degree to which they employ alienation from a critical position, but their shared trait is that alienation is everywhere in many forms and unavoidable as such. From this point, I will examine some historical attempts to bring such overall characterizations of society closer to the everyday life of people living in it, e.g. empirical instrumentalizations of alienation, and finally, I will examine a present-day attempt to make use of the term alienation within social work. Along the way, I will recall the necessary perspectives to discuss the status of alienation theory within social work with vulnerable groups of society. At the end of the paper, I will reflect upon the issues between the two historical foci and relate this to the potential use of alienation theory towards vulnerable groups from the standpoint of the practitioner.

Alienation theory is a very broad field to cover. Therefore, I will selectively choose those positions that fit into the framework stated above, namely obvious examples of those who treat alienation as an omnipresent characteristic of society and those who have modified this approach to recognize it in the concrete suffering of all people and, in particular, vulnerable groups such as psychiatric patients.

1   Alienation as omnipresent

From a historical point of view, theories of alienation have especially been influenced by three famous thinkers, namely Rousseau, Hegel and Marx. These classics are my point of departure because they have had an important influence on present-day theories of alienation, and – more importantly for our purpose – they do illustrate positions where alienation covers human existence as such and not only certain types of existence. This stand is not least illustrated by these famous words by Rousseau:

> Man was born free, and everywhere he is in chains. Many a one believes himself the master of others, and yet he is a greater slave than they (Rousseau, 1762/2002, p.156).

According to Rousseau, man is born with an inherited drive towards freedom and autonomy, towards avoiding pain and empathizing with his fellow beings. The natural human being is concerned with his own self-preservation and does not engage in conflicts unless his existence is under threat. In contrast, modern man has to submit to hierarchies and unequal relations to other people to survive. In this process, man is forced to permit actions against his empathetic nature and moral convictions. This regards everyone, though it is particularly summarized in Rousseau's characterization of a European minister who

> ….pays court to men in power whom he hates, and to rich men whom he despises; he sticks at nothing to have the honor of serving them; he boasts proudly of his baseness and their protection; and proud of his slavery, he speaks with disdain of those who have not the honor of sharing it. What a spectacle must the painful and envied labors of a European minister of state form in the eyes of a Caribbean! (Rousseau, 1755/2002, p.137)

I shall return to this European minister at the end of the paper, but for now, we shall note that this "selling out" of one's nature and moral is what constitutes Rousseau's alienation. In modern society, man is not on hisown as he is in nature but only exists by virtue of his relations to other people. Therefore, our self-awareness and identity are likewise dependent on the opinions of others and we could not exist without them. Rousseau considers this interdependency between people a result of industry, growth, trade and the complex economic and political relations between cities and nations that follow from this development. Especially the rise of the complex lives in the cities can be contrasted to the simpler and authentic lives in country villages (Rousseau, 1782/1953). Through this approach to life in modern cities, Rousseau accordingly conceives of the concept of alienation as a critical term that targets inequality and oppression. This polemic element was equally important to Marx and his followers. We will not dive further into the particularities of Rousseau at this point but continue to another pioneer, namely Hegel, to whom alienation is not something that exists only in oppressing forms but can be considered a general principle of development of self-identity. In his approach, alienation is the process by which we become aware of ourselves by externalizing our existence into something "other" than ourselves, e.g. our creative products of labour and our interdependence with other people through roles and relations such as that between master and servant. In accordance with this principle, "the other" or "alien" becomes a mirror in which the self becomes

> alienated from itself and then returns to itself from this alienation,   and is only then revealed for the first time in its actuality and truth" (Hegel, 1807/1977, p.21).

To Hegel, alienation is not a product of an oppressive society as it is to Rousseau, but a metaphysical principle guiding all development towards a unified existence. Thus, whether we speak of individuals, society or even the world spirit, alienation is the process by which they will achieve self-identity by overcoming the apparent gap between themselves and "the other". That which has become alien has to be recognized as part of oneself. This is also is known as the dialectical principle of (self-) development. From the thesis (being of man), an antithesis is derived (what apparently is alien to man's being), and the synthesis signifies the process in which this contradiction is dissolved into an emerging unity. In many respects, this idea is recalled in the later works of authors such as William James, Charles Horton Cooley, George Herbert Mead, Alfred Schutz and their followers, i.e. the idea that our self-awareness is a product of our interaction with the social world and other people in particular. Whereas the dependency on other people to gain identity is a threat to human autonomy in Rousseau's

framework, it is the main principle without which self-awareness would not be possible according to Hegel and his pragmatist successors. Thus, alienation is not a result of the untamed development of modern society but a metaphysical premise guiding all human development as such. In other words, one could say that this takes the omnipresence of alienation to its most universal form – a form in which it is not something destructive to human nature by default.

However, simultaneously with the Hegelian approach, alienation became a core concept to the critical sociological disciplines that took their point of departure in the Marxist conception. The Marxist conception was initiated by Feuerbach's criticism of Hegel's idealism. In short, Feuerbach opposed the Hegel's theological foundation and claimed that religion, as well Hegel's world spirit, is an idealization of the positive potentials of man projected onto an image of a perfect being. Thus, submission to a religious faith is alienating because man is distanced to himself and his own potentials by this external projection. Marx took this criticism further because he did not think that the recognition of religion as a human product is enough to eliminate alienation of man but only creates a dualism between man and religion. To understand religion and its alienation, we have to understand the historical struggles for survival and resources that give rise to class division, private ownership of means of production and oppression of the working class (Marx & Engels, 1845/1972). To Marx, alienation designates the "perversion" of wage labour and its severe effects on social relations as well as personal identity. Man is turned into a slave of his own products; they are no longer his own and do not reflect the freedom and creativity of his personality or any immediate practical value, because he has to dispose of them in favour of a wage that is crucial for sheer survival. The effects of alienation are summarized in four points by Marx: 1) Man is alienated towards his own products. 2) Man is alienated towards the process of production. 3) Man is alienated towards his natural tendency to cooperate with others to survive. 4) Man is alienated towards his fellow workers (Marx, 1932/1964). In capitalist societies, the worker is not evaluated on the basis of his human capabilities but his wealth, and the goal of his activities is to earn as much as possible at the cost of his freedom, creativity and solidarity. As such, only a revolution and redistribution of the means of production and resources into the hands of the workers can eliminate the alienation of capitalism.

One important shared trait to be extracted from these historical perspectives is that their respective concepts of alienation presuppose an ideal state of man. Thus, the assumed omnipresence of alienation is closely related to underlying assumptions of the nature of man, as well as society, e.g. his freedom, creativity or innate empathy and solidarity. Though we can follow the thoughts of Hegel in later pragmatism, our focus will mainly be the development from Rousseau and Marx because this line of development has informed the use and controversies of the term in the 20th century and beyond. However, as we will see, the 20th century did also offer concepts of alienation that were based on other approaches than strictly Marxist, or at least related to it in less restrictive forms. Some approaches, namely those that apply the concept to mental suffering, poverty, marginalization and social isolation, have strong connotations to those groups are who usually the targets of social pedagogical and special educational intervention. Thus, the following sections will demonstrate how alienation has gradually been translated from an overall characterization of society into a characterization of concrete phenomena of the life worlds of people, especially vulnerable groups.

2   Alienation in the twentieth century

During the twentieth century, alienation became a core concept within critical sociological and psychological works that partly or mainly were inspired by the Marxist theses but included existentialist and psychoanalytic perspectives as well as notions from Durkheim's sociology. Thus, Freudo-Marxists like Erich Fromm and Wilhelm Reich associated the emancipation from capitalist society with that of sexual liberation. In this way, they united the question of inequality of gender with that of the inequality of classes within the same framework. This stand is especially prominent in Reich's view that oppression of sexuality is an important feature of capitalist maintenance of class divisions and a prime source of the mass psychology of fascism (Reich, 1933/1970). In a similar spirit, authors from the Frankfurt School including Adorno, Horkheimer and Marcuse adjust the concept of alienation to their diagnosis of the problems of society after the World War 2. Adorno and Marcuse developed the theory of "technological rationality," according to which the practical technological progress of man can alienate him to other humans to an extent where a well-educated railroad engineer is able to consider the deportation of Jews to concentration camps a rational problem to be solved and not a question of moral and guilt (Marcuse 1941/2004). In the same line of thought, Horkheimer and Adorno are preoccupied with the Marxist concept of Commodity fetishism, which signifies the modern worker's craving for commodities whose production runs through all sectors of society. The technological progress, which was supposed to make man free, instead makes him a slave of commodities and implicitly an ally with capitalism (Horheimer & Adorno, 1947/2004). The same line of thought is proposed by Marcuse, namely that the soul of the worker has been absorbed into the one-dimensional focus on the production and consumption of material goods of modern society:

> The people recognize themselves in their commodities; they find their soul in their automobile, hi-fi set, split-level home, kitchen equipment (Marcuse, 1964, p.11)

To Joachim Israel, this reification is a main source of alienation in so far as dead objects rule the world of living people instead of their social relations to other living beings (Israel, 1971). In this course of commodity production, Erich Fromm suggests that the servants of the resulting rising bureaucracy are at the greatest risk of alienation, rather than the traditional worker:

> If anything, the clerk, the salesman, the executive, are even more alienated today than the skilled manual worker. The latter's functioning still depends on the expression of certain personal qualities like skill, reliability, etc., and he is not forced to sell his 'personality,' his smile, his opinions in the bargain (Fromm, 1961, p.87).

With this, Fromm echoes Rousseau's alienated minister who sells himself to people he despises in order to gain personal benefits. In modern society, man himself is a commodity to be sold.

We could continue this enumeration of critical approaches to the alienation of capitalist society in life-long studies. Fortunately, the goal of the article is not to delve into detailed comparisons but, as mentioned, to illustrate some general features of these critical theories of alienation. In this regard, a lot of work on alienation in the twentieth century may simply be summarized in the words of Marcuse:

> the subject which is alienated is swallowed up by its alienated existence. There is only one dimension, and it is everywhere and in all forms (Marcuse, 1964, p.13).

Thus, at this point, we should be in no doubt that the classical approaches to alienation presuppose the concept as a general characteristic of modern society and therefore alienation as an omnipresent phenomenon. As such, alienation is first and foremost an analytical concept that offers general criticism of overall structures of society and implies the suffering of all people living in society, whether they are able to survive and cope with the challenges of alienation or not. However, this presupposed omnipresence poses questions to be solved, for how is the social worker supposed to discern those expressions of alienation that are of particular interest to his work with marginalized groups from alienation in general? Is any kind of alienation a potential target for the social worker, or will his practical interest be bound to certain types? In the following section, these questions will investigated by turning the focus to those theories that particularly imply alienation as certain types of destructive experience. Thus, alienation will be deemphasized as an omnipresent characteristic of society for now. Later, these two levels, alienation as an omnipresent feature of society and an experiential perspective, will be discussed in relation to social work and intervention.

3   The phenomenology of alienation

One route to the experiential dimensions of alienation is found within the framework of existentialism. The core issue of existentialism is how the individual is able to navigate and find his life meaningful in the normlessness and complexity of modern society. These existential conditions of modern society lead to existential suffering such as feelings of meaninglessness, loss of control over one's own life and isolation. Though the concept of alienation may not be in focus within the existentialist tradition, its themes of existence can be related to that of alienation theory (Cooper, 1999). The question about normlessness has been preceded in especially Durkheim's works, in which it is called "anomy" and seen as a main cause of suicide (Durkheim, 1897/2005). Anomy is considered a consequence of loss of attachment to traditions, religion and family relations due to the constant disorganization and reorganization of society. According to Kierkegaard, the anomy distances man from God to an extent where he is alienated towards his spiritual nature because he gets lost in the material aspects of the world (Kierkegaard 1843/2017 and 1848/2917). To Sartre, the anomy is a result of man's acknowledgement that there is no God, which makes man isolated because he has to make sense of his life on his own. Man must confront his existential loneliness, loss of meaning and anxiety by taking responsibility for his own life project (Sartre 1943/2012). The line of thought applies to Heidegger; if man blindly leaves the control of his life project to authorities, the gap between self and other risks growing to an extent where the individual is completely isolated (Heidegger 1927/1996). Neither Sartre nor Heidegger makes use of the term alienation as a core concept. However, Heidegger's notion about being "fallen" applies to the thesis that man can live his life unreflectingly and automatically submit to authorities in a wide sense, e.g. through the use of fatalist expressions in the language by which people describe themselves and through submitting to concrete authorities, e.g. by making family traditions decide the course of one's life. The existentialist David E. Cooper (not to be confused with the anti-psychiatrist David Graham Cooper) has elaborated on the relation between being fallen and alienation theory concerning man's isolation and finds the notions compatible (Cooper, 1999). I find Cooper's associations between alienation theory and fallenness valid, acknowledging that existentialism has inspired the Frankfurt School generally. However, existentialism may deemphasize the political and economic structures of alienation compared to the existential dilemmas and issues that arise from these structures. Thus, existentialism provides a route from the critical characterizations of society to the phenomenology of anomy and isolation. Such relations between the structural and

experienced levels of alienation were also promoted by Fromm, though he suggests that loneliness and estrangement are grounded in consumerism rather than anomy (Fromm,1961):

> they worship things, the machines which produce the things – and in this alienated world they feel as strangers and quite alone (Fromm, 1961, p. 87).

In Fromm's perspective, this loneliness is further related to that of alienation in terms of experiences of self-estrangement, much in line with the existential notion of fallenness:

> By alienation is meant a mode of experience in which the person experiences himself as an alien. He has become, one might say, estranged from himself (Fromm, 1962, p. 56).

To Fromm, alienation is primarily related to types of experience, but he suggests explicit relations between these modes of experience and capitalism in modern society.

In contrast to Fromm's approach, Seeman is known for operationalizing alienation empirically in ways in which he tries to loosen the concept from its critical foundation. I shall pay some attention to this approach because it seems compatible with some modern approaches to the term, and the question is whether Seeman's strategy is a successful solution to the controversies of the critical foundation of the term. Thus, Seeman's instrumentalizations are grounded in multiple resources by which he forms a taxonomy of the experiences of alienation, and not just Marx. For example, 1) the Marxist notion of powerlessness can be measured in terms of a person's expectation about the extent to which his wishes can be fulfilled. 2) The notion of meaninglessness from the existential tradition can be measured as a person's lack of faith in the predictability of behaviour according to the extent to which the world seems meaningful to him. 3) Anomy can be measured in terms of the extent to which workers think certain goals are only achievable though immoral behaviour. 4) Isolation can be measured as a person's low expectations to a positive outcome of actions that follow the values and agenda of the society he lives in. 5) Fromm's self-estrangement can be measured as a person's low expectation about the extent to which he can find occupations that satisfy his own needs (Seeman, 1959). Seeman's instrumentalization of alienation is an attempt to provide an empirical framework from which alienation becomes accessible, while at the same time, he deemphasizes the critical and polemic aspects of the alienation concept, for example with regard to his instrumentalization of powerlessness, which

> does not take into account, as a definitional matter, the frustration an individual may feel as a consequence of the discrepancy between the control he may expect and the degree of control that he desires (Seeman, 1959, p.784).

Thus, within this framework, the negative experiences of powerlessness are not essential to the measurement of expectations of control. There can be incidences in which the distance between the wishes of a person and the expected control does not imply frustration or suffering. Thus, one important consequence of Seaman's approach is that alienation is not something that can be related to suffering by default from an instrumental point of view. The concept of alienation loses its attachment to critical Marxism and is instead taken as a value-free, instrumental concept that may or may not measure expectations related to frustration and suffering. Consequently:

this construction of 'powerlessness' clearly departs from the Marxian tradition by removing the critical, polemic element in the idea of alienation (ibid.).

It is important to keep Seeman's theory in mind because we will return to it once more later. For now, I still need to present some perspectives that move in the opposite direction of Seeman.

In contrast to Seeman, other pioneers with phenomenological agendas make explicit connections between, especially, mental suffering and the omnipresent aspects of alienation, by which they bring the concept into the field of psychiatry and psychology. Thus, in our historical analysis, we have arrived at the point where alienation is directly related to debates about mental illness versus normality, not least the discussion about the extent to which mental illness is mainly caused by genetic inheritance or societal circumstances. As we will see, the authors in question emphasize explicit associations between the omnipresence characteristics of alienation, not least inspired by Marx, and particular suffering that assumingly is mediated by mentally dysfunctional family relations.

4   Alienation as mental suffering

The psychiatrist Ronald David Laing makes strict connections between the dysfunctional structures of society, which he considered the basis for dysfunctional family relations that lead to mental disorders such as schizophrenia (Laing 1967; 1964). Accordingly, his definition of alienation is related to the destructive aspects of modern society such as outrageous violence, distrustfulness and degradation of human relations. Society undermines its own survival, and the internalization of this dysfunctionality results in reification, depersonalization and fragmentation of the human mind. Thus, certain forms of schizophrenia can be seen as a sociobiological response to the alienating structures of society:

> Our society may itself have become biologically dysfunctional, and some forms of schizophrenic alienation from the alienation of society may have a sociobiological function that we have not recognized (Laing, 1967, p.98).

By this, Laing suggests that the reduction of schizophrenia to a question of inheritance only overlooks that a dysfunctional society may influence and even contradict the biological dispositions of man. Thus, he proposes a dialectical view on the interaction between inheritance and environment. Further, inspired by the systems theory of Bateson, Laing emphasizes the dysfunctional behavioural patterns of families as an important intermediating factor between the general self-destructiveness of society and the dissociation of the human mind. Alienation is a characteristic trait of psychosis and schizophrenia in forms of loss of meaning; the world does not make sense anymore but has become mechanical and empty, to an extent where the psychotic has replaced it with a fantasy world that makes sense to himself. There may be elements of these fantasies that can be shared with some branches of the surrounding community, such as belief in supernatural phenomena, but if a person cannot achieve recognition of his experiences and imaginations from his surrounding, he is at risk of total isolation and thus "psychotic alienation":

> Such ideas and experiences tend to isolate a man from his fellows in our present Western culture and, unless they serve at the same time to draw him into a small group of similar 'eccentrics', his isolation is greatly in danger of passing over into psychotic alienation (Laing 1964/1971, p.151).

By introducing alienation within the domain of psychopathology, he brings the concept closer to the phenomenology of mental suffering, which not least characterizes groups of people that usually would be targets of social work.

In the same line of thought, Braun tries to outline a taxonomy of experiences that can be related to concerns of social psychiatry. Thus, he finds that alienation is empirically accessible in experiences of apathy, guilt, shame, boredom, lack of intimacy, anxiety, pessimism or egocentrism. These experimental aspects of alienation are discussed in relation to psychosis and schizophrenia to provide a framework for empirical analysis of alienation (Braun 1976). What is important to note is that this grounding of alienation draws upon multiple sources inspired from different traditions such as Durkheim's sociology and existentialism. It focuses on isolation, meaninglessness and loneliness apart from the foundation in Marxism. However, in the following section, I will provide an example of applied use of alienation theory where this premise seems to be hidden by virtue of an instrumental definition of alienation that seems compatible with Seeman's approach. The question to be explored is to which extent such an *a priori* detachment from the critical tenets of the term is beneficial for the social worker.

5   Adolescent alienation

One traditional subject in the field of social work regards processes of inclusion and exclusion of vulnerable groups such as students belonging to ethnic minorities or disabled students. One problem that often characterizes these students is a troublesome relation to the school, a distance between themselves and the school as an institution, which in the worst case makes them give it up and excludes them from further education. Braun, Higgins and Paulsen have explored and conceptualized this as "Adolescent Alienation" in American Schools. To these authors,

> (…) alienation signifies a separation or distance among two or more entities and involves a sense of anguish or loss, resulting in a student viewing life and school as fragmentary and incomplete (Brown, Higgins & Paulsen, 2011, p.4).

In this regard, they do not refer to any particular historical definition by Rousseau, Marx or Hegel, but take an instrumental approach defined by types of experience as shown in the preceding analysis. Further, in correspondence with the conceptions of especially Fromm and Laing, these experiences imply frustration such as anguish or loss. In contrast to Seeman who tries to avoid frustration as part of the definition of alienation, Brown, Higgins and Paulsen share the idea that alienation can be instrumentally defined by virtue of a taxonomy of experiences similar to those described by Seeman, though they do not refer directly to him as the source. Thus, they classify experiences of alienation into experiences of powerlessness, normlessness, meaninglessness and social isolation/estrangement, which is compatible with Seeman's taxonomy. Such experiences can be accessed by teachers in the form of certain focus points and questions in the course of educational practice. With regard to feelings of powerlessness, one can ask to which extent the students find the rules of the school too strict, whether they are afraid to ask teachers for help, whether they think teachers are hostile to students, or whether the student in general finds problems of life unsolvable. With regard to normlessness, one can ask to which extent the student knows about the rules of the school, to which extent the student is interested in following the norms of mainstream society, and to which extent the student is willing to break them (e.g. cheat at exams) to achieve personal goals. With regard to meaninglessness, one can ask to which extent the student avoids schoolwork or find it meaningful and applicable. With regard to self-estrangement, which the

authors associate with loneliness in particular, one can ask to which extent the student is socially engaged, looks forward or is afraid to go to school, and whether the student has friends. The suggested implication of the article is to investigate among students which aspects of the school's structure they identify as alienating, and intervene accordingly by involving family, school and related authorities. The chosen example illustrates an attempt to bring the concept of alienation close to the actual life worlds of a typical target group of social work, but without referring to essential characteristics of alienation in a wider critical perspective. Thus, even without concrete references to the history of alienation theory, Brown, Higgins and Paulsen's investigation of adolescent alienation implies inspiration from Seeman's taxonomy and his attempt to deemphasize the critical aspects of the term in favour of a neutral, instrumental definition.

Others have followed the same line of thought with strikingly similar taxonomies, e.g. within Student Learning Theory, where alienation is approached in the form of experiences of powerlessness, meaninglessness and self-estrangement. However, in this case, there is particular focus on classroom-related learning such as 1) degree of difficulty, 2) level of information concerning goals and feedback and 3) scope of leaving personal choice to the students (Bernhardt and Ginns, 2014). In these cases, the inspiration from instrumental taxonomies such as Seeman's are obvious due to the cluster of shared characterization of experiences such as powerlessness and self-estrangement. However, despite his attempt to detach himself from the political polemics of the term, Seeman leaves obvious traces back to critical characteristics of alienation from Marxism, as well as from existentialism and the anomy of Durkheim. Seeman's categories cannot be fully detached from their critical foundation because his general notion of powerlessness owes to that of Marxism, normlessness to Durkheim, meaninglessness to existentialism and self-estrangement to Rousseau as well as modern pioneers like Fromm and Laing. Thus, being unable to detach themselves completely from their historically grounded premises, applied approaches like Braun, Higgins and Paulsen's are at best ambiguous and vague with regard to their attitude to alienation as an omnipresent characteristic of society. Still, alienation as omnipresent is implied in each experiential instrumentalization of experiences, and taken together, these contribute to a shared but hidden foundation, namely that alienation is considered a destructive or non-productive aspect of human society that has to be counteracted, whether this happens within Marxist or existentialist conceptual frameworks (see also Rae, 2010). Consequently, even in approaches in which alienation is narrowly defined in terms of certain types of experience, we are implying its historical foundations in the critical and analytical uses that concern society, both at the level of omnipresent and localized experiential aspects of alienation. At best, such modern approaches leave the relation between the analytical and empirical usage of the concept ambiguous, though these instrumental definitions may work for all practical purposes. Present-day approaches have not really solved the historical controversies of the alienation concept; rather, they have reduced the concept to minimal instrumental definitions that may work in the course of practice, e.g. related to young people and their relation to school, but disregards the associations between the overall characteristics of society and particular people's particular suffering, leaving it to the newcomer within social work to sort them out.

The final question to this historical review is what history leaves to a newcomer in social work. How can we relate the presented perception of alienation as omnipresent to that of particular experiences, and in which cases is alienation of particular interest to social work with vulnerable groups? The final entry to the question of the status of alienation theory

within social work will therefore be a discussion about its potential use for practitioners of social work.

6   Alienation theory and social work

One may say that at first glance, alienation, in the broadest sense possible, offers several levels of characterization that imply the notion that every person living in modern society is alienated to some extent. These characteristics have been associated especially with Marxism. However, the foundation of the term can be traced further back in history, among others to Rousseau whose approach seems of equal importance to modern notions of alienation. Further, the general conceptions of Rousseau, Hegel and Marx have later been supplemented with notions of anomy and meaninglessness owing to existentialism and Durkheim, and not least the Frankfurt School. These concepts of alienation as a general characteristic of society have especially offered themselves as analytical tools that concern social analysis in general, but not necessarily vulnerable groups in particular, in so far as omnipresent alienation concerns everyone. To deal with this characteristic of omnipresent alienation, I have also presented theories in which alienation are related to specific types of experience of discrepancy between oneself and the surroundings leading to mental suffering, e.g. Laing's theory of schizophrenia. However, in contrast to Laing, who makes explicit associations between omnipresent aspects of alienation and particular suffering, I have presented approaches to alienation, such as Seeman's, in which the experiences of alienation are detached from critical aspects of Marxism. Instead, alienation is translated into measurable categories that deal with the worker's experience of control in a general sense, i.e. without implying that lack of control leads to frustration. Further, I have exemplified how such an instrumentally purified notion of alienation is implied in a modern investigation of adolescent alienation, and how its relation to preceding theories about alienation as omnipresent becomes ambiguous and tacit. Yet, the categories chosen to signify adolescent alienation reflect the historical foundation in critical sociology.

Taken together, the social worker is offered two ways to make use of alienation theory, but no obvious or transparent ways to relate the critical analytical usage and instrumental usage to each other. History reveals that the relation between these has been theorized quite differently; some try to loosen up the relation between the critical and the experiential aspects of alienation theory, like Seeman. Others try to strengthen this relation, like Laing, and others again try to reformulate alienation to fit modern society by combining existentialist and Marxist approaches, like the Frankfurt School. From this, at least one point can be taken as evident, namely that the idea that the concept of alienation owes to Marx only, and should relate to the adoption or rejection of a corresponding political programme, is not supported by the history of alienation theory. What is revealed is a much broader concept, preceding Marx as well as further developed by and owing to Marx, with different degrees of attachment to its history. At best, the newcomer to social work is left with a scope of options, in which it will be the worker's own job to decide which approach fits his or her own ideals and practice – if any at all.

Though I believe that the ambiguity left by history is a fundamental premise of present-day usage of alienation theory, I do think it is possible to specify what kind of alienation may seem particularly important when dealing especially with vulnerable groups. Thus, from an analytical point of view, all people may be alienated, but in practice, not all people are of equal relevance to social work that deals with vulnerable groups. So, when does alienation reveal itself as something that can be a target of social intervention addressing vulnerable groups in particular?

At this point, we can return to the case of Rousseau's European minister. Does Rousseau's minister feel alienated towards himself? Does he feel that he is selling out of himself? If he does not, would it be among the goals of social work to convince him otherwise? For example, the minister may think that political spin and questionable alliances are necessary means to achieve noble goals within politics. He may feel that he neither sells out nor that his means are illegitimate or contrary to his nature. In such a case, we may encounter a conflict between the omnipresent alienation under which he is characterized, and alienation understood in terms of experiences of discrepancy and frustration. In the case of Rousseau's minister, the answer may seem simple because he does not belong in any of the groups that are traditional targets of social work. The minister is not marginalized, nor is he disabled or suffering from his alienation to any self-destructive extent. It does not hinder his sheer survival, nor does it put him in immediate risk of social isolation or exclusion. Maybe it will in time, but Rousseau does not imply that he is suffering as such, and indeed, such suffering is not necessary to claim that he is alienated in Rousseau's sense. We may still be dealing with an alienated person, albeit in a general analytical sense that concerns society as an institution where people mainly are unaware of their own alienation. To avoid this kind general alienation, society would have to be restructured. Such restructuring of society, may it refer to revolution or gradual reformation, is beyond the power of the particular social worker to initiate by virtue of social intervention under daily circumstances. However, when dealing with marginalized groups, the worker may be confronted with concrete suffering that implies a degree of alienation revealing itself as part of social processes that enhance the group's risk of marginalization and exclusion. It is at this stage, when expressions of alienation manifest its consequences in concrete suffering, that the social worker gets a reason intervene in particular communities – at least to the extent that the social worker can help identify the local expressions of alienation, help the groups to cope with effects of alienation in daily life, enhance resistance towards alienation, and empower the groups to overcome and change the localized processes of alienation as much as possible. Such localized interventions may lack the means to counter a generally alienating society. However, interventions can help vulnerable people resist the most evident destructive effects of alienation to the extent possible. This takes place within overall structures of alienation that may not imply the same destructive effects on daily life for all members of society, like the case of the European minister. Further, such a goal does not need to lend itself to any specific theory but can be supported by Rousseau, existentialism and Marxist approaches, without implying that the social worker is committed to start a revolution and de-alienating society simultaneously at all possible levels.

In sum, history has left the social worker with ambiguous approaches to alienation theory, especially concerning its status as an analytical concept that has mainly been used critically, but also concerning its identification of effects of marginalization such as feelings of loss of control, loneliness and meaningless. The precise relations between these levels of alienation are not given by history, though it has left a scope of possible usages, some in which the association to the critical analytical term has become tacit and at best ambiguous. Correspondingly, this article cannot provide unambiguous relations between those levels beyond the scope of options provided by history itself. However, the article does point to cases, namely vulnerable groups, where alienation reaches a level where people suffer in a sense that is closely related to their already marginalized position and enhances their experiences of being excluded from mainstream society. In such cases, alienation becomes accessible to the social worker, if not to counter its general foundation by virtue of revolution,

then at least to counter the damage of destructive consequences of alienation that reveal themselves as essential parts of local processes of marginalization.

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