



Restoring Worker Subjectivity: Rethinking Dehumanization and the Crisis of HR

Fabio Falino, Giulia Perasso

Abstract: *Organizational dehumanization and the growing fragmentation of the human resource (HR) function have been associated with employee stress, turnover, and declining organizational effectiveness. Although these issues have been widely discussed, they are rarely examined within a unified theoretical perspective. This perspective paper aims to conceptually integrate these two organizational phenomena and examine how the recognition of worker subjectivity may contribute to improving employee well-being and organizational performance. The paper argues that neglecting worker subjectivity undermines motivation, psychological resources, and the alignment between individual and organizational needs. It proposes that dehumanization and HR fragmentation are interconnected processes that reinforce one another. The paper discusses how recognizing worker subjectivity can inform HR practices, organizational design, and leadership approaches aimed at fostering sustainable performance, participation, and employee well-being. Future directions include the development of subjectivity-oriented organizational interventions. By integrating organizational dehumanization and HR fragmentation within a common theoretical framework, this paper offers a novel perspective that identifies worker subjectivity as a strategic lever for organizational development and provides a conceptual foundation for future research and management practice.*

Keywords: Employee Well-Being, Human Resource Management, Organizational Behavior, Worker Subjectivity.

Nomenclature:

HR: Human Resource

HRM: Human Resource Management

OCB: Organizational Citizenship Behaviours

I. INTRODUCTION

Internationally, recent studies on industrial workers show that approximately 9% experience high occupational stress, with peaks exceeding 10% in the manufacturing sector [1], and that stress accounts for around 8% of actual turnover [2]. In some countries, turnover is estimated to range between 15% and 18% annually [3], with negative consequences for organizational performance. The literature describes the current employment landscape as marked by deep and persistent crises, in which organisations face growing challenges in implementing effective employee retention

strategies [4]. It is essential to recognize that stress, turnover, and misalignment between employees and organizations are linked to two interrelated constellations of factors: (i) the dehumanization of workers and its correlates [5] [6] [7] [8]; and (ii) the progressive erosion of the HR function, which appears increasingly fragmented, aligned with managerialism, and unable to balance organizational performance with employee well-being genuinely.

This perspective paper develops a theoretically grounded perspective on how the neglect of worker subjectivity undermines motivation, well-being, and organizational functioning. However, existing literature has rarely integrated organizational dehumanization and HR fragmentation into a unified theoretical perspective grounded in psychological mechanisms. Specifically, the present paper proposes a conceptual integration that reframes dehumanization and HR fragmentation as interconnected phenomena, suggesting that the recognition of worker subjectivity may be a critical lever for restoring alignment between individual and organizational needs.

II. DEHUMANIZATION AT WORK AND ITS EFFECTS

Today, worker dehumanization has become an increasingly studied phenomenon. Dehumanization occurs when workers are perceived as instruments rather than as individuals [5] [6], leading to emotional alienation and surface acting behaviours aimed at conforming to organizational demands [9] [10]. When employees internalize such treatment, they may develop self-objectification, perceiving themselves as mere functional means for the organization. This dynamic is particularly evident in low-status, repetitive, or fragmented jobs, where autonomy and task variety are limited [11]. Such conditions may frustrate basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, thereby undermining intrinsic motivation and psychological functioning.

The psychological and social consequences of dehumanization are multiple and detrimental. Recent studies show that stress, burnout, turnover, and displaced aggression toward family or social environments are direct outcomes of perceiving oneself as being objectified at work [12] [13]. Emotional labor, defined as the pressure to display organizationally prescribed emotions, further amplifies dehumanization, reducing job satisfaction and fostering emotional detachment from work [10] [5]. In addition, workplace ostracism intensifies perceptions of exclusion and devaluation of personal contribution, increasing the risk of depression, turnover, and reduced loyalty towards the organization [13]. These dynamics may also be interpreted as persistent

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threats to personal resources that trigger stress and defensive coping responses.

Management plays a crucial role in mitigating these effects. Authentic and empathetic leadership, characterized by transparency, support, and encouraging feedback, is associated with lower perceptions of dehumanization and higher levels of employee well-being [14]. Similarly, valuing workers in their uniqueness and humanity-through autonomy, participation, and recognition of individual specificities-may represent a strategic organizational resource to enhance productivity, safety, and job satisfaction [15], as it supports both need satisfaction and resource replenishment.

Finally, the literature suggests that dehumanization is not merely an ethical concern, but has tangible implications for organizational performance. Approaches that integrate attention to emotional labour, such as participatory ergonomics, with the recognition of worker subjectivity may contribute to reducing stress and turnover while improving organizational climate and performance outcomes [9] [10] [16].

III. THE ROLE AND IDENTITY CRISIS OF HR

Today, the role of human resources (HR) is characterized by multiple structural dualisms and paradoxes, exacerbated by the recent pandemic [17] and by the persistent gap between academic research and HR practice [18]. HR professionals are required to balance employee protection with profit imperatives, employee autonomy with organizational control, and the knowledge economy with market logics. This permanent tension generates a complex environment in which HR practitioners must navigate contradictory demands, often without adequate tools. These tensions may reflect structural constraints that hinder the consistent support of employees' basic psychological needs, particularly autonomy and relatedness.

Moreover, the HR function is marked by operational and identity fragmentation: HR simultaneously acts as advisor to managers, service provider, regulator, and change agent [19]. These roles may conflict with one another, reducing HR's capacity to act coherently and strategically. Such fragmentation may also entail the dispersion of organizational and psychological resources, which can be interpreted through the lens of Conservation of Resources Theory, as competing demands increase the likelihood of resource depletion and role strain.

Managerialism and the adoption of compliance-oriented technologies have further intensified this paradox, transforming HR into an executor of corporate strategies and marginalizing employee subjectivity [20]. The use of digital tools for monitoring and management by HR can widen the gap between these professionals and workers, fostering distrust and perceptions of excessive control, particularly in manual or operational contexts [21]. This condition amplifies the emotional burden of HR professionals, who are required to mediate between organizational demands and employee well-being, thereby increasing the risk of professional burnout [22]. The emotional labour involved in managing layoffs, conflicts, or restructuring processes can become intense and prolonged, requiring often improvised coping strategies [23], further contributing to resource exhaustion.

The relationship between HR and employees is further complicated by the management of the psychological contract and employee voice [24]. The standardization of processes and the top-down management of employee opinions may undermine trust, spontaneity, and motivation, foster employee silence and weaken authentic participation [25], which remains a key driver of organizational well-being, especially in times of crisis. In this sense, neglecting employee subjectivity may reduce HR's perceived legitimacy and effectiveness.

These dynamics suggest the need for the HR function to evolve beyond a primarily administrative, compliance-oriented role toward one that facilitates the recognition and integration of human subjectivity, supporting both employees' need satisfaction and the preservation of critical organizational resources.

IV. SUBJECTIVITY AS A TURNING POINT

Over the past decades, literature on human resource management (HRM) has shown that recognizing worker subjectivity represents a crucial turning point for contemporary organizations. Treating workers as subjects rather than as objects means acknowledging their emotions, knowledge, aspirations, and limitations, while fostering active participation, participatory safety, and spontaneous prosocial behaviours such as organizational citizenship behaviours (OCB). These factors contribute to improved performance and organizational well-being [16]. The recognition of subjectivity may support the satisfaction of basic psychological needs, thereby fostering intrinsic motivation and discretionary work behaviours. Subjectivity may be understood as a source of personal and relational resources that sustain engagement and resilience in demanding work environments.

To revitalize the HR function, a shift is suggested from a paradigm of D-reflexivity (deconstruction and critique) to one of R-reflexivity (reconstructive critique). This implies adopting a critical approach that integrates alternative perspectives, recognizes power and conflict, and situates HR within the broader social and economic context. In this framework, subjectivity becomes a key strategic lever. HR professionals may recover their professional identity and better balance the tensions between management and employees, moving beyond a purely bureaucratic or strategic-partner role for top management. Listening, mediation, and conflict management can therefore be interpreted as practices that support both the satisfaction of needs and the preservation of resources.

Several practical examples illustrate how a subject-centred approach can be translated into concrete actions. Green HRM [26] [27] [28], participatory ergonomics, and the attentive management of generational differences and workforce aging [29] [30] [31] represent effective tools for encouraging voluntary and discretionary behaviors, such as the adoption of environmentally sustainable practices or the use of customized ergonomic solutions. These approaches suggest that employee behaviour does not depend solely on standardized rules or incentives, but also on the





organization's ability to value intrinsic motivation and experiential competence.

Subjectivity may also serve as an integrating element between ethics, performance, and organizational sustainability. Work environments that recognize the dignity and uniqueness of employees are associated with lower stress, burnout, and turnover, as well as improved safety and process quality. At the same time, promoting employee voice [25] and OCB may strengthen individual responsibility and motivation, supporting more sustainable and participatory organizational dynamics.

V. FUTURE DIRECTIONS: AN INTEGRATIVE-APPLIED APPROACH

Building on the previous discussion, future research may further explore how worker subjectivity can be systematically integrated into organizational design and HR practices.

In this regard, multidimensional subjectivity-oriented interventions [31] may represent a promising direction for inquiry. These interventions typically involve three interconnected processes: (i) the systematic collection of workers' subjective experiences (e.g., perceptions of strain, motivation, misalignment); (ii) the aggregation and interpretation of this information at the group or organizational level to identify recurring patterns; and (iii) the integration of these insights into organizational decision-making, such as the redesign of tasks, workflows, or HR practices. In this sense, subjective experience is translated into structured organizational knowledge that can inform adjustments in both work design and people management processes. These approaches often rely on continuous listening mechanisms and mediation practices aimed at aligning individual needs with organizational constraints.

Overall, further research is needed to clarify the conditions under which these interventions can be effectively implemented and to examine how they may help align employee well-being with organisational performance, as these approaches remain underexplored in empirical research.

VI. CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that organizational dehumanization and the fragmentation of the HR function are interconnected phenomena that undermine both employee well-being and organizational effectiveness. Recognizing worker subjectivity is therefore not only an ethical concern, but a theoretically grounded pathway for fostering sustainable performance, engagement, and resilience in contemporary work contexts.

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DECLARATION STATEMENT

Some of the cited references are older and are noted explicitly as [5]. However, these works remain significant for the current study, as they are pioneering in their fields.

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