WORKERS AS OBJECTS:
THE NATURE OF WORKING OBJECTIFICATION
AND THE ROLE OF PERCEIVED ALIENATION

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The aim of the present study is to advance the research on working objectification by analyzing its nature and the mechanism underlying this process. In particular, we hypothesized that working objectification involved an automatic association of the worker with an object and a full denial of humanness related to both agency and experience. Further, we expected that perceived alienation could explain the relationship between critical working conditions and objectifying perceptions. Results showed that, compared to an artisan, a factory worker was automatically associated with the object-related words rather than with person-related words. Furthermore, the factory worker was perceived as having less agency and experience than the artisan. Finally, the perception of the factory work as fragmented, repetitive, and other-directed was related to a view of work as being more alienating, which, in turn, led to the increased objectification of the worker. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

In the last critical economic period, several companies decided to delocalize their production. Some did so to survive, whereas others did it simply to obtain greater profits and lower costs. In Italy alone, 27,000 companies delocalized their production (CGIA Mestre, 2013). In such a scenario, it appears evident that workers can be seen and treated as mere tools, rather than as human beings. It seems that workers have become easily eliminable and replaceable with similar, cheaper tools without any concern for them, their feelings, and their lives, as if they were cold objects. This manner of treatment of workers as things is a perfect example of objectification, which means perceiving and "treating as an object what is really not an object, what is, in fact, a human being" (Nussbaum, 1995, p. 257). Recent empirical evidence has shown that working objectification can arise as a consequence of the critical features that characterize the activity performed by workers (Andrighetto, Baldissarri, & Volpato, 2016). Draw-

ing on these findings, the present research aims to understand more deeply this phenomenon in the work domain by analyzing its nature and the mechanism that can lead to the object-like treatment of workers.

THE NATURE OF OBJECTIFICATION

According to Nussbaum (1995), objectification is treating a human being as an object. It can be characterized by seven dimensions. Four of these dimensions involve the treatment of a person as a mere tool (see Holland & Haslam, 2013; Vaes, Loughnan, & Puvia, 2014). The objectifier sees the objectified person as a tool (instrumentality) that is interchangeable with other objects (fungibility), possessed by someone else (ownership) and broken up (violability). The other three dimensions concern the denial of the humanness of the person. The objectifier sees the objectified person as lacking autonomy and self-determination (denial of autonomy), agency and activities (inertness), and feelings and experiences (denial of subjectivity). Therefore, objectification is literally the perception of someone as an object and not as a person (Heflick & Goldenberg, 2014). Moreover, this perception involves two aspects: the view and the treatment of the person as an instrument and the denial of humanness related both to agency and to experience (Li, Leidner, & Castano, 2014). Indeed, the aspects of inertness, denial of autonomy, and denial of subjectivity fit well with the dimensions of the mind (proposed by Gray, Gray, & Wegner, 2007) that we usually attribute to others when we consider them to be fully human: agency (the ability to have thoughts and intentions, the capacity to act, plan and exert self-control) and experience (the ability to have emotions and sensations, the capacity to feel pain and pleasure). These dimensions are also consistent with the two universal dimensions of human social cognition, competence and warmth (Stereotype Content Model; Fiske, Cuddy, & Glick, 2007), and the two senses of humanness, human uniqueness and human nature, proposed by Haslam and colleagues (Haslam, 2006; Haslam, Loughnan, & Holland, 2013). Actually, classic psychosocial research on objectification, which usually focuses on the sexual domain, does not show a unique way of denying humanness related to this phenomenon. For example, in a series of studies, Heflick, Goldenberg, Cooper, and Puvia (2012; see also Heflick & Goldenberg, 2009) demonstrated that focusing on women's appearance leads to perceptions of them as lacking the dimension of experience in terms of human nature traits. In contrast, Gray, Knobe, Sheskin, Bloom, and Barrett (2011) found that focusing on a person's body compared to his or her mind can increase attributions of experience (for this debate, see, e.g., Goldenberg, 2013; Li et al., 2014).

Focusing on the nature of objectification in the work domain, Nussbaum (1995) speculated about the object-like treatment of workers starting with Marx's analysis. Instrumentality — the perception of workers as mere tools — and the view of workers as mindless entities — the denial of human autonomy and subjectivity — are the crucial dimensions involved in the process of working objectification. Those who work at a machine, following the rhythm of production and making repetitive gestures, look like extensions of the same machine, as mere interchangeable tools that cannot make decisions and organize using their own initiative. All workers are seen as being equal, and their subjectivity, feelings, and experience are eliminated.

Basing on these theoretical analyses, throughout the present paper, we conceptualize workers' objectification first as the perception of a person as an object. Further, we assume that this phe-

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nomenon involves two components, instrumentality and denial of humanness, in terms of a decrease in the attribution of both human mind dimensions of agency and experience.

WORKING OBJECTIFICATION: EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

Only recently, social psychology has begun to investigate the phenomenon of objectification in the work domain. Particularly, Gruenfeld, Inesi, Magee, and Galinsky (2008), with a focus on instrumentality, showed that in hierarchical relationships at work, power positions can lead to the perception of subordinates as mere tools who are useful for one's own purpose. In this case, objectification involves the tendency to approach the subordinates exclusively on the basis of their usefulness to achieve a goal, regardless of their gender and human qualities.

More recently, in a study that is particularly relevant to the present research, Andrighetto et al. (2016) investigated working objectification. By analyzing both aspects of instrumentality and denial of humanness, they argued that industrial settings, where workers perform repetitive, fragmented, and controlled tasks, lead to workers' objectification. To empirically verify their assumptions, they asked participants to watch a video of an artisan or a factory worker, depending on the condition, focusing on the job activity or on the person filmed in the video. Emphasizing the factory worker's activity as opposed to his or her personhood promoted objectification in terms of both increased perceptions of the worker as an instrument and decreased attributions of humanness. Importantly, these effects did not emerge for the artisan. Therefore, at least within the manual work domain, tasks with particular features (e.g., repetitive movements and subordination to the machine) promote working objectification. In contrast, objectification does not occur if manual but less repetitive and other-directed tasks (i.e., artisanal work) are taken into consideration. Further, they tested the separate impacts of critical features that characterize factory work, including the repetitiveness of movements, fragmentation of activities, and dependence on the machine (Blauner, 1964), on objectification. They found that such features operate independently and similarly to promote an objectified view of the target. Simply describing the target work as highly repetitive, highly fragmented, or highly dependent on the machine, increased the participants' perceptions of the worker as an instrument (vs. a human being) and decreased the attributions of human mental states.

Although these previous studies represent the first important steps in the knowledge relating to objectification caused by critical working conditions, these findings should be expanded to deepen understanding regarding the nature of working objectification. In particular, using the definition of the phenomenon mentioned above, the present research aims to examine whether objectification actually involves a perception of a person as an object by analyzing the automatic association between these two concepts. Indeed, as conceptualized by Andrighetto and colleagues (2016), working objectification can be explained as a cognitive process in which human beings who perform standardized actions may be identified as mere mindless things. Therefore, working objectification may involve an unaware process that automatically links workers to objects due to the performed activity. Furthermore, the denial of humanness is analyzed to understand whether objectification implies a decreased perception of workers as humans in terms of reduced attributions of both agency and experience. Finally, this study aims to understand the process underlying this phenomenon in the work domain by focusing on the role of perceived alienation.

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Worker alienation has been typically analyzed in relation to its effect on workers. It has been found to have critical consequences on satisfaction, performance, and different side effects (see Chiaburu, Thundiyil, & Wang, 2014) and to be caused by task variety, task identity, control over the work, and social support (e.g., Shantz, Alfes, Bailey, & Soane, 2015). In this work, with the aim of integrating the psychosocial process of objectification into working dynamics, we changed the perspective to understand the impact of alienated activities on laypeople's perceptions of workers. Indeed, as shown by different theoretical analyses, alienation can have a particular role in the objectification of workers.

According to Marx (1844, reported in Tucker, 1978), in a capitalistic society, work is not a free conscious activity through which humans can manifest their humanity. Instead, it is an activity through which they are alienated. In this system, the product and worker's life itself become properties of the capitalist. Mankind is alienated because humans lose their peculiar ability to transform nature on the basis of their own planning and autonomy. Alienated work, thus, is a labor of self-sacrifice and mortification. Work is reduced to a means through which the capitalistic class can obtain profit. Therefore, workers become mere commodities who are evaluated and perceived merely in terms of their productivity, rather than in terms of their humanity.

Following Marx's assumptions, the sociologist Blauner (1964) analyzed the causes of the use of workers as objects. Blauner highlighted that the performance of fragmented, repetitive, and other-directed tasks is a source of alienation that involves different aspects, including powerlessness, meaninglessness, isolation, and self-estrangement. Powerlessness arises when an individual is other-directed and controlled by other people or by an impersonal system as well as when he/she cannot impose him/herself as an active subject of change. Furthermore, workers who perform highly fragmented and repetitive activities know how to perform a limited number of tasks without knowing how they are integrated with those of other workers. The outcome is the isolation of the individual, loss of meaning, and decline of capacity to act intelligently. In this sense, alienation involves a transformation of the person into a self-estranged entity without power and agency. That is, the individual is merely an object. Therefore, objective features that are related to the activity, such as fragmentation, repetitiveness, and other-direction, lead to alienation. In turn, according to Blauner, the worker's alienated state makes it more likely that he/she is seen and treated as a thing, rather than as a person.

Starting with these reflections, we assumed that critical working activities, characterized by low control of work pace, high repetitiveness, and high fragmentation, would lead to the perception of work as being more alienating and that this perception would lead to increased perceptions of workers as objects.

THE PRESENT STUDY

Based on the study of Andrighetto and colleagues (2016), we used the same materials (i.e., the two videos of a factory worker and an artisan) to extend their findings in two directions. The first direction concerns the nature of objectification. Primarily, we aimed to analyze if objectification involves an automatic association of a human being with a mere object. In particular, we decided to compute this association at an implicit level in order to provide evi-

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dence that, as supposed by Andrighetto and colleagues, working objectification involves an un-aware cognitive process in which workers are automatically linked to mere objects as a conse-quence of the performed activity. Moreover, implicit measure allowed us to avoid participants' desirability concerns (e.g., Crowne & Marlowe, 1964; Nederhof, 1985) that emerged in An-drighetto and colleagues' study in which only an explicit self-report measure was used, leading to low scores of objectification. Further, we wanted to test whether both dimensions of human-ness (agency and experience) are involved in working objectification. To achieve these aims, after viewing both videos, participants evaluated the workers on the dimensions of agency and experience and completed an Implicit Association Test (IAT; Greenwald, McGhee, & Schwartz, 1998) in which they had to categorize the two workers and words concerning the concept of object or the concept of person. We hypothesized that working objectification im-plies a denial of whole humanness in terms of a decreased attribution of both agency and expe-rience to the factory worker compared to the artisan. Further, we hypothesized that participants should be quicker in completing the IAT task in which object-related concepts are associated with the factory worker and person-related concepts are associated with the artisan, rather than the reverse task.

The second direction concerns the process by which a worker can be objectified con-sidering the effect of alienation on objectification. Given that Andrighetto and colleagues (2016) found that each of the three examined conditions had an effect on objectification, we considered repetitiveness, fragmentation, and other-direction as a unique variable that repre-sents critical job conditions. To verify our assumptions, we asked participants to rate the extent to which they thought that the job was characterized by critical job conditions and the extent to which they thought that the job was alienating. We hypothesized that, first, the factory work would be perceived as being characterized by critical job conditions and as being alienating, to a greater extent than the artisan work. Furthermore, we hypothesized that critical job conditions would lead to objectification via the increased perception of alienation. That is, the perception of work as repetitive, fragmented, and other-directed should lead to the perception of the activi-ty as being more alienating, which, in turn, should increase the perception of the worker as a mere thing.

METHOD

Participants and Procedure

In this study, 68 undergraduates (54 females) participated in exchange for partial course credits. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 52 years ($M = 23.47$, $SD = 5.96$). They were indi-vidually examined, and the experiment was introduced as a task involving impression formation. A within-subjects design was used in which all participants observed both the factory worker's clip and the artisan's clip (the order was counterbalanced). Then, they completed a questionnaire to evaluate job conditions, alienation, and the workers' agency and experience. Additionally, they completed the IAT. As a final task, participants were asked to provide demographic information, thanked and fully debriefed.

Materials

Videos. The two clips were the same used in Andrighetto et al. (2016). The factory worker's clip depicted a worker inserting a unit inside a welding machine, a repetitive and short action that was perfectly synchronized with the machine. The artisan's clip showed a worker performing different operations related to the production of a chair (e.g., woodcutting) from the beginning to the end of the process. Each clip was 1min and 56s long.

Measures of critical job conditions and alienation. Eleven words related to critical job conditions (e.g., repetitive, fragmented, dependent on the machine; α for factory worker = .68; α for artisan = .79), and six related to alienation (e.g., estranging, alienating, mortifying; α for factory worker = .60; α for artisan = .69). The participants were asked to rate the extent to which each job had these characteristics on a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *extremely*).

Measures of agency and experience. To measure attributions of agency and experience to workers, participants were asked to rate the extent to which each worker had different mental abilities (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *extremely*). These abilities captured the two dimensions of mind (Gray et al., 2007). Specifically, seven items were related to agency (e.g., self-control, planning, thought; α for factory worker = .87; α for artisan = .82), and 11 items were related to experience (e.g., feeling fear, having a personality, having consciousness; α for factory worker = .93; α for artisan = .91).

IAT. The implementation of the IAT followed the seven-block procedure described by Greenwald, Nosek, and Banaji (2003). In one combined block (compatible block), factory worker stimuli and five object-related words (object, thing, tool, machine, utensil) shared the same response key, while artisan stimuli and five person-related words (person, subject, man, individual, inhabitant) shared a different key. In the other combined block (incompatible block), the artisan stimuli and object-related words and factory worker stimuli and person-related words shared the same response key. Each combined task consisted of 40 test trials, which were preceded by 20 practice trials. For each trial, the stimulus was shown until the participant gave the correct answer. After any incorrect response, a red X immediately appeared below the stimulus. The correct response was required before the next trial began. The order of presentation of the two combined tasks was counterbalanced across participants.

The worker stimuli were five frames selected from the artisan video and five frames selected from the factory worker video. A separate sample (*n* = 22, 14 females) rated the words used in the IAT on a scale ranging from 1 (*typically associated to person*) to 7 (*typically associated to object*) in response to the following question: "How much are these words typically associated with the concept of person versus the concept of object?" We averaged the responses to the person-related words (α = .97) and the object-related words (α = .91). A paired-samples *t*-test showed a robust difference, $t(21) = 10.28$, $p < .001$, $d = 2.19$. For both object-related words (*M* = 6.42, *SD* = 1.11) and person-related words (*M* = 1.43, *SD* = 1.19), scores differed significantly from the neutral point of the scale, $t(21) = 10.23$ and $t(21) = -10.15$, respectively, $ps < .001$.

RESULTS

A within-subjects multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted to analyze the effects of work type (factory worker vs. artisan) on participants' perceptions of job

conditions, alienation, and attributions of agency and experience to the target. The multivariate test revealed a main effect of work type, $\lambda = .102$, $F(4, 64) = 140.44$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .99$. As reported below, univariate tests showed a significant effect of work type on each dependent variable.

Critical Job Conditions and Alienation

Regarding critical job conditions, the analysis showed a significant effect of work type, $F(1, 67) = 372.57$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .85$, indicating that the job of the factory worker ($M = 5.69$, $SD = .68$) was perceived as being more repetitive, other-directed, and fragmented than that of the artisan ($M = 3.28$, $SD = .81$). Also, the results for alienation revealed a significant effect of work type, $F(1, 67) = 378.35$; $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .85$, indicating that the job of the factory worker ($M = 5.37$; $SD = .90$) was perceived as being more alienating than the job of the artisan ($M = 2.63$; $SD = .78$) (see Figure 1).
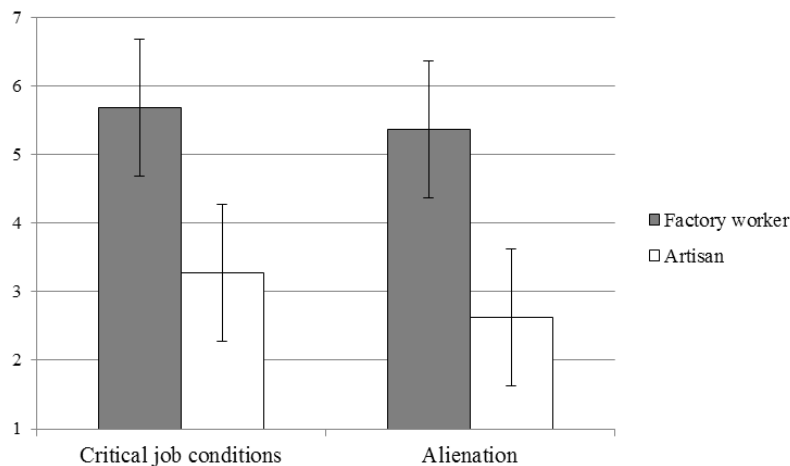

FIGURE 1
Perception of critical job conditions and alienation as a function of the work type
(factory worker vs. artisan).
Error bars indicate one standard error above and below the mean.

Agency and Experience

Regarding agency, the analysis showed a main effect of work type, $F(1, 67) = 18.1$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .21$, indicating that participants attributed less agency to the factory worker ($M = 4.67$, $SD = 1.13$) than to the artisan ($M = 5.18$, $SD = .81$). Similarly, participants attributed less experience to the factory worker ($M = 4.73$, $SD = 1.22$) than to the artisan ($M = 5.2$, $SD = 1.04$), $F(1, 67) = 22.04$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .25$ (see Figure 2).
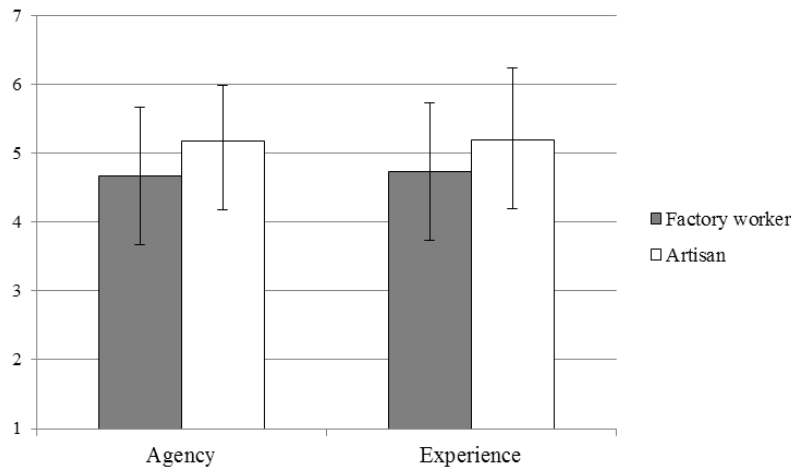
FIGURE 2
Attribution of agency and experience as a function of the work type (factory worker vs. artisan).
Error bars indicate one standard error above and below the mean.

IAT

To calculate implicit objectification, the *D*-score measure proposed by Greenwald and colleagues (2003) was employed. The higher the value of the *D*-score, the stronger the association between the factory worker, rather than the artisan, with object-related words. The analyses revealed a positive mean ($M = 0.226$, $SD = 0.436$) that was reliably different from zero, $t(67) = 4.29$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.05$. As hypothesized, there was a significant association between the factory worker and the object words and between the artisan and the person words. The factory worker was more associated with object concept than person concept.

The Mediator Role of Alienation

To examine the mediation role of perceived alienation in the relationship between critical job conditions and the implicit measure of objectification (*D*-score), we computed a differential score for each variable under examination. Therefore, in the subsequent analyses, critical job conditions, alienation, agency and experience scores were operationalized as the difference between the average score relative to the factory worker and the average score relative to the artisan. For instance, higher alienation scores indicate that factory work was perceived as being more alienating than artisan work, while lower agency scores indicate that the factory worker was perceived as being less capable of agency than the artisan.

As shown in Table 1, the perception of critical job conditions was positively correlated with the perception of alienation. Furthermore, the perception of alienation was negatively correlated with the perception of agency and experience and was positively correlated with the *D*-score.

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TABLE 1
Correlations between variables

Variables	1	2	3	4	5
1. Job conditions	–				
2. Alienation	.27*	–			
3. Agency	−.03	−.42**	–		
4. Experience	.03	−.35**	.41**	–	
5. *D*-score (IAT)	.13	.26*	−.11	−.01	–

* $p \le .05$. ** $p \le .01$.

The indirect effect of critical job conditions on objectification via alienation was tested using Hayes' (2013) PROCESS macro and the bootstrapping method (5,000 resamples). The analysis showed that participants' perceptions of critical job conditions were related with increased perception of alienation, $b = .33$, $SE = .13$, $t(1,66) = 2.48$, $p = .02$. In turn, a higher level of alienation was significantly related to a higher D-score, namely a stronger association between the factory worker and object-related words, $b = .09$, $SE = .47$, $t(2,65) = 1.96$, $p = .05$. Importantly, the indirect effect of participants' perceptions of job conditions on D-scores via alienation emerged as significant. The point estimate was .03 and the 95% CI was [0.0038, 0.0735]. Therefore, an increased perception of the factory work as being characterized to a greater extent by repetitiveness, fragmentation, and other-direction than the artisan work led to its evaluation as being more alienating than artisan work; this greater alienation, in turn, led to a stronger association, of the factory worker than the artisan with object-related words (see Figure 3).
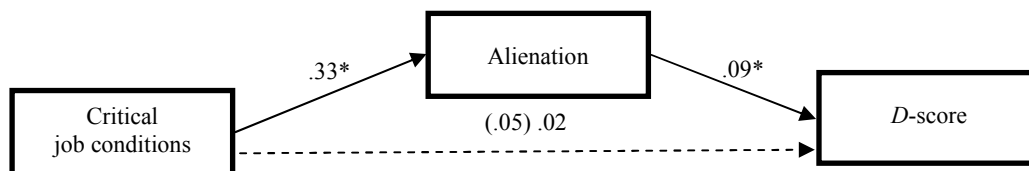

FIGURE 3
Model testing the indirect effect from perceived critical job conditions
to implicit objectification (*D*-score) via perceived alienation.
* $p \le .05$. Coefficient value in parentheses is the total effect.

Similar results were found for agency and experience. Higher levels of critical job conditions were associated with a higher level of alienation. In turn, a higher level of alienation was significantly related to a lower level of agency, $b = −.39$, $SE = .10$, $t(2,65) = −3.865$, $p < .001$, and experience, $b = −.28$, $SE = .08$, $t(2,65) = −3.23$, $p = .002$. Importantly, the indirect effects of participants' perceptions of critical job conditions on lower agency and experience scores via alienation emerged as significant. The point estimate was −.13 and the 95% CI was [−0.2634, −0.0427] for agency, whereas the point estimate was −.09 and the 95% CI was [−0.1857, −0.0367] for experi-

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ence. Therefore, an increased perception of the factory work as being characterized to a greater extent by repetitiveness, fragmentation, and other-direction than the artisan work led to the perception of factory work as being more alienating than artisan work which, in turn, led to the attribution of less experience and agency to the factory worker than to the artisan (see Figures 4 and 5).
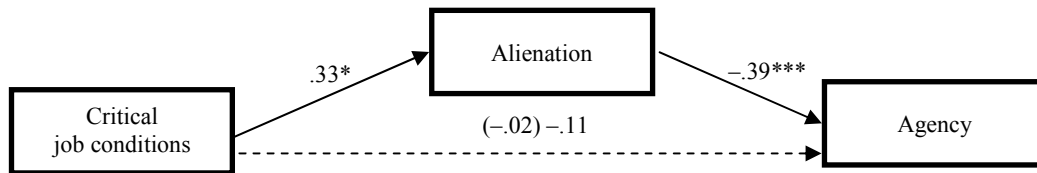

FIGURE 4
Model testing the indirect effect from perceived critical job conditions to agency via perceived alienation.
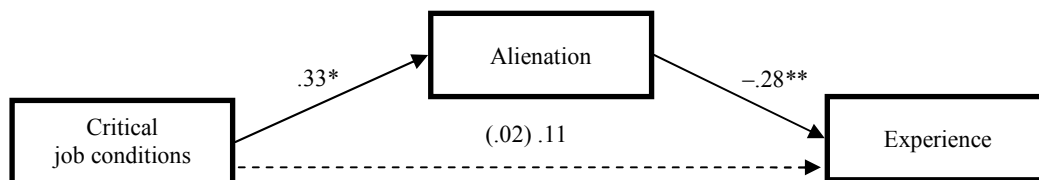* $p \leq .05$. *** $p \leq .001$. Coefficient value in parentheses is the total effect.

FIGURE 5
Model testing the indirect effect from perceived critical job conditions
to experience via perceived alienation.
* $p \leq .05$. ** $p \leq .01$. Coefficient value in parentheses is the total effect.

DISCUSSION

The present study advances knowledge on objectification at work in two directions. First, the nature of working objectification was analyzed. The results showed that working objectification involved an implicit representation of the factory worker as an object: compared to the artisan, the factory worker, who performed repetitive, fragmented, and other-directed activities, was automatically associated with the concept of object more than with the concept of person. This finding extends in an important way the research conducted by Andrighetto and colleagues (2016). They found a higher association of the objectified target with human-related words than with instrument-related words (despite varying according to the focus manipulation). This kind of association might be explained by desirability issues related to the explicit measures they used. Here, we avoided this desirability influence using implicit techniques, which are less susceptible to motivated responding (Gawronski & Bodenhausen, 2006); we found that the factory worker is automatically associated more to object-related words than human-related words. Crucially, the IAT seems to suggest that working objectification is not only an explicit evaluation of workers as object-like, but it also involves unaware categorization processes. This result provides us with further support for the conceptualization of working objectification as a consequence also of a cognitive process (An-

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drighetto et al., 2016) in which workers who perform repetitive, fragmented, and machine-like movements, are automatically assimilated to mere objects.

Furthermore, working objectification involves a denial of humanness related to both agency and experience. We found that, compared to the artisan, the factory worker was perceived as being less able to experience different mental states related to both dimensions of humanness. Therefore, as stated by Nussbaum (1995) and Blauner (1964), the objectified worker is seen as lacking in autonomy and subjectivity.

The second direction concerns the process that leads to these objectifying perceptions. Consistent with the analysis conducted by Blauner (1964), the perceptions of a job as being fragmented, repetitive, and other-directed, is related to a view of work as being more alienating. This perceived work alienation, in turn, leads to a perception of the worker as being more similar to an object that lacks agency and experience. This process highlights how the perception of objective features of work can influence the perception of the more subjective feature of alienation. Evaluating an activity as being more repetitive, fragmented, and other-directed leads to an association of the work with alienation. In turn, work that is perceived as being potentially alienating — something that can estrange the worker from him/herself — triggers a perception of the worker no longer as a human being but as a mere object. The worker becomes an empty body, lacking a mind, a means of production.

These findings also provide new evidence for the research on alienation. Indeed, here, we considered the detrimental effects of alienation on laypeople's perceptions of workers. This is of particular relevance in work domain research that usually considers the consequences of alienating work on the worker's self-image (e.g., Shantz et al., 2015). This research shows that the perception of work as alienating has negative consequences on how the worker is seen by others, promoting the view of him as a mere tool.

Future research is needed to deepen understanding of the phenomenon and to go beyond the limits of the present study. These results must be replicated with different and simpler stimuli than the videos that are full of possible confounding variables, even though they were pretested. Further, as Andrighetto and colleagues (2016) did, it could be useful to manipulate single critical job conditions, that here were considered together and detected with self-report measures, to analyze the specific effect of these conditions on alienation and, in turn, objectification.

Moreover, future directions should analyze the phenomenon by integrating the motivational and the cognitive processes that drive working objectification. Objectification indeed can be triggered by a hierarchical relation in which powerful roles lead to objectify powerless workers (Gruenfeld et al., 2008; but see also Landau, Sullivan, Keefer, Rothschild, & Osman, 2012), or by a cognitive worker-object association due to the critical performed activities requested by work. An interesting future step may be to study the interaction between these two processes, hypothesizing a dangerous exponential effect on the object-like treatment of workers. Working objectification should be also investigated considering further relevant dimensions, such as the reduction of the worker to body and to silence (Langton, 2009; see also Auzoult & Personnaz, 2016). Indeed, perceiving the workers as mere bodies that are unable to speak may be another dangerous way to deny humanness which could lead to detrimental consequences such as, for example, a scarce consideration of them as active actors in the organizational decision processes.

To understand the possible impact of objectification in the work domain, future research should also verify if perceived alienation and objectification can influence company policies and

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decisions toward workers. These objectifying perceptions could effectively lead to negative consequences at a more interpersonal level, for example, in the exploitation of workers by superiors, resulting in a worsening of work conditions. Such deterioration, in turn, could increase alienating and objectifying perceptions that can trigger a detrimental vicious circle. Longitudinal field studies could be useful in promoting understanding of the relationship between the variables examined in this study and the evolution of a possible process that links objectification to the mistreatment of workers. Moreover, the fact that objectification arises also at an implicit level suggests that working objectification is a process that may occur also unintentionally. This aspect is particularly insidious, as it may influence relevant decisions in the work context in a subtle and unintentional way and, thus, through a process that is hard to control and to modify.

Finally, research should pay attention to the consequences of this objectifying gaze on workers' identity. Different steps have already been taken in this direction. The perception of being objectified leads workers to objectify themselves (Auzoult & Personnaz, 2016; Baldissarri, Andrighetto, & Volpato, 2014) as well as the specific performed activities (Baldissarri, Andrighetto, Gabbiadini, & Volpato, 2016). Furthermore, these self-objectifying perceptions are linked to detrimental consequences in personal dimensions in the form of a reduction in perceived personal free will and well-being (Baldissarri et al., 2016; Baldissarri, Andrighetto, & Volpato, 2017). This line of research is fundamental to understand the impact of objectification on workers' identity and to identify potential protective factors, such as a high level of self-consciousness (Auzoult & Personnaz, 2016), that can prevent workers from feeling like objects, rather than human beings, even if they work in critical objectifying conditions.

CONCLUSIONS

Given the current critical work scenario, in which workers are treated as mere interchangeable tools, analyzing the factors that trigger this kind of treatment is relevant. This research contributes to comprehending the nature of working objectification and the process underlying this phenomenon, revealing that alienating work leads to the perception of workers as mere mindless things. Dehumanizing perceptions of workers are critical factors in maintaining the existing critical situation (Volpato, Andrighetto, & Baldissarri, 2017). Therefore, the study of the phenomenon of objectification is noteworthy in understanding and preventing the treatment of workers as mere objects.

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