



A dialectical theory of the decision to go to work: Bringing together absenteeism and presenteeism



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ABSTRACT

The decision to *not* attend work (absenteeism) has been the focus of a great deal of inquiry; however, research is emerging on the importance of the decision to attend work when ill (presenteeism). Interestingly, despite being the outcome of the same decision, these constructs have developed relatively independently. We argue that absenteeism and presenteeism are strategies employees use to navigate the dialectical tensions in the supervisor–subordinate relationship. Thus, understanding the nature of those tensions, their context, and the strategies employed to manage the tensions can inform employees' decision to attend work.

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1. Introduction

Absenteeism is one of the most studied constructs in organizational behavior and human resources (Harrison & Martocchio, 1998). Interestingly, a related employee phenomenon has emerged over the past few years, owing largely to changes in the workplace environment that result in employees carrying increased workloads with fewer resources and organizational support (Pilette, 2005). Employers are increasingly concerned about presenteeism, which occurs when employees come to work despite medical or mental illness that should keep them away from work (Aronsson, Gustafsson, & Dallner, 2000; Bungum, Satterwhite, Jackson, & Morrow, 2003; Gosselin, Lemyre, & Corneil, 2013), because the cost and productivity loss associated with presenteeism may be significantly greater than that of absenteeism (Goetzel, Hawkins, Ozminowski, & Wang, 2003; Hemp, 2004; Schultz & Edgington, 2007). Absenteeism and presenteeism are the result of a single decision point: the choice between going to work and not going to work is the common thread in the constructs. However, absenteeism and presenteeism have developed from different literatures and have been explained using different theories. We propose that a theory of one's relationship with his or her supervisor, relational dialectics theory, helps us unite these two constructs into a more clear understanding of how employees manage the decision to go to work.

Dialectical theories are based on a foundation of opposing forces, or tensions, that act on social relationships (Baxter, 1990). Because the opposing forces are "interdependent and mutually negating" (Bantham, Celuch, & Kasouf, 2003, p. 266), they lead to uncertainty that employees and supervisors respond to by bringing the tensions closer to equilibrium (Baxter, 1988, 1990). Further, as individuals respond to the tensions they experience, they grow and change (Montgomery, 1993). We utilize dialectical theories to extend the literature in two meaningful ways. First, we propose that dialectical theories can be applied to understand one's relationship with one's supervisor. Dialectical theories have been widely applied in organizational theory (Benson, 1977), particularly in the context of organizational change (Van den Ven & Poole, 1995). To a much more limited extent, dialectical theories have been proposed for social relationships in the workplace, specifically the relationship between coworkers (Bridge & Baxter, 1992; Halbesleben, 2012). To this point, one's relationship with his or her supervisor has been largely driven by theories of social exchange (Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchison, & Sowa, 1986; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002).

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Examining workplace relationships through the exchange lens has contributed a great deal to our understanding of workplace attitudes and behavior. Favorable exchange relationships between employees and supervisors have been linked to a number of positive individual and organizational outcomes (Armeli, Eisenberger, Fasolo, & Lynch, 1998; Eisenberger, Armeli, Rexwinkel, Lynch, & Rhoades, 2001; Kinnunen, Feldt, & Makikangas, 2008; Lee & Pecce, 2007; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). Since employees tend to ascribe the organization humanlike characteristics, an employee will consider the actions of the supervisor, the organizational agent, to be indicative of the organization's intent (Eisenberger et al., 1986). Exchange theories suggest that an employee will engage in reciprocity or retaliation based on his or her perceptions of the supervisor's orientation towards him or her (Blau, 1964; Gouldner, 1960). Relationships with reciprocal exchanges will likely persist while relationships with retaliatory exchanges will likely cease.

We argue that, while valuable, exchange theories do not fully account for the dynamics of the supervisor–subordinate relationship. An assumption of exchange theories is that the relationship should “progress” or change in a linear growth pattern; research suggests that such models of relationships do not capture the true essence of relationships (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). A growth model implies that if progress is not being made in the relationship, it is somehow broken (Wiseman, 1986). However, as relationship researchers in other contexts have suggested, relationships are better conceptualized as “flexible” rather than “fragile” (Becker et al., 2009). In other words, relationships fluctuate in their closeness; however, that does not mean the relationship ends.

As an illustration of how dialectical theories can be applied to understand one's relationship with one's supervisor, we apply dialectical theories and, in particular, the management of dialectical tensions to the absenteeism and presenteeism literatures. The literatures on absenteeism and presenteeism have grown from quite different foundations and researchers have yet to bring these two concepts together under one theoretical framework. This is peculiar, however, as the experiences of absenteeism and presenteeism can be boiled down to a single decision – the decision to attend work or not when experiencing physical or psychological illness. We propose that this decision can be explained by understanding the dialectical tensions experienced by the employee within their specific work context and the strategies used to manage those tensions. One key element of relationships is one's involvement in them. We argue that the decision to attend work is a reflection of one's desire to be more or less involved in a relationship with his or her supervisor.

Prior to explicating our dialectic theory of the decision to attend work, we must clarify several assumptions we will make moving forward. Theories of relational dialectics are inherently interpersonal and we will focus on the supervisor–subordinate relationship in this paper. However, we are also describing a decision that is ultimately the employee's alone. As a result, we will focus primarily on the manner in which the employee experiences and addresses the dialectic tensions inherent in his or her relationship with his or her supervisor. We will briefly examine the supervisor's experience of these tensions later in the paper, acknowledging that the dialectical processes are *interpersonal*, but maintaining an emphasis on the *intrapersonal* elements that drive an employee's decision to attend work.

2. The decision to attend work: absenteeism and presenteeism

2.1. Sickness absenteeism

As one of the most common workplace problems, absenteeism is a complex phenomenon (Johns, 2003). Sickness absenteeism, in particular, constitutes the main cause of absence from work and accounts for over four percent of organizational productivity loss, or an average of 10.4 days lost per employee per year (Goetzel et al., 2004). Sickness absenteeism refers to missed time from work due to health and disease conditions (Goetzel et al., 2004; Harrison & Price, 2003). Voluntary absenteeism occurs when an employee chooses to withdraw or escape from aversive work circumstances (Schaufeli, Bakker, & Rhenen, 2009), or as a means of protest against unpleasant work conditions (Chadwick-Jones, Nicholson, & Brown, 1982). These voluntary “skip days” are generally one-day absences and are operationalized in terms of the frequency rather than duration (Chadwick-Jones, Brown, Nicholson, & Sheppard, 1971; Schaufeli et al., 2009).

Involuntary absenteeism occurs as “a reaction to distress caused by job demands” (Schaufeli et al., 2009, p. 896). An employee may engage in absence behavior to cope with job stressors such as work overload (Dwyer & Ganster, 1991), high burnout levels (Iverson, Olekalns, & Erwin, 1998), and work–home conflict (Goff, Mount, & Jamison, 1990). Such stressors may involuntarily render the employee unable to perform work tasks (Chadwick-Jones et al., 1982). In contrast to voluntary absenteeism, involuntary absenteeism is operationalized in terms of the duration of the absence rather than the frequency (Schaufeli et al., 2009; Steel, 2003). Because the focus of our theory is to bring together absenteeism and presenteeism, which share a common thread of illness, we will focus on involuntary (or sickness) absenteeism in this paper. That said, while the term used in the literature has been involuntary, that refers more to the underlying reason for the absence. In this context, involuntary should not be taken to mean that the employee has no control over his or her decision to attend work. Instead, it is meant to suggest that the absence is not due to an employee simply skipping work, but that the employee is indeed suffering from physical or mental illness. More recently, researchers have referred to it as “sickness” rather than “involuntary” absenteeism. Clearly, the very existence of presenteeism (presenting to work despite being sick) is evidence that both sickness absenteeism and presenteeism are subject to the same level of discretionary control by the employee and there is still a decision regarding whether or not to attend work.

Theory-based studies of absenteeism are rare (Harrison & Martocchio, 1998). One of the most widely-cited frameworks (Steers & Rhodes, 1978, 1984) suggests that attendance is indirectly influenced by an employee's demographic characteristics through proximal constructs of motivation (job satisfaction and other pressures to attend) and ability to attend (constraints that may impede an employee's choice). Absenteeism researchers also have relied on decision-making theories to explain work absence. A number of researchers have framed absence as the result of a process of choosing between absence and attendance

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