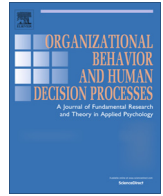




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## Why and when do employees imitate the absenteeism of co-workers?

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## ABSTRACT

We aimed to shed light on the reason why individual employees adjust their absence levels to their co-workers' absence behavior and under what conditions imitation is most likely by integrating social learning theory and social exchange theory. In Study 1, a vignette study among 299 employees, we found that respondents were more likely to call in sick when coworkers were often absent because respondents had more tolerant absence norms and more economic as opposed to cooperative exchange norms. This study also showed that employees strongly disapproved of absence and had stronger cooperative exchange norms when they worked in highly cohesive and task interdependent teams. In Study 2, a field study in 97 teams, we found that coworker absence was less strongly imitated under conditions of high cohesiveness and task interdependency. Our findings suggest that employee behavior is not only influenced by team norms about acceptable absence levels, but also by norms on what level of cooperation is expected.

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## 1. Introduction

*"I do not like to miss work, it would make it harder on my co-workers."*

*"I carried the load when others were out, so now it is my turn to take time off."*

[Employees from this study's sample]

Missed work due to employee absence is estimated to cost organizations in the U.S. about 202 billion dollars every year (Goetzl, Hawkins, Ozminkowski, & Wang, 2003). Absenteeism, defined as the employee's failure to report for scheduled work (Johns, 2008), can be seen as mildly deviant behavior as the employee falls short in his or her contract with the employer, resulting in reduced organizational productivity (Harrison, Johns & Martocchio, 2000; Robinson & Bennett, 1995). Although employees may call in sick for legitimate reasons, there is a grey area of reasons for reporting sick that are less legitimate, such as not feeling like going to work, or conflicting demands between work and

family (Johns, 2008). Due to this information asymmetry concerning reasons for being absent, the problem is difficult to fight for organizations and difficult to study for researchers.

In an attempt to better understand the causes of absenteeism, research has shifted from a focus on individual-level predictors such as health and job satisfaction (e.g., Darr & Johns, 2008; Harrison & Martocchio, 1998; Hensing, Alexanderson, Allebeck, & Bjurulf, 1998) to group-level predictors, such as absence cultures (Rentsch & Steel, 2003). Workplace absence culture refers to the set of absence-related beliefs, values, and behavioral patterns shared by the members of an organization, a team, or some other organizational unit (Nicholson & Johns, 1985). Taking into account how group level processes may affect employee absence is particularly important since teams have become a common way in which work is organized (Mathieu, Maynard, Rapp, & Gilson, 2008). There is strong evidence that co-workers' absence behavior influences the absence rates of individual group members (Duff, Podolsky, Biron, & Chan, 2014; Gellatly & Allen, 2012; Johns, 2008; Rentsch & Steel, 2003) in such a way that an employee is more likely to be absent when co-workers are often absent. Team members thus seem to imitate each other's absence behavior. However, two pressing questions have remained unanswered. First, why do team members imitate each other's absence behavior, and second, under what team conditions is the imitation of absence behavior more or less likely?

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Most commonly, research on team absence norms and behavior is built on social influence theories such as social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) and social information processing theory (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978). The core idea behind these perspectives is that together, team members create norms concerning acceptable absence behavior. Newcomers learn this team norm while interacting with their co-workers; after having internalized the group norm, newcomers adjust their absence behavior accordingly (Dello Russo, Miraglia, Borgogni, & Johns, 2013). Thus, the simple acquisition of information from an accepted source is assumed to cause imitation. Absenteeism research has confirmed that employees adjust their absence behavior to what they believe is the group absence norm (Dello Russo et al., 2013; Martocchio, 1994; Xie & Johns, 2000), co-workers', and supervisors' expectations of acceptable absence rates (Bamberger & Biron, 2007; Markham & Mckee, 1995), or to the supervisor's and team's absence levels (Duff et al., 2014).

In addition to social influence theories, the literature on coworker influence (Chen, Takeuchi, & Shum, 2013) highlights that team members affect each other's behavior through social exchange mechanisms. Social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) suggests that team members can influence each other's behavior either positively or negatively, depending on whether they have a high or low quality exchange relationship (Chen et al., 2013). When team members have high quality exchange they trust each other, feel committed to each other, and support each other (Kamdar & Van Dyne, 2007). Conversely, under low quality exchanges, team members do not trust each other, are not committed to each other, and chose their self-interest over the group interest. A response to a coworker's absence spell can then be either cooperative or uncooperative. In a cooperative exchange, the employee will go to work even though co-workers are sick, as in high quality exchange, exchange partners tolerate short-term inequity and are motivated to maintain the relationship (Chen et al., 2013). The first quote above reflects such a cooperative response, in that the employee goes to work because s/he wants to be there for his/her co-workers. In an uncooperative exchange an employee will repay absence spells of co-workers by elevating his or her own absence, making sure s/he does not work more than co-workers. The second quote presented is an example of this strategic response to get even. The exchange of "disfavors" creates economic exchange relationships among team members, whereby they strategically balance their absence levels (Ferris, Brown & Heller, 2009; Sanders & Nauta, 2004).

To our knowledge, absence research has not examined the possibility that social exchange relationships explain why absence levels are interrelated in teams. This is important not only because it would advance theoretical knowledge of how imitation of behavior in teams happens, but also because it would give organizations new leads as for how to prevent undesirable imitation behavior. The target of intervention could be discouraging tolerant absence norms but also enhancing cooperative relationships. We suggest that the two theoretical perspectives, social influence and social exchange, can be integrated through their common recourse to norms. By often being absent, teams might develop norms concerning what level of absence is acceptable, but at the same time, this behavior may inform team members about norms of cooperation (i.e., economic and/or cooperative exchange). We aim to advance our understanding of why employees attune their absence rates to those of their co-workers using insights from both social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) and social exchange theory (Blau, 1964). To test these theoretical frameworks, we study the reasons (i.e. absence norms, exchange norms) employees have for their decision to call in sick in response to high co-worker absenteeism in Study 1, a vignette study among 299 employees.

Next, we address our second research question, under what conditions is the imitation of absence behavior most and least likely to occur? Teams have been defined as "collectives who exist to perform organizationally relevant tasks, share one or more common goals, interact socially, exhibit task interdependencies, and maintain and manage boundaries" (Mathieu et al., 2008, p. 411). This definition implies that teams have some level of social integration – that is, cooperation as socially cohesive groups that work interdependently. However, teams can vary in how socially integrated they are, and these variations influence the norms that develop in teams (Harrison et al., 2000; Xie & Johns, 2000). For instance, based on social exchange theory, we would expect that in high socially integrated teams, defined as work teams in which employees have a strong group feeling and work interdependently, more cooperative norms develop disapproving of absence and favoring cooperative exchange. As a result, employees in high socially integrated teams might respond less strongly to absence spells of co-workers because they value the cooperative relationship within the team while employees in low socially integrated teams focus more on their self-interest and therefore retaliate. In Study 1, we first verify if teams with high social integration (i.e., high team cohesion and task interdependence) have less tolerant absence norms and stronger cooperative exchange norms, whereas low socially integrated teams have more tolerant absence norms and stronger economic exchange norms. Then, in Study 2, a field study among 97 work teams, we examine if the imitation of absence behavior among team members is weaker in more, as compared to less, socially integrated teams. Testing whether the imitation of absence behavior differs between high versus low socially integrated teams can thus shed further light on the theoretical mechanism that is responsible for the imitation of absence behavior in teams.

In the following, *employee* is used to refer to the target person, *co-worker* is used for the team members that influence the target person, and *team members* refers to all team members, including the co-workers and the target person. The terms *team* and *group* are used interchangeably.

## 2. Theoretical framework

### 2.1. The social influence process

Insights from social information processing theory (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978) and social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) are most commonly used to explain the emergence of absence cultures and their impact on individual absence behavior (Gellatly & Allen, 2012). Both theories are based on the premise that individuals are motivated to belong to a social group. As assumed by social information processing theory, in order to fit in with others, individuals search their social environment for information about appropriate attitudes, common practices, and expected behaviors (Robinson & O'Leary-Kelly, 1998). Employees working in the same context will receive similar social cues about appropriate behavior. This increases the likelihood that team members develop similar views about acceptable absence levels, adjusting their absence behavior to emergent norms.

Social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) describes how individuals seek information about appropriate behavior in their social environment. A key assumption is that individuals use role models, such as co-workers, to learn about group norms and accepted behaviors (Robinson & O'Leary-Kelly, 1998). The behavior of co-workers forms the standard, guiding employees to behave in a way that will lead to their social acceptance by the group. From this point of view, employees follow the example of their

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