Group norms and excessive absenteeism: The role of peer referent others

Peter Bamberger *, Michal Biron 1

Davidson Faculty of Industrial Engineering and Management, Technion—Israel Institute of Technology, Haifa 32000, Israel

Received 25 April 2006
Available online 7 May 2007

Abstract

Drawing from social identity and social influence theory, we propose that the absence-related norms of an individual’s work-based referent others will have a significant effect on the likelihood of excessive absence behavior. We then develop and test a model of the social mechanisms potentially underlying the relationship between referent absence norms and the likelihood of excessive absence behavior. Our findings indicate that referent group norms significantly explain excessive absence behavior, even when taking into account the absence norms associated with the formal organizational units within which these referent groups are often nested. They also indicate that permissive referent group norms are likely to have a greater impact on the probability of target excessive absence when the target has a more conformist disposition. Finally, post-hoc findings suggest that the more negative targets’ perceptions of the consequences of absenteeism, the more attenuated the impact of permissive group norms on excessive absence behavior.

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Keywords: Absenteeism; Peer norms; Absence culture; Referent others; Social comparison; Social influence; Social identity

Introduction

Since the early 1980s, researchers studying employee absenteeism have increasingly come to recognize that group and organizational factors may serve as important predictors of individual absence patterns (Rentsch & Steel, 2003). Specifically, drawing from the suggestion of Chadwick-Jones, Nicholson, and Brown (1982) regarding the variance in absence levels across industries, organizations, and intra-organizational units, a number of absence researchers consistently demonstrated the role of social influence and “absence culture” in determining individual absence behavior (Johns, 1997). Taken together, these studies suggest that individual absence decisions are highly malleable and are strongly influenced by organizational or work unit absenteeism norms, commonly inferred to reflect the organization’s or unit’s “absence culture” (Harrison, Johns, & Martocchio, 2000).

Although researchers have used a wide range of methodologies and study designs to examine the social mechanisms underlying employee absenteeism, to date, the research has been deficient in two important aspects. First, despite its grounding in the social influence paradigm, the literature on absence culture has paid relatively little attention to the norms held by individuals’ work-based referent others; that is, those with whom individuals report having supportive (Ibarra, 1993), and expressive or self-revealing (Blau, 1977) relationships grounded on a sense of intimacy and trust, the sharing of thoughts and feelings, and the sense that one is able to seek help from the other (Crary, 1987). Such peer relationships can become among the most central in workers’ life (Bacharach, Bamberger, & Vashdi, 2005). Instead, studies of the social mechanisms underlying individual absenteeism have tended to focus
on the absence-related norms commonly held by those in formal, organizationally defined work-units (e.g., departments, work teams) (Sanders, 2004). Although research on unit-level absence culture leaves little doubt that the norms and behaviors of one’s organizational or unit peers play a strong role in shaping individual absence behavior, the social influence and identity literatures (Abrams, Wetherell, Cochrane, Hogg, & Turner, 1990; Turner, 1985) suggest that an individual’s absence-related attitudes and behaviors may perhaps be most influenced by the standards or norms of an individual’s work-based referent others.

Second, as noted by Rentsch and Steel (2003, p. 188), “relatively little research has addressed the theoretical underpinnings of the etiology of absence culture”. Thus, despite substantial evidence that peer norms influence the absence decisions of unit members, relatively little is known as to how and when they do so (Johns, 1997). That is, research into absence culture has yet to examine the social mechanisms by which the normative context influences individual absence behaviors, and the conditions under which the impact of such normative influences may vary. Although three central motivations, namely to affiliate, to be accurate, and to maintain a positive self-concept, have been identified as driving targets’ conformity behaviors (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004; Cialdini & Trost, 1998), researchers have yet to exploit such motivational models to explain the processes underlying group influences on individual absence behaviors.

The current study addresses both of these issues as they relate to excessive absence behavior. We define excessive absence behavior as a rate of absenteeism that, from the perspective of the formal organization, exceeds some socially constructed and taken for granted benchmark, itself based on national, industry or organizational absenteeism data. As we discuss in greater detail below, this construct has significant theoretical and empirical relevance because such behavior is often viewed by employers as being intolerable and justifying disciplinary action (Barmby, Orme, & Treble, 1991; Miners, Moore, Champoux, & Martocchio, 1995). Drawing from the literature on social influence, social identification and self-categorization, we posit that targets’ excessive absence behaviors are affected by the absence-related norms of their referent others as a result of social mechanisms that may be derived from normative, informational (Deutsch & Gerrard, 1955) as well as referent informational (Turner, 1982) influence theories. As suggested by normative influence theory, individuals—particularly those predisposed to conform to peer pressure—may be motivated to adopt absence behavior consistent with referents’ norms as a means by which to gain the social approval of such referent others and to build or maintain relationships with them. Consistent with an informational influence mechanism, absence norms of referent others provides valuable and accurate information about the social reality of such behavior, thus shaping the individual’s own perceptions regarding the likely costs and benefits of absenteeism, and, in turn, influencing the individual’s likelihood of excessive absence behavior. Finally, consistent with social identification (Taijfel & Turner, 1979) and self-categorization theories (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987), underlying referent informational influence, the link between referent group absence norms and target absence behavior may stem from the target’s interest in adopting the referents’ absence norms as his or her own, and then acting upon these adopted norms, as a means by which to maintain or enhance his or her own self-image. It is important to note that our objective in the current study is not to test these alternative social influence theories themselves, but rather to use them as a framework from which to derive testable hypotheses regarding the way in which referent norms influence individuals’ excessive absence behavior.

Excessive absenteeism

Rather than seeking to explain the variance in some count-based, absence rate as is common in much of the absence literature (e.g., Mathieu & Kohler, 1990; Sanders, 2004), in the current study our focus is on excessive absenteeism. As noted above, excessive absenteeism is defined as a rate of absenteeism that exceeds a level socially constructed by management as “reasonable”, with data derived from the formal organization itself or its broader environment serving as a basis for managers’ inferences as for what is considered “reasonable”. The operationalization of such a construct is therefore contingent upon the dichotomization of some count-based absence variable. Although the dichotomization of continuous variables is generally admonished in the research literature (MacCallum, Zhang, Preacher, & Rucker, 2002), MacCallum et al. (2002, p. 38) note that dichotomization may still be justified in those cases in which it is grounded on some theoretical or practical distinction or when, from a statistical perspective, “the distribution of a count data is so highly skewed (that) such a distribution indicates the presence of two groups of people”. We believe that, as a construct, excessive absenteeism meets both criteria.

At the construct level, excessive absenteeism is likely to offer a greater degree of predictive utility than absence rate in that most absence-related outcomes are influenced by lost-work days only when some reasonably expected level is exceeded. Indeed, it is typically only when employees exceed the data-based levels deemed by management to be reasonable that these workers are likely to be classified as problematic absentes and to experience any associated sanctions (Cole & Kleiner, 1992; Durden & Ellis, 1995). Moreover,
although in theory there may be some direct, linear association between employee absence and marginal product, given that a certain, average level of absence is likely to be unavoidable (i.e., due to illness, injury, etc.) and that most employers assume this average level of employee absenteeism in structuring their work processes and developing their business models, in practice, the actual impact of lost days on marginal product when absence is below this threshold level is likely to be substantially less than when it is above this threshold level (Mills & Dalton, 1994; Miners et al., 1995).

While a focus on excessive absenteeism may thus be justified on theoretical and practical grounds, as suggested by Bacharach (1989), empirical evidence of construct validity provides further justification for incorporating a construct into a theoretical model. Schwab (1980) suggests that construct validity may be inferred to the extent that a variable manifests expected interconstruct relationships. In this context, previous research indicates that, while nominal absenteeism is not necessarily explainable as a function of health status, absenteeism above some average threshold level typically is (Mastekaasa & Olsen, 1998; Osborg, 2005). There is also substantial evidence in the I/O psychology, industrial relations and education literatures that excessive absenteeism is predictive of expected outcomes. For example, Miners et al. (1995) discuss the link between excessive absenteeism and the risk of progressive disciplinary action including dismissal (Wong, 1999). Similarly, education researchers suggest that a level of student absenteeism above the norm is often associated with problematic outcomes (e.g., early school withdrawal and poor academic performance) and therefore provides a more suitable basis (relative to nominal absence rates) for making decisions regarding administrative intervention (Durden & Ellis, 1995). Such findings have led Durden and Ellis (1995, p. 334) to conclude that in absenteeism research, “what really seems to matter is excessive absenteeism”.

A focus on excessive absenteeism may also be advantageous from a psychometric perspective. Because absence data are count-based, those analyzing such data are typically forced to contend with problems associated with non-normal distributions. Studies treating absence as a continuous variable have often been criticized for using inappropriate methodologies (Hammer & Landau, 1981; Sturman, 1999). Indeed, Sturman (1999) concludes that the logistic analyses of dichotomized absence data tends to be, if anything, more conservative in nature, that it offers a greatly reduced risk of Type I error, and that researchers have little reason to question the findings generated by such analyses. Other researchers also suggest dichotomization and logistic regression as an approach that can help circumvent some of the distribution-related problems of absence data (Harrison & Hulin, 1989; Mastekaasa & Dale-Olsen, 2000).

Impact of formal work unit versus referent absenteeism norms

Consistent with Hackman’s conceptualization of group norms as reflecting the “distribution of members’ approval and disapproval for various behaviors that might be exhibited in a given situation”, and whose main function is to “regulate and regularize members’ behavior” (1992, pp. 235–236), group absence norms have been defined as a set of shared beliefs and perceptions regarding what is an acceptable rate of, or justification for, employee absences in a given work unit (Chadwick-Jones et al., 1982; Johns & Nicholson, 1982). These shared beliefs and perceptions emerge over time as a function of social interaction, communication and observations among work unit members (Markham & Mckee, 1995; Rentsch & Steel, 2003), and may, regardless of official company policy regarding absenteeism, serve as critical regulators of employee absence behaviors (Chadwick-Jones et al., 1982). More tolerant absence-related beliefs and perceptions may be reflective of more permissive absence norms, whereas perceptions of absenteeism as being legitimate and acceptable in a more restricted range of circumstances may be reflective of more rigid absence norms.

I/O psychologists examining the degree to which one’s normative context (actual or perceived) influences an individual’s own attendance behavior have found perceived normative expectations to be highly correlated with attendance behavior for bus drivers (Geurts, Buunk, & Schaufeli, 1991), financial service employees (Martocchio, 1994), and homeless shelter volunteers (Harrison, 1995). While many of these studies focus on the actual, perceived or inferred norms of those in an individual’s formal work unit (be it a work group, department or plant), in the current study we focus on the potential impact of normative influences stemming from those who, according to social identity theory, may be most instrumental in shaping an employee’s absence-related attitudes and behaviors, namely those employees comprising the individual’s informal peer reference group. These employees—connected to the focal or target individual in the context of a relationship that, according to Sanders (2004, p. 137), is framed “outside the formal structure of the organization”—are typically those in whom the individual places the greatest trust, with whom s/he has the closest work-based ties, and to whom s/he turns to for advice and support. Our focus on referent groups is in line with previous findings regarding the moderating role of work group cohesiveness (suggesting that normative influences may be stronger among peers who more closely identify with one another) (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980; Hackman, 1992).

The traditional social influence paradigm (Deutsch & Gerrard, 1955) suggests that when employees experience uncertainty about which mode of action to adopt in
response to a given stimuli (e.g., a sick child, a slight fever), they often engage in social comparisons in an attempt to either garner additional (or simply more reliable) information upon which to base their decision, or to better assess which mode of action will help them construct a more positive self-image. Peer referents may play a key role in social comparison process (Ibarra & Abrams, 1993). Self-categorization theory (Hogg & Abrams, 1993; Turner et al., 1987) suggests that subjective uncertainty promotes in-group identification and thus a tendency to make the foci of such social comparisons precisely those co-workers with whom the individual most closely identifies, namely the members of their peer referent group. The basis of identification with this referent group need not be formal work-group or departmental affiliation. Indeed, as McDonald and Westphal (2003, p. 4) note, “people can base their identification with categorically similar others on a wide range of social attributes”. Based on the research of Harrison, Price, Gavin, and Florey (2002), we assume that such identification may just as likely be based on deep-level individual (e.g., personality) attributes as surface-level (e.g., demographic) attributes, and that, regardless of the basis of identification, individuals are likely to develop close, supportive relations with those with whom they most identify (Bacharach et al., 2005).

In the workplace, the norms and attitudes of peer referents are likely to have a powerful effect on individuals’ attendance behaviors for a number of reasons. First, as noted by McDonald and Westphal (2003), research on in-group biases (Brewer & Brown, 1998) suggests that referent others are often viewed as having greater expertise and expressing more valid and reliable views than other work-based peers. As a result, normative inferences drawn from peer referents’ verbal remarks or behaviors may be given more weight than the normative inferences drawn from the behavior or remarks of other work-based colleagues when individuals make absence-related decisions. Second, as McDonald and Westphal (2003, p. 8) also note, individuals are typically more familiar with the beliefs and norms of their work-based referents regarding important issues than they are with those of other work-based acquaintances. Seeking to reduce rather than increase uncertainty, it is only logical for individuals to calibrate their own behaviors with these more familiar (and hence, perhaps more comprehensible) beliefs and norms. Third, given their more intense and deeper ties to one another, referent group members may be better able to monitor and sanction conformity with their mutual beliefs and norms than are members of a formally-defined work unit (Lazarsfeld & Merton, 1954). If this is in fact the case, it would only further increase one’s interest in adopting behaviors consistent with the normative tone set by one’s peer referents. Finally, if being around one’s work-based significant others is, at least from a social perspective, a key motivator for attending work (Bacharach et al., 2005; Gersick, Bartunek, & Dutton, 2000), then it may be that individuals are less motivated to attend when their referents exhibit a pattern of more frequent absenteeism. Consequently, consistent with Reimann and Wiener’s (1988) perspective that informal sub-unit norms may more strongly influence members’ behavior than formal unit or organizational goals, we posit that:

Hypothesis 1: Even when controlling for departmental influences, more permissive referent group absence norms will be associated with a greater likelihood of targets’ excessive absenteeism.

Referent group norms and individual absenteeism: A tripartite social influence model

But what are the social-psychological processes by which group norms shape individual absence behaviors? Paralleling the three conformity motivations noted above (affiliation, accuracy, and maintenance of a positive self-image), over the past 50 years, social influence researchers have identified three main pathways along which reference group norms may influence a target’s behavior. Social influence theory has its roots in the early studies of group attitude and perceptual convergence (Sheriff, 1936; Newcomb, 1943). These studies suggest that people conform to social norms, and that, “there are influence processes inherent in social relationships and implicit pressures for agreement even without instructions to agree or explicit group membership” (Turner, 1991, p. 16). In an attempt to explain such tendencies, Festinger (1950) and Deutsch and Gerrard (1955) developed the theory of informal social communication which has since become known as the “Dual Process Theory” of normative and informational social influence (Turner, 1991). In addition, Turner (1982) and colleagues (e.g., David & Turner, 2001) proposed that while these two social influence pathways may be interrelated and often difficult to disentangle, a third referent informational influence pathway—focusing on individuals’ need to maintain a positive self-concept—may also explain individuals’ tendencies to calibrate their absence behaviors so as to be consistent with the norms inferred to be held by targets’ referent others.

The normative influence model

Normative social influence has been defined as “conformity to the positive expectations of self and others in order to gain approval and avoid rejection” (Turner, 1991, p. 144). According to the normative influence dimension of dual process theory, at its most basic level, attitudinal or behavioral uniformity is motivated by an underlying desire to please relevant others. Others often become “relevant” to an individual because they are perceived by the individual as having some degree of power to reward, punish, accept or reject that individual,
and in that the individual senses that his attitudes or behaviors are open to surveillance by these others (Abrams et al., 1990). The combination of dependence and identifiability makes individuals vigilant as to the norms and expectations held by these relevant others and motivates them to avoid behaviors that might be deemed by these others as normatively inconsistent (Hackman, 1992).

However, Festinger and his colleagues (Festinger, Schachter, & Back, 1950, p. 105) recognized early on that normative influence is not universal and distinguished between two types of social influence targets, namely “conformers” (i.e., those “passive followers” highly susceptible to social influence) and “deviates” (i.e., those more individualist members or dissenters who tend to direct their own behaviors). More recently, Hackman (1992, p. 240) noted that there appears to be “great variation in the degree to which different people comply with group norms”. Some of this variance may be explained by individual differences (Ferris, Bergin, & Wayne, 1988).

Consistent with the affiliation basis of the normative influence perspective, research examining the dynamics of normative influence suggests that, individual differences potentially associated with individuals’ need or desire for affiliation—variables including locus of control (Spector, 1983) and self-esteem (Arndt, Greenberg, Schimel, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 2002)—appear to condition individuals’ susceptibility to normative influence. Developmental psychologists view such individual differences as underlying a broader construct, namely, conformity disposition; a construct tapping an individual’s overall desire for affiliation and willingness to accede to pressure from peers (Berndt, 1979). Conformity disposition has been found to significantly moderate the impact of peer pressure on adolescent misconduct and antisocial behaviors, with peer pressure more strongly associated with misconduct and antisocial behavior among those scoring higher on general conformity disposition (Brown, Clasen, & Eicher, 1986). Accordingly, we posit that:

Hypothesis 2: The positive association between permissive referent group absence norms and the likelihood of excessive absence behavior will be contingent upon individuals’ conformity disposition such that a stronger association will be found among those possessing a stronger conformity disposition.

The informational influence model

However, in addition to exerting such normative influence, by responding to targets’ accuracy concerns, referent groups may shape targets’ behavior-related judgments and thus exert informational influence. According to this element of dual process theory, particularly under conditions of uncertainty, conformist behavior can be expected as targets turn to referent others for the information needed in order to form an accurate view of reality and make judgments (e.g., whether or not to report to work) offering the highest degree of personal utility. Motivated to make the “correct” choice, under such conditions, individuals use social comparison as a basis of reality testing. The social reality emerging from this social comparison process may often provide the premises upon which behavior-related judgments are subsequently based. As individuals become increasingly reliant upon others for valid information and evidence to be used in establishing decision premises and making choices, they also become increasingly subject to “informational influence”. Distinguishing informational from normative influence, Turner (1982) notes that unlike the latter: (1) the source of informational influence rests with those who can provide information about reality per se, rather than those who can reward or punish, (2) the vehicle of informational influence is social comparison rather than group pressure, and (3) informational influence is maximized when social reality is ambiguous rather than when the targets perceive themselves to be dependent upon or subject to the surveillance of the referent group.

An informational influence perspective, combined with elements of social learning theory (Bandura, 1971) and the theory of reasoned action (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980) appears to implicitly underlie much of the extant theory regarding absence culture and the role of absence norms in shaping individual absence behaviors. Specifically, Nicholson and Johns (1985) suggest that peers influence one another’s absence behaviors through the social conveyance of societal and workplace information, while Harrison and Martocchio (1998) suggest that expectancies generated on the basis of implicit information gathered from one’s peers largely shape individuals’ own attendance-related decisions. Specifically, they (p. 325) note that “employees are absent when the expected utility of going to work is surpassed by the expected utility of engaging in an alternative, often home- or leisure-oriented behavior”. Implicit in these statements is the notion that referent others’ absence norms, and in particular, what they express as being legitimate or illegitimate causes for absence, are likely to be viewed as reflecting the experience of trusted others, thus providing valuable information regarding the expected benefits and costs of being absent from work, and shaping individuals’ assessments of the subjective expected utility of being absent. To the degree that such legitimacy beliefs are pervasive among members of one’s reference group, they may serve as ambient stimuli (Hackman, 1992), shaping actors’ behavior-outcome linkages, and consequently, their absence behavior.

The discussion above suggests that referent group norms may influence individual absence behaviors by shaping the expected consequences that individuals associate with such behaviors. While permissive referent
group norms may generate more positive expectancies (e.g., break with routine) and thus result in a higher likelihood of excessive absence behavior, more rigid referent group norms may generate more negative expectancies (e.g., threat of discipline), resulting in a lower likelihood of such behavior. Accordingly we hypothesize:

Hypothesis 3: Perceived positive and negative expected consequences of absenteeism will mediate the association between referent group absence norms and the likelihood of excessive absenteeism.

The referent informational influence model

Focusing primarily on individuals’ interests in maintaining a positive self-concept, the referent informational perspective suggests that a target’s referent-based normative context influences his/her attendance behavior by shaping the norms underlying such behavior. Drawing from social identity and self-categorization theory, this perspective suggests that, when a particular reference group is deemed central to one’s own identity, targets are likely to be, as noted by Wood (2000, p. 557) “under pressure to adopt the prototypic in-group attitudes, norms and beliefs as their own”. Turner (1982, p. 31) puts it even more clearly: “Individuals define themselves as members of a distinct social category...learn the stereotypic norms of that category... (and then) assign these norms to themselves in the same way that they assign other stereotypic characteristics of the category to themselves”. As Newcomb’s (1943) seminal study of the transformation of college students’ political views illustrates, people often internalize the norms of groups they join, and do so not so much out of surveillance or conformity concerns (normative influence) or new information regarding the utility of holding particular attitudes or beliefs (informational influence), but rather in an attempt to align their own beliefs and perceptions with those deemed characteristic of some salient social identity. More recently, Abrams et al. (1990) demonstrated empirical support for the referent informational influence perspective.

As noted by Turner (1982), referent informational influence theory suggests that those with high influence potential are not those with the ability to reward or punish or provide information about reality per se, but rather those who typify the norms held by those with whom the target identifies (typically the referents themselves). As such, their vehicle of social influence is social identification and self-categorization rather than peer pressure or the ability to provide valid information for systematic analysis. In the context of absence behavior, targets align their personal absence norms with those held by their referent peers in an effort to maintain internal-external compatibility or coherency (Xie & Johns, 2000; Markham & Mckee, 1995). Whether such an alignment process occurs knowingly or unconsciously, these referent-influenced personal absence norms are likely to subsequently determine target’s absence behaviors (Harrison, 1995). Accordingly we posit that:

Hypothesis 4: Targets’ personal absence norms will mediate the association between permissive referent group absence norms and the likelihood of excessive absenteeism.

Method

Sample

Data were collected from 154 production workers employed (for at least a year) at a food manufacturing enterprise in Israel owned by a large, multi-national corporation and employing 310 non-exempt employees. The sample was generated using a chain-referral (i.e., network) sampling methodology (Goodman, 1961). Drawing from Ericson (1979) and Heckathorn (1997), we applied a refined form of chain-referral sampling designed to reduce the risks of sample bias. First, we randomly selected an initial sample of 50 production workers (wave 1). According to Heckathorn (1997, p. 176) this is the most crucial refinement since, no matter how many waves the chain-referral sample may contain, it necessarily reflects any biases in the initial sample. Second, in order to avoid masking bias, participants were never specifically asked to refer us to additional subjects. Rather, drawing from the approach used by other social network researchers to identify referent others (e.g., Burt, 1984; Verbrugge, 1977), subjects were asked to identify up to five coworkers with whom they felt “most strongly connected; that is those whose opinions you most closely value—people you can really talk to and rely upon”. Those identified were included in subsequent sample waves. By restricting the number of coworker referents that participants could list we also reduced the likelihood that those with a greater number of network links would be over-sampled ( Heckathorn, 1997). The average number of referents provided by study participants was 2.6 (SD = 1.4).

Third, to reduce the risk of volunteer bias, we arranged for all selected employees to complete the questionnaire during work hours. Indeed, despite the non-anonymous nature of the survey, the response rate for all 50 of those randomly selected to participate in the initial wave was 100%. These 50 randomly sampled employees identified a total of 135 “referent others”, 26 of whom were identified as such by two or more of the 50 randomly sampled employees. Fifty-six of those identified as referent others by one or more members of the original sample were not among the original 50 sampled employees. Of these 56 additional individuals identified as referent others in wave 1, 52 agreed to participate in the study, serving as the wave 2 sample. These 52 individuals identified 138 “referent others”,

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32 of whom were identified as referent others by two or more members of this second wave. Forty-nine of those identified as referent others by wave 2 participants were neither included in the original sample, nor identified as a “referent other” by the members of the original sample. Of these 49 additional individuals identified as referent others in wave 2, 46 agreed to participate in wave 3, providing us with a total of 115 referents of which only 9 had not been identified as referent others by members of earlier waves. Of these 9, 6 agreed to participate in the fourth and final sample wave. Consequently, of the 164 employees asked to participate across the four waves, 154 agreed, resulting in an overall response rate of 94%.

Of the 154 employees surveyed, 13 were excluded from our analysis for various reasons (e.g., excessive missing data). Of the remaining 141 employees, 64% were males, most were married (84%), and the mean age was 41.8 (SD = 9.2). Thirty-five percent of the respondents had some schooling, 28% graduated high school, and the remaining 37% received a BA or MA degree. Thirty-six percent of the subjects were born in Israel, and 53% were born in the former USSR.

Although nearly half the enterprise’s workforce was surveyed, a risk of sample bias remained. In order to assess the risk of such bias, using t-tests, we compared the 141 employees participating in the study with the 169 non-exempt employees not included in the sample along a number of demographic (e.g., seniority, age, education, marital status) and outcome criteria (i.e., number of days absent). In no case were any differences statistically significant.

**Measures**

**Excessive absenteeism**

As noted above, we defined excessive absence behavior as a rate of absenteeism that exceeds some formal organizational benchmark; one that while data-based is nevertheless socially constructed. In the current study, this rate was operationalized in terms of total-days-lost data over a 6-month period. Data regarding absence for any reason other than approved vacation (such as personal illness and work-related injury) were collected from the enterprise’s personnel files. For each employee, we calculated the total days of absence over the 6 months following the collection of our survey data (i.e., October 2003 to March 2004; see section on Procedure below). Using these total-days-lost data, we then categorized each employee as manifesting a pattern of reasonable versus excessive absenteeism using a cutoff criterion of 2.9 days (i.e., excessive = 3 or more days). Consistent with the conceptualization of excessive absenteeism noted above, we specified a 2.9-day cutoff on the basis of similar organizational and national averages. Specifically, the 6-month enterprise mean for employee absenteeism (identical to the mean sample rate of absenteeism for the 6 month period under investigation) was 2.9 days. For the same 6-month time period, the mean national rate of absenteeism was 2.6 days for the Israeli civilian labor force (Hashavim, 2004).

Aside from the theoretical justifications for dichotomizing day-lost absence data noted earlier, in the current study, further justification for dichotomization stemmed from the nature of the data themselves. Consistent with previous absence studies, the data from this 6 month period were highly skewed to the right (Skewness = 1.604 (SE = .206); Kurtosis = 2.065 (SE = .410)) and a Kolomogoro–Smirnov test confirmed that they were not normally distributed (KS = .388, p < .01). Moreover, no semblance of a normal distribution could be adopted even on the basis of square root or logarithmic transformation (Harrison & Hulin, 1989; Watson, Driver, & Watson, 1985).

Using this 2.9-day cutoff criterion, 41% of the employees in the sample manifested a pattern of excessive absence behavior for the 6-month under investigation (the median being at one or more days). This cutoff is consistent with findings regarding the mean level of blue-collar absenteeism reported in studies conducted in the United States (e.g., Markham & Mckee, 1995), yet it is slightly above the 6-month cutoffs suggested by a number of recent American (Miners et al., 1995) and European studies (i.e., Godin & Kittel, 2004; Mastekaasa & Dale-Olsen, 2000). Still it made little sense to use a lower cut-off (e.g., two or more days per 6-month period, or the median) since this would have identified at least 45% of study participants as manifesting a pattern of excessive absenteeism behavior. Perhaps most importantly given the conceptualization of excessive absenteeism noted above, our operationalization in terms of 3 or more days lost (in a 6-month period) was consistent with the company’s specified absence policy.

**Personal and referent group permissive absence-related norms**

Permissive absence-related norms at the individual and referent group levels were measured on the basis of an instrument developed by Harvey and Nicholson (1999). Using this scale, respondents were asked to indicate along a five-point scale the degree to which they viewed 20 possible reasons for absence (e.g., migraine, child’s illness) as “justifiable”, with a greater number of more highly justifiable reasons being indicative of more permissive absence norms. Although the original instrument developed by Harvey and Nicholson (1999) included 18 items focusing on one’s own illness symptoms (e.g., headache, severe headache, migraine, backache, sore throat, neck-strain), based on the six illness clusters identified by these researchers, we combined a number of related symptom-items (e.g., migraine or...
severe headache) in order to reduce the list of own-illness items to 13. These final items were also the most prevalent among the physician-prepared, medical excuses that absent employees were required to submit upon their return to work. We then supplemented 7 additional items relating to personal situations potentially requiring absence from work (e.g., parental illness, child’s illness; important event at child’s school; household chore) generated on the basis of interviews with ten employees from a separate (but nearby) manufacturing facility owned by the same multinational firm and employing some 150 non-exempt workers. This 20-item instrument was pilot tested on a random sample of 34 employees not included in the main study (\(\alpha = 0.81\)). Although given the opportunity to supplement additional reasons justifying absence, none of those in the pilot study did so.

For **permissive personal absence norms**, we calculated the mean score across these 20 items. Cronbach \(\alpha\) for this scale was 0.81. For **permissive referent group absence norms**, we aggregated the personal absence norms for each of the individuals identified by a target as serving as a referent. Referents were identified in the context of the chain-referral sampling method discussed above. Specifically, as noted earlier, each target was asked to identify up to five coworkers with whom they felt “most strongly connected”, whose opinions they “most closely valued”, i.e., people they “can really talked to and rely upon”. The wording of this item is nearly identical to that used in previous network studies to elicit the names of those with whom a given target has strong ties (e.g., Burt, 1984; Verbrugge, 1977). Those identified (minimum number of referents = 1; maximum number of referents = 5) were deemed to serve as the target’s primary workplace reference group. Reference groups were highly heterogeneous with respect to ethnic background. Based on Gellatly’s (1995) approach, the group-aggregated score (mean) was assigned to the target employee who listed these members as his or her referent-others. In no case did any two referent groups contain exactly the same individuals. As with personal absence-related norms, the aggregate (i.e., mean) score for the group ranged from 1 (i.e., restrictive norms) to 5 (i.e., permissive norms). We used two statistics to further support the aggregation of individual responses to the aggregate level (Bliese, 2000). The \(r_{WG}\) (inter-member agreement) was calculated for each referent group on the absence-norm variable, denoting the degree to which ratings from individuals in the same group were interchangeable (Bliese, 2000; Martocchio, 1994). Across the 141 referent groups, the mean \(r_{WG}\) was 0.8, which is considered high enough to justify aggregation, indicating that members share the same behavioral, affective, or motivational experience. ICC\(_2\) (inter-member reliability), which is based on the ratio of variance within group and variance between groups, was also calculated for the referent group absence-norm variable. ICC\(_2\) across the 141 referent groups was 0.52, suggesting that variance was smaller within groups than between groups and allowing us to safely use group means to reliably differentiate between the groups (Bliese, 2000).

**Conformity disposition**

Conformity disposition was assessed on the basis of the measure developed and validated by Brown et al. (1986). Using this instrument, respondents were asked to indicate their degree of agreement (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree) with six statements regarding their tendency to be influenced by others (e.g., “my friends could push me into doing just about anything”). Higher scores indicated a higher degree of conformity. Cronbach \(\alpha\) for this scale was 0.8.

**Perceived expected consequences of absenteeism**

Subjective expected utility of being absent was assessed on the basis of a twelve-item index developed by Morgan and Herman (1976). Using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = very unlikely; 5 = very likely), respondents were asked to indicate the probability that they would experience each of six positive (e.g., “would provide a break from routine; such as leisure time for reading, sports, etc.”), and six negative (e.g., “would cause problems in relations with supervisor, such as loss of promotional opportunities”) absence consequences of being absent from work. Higher scores indicated a higher degree of both sub-dimensions of the scale. Cronbach \(\alpha\) for the positive and negative expectancies sub-dimensions was 0.86 and 0.78, respectively.

**Control variables**

In order to take into account the possible confounding effects of departmental influences, in all of our models we controlled for **permissive departmental absence norms** as well as two dummy variables representing the three departments in the plant. Departmental absence norms were assessed by aggregating the personal absence norms for each of the members of a common department to the department level. As with personal and reference-group absence norms, the aggregate (i.e., mean) score for the department ranged from 1 (i.e., restrictive norms) to 5 (i.e., permissive norms). Given that the 141 employees were distributed among the factory’s three shop-floor departments (average of 47 employees per department), all subjects received one of only three different values for permissive departmental absence norms. Mean \(r_{WG}\) across the three departments was 0.89. ICC\(_2\) was 0.52. In addition, in order to consider other department-related features such as size, supervisor, and work process, we used two dummy variables to represent employees’ departmental assignment.

We also controlled for five demographic variables in testing our models, namely employee age, company ten-
ure, gender, number of dependent children, and average monthly income. All five of these variables are established correlates of absence behavior although the results of some meta-analyses suggest inconsistent relationships (Farrell & Stamm, 1988). By controlling for such variables, absence researchers are able to account for possible demographic confounds and demography-as-proxy effects (Price, 1995).

Finally, we controlled for two health-related variables, namely health status and somatic symptoms. Health status was assessed using the following two items: (1) “In the past 12 months, how many times did you see a doctor?” (scale ranged from 1 = never to 7 = more than 10 times); (2) “How would you define your health status in the past 12 months?” (scale ranged from 1 = very good to 7 = very bad). Cronbach $\alpha$ for health status was 0.68. Somatic symptoms were assessed on the basis of the measure developed and validated by Derogatis (1977). Respondents were asked to indicate how frequently have they experienced any of the twelve symptoms during the past week (1 = not at all; 5 = extremely) (e.g., “headaches”, “pains in lower back”). Higher scores indicated a higher degree of somatic stress. Cronbach $\alpha$ was 0.8.

**Procedure**

The research was conducted with full cooperation of the plant’s management and union representatives. All participants completed a 15–20 min-long, non-anonymous survey (non-anonymity was required in order to match employees with company absence data and their respective peer group) in small groups (usually no more than 3 or 4 at a time) during their work hours. Given the high proportion of Russian-speaking immigrants, two versions of the questionnaire were distributed, one in Hebrew and one in Russian. Both versions were backtranslated into English to ensure the quality of translation.

**Statistical analyses**

All hypotheses were tested on the basis of logistic regression analysis with excessive absenteeism serving as the dependent variable.

**Results**

Table 1 presents means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations of the measured variables. As the table indicates, 41% of the respondents exhibited a pattern of excessive absenteeism (i.e., were absent greater than 3 days in the past 6 months). There appear to be no problems of multicolinearity, since the highest correlations are .57 (between seniority and average income). As can be seen in Table 1, (poor) health status and somatic symptoms had a positive correlation ($r = .18$, $p < .05$ and $r = .21$, $p < .05$, respectively) with excessive absenteeism. In addition, seniority and monthly income had inverse but marginally significant correlations with the likelihood of excessive absenteeism ($r = -.14$, $p < .1$ and $r = -.15$, $p < .1$, respectively).

As can be seen in column 1 of Table 2 (control model), two of the control variables were associated with the likelihood of excessive absenteeism, namely gender (male) and somatic symptoms ($B = 1.03$, Odds Ratio (OR) = 2.80, $p < .05$ and $B = .616$, OR = 1.85, $p < .5$, respectively). The results of our test of Hypothesis 1 are presented in columns 2 of Table 2. This hypothesis posited that even when taking departmental variables into account, permissive group absence norms would have a significant, positive impact on the likelihood of excessive absenteeism. This main effect model was tested twice. We first included permissive referent-group absence norms as well as the $r_{WG}$ for referent group norms (in order to partial out any of the variance in excessive behavior potentially explained by the homogeneity of referent group norms). As predicted, even when taking departmental-level factors into account, permissive referent group absence norms were strongly associated with the likelihood of excessive absenteeism ($B = 1.36$, OR = 3.89, $p < .01$). Given that the $r_{WG}$ of referent group absence norms was not significantly associated with excessive absenteeism ($B = .203$, OR = 1.23, n.s.), this additional control variable was dropped from the remaining models. The elimination of this variable had a minimal effect on the association between referent group absence norms and excessive absenteeism ($B = 1.37$, OR = 3.92, $p < .01$) (see column 2). Given an odds ratio of 3.92, individuals whose referents, on average, reported absence norms of 3.5 were nearly four times as likely to exhibit a pattern of excessive absenteeism as those whose referents reported absence norms at the approximate mean level of 2.5. Moreover, the consideration of referent group norms appears to offer significant explanatory value ($\Delta - 2 \text{ Res. Log Likelihood} = 32.74; p < .01$).

In columns 3–5 of Table 2, we report the results for the remaining hypotheses which aimed at explaining this association between permissive referent group absence norms and excessive absenteeism. Hypothesis 2 suggested that the positive association between permissive referent group absence norms and the likelihood of excessive absence behavior would be contingent upon individuals’ conformity disposition. Indeed, the results presented in column 3 indicate that while conformity disposition had an inverse association with excessive

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1 Results for this model are not shown in Table 2, but will be provided upon request from the authors.
| Variable                                                      | M   | SD   | 1     | 2     | 3     | 4     | 5     | 6     | 7     | 8     | 9     | 10    | 11    | 12    | 13    | 14    | 15    | 16    | 17    |
|---------------------------------------------------------------|-----|------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| Excessive absenteeism                                        | .41 | .49  | .21   | .20   | .02   | .08   | .10   | .08   | .11   | .04   | .08   | .09   | .09   | .07   | .06   | .04   | .03   | .06   | .01   | .01   |
| Male                                                          | .64 | .48  | .01   | .02   | .03   | .09   | .08   | .09   | .06   | .05   | .06   | .06   | .06   | .06   | .06   | .06   | .06   | .06   | .06   | .06   |
| Age                                                           | .42 | .2   | .01   | .02   | .03   | .09   | .08   | .09   | .06   | .05   | .06   | .06   | .06   | .06   | .06   | .06   | .06   | .06   | .06   | .06   |
| Seniority                                                     | .10 | .47  | .21   | .20   | .02   | .08   | .10   | .09   | .11   | .08   | .07   | .07   | .07   | .07   | .06   | .06   | .06   | .06   | .06   | .06   |
| Health status                                                 | 4.4 | 2    | .18   | .28   | .15   | .09   | .11   | .22   | .33   | .33   | .33   | .33   | .33   | .33   | .33   | .33   | .33   | .33   | .33   | .33   |
| Somatic symptoms                                              | 1.9 | .75  | .21   | .28   | .15   | .09   | .11   | .22   | .33   | .33   | .33   | .33   | .33   | .33   | .33   | .33   | .33   | .33   | .33   | .33   |
| Department 1                                                   | .65 | .48  | .03   | .02   | .10   | .15   | .11   | .09   | .09   | .09   | .09   | .09   | .09   | .09   | .09   | .09   | .09   | .09   | .09   | .09   |
| Department 2                                                   | .18 | .39  | .07   | .15   | .17   | .00   | .27   | .27   | .15   | .09   | .09   | .09   | .09   | .09   | .09   | .09   | .09   | .09   | .09   | .09   |
| Referent group personal absence norms                          | 2.48| .56  | .21   | .20   | .01   | .23   | .27   | .02   | .03   | .06   | .41   | .41   | .41   | .41   | .41   | .41   | .41   | .41   | .41   | .41   |
| Departmental permissive absence norms                          | 2.46| .25  | .03   | .12   | .11   | .17   | .09   | .08   | .08   | .08   | .08   | .08   | .08   | .08   | .08   | .08   | .08   | .08   | .08   | .08   |
| Referent group personal absence norms                          | .80 | .70  | .07   | .09   | .02   | .13   | .03   | .16   | .08   | .08   | .08   | .08   | .08   | .08   | .08   | .08   | .08   | .08   | .08   | .08   |
| Conformity disposition                                        | 2.33| .82  | .06   | .01   | .17   | .07   | .09   | .05   | .08   | .08   | .08   | .08   | .08   | .08   | .08   | .08   | .08   | .08   | .08   | .08   |
| Perceived negative expected consequences                      | 3.16| .97  | .14   | .12   | .02   | .02   | .11   | .04   | .06   | .06   | .06   | .06   | .06   | .06   | .06   | .06   | .06   | .06   | .06   | .06   |
| Perceived positive expected consequences                      | 2.80| 1.08 | .03   | .09   | .07   | .18   | .01   | .07   | .19   | .08   | .08   | .08   | .08   | .08   | .08   | .08   | .08   | .08   | .08   | .08   |

*p < .05.

**p < .01.

# p < .1.
Table 2
Logistic regressions with excessive absenteeism as the dependent variable

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>(1) Control model</th>
<th>(2) Main effect of group norms</th>
<th>(3) Normative influence model</th>
<th>(4) The informational influence model</th>
<th>(5) Referent informational influence model</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>B</td>
<td>SE</td>
<td>OR</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>SE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>1.03*</td>
<td>.477</td>
<td>2.801</td>
<td>1.016*</td>
<td>.542</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>.005</td>
<td>.023</td>
<td>1.005</td>
<td>.015</td>
<td>.027</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seniority</td>
<td>–.036</td>
<td>.036</td>
<td>–.964</td>
<td>–.063</td>
<td>.043</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of children under 18</td>
<td>–.152</td>
<td>.130</td>
<td>–.859</td>
<td>–.196</td>
<td>.153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average monthly income</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td>–.003</td>
<td>.009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health status</td>
<td>.190</td>
<td>1.68</td>
<td>1.209</td>
<td>.154</td>
<td>.192</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somatic symptoms</td>
<td>.616</td>
<td>.287</td>
<td>1.851</td>
<td>.782</td>
<td>.318</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Department 1</td>
<td>–1.955</td>
<td>4.54</td>
<td>–.141</td>
<td>–.692</td>
<td>5.492</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Department 2</td>
<td>.536</td>
<td>.873</td>
<td>1.710</td>
<td>.652</td>
<td>1.019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Referent group permissive norms</td>
<td>1.366**</td>
<td>.489</td>
<td>4.021</td>
<td>–1.944</td>
<td>1.399</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conformity disposition</td>
<td>–3.978</td>
<td>1.591</td>
<td>.019</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group absence norms x conformity</td>
<td>1.522**</td>
<td>.609</td>
<td>4.583</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived positive expected consequences</td>
<td>–.026</td>
<td>.230</td>
<td>.974</td>
<td>–.474</td>
<td>.350</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal permissive norms</td>
<td>–.222</td>
<td>.161</td>
<td>.828</td>
<td>–.450</td>
<td>.171</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Model summary

\[
\chi^2(10) = 19.22^* \\
\chi^2(11) = 34.65^* \\
\chi^2(12) = 45.05^* \\
\chi^2(13) = 36.54^* \\
N = 138
\]

\[
\text{LL} = 168.161 \\
\text{LL} = 135.424 \\
\text{LL} = 111.855 \\
\text{LL} = 134.469 \\
N = 126
\]

\[
R^2(Cox and Snell) = .12 \\
R^2(Cox and Snell) = .24 \\
R^2(Cox and Snell) = .32 \\
R^2(Cox and Snell) = .24 \\
N = 125
\]

\[
\text{p} < .05. \\
\text{p} < .01. \\
\text{p} < .1.
\]
absenteeism \((B = -3.98, p < .05)\), as posited, a stronger association between referent group absence norms and excessive absenteeism was found among those with a stronger conformity disposition \((B = 1.52, p < .05, \text{OR} = 4.58)\). Moreover, based on the change in \(-2 \log \text{Likelihood} = 23.57, p < .05\), it appears that, as hypothesized, the target’s conformity disposition plays a significant role in determining the extent to which permissive referent group absence norms influence his or her absence behavior.

Hypothesis 3 posited that the subjective expected utility of absenteeism would mediate the association between referent group absence norms and the likelihood of excessive absenteeism. Following convention for assessing mediation effects (Baron & Kenny, 1986), we first regressed the presumed mediator (i.e., perceived positive/negative consequences) on the independent variable (i.e., group absence norms). As shown in Table 3, permissive referent group absence norms had no significant association with perceived negative expected consequences of absenteeism \((B = -0.001, \text{n.s.})\). Given that this condition was not met, there was no point in proceeding with the mediation test for perceived negative expected consequences. However, Table 3 also indicates that permissive group absence norms did have a significant positive association with perceived positive consequences of absenteeism \((B = .277, p < .05)\). Nevertheless, as column 4 of Table 2 indicates, when we regressed the dependent variable (i.e., excessive absenteeism) on both the independent variable (i.e., permissive group absence norms) and the presumed mediator (i.e., perceived positive consequences), the latter had no significant association with the likelihood of excessive absenteeism \((B = -0.026, \text{n.s.})\). Indeed, based on the statistically insignificant change in the \(-2 \log \text{Likelihood} (\Delta -2 \log \text{likelihood} = 0.955, \text{n.s.})\) it appears that, contrary to Hypothesis 3, the subjective expected utility of absence does not play any meaningful role in mediating the association between permissive referent group absence norms and the likelihood of a target’s excessive absenteeism.

Hypothesis 4 proposed that targets’ personal absence norms would also mediate the association between permissive referent group absence norms and the likelihood of excessive absenteeism. Again, following convention for assessing mediation effects (Baron & Kenny, 1986), we first regressed the presumed mediator (i.e., personal absence norms) on the independent variable. As shown in Table 3, permissive referent group absence norms had a significant positive association with permissive personal absence norms \((B = .195, p < .05)\). Nevertheless, as column 5 of Table 2 indicates, when we regressed excessive absenteeism on both the independent variable and the presumed mediator, the latter had no significant association with the likelihood of excessive absenteeism. Indeed, based on the statistically insignificant change in the \(-2 \log \text{Likelihood} (\Delta -2 \log \text{likelihood} = 1.888, \text{n.s.})\) it appears that, contrary to Hypothesis 4, personal absence norms do not play any meaningful role in mediating the association between permissive referent group absence norms and the likelihood of a target’s excessive absenteeism.

**Discussion and conclusion**

Drawing from the social influence and self-categorization literatures, the current study aimed at addressing two gaps in absence research, the first having to do with

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**Table 3**

Personal permissive absence norms and perceived positive and negative expected consequences of absenteeism regressed on referent group permissive absence norms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Personal permissive absence norms</th>
<th>Perceived positive consequences</th>
<th>Perceived negative consequences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(B)</td>
<td>(SE)</td>
<td>(B)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>.990</td>
<td>.151</td>
<td>.082</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>-.195*</td>
<td>.007</td>
<td>-.170*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seniority</td>
<td>.354*</td>
<td>.011</td>
<td>-.028</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children under 18</td>
<td>.054</td>
<td>.041</td>
<td>.115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average income (monthly; NIS)</td>
<td>-.285*</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>-.070</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health status</td>
<td>-.153w</td>
<td>.052</td>
<td>-.116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somatic symptoms</td>
<td>.044</td>
<td>.088</td>
<td>.138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Departmental permissive absence norms</td>
<td>1.214</td>
<td>2.847</td>
<td>2.372</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Department 1</td>
<td>-.1226</td>
<td>1.429</td>
<td>-.165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Department 2</td>
<td>-.117</td>
<td>.282</td>
<td>.257</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group permissive absence norms</td>
<td>.195*</td>
<td>.123</td>
<td>.277</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\* \(p < .05\).

\w \(p < .1\).
the role of referent-others in influencing targets’ absence behaviors, and the second having to do with the mechanisms underlying such influence processes.

Regarding the first issue (i.e., role of referent others), our findings indicate that, consistent with self-categorization and social influence theory, referent group absence norms play an important role in explaining excessive absence behavior, even when taking into account the absence norms associated with the formal organizational units (i.e., departments) within which these referent groups are often nested. Our findings suggest that the locus of absence culture may be more difficult to pinpoint, varying from one employee to the next, and tied as much to informal social networks as to formal organizational structures. Individuals’ tie-ins to alternative informal organizational social networks may offer greater explanatory potential with respect to absenteeism than their demographic profiles or their employment in one department or workgroup versus another. While these social ties may themselves be demographically driven or influenced by organizational staffing patterns (with referent groups potentially overlapping with formal work groups), our findings suggest that it may be difficult to explain the variance in individual absence behaviors without knowing something about the absence norms of those with whom the individual relates.

Interestingly, while permissive referent-groups norms had a strong, positive association with the likelihood of targets’ excessive absenteeism, the likelihood of excessive absenteeism was found to be unrelated to departmental-level permissive absence norms, suggesting that referent-group norms may have a more potent influence on target absence behavior than the norms associated with the target’s formal work unit. Although one explanation for the dominance of reference group norms may be the tendency of referent group members to hold more permissive absence norms, this conformity disposition was found to have a generally negative association with excessive absenteeism. However, for conformity-pre-disposed individuals whose work-based referent-others hold more permissive absence norms, this conformity predisposition appears to work against any organizational interest in reducing the incidence of excessive absenteeism in that it strengthens the generally positive association between permissive referent group absence norms and target absenteeism. Fig. 1 illustrates the conditioning effect of conformity disposition on the relationship between referent group norms and excessive absenteeism. Using the approach recommended by Harrison (2001), each of the three curves reflect a different level of conformity disposition (i.e., mean level and one standard deviation above and below the mean). As shown, the strongest and most consistent association

[Fig. 1. Group permissive absence norms and excessive absenteeism as a function of conformity disposition: curves for 3 different levels of the moderator (−1SD, mean, and +1SD of conformity disposition).]
between group absence norms and excessive absenteeism was found among more conformist-oriented employees. In contrast, the likelihood that less conformist-oriented employees would exhibit excessive absenteeism seemed to be independent of their referents’ norms.

Turning to the role of informational influence, our findings did not support the hypothesized mediating effect of perceived positive and negative consequences of absenteeism. Nevertheless, as shown in Table 4, post-hoc analyses indicate that the positive association between permissive referent group absence norms and the likelihood of target excessive absenteeism is significantly attenuated when individuals strongly associate the likelihood of target excessive absenteeism with negative consequences.2 What is interesting, however, is that while individuals’ perceptions of the positive expected absence consequences were significantly associated with referent group permissive norms, their perceptions of negative expected consequences were not. Thus, while there is post-hoc evidence that the perceived ‘costs’ of absenteeism attenuate any positive association between referent group norms and targets’ excessive absenteeism, contrary to the informational influence perspective, there is no evidence that targets’ perception of such costs are in any way influenced by referent group norms.

Finally, no support was found for the mechanism suggested by referent informational influence theory. Although consistent with this theory, we found targets to adopt reference group absence norms as their own, targets’ own absence-related norms did not significantly mediate the association between reference group absence norms and the likelihood of excessive absenteeism and were not even related to excessive absenteeism at the bivariate level. One possible explanation for the lack of a mediating role for personal absence norms is that individuals need not necessarily internalize the norms of others and act on these internalized norms in order to construct and maintain a positive-self image. Rather, in a manner more consistent with conscious and rational process of self-image construction suggested by the Social Identity model for Deindividuation Effects (SIDE; Reicher, Spears, & Postmes, 1995), targets may adopt behaviors or utility perceptions consistent with referent norms as a means by which to maintain or enhance a positive self-image without blindly or mindlessly internalizing the norms of their referent others. Even if the norms of referent-others are internalized, to the extent that targets’ act on the basis of maintaining or enhancing their positive self-image, their absence behaviors may be driven more by an interest in behaving in a manner that is not divergent from the implicit norms of their referent others, than in a manner that is consistent with their personal absence-related norms. Furthermore, it may also be that conformity disposition serves as a salient moderator of the association between referent group norms and excessive absenteeism because high conformist individuals have a heightened need to maintain or enhance a positive self-image and feel that one means by which to do this may involve the adoption of absence patterns more consistent with norms of their referent others (Brewer & Roccas, 2001).

Limitations

Given that a desire to maintain a positive self-image may also underlie the conformity and subjective utility effects noted above, and the fact that the hypotheses derived from normative and informational influence theories were tested on norms held by referent (as opposed to generalized) others, one important limitation of our study is that it provides little insight into which of the three social influence theories—normative, informational and referent-informational—is most able to explain how and when individuals will adopt absence behaviors consistent with their normative context. However, given the continuing debate over the relevance, no less, validity of distinctions drawn between normative, informational and referent-informational influence (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004; David & Turner, 2001),
rather than attempting to test the relative strength of these three different social influence theories in explaining employee absence behavior, the aim of the current study was simply to use these alternative social influence theories as a basis for theory generation. That is, rather than seeking to place these theories into some competitive testing framework, our intent was strictly to draw from them the possible social mechanisms underlying the tendency of individuals to adopt patterns of absenteeism consistent with their surrounding normative context.

A second limitation of the current analysis has to do with the fact that we examined excessive absenteeism over only 6 months—what Harrison and Martocchio (1998, p. 309) refer to as a mid-term period of aggregation. Longer periods of data collection—defined by Harrison and Martocchio (1998, p. 308) as one or more years—are generally preferable in the collection of absence data in that they offer a greater degree of “ecological validity”, capturing the “yearly rhythms serving as strong external pacers of behavior” (Harrison & Martocchio, 1998, p. 308). Longer data aggregation periods are also likely to reduce any confounding effects having to do with situation-specific labor market or workplace conditions. Still, by focusing on the likelihood of excessive absenteeism rather than on a continuous measure of absence incidence or frequency, we were able to avoid the problems of skewness and leptokurtosis typically associated with short and mid-term periods of aggregation.

A third limitation of the study stems from the use of non-anonymous data collection (necessary in order to link data regarding norms with objective absentee data). The lack of participant anonymity may have resulted in an unknown degree of social desirability bias. If so, this might explain the lack of a significant correlation between individual absence norms and excessive absenteeism. On the other hand, any systematic social desirability bias of absence norms should have also attenuated the link between aggregated norms and absenteeism. The fact that a significant association was nevertheless found between reference group norms and excessive absenteeism suggests a relatively limited risk of such a bias. Nevertheless, in the future, absence researchers examining the impact of absence norms may wish to control for participant social desirability.

Finally, our study offers somewhat limited generalizability in that it focused on blue-collar workers employed in only one plant of a multinational food manufacturer in Israel. Consequently, additional work is necessary before researchers can comment upon the social mechanisms underlying absence behavior among white-collar employees or among blue-collar workers (and especially, non-union workers) employed in other industries and countries.

**Implications**

Despite these limitations, the findings reported above have a number of important theoretical, methodological and practical implications. From a theoretical perspective, our findings suggest the need to go beyond Nicholson and Johns’ (1985) notion of organizational or unit-specific absence culture and to think in terms of multiple organizational sub-cultures defined on the basis of members’ individual referent networks. The norms characterizing these sub-cultures gain their potency precisely because, relative to the formal organizational units within which they are embedded, they are more proximate to the individual actor (Ibarra & Andrews, 1993).

While the data limitations noted above prevented us from examining the explanatory potential of such sub-cultures relative to the broader departmental or organizational absence cultures within which they are nested, our findings leave little doubt that social comparison-based models of absenteeism will offer limited predictive validity to the extent that they neglect those having substantial social influence potential, namely the employee’s referent-peers.

From a methodological perspective, our findings suggest that organizational analyses grounded on social comparison may have much to gain by breaking beyond the formal organizational structure and focusing on members’ informal relations with referent peers, particularly when seeking to explain when and why organizational members adopt patterns of behavior counter to the interests of management. While such an approach has become rather taken for granted among researchers examining organizational behavior from a social network perspective (e.g., Ibarra & Andrews, 1993), and has more recently been proposed as a mechanism by which to understand the adoption or exacerbation of employee misbehavior (Bacharach, Bamberger, & Sonnenstuhl, 2002), the results of our study suggest that absence researchers interested in better understanding the normative and social context of employee absence behavior should pay closer attention to these highly informal, peer-based group cultures. Although our understanding of the nature of these group cultures of absenteeism and the social comparison processes upon which they are based might be enhanced through ethnographic research, as we have demonstrated in the current study, sociometric or network-based methodologies are also well-suited to capturing and analyzing such phenomenon.

Finally, for practitioners, our findings suggest the need to adopt intervention strategies that are focused on the organization’s informal group cultures. Although researchers and practitioners have proposed a variety of organization-wide and unit-level interventions designed to precipitate a change in absence norms (Mathieu &
Kohler, 1990), the findings presented above suggest that managers may need to work on a more micro level, mapping informal clusters or “hot-spots” of absenteeism, and seeking to influence those tending to emerge at the hub or core of these referent networks. Although unionized firms tend to have higher rates of absenteeism than non-union firms (Harrison & Martocchio, 1998), managers of unionized firms may have an advantage in this regard. Managers able to develop cooperative labor-management attendance programs may be able to take advantage of the union’s knowledge of the organization’s informal referent-based networks, often the same networks that unions rely on when needing to mobilize for collective action (Bacharach, Bamberger, & Sonnenstuhl, 2001).

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank three anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments on earlier drafts. We would also like to thank Tamir Noiman for his assistance in the data collection.

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