SOCIAL COHESIVENESS AND ABSENTEEISM
The Relationship Between Characteristics of Employees and Short-Term Absenteeism Within an Organization

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This study tries to explain the relationship between characteristics of the employees (e.g., gender and working hours) and short-term absenteeism by examining the social cohesiveness of a team. Hypotheses are formulated concerning gender and working hours of employees, social cohesiveness, and short-term absenteeism. To test these hypotheses, network data on 56 employees in 8 comparable teams within an organization were collected. The results show that similarity in gender and percentage of full-time employees within a team were positively related to the social cohesiveness of a team and that social cohesiveness is negatively related to short-term absenteeism.

Keywords: *social cohesiveness; short-term absenteeism; anticooperative behavior; teamworking*

One of the most distinct developments of the labor market in the last decades is the increase of female labor force participation (International Labour Organisation [ILO], 1995, 2002). Changing

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attitudes toward the division of paid labor and care between women and men, an increase in education level, a decrease in the number of children per family, and the desire or need to supplement family income appear to be important explanations for this increase of female labor force participation.

More or less related to this increase, an increase in part-time employment (Hutchinson & Brewster, 1994; ILO, 1995, 2002) can be observed. In the northern European countries, the percentages of part-time employment is a great deal higher than in most other industrialized countries; the Netherlands ranks highest with well over 30% of the workforce in part-time employment (ILO, 2002). Other countries with a high proportion of part-time jobs are Iceland, Switzerland, Norway, Mexico, and Australia.[1]

The question of if there are differences in individual performance within organizations between part-time and full-time employees is, however, rarely the subject of research. And, when this question is asked, results are inconclusive. This is especially the case when differences in absentee rates between part-time and full-time employees are examined (Allegro & Veerman, 1998; Feldman, 1990; Feldman & Doerpinghaus, 1992; Schwartz, 1996; Smulders, 1993). Some results show that full-time employees have higher absentee rates; other results, however, show that part-time employees have higher absentee rates.

Research is also inconclusive regarding the effect of gender on absenteeism. Some research shows that men have higher absentee rates than women, whereas other research shows that women have higher absentee rates than men (Cuelenaere, Jetten, & Van Kooten, 1996; Puglieshi, 1995; Spielberger & Reheiser, 1994). The discussion whether maternal leave should be part of the absentee rates of women does not help to make this relationship more conclusive (Thomas & Thomas, 1994; Van den Heuvel & Wooden, 1995).

The above-mentioned studies share a tendency to focus on the individual level while ignoring the mechanism of the group level. The absence of an examining mechanism at the group level seems a serious limitation on this area because research on intragroup relationships has shown that differences in characteristics within a group are one of the main sources of intragroup problems and con-

flicts (Rubin, Pruitt, & Kim, 1994), and these problems can be assumed to be related to absenteeism.

There are, however, some studies on the relationships between characteristics of teams and absenteeism (Geurts, Buunk, & Shaufeli, 1991; Martocchio, 1994; Van Yperen, 1998; Van Yperen, Hagedoorn, & Geurts, 1994). For instance, results of research by Geurts et al. (1991) on bus drivers show that members of strong cohesive working groups see leaving their colleagues alone as highly undesirable and will, because of this, avoid absenteeism. In this article, related to these results, we try to explain the relationship between characteristics of employees and absenteeism by examining the relationship between characteristics of employees and cohesiveness of a team.

When speaking about absenteeism, a distinction is often made between white, gray, and black absenteeism (Allegro & Veerman, 1998). In the case of white absenteeism,[2] it is quite obvious that an employee is ill (e.g., having a high fever or a broken leg). Absenteeism is called grey if the illness is psychological or psychosomatic, such as headache or tiredness. In all these cases, diagnoses are hard to make. Absenteeism is called black if someone who is not ill at all reports himself or herself as sick. This black variant of absenteeism is also known as illegal absenteeism. By and large, researchers agree that frequent, short-term absenteeism is the most valid indicator of black absenteeism and is controlled by the employee (Judge & Martocchi, 1996). Because short-term absenteeism is very hard to predict in time, it causes problems of coordination and diversion of work for organizations (Van Yperen et al., 1994). This black variant of absenteeism can be seen as anticooperative behavior toward other employees within the team (Sanders, Van Emmerik, & Raub, 2002; Van Dierendonck, Le Blanc, & Van Breukelen, 2002): the same amount of work has to be done with fewer employees.

Because of the importance of short-term absenteeism for the management of organizations, in this article we focus on short-term absenteeism. The question then is why employees within an organization differ in their choices to report themselves ill for a short

period, even when they are not ill at all, and to what degree and in what way these choices are related to characteristics of employees and cohesiveness within a team. The research problem addressed in this article is formulated as follows:

> Can the relationship between characteristics of employees (e.g., gender and working hours) and short-term absenteeism be explained by the cohesiveness of a team?

GENDER, WORKING HOURS, AND COHESIVENESS

The chance that individuals have tight relationships if they share more important characteristics with each other is usually referred to as the "homophily principle" (Louch, 2000; Rogers, 1979). According to this principle, people prefer to interact with others who are similar on given attributes, such as gender, to gain valued expressive resources. This tendency generally results in homophilous ties and, on an aggregate level, to an increase in communication within their own group and to a decrease in interactions with other subgroups. This will in turn increase the cohesiveness within the group. Cohesiveness comes from interpersonal attraction and also indicates how far employees are committed to the goal of the group, to what extent the group is able to influence its members, and to what degree individuals identify themselves with the team (Guzzo & Shea, 1992). In this article, we assume that gender is an important characteristic in terms of the homophily principle. Therefore, we expect that the more employees within a team are similar with respect to gender, irrespective if it concerns female or male employees, the more cohesive the team will be. Our first hypothesis is formulated as follows:

> *Hypothesis 1:* Similarity in gender within a team is positively related to cohesiveness of a team.

It seems not likely to consider the number of working hours as a characteristic that will increase the chance that employees form homophilous ties. Although part-time employees share the charac-

teristic of being a part-time employee, there is little opportunity to develop informal relationships with other team members within teams with a relatively high number of part-time employees. The opposite will be the case for teams with a relatively high number of full-time employees: they will have a lot of opportunities to form a cohesive team. In this way, the number of working hours can be seen as an amount of time that can be used to start and maintain informal relationships. The more time employees are in the organization, the more time they will have to informally meet other employees. This means that the more a team has a relatively high number of full-time employees, the greater the chance that this team will be cohesive. The following hypothesis can be formulated:

Hypothesis 2: The relative number of full-time employees within a team is positively related to cohesiveness within a team.

COHESIVENESS AND SHORT-TERM ABSENTEEISM

A cohesive group will have a strong impact on its members, who will strive to keep the group intact and remain a member of the group, conform to the group norms, and regard the group's interest above their own. Cohesiveness is an important characteristic of teams because team members are more willing to show cooperative behavior if the informal relationships are stronger (Mudrack, 1989; Mullen & Copper, 1994), and they tend to be more sensitive to others and more willing to aid and assist them (Schachter, Ellertson, McBride, & Gregory, 1951). Research shows positive relationships between cohesiveness and cooperative behavior (Kidwell, Mossholder, & Bennett, 1997). Also, numerous old studies found empirical evidence for the hypothesis that cooperative behavior increases within cohesive groups (Blau, 1955, 1964; Homans, 1965). In this study, assuming that short-term absenteeism can be seen as a form of anticooperative behavior, we formulate a third hypothesis as follows:

Hypothesis 3: Cohesiveness within a team is negatively related to short-term absenteeism of employees.

METHOD

A total of 56 employees (response rate = 90%) from 8 self-managing teams participated in this study. All respondents were employees from a housing corporation, and 25 were female (44%) and 31 were male (56%). The mean age of the respondents was 44 years (*SD* = 11.4), and they had on average worked 15.5 years (*SD* = 8.5) within this organization. Part-time employees accounted for 30% of the respondents and included 13 women and 4 men.

The organization with the 8 self-managing teams can be characterized as an organization with little hierarchy. The teams are comparable with respect to type of work and responsibilities. Each team is independent from each other and has the responsibility to match houses with tenants in a specific part of the city. In some parts of the city, the housing corporation owns more houses than in other parts. This means that the teams differ is size (4-15 members; *M* = 7, *SD* = 3.4). In addition, the 8 teams differ in the percentage of women (0%-75%) and in the percentage of part-time employees (0%-50%).

To test the various hypotheses, teams with at least four respondents should be considered, which allows a meaningful study of small group cohesiveness (cf. Carron & Spaink, 1995; Hare, 1981). All the teams considered in this study have more than four respondents.

To understand informal networks in organizations, one must gain a familiarity with the informal network and its participants that goes beyond the information readily available from questionnaires and personnel records. Therefore, in cooperation with the managing director of this housing corporation, the researcher shared an official office for 3 months. Approval for the study was granted by the commission of the works council. The researcher organized management meetings and interviews with all heads of the units to gain commitment for participation, a photograph of the researcher was published on the intranet with a short interview of all research activities, and employees were assured that their participation in the study would be kept confidential. Questionnaires were coded,

put in a sealed envelope, addressed by name, and distributed to the employees in person.

MEASUREMENTS

ABSENTEEISM

Data concerning absenteeism within the organization were obtained from the organization and linked to the data set of the questionnaire at the individual level. The total absentee rate in the year of the data collection within the organization was .13.

This means that, on average, the employees were absent for 13% of all the days in the year. A comparison with national data on absenteeism shows that the absentee rate within this organization is high (Central Office for Statistics, 2000, 2002).

The data on absenteeism were divided into short-term (1 or 2 days) and long-term (longer than 2 days) absenteeism. Of the 56 respondents, almost half of them (n = 27) reported themselves ill once or more often for a short-term period, and 16% of the employees reported themselves ill for a longer time. Of the 27 employees who were absent for a short term once or more, 12 were short-term absent once, 11 were twice, 2 employees were 3 times, and 2 employees were absent 4 times for 1 or 2 days.

COHESIVENESS

All employees were asked two questions concerning the tightness of informal relationships. First, a question was asked about the frequency of informal meetings with other colleagues within the organization:

> Within an organization there are some people you talk to more than others. If you remember the last 3 months, who are the people you talk to about the organization, about new developments in the organization or the team, or about personal concerns? To answer this question, it is important to distinguish between formal (the official meetings) and informal meetings. To answer this question, do not

> think about the formal meetings, but focus on the informal meetings you had with your colleagues in the last 3 months. Can you state for each of the colleagues mentioned below how frequently you talk with him or her: (a) not so often; (b) usually once or twice a month; (c) usually once or twice every week; or (d) usually every day.

To identify the closeness of the informal relationships, the respondents were asked to answer the following question:

> Within an organization, you feel a stronger bond with some people than with others. Can you state for each of the following employees how strong your relationship with him or her is? The relationship with the other employees can be characterized as (a) no bond at all; (b) not a very strong bond; (c) a relatively strong bond; or (d) a very strong bond.

First, the degree of symmetry (Wasserman & Faust, 1994) was calculated. The relations were acceptably symmetrical, with 79% of all relationships symmetrical. This increases to 94% if the data are dichotomized. This means that if Respondent I indicates a strong relation to Respondent J, in 94% of all the relations, Respondent J also indicated a strong or a relatively strong relation to Respondent I.

The informal relationships between employees within a team are measured as the average of the informal relationships respondents have with employees within their team. The 8 teams are not different from each other in terms of the relative frequency of the informal meetings, $F(7, 54) = .94$, *ns*, but differ in their closeness with the other team members, $F(7, 54) = 2.52$, $p < .01$.

These two relative measurements—frequency of informal meetings and closeness of the informal relationship—are highly correlated: $r = .73$ ($p < .05$). This means that both the relative measurements can be seen as indicators of the concept cohesiveness. In the analyses described below, besides the two relative measurements, the mean of the relative frequency and the relative closeness of the informal relationships on the team level are used as indicators of the social cohesiveness of a team. The mean cohesiveness of the teams is 4.29 ($SD = 0.53$).

RESULTS

GENDER, WORKING HOURS, AND SOCIAL COHESIVENESS

To test the first and second hypotheses concerning the similarity in gender and the percentage of full-time employees, analyses were done on the team level. Because the number of teams was low, the correlations were checked for outliers by means of plots. No outliers were found.

To measure similarity with respect to gender, the degree of similarity was calculated on the level of dyads. The number of dyads that are similar with respect to gender is related to the total number of dyads within a team. For example, for a team with four employees, six dyads can be distinguished (AB, AC, AD, BC, BD and CD). In this case of two female and two male employees, the degree of similarity in gender is 2^4 divided by 6, that is, 33%. If the team consists entirely of employees of the same gender, the degree of similarity is 100%.

To test Hypothesis 1 and Hypothesis 2 (that similarity in respect to gender, Hypothesis 1, and percentage of full-time employees, Hypothesis 2, are positively related to the social cohesiveness within a team), correlations between the frequency of informal meetings, the closeness of informal relationships, and the cohesiveness as indicators of cohesiveness on one hand and the degree of similarity in respect with gender and percentages of full-time employees on the other hand were calculated on the team level. The correlations are given in Table 1.

As expected in Hypothesis 1, significant correlations were found regarding the degree of similarity with respect to gender and the frequency of informal meetings, closeness of the informal relationships, and cohesiveness within a team. This means that we can confirm Hypothesis 1: similarity with respect to gender is positively related to cohesiveness within the team.

As expected in Hypothesis 2, significant correlations were found regarding the relative number of employees within a team who are full-time and the frequency of informal meetings and the social cohesiveness within a team. However, the correlation

TABLE 1: Spearman Rank Correlations Between the Degree of Similarity for Characteristics of the Teams and the Frequency of Informal Meetings, the Closeness of Contacts, and Cohesiveness Within a Team (n = 8)

Variable	*Frequency of Informal Meetings*	*Closeness of Informal Relationships*	*Cohesiveness*
Similarity with respect to gender within a team	.66*	.67*	.76**
Percentage of full-time employees within a team	.72**	.46	.68*

*p < .10. **p < .05.

between the percentage of full-time employees and the closeness of the informal relationships was not significant. This means that we only partly can confirm Hypothesis 2.

SOCIAL COHESIVENESS AND SHORT-TERM ABSENTEEISM

The third hypothesis, that social cohesiveness and short-term absenteeism are negatively related, was tested using multilevel models in hierarchical linear modeling (HLM; Raudenbush & Bryk, 1986; Snijders & Bosker, 1999). HLM provides for a more robust examination of models for data having two or more levels, in this case characteristics of employees on the individual level and characteristics of the team on a team level. HLM is a statistical model for hierarchically structured data that takes into account within-group variability as well as between-group variability. It is similar to a (logistic) regression model but includes random effects to represent the unexplained differences between groups (in this case teams). The use of ordinary logistic regression analysis would lead to unreliable results because employees within the same team have common influences, so that the assumption of independent observations, required for ordinary regression analysis, would be violated (Snijders & Bosker, 1999). Fixed effects were entered into the model on the basis of theoretical consideration, as in regression analysis. In addition, we estimated random effects at the level of the team: we assumed that teams differ randomly in the overall level on the dependent variable (short-term absenteeism) and we allowed

TABLE 2: Results of a Multilevel Analysis With the Short-Term Absentee Rate as Dependent Variable (n = 56)

Variable	*Model 1 B*	*Model 2 B*
Individual level		
No. of working hours (1 = full-time)	.33	.43
Gender (1 = male)	.19	.15
Experience	.06	–.11
Age	–.15	–.16
Team level		
Social cohesiveness		–9.31**
Constant	5.66	–39.97**
Model fit		
Deviance	67.64[a]	40.27
Difference in deviance	4.75 (df = 4)	20.37** (df = 1)

a. Deviance compared to the null-model.
*p < .10. **p < .05.

that teams differ randomly in the regression coefficients of the variables on the level of the employees (random slopes). In this study, the presentation of results focused on fixed effects.

In order to test Hypothesis 3, short-term absenteeism was taken as the dependent variable (*0* = no short-term absenteeism in the last year; *1* = absenteeism for a short term one or more times in the past year). In the first model, the effects of the individual variables on short-term absenteeism are reported. In addition to gender and working hours, age and years of experience within this organization are taken into account. Subsequently, the social cohesiveness at team level was added. The results are given in Table 2.

For short-term absenteeism, the results of Model 1 show that the individual variables (gender, working hours, age, and experience within this organization) do not have a jointly significant contribution: difference in deviance = 4.75, df = 4, *ns*). Both gender and part-time or full-time employment have no significant effect on short-term absenteeism. By adding the social cohesiveness, the model improves significantly (difference in deviance = 20.37, df = 1, $p < .01$). Cohesiveness is negatively related to short-term absenteeism ($b = –9.28$, $p < .01$): the more cohesive a team, the lower the short-term absenteeism of the employees within the team. This means that we can confirm Hypothesis 3.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

In this article, we have tried to explain the inconclusive results concerning the relationship between characteristics of the employee, in this case gender and the number of working hours, and short-term absenteeism by examining the cohesiveness within a team. In contrast to earlier research, the explanation of the relationship between the number of working hours and absenteeism was not explored at the level of individual characteristics but at the team-level: the degree of social cohesiveness. Given these results, the conclusion can be drawn that the relationship between gender and working hours on one hand and short-term absenteeism on the other hand can be explained by the social cohesiveness within the team.

The results of this study indicate that it makes sense to focus on mechanism on the group level for explaining differences between individuals. Also, in management literature, the conclusion is drawn that despite the substantial importance due to the increase of organizations with self-managing teams, insufficient attention has been given to the effects of the group on behavior of employees (House, Rousseau, & Thomas-Hunt, 1995; Mowday & Sutton, 1993; Rousseau & Fried, 2001).

As expected, the similarity in respect to gender was found to be positively related to the frequency of informal meetings, to closeness of informal relationships, and to cohesiveness. In our analysis, we did not make any differences between teams with a lot of women and teams with a lot of men. This can be done in further research using literature on the relationships between gender and informal relationships within organizations. As expected, the percentage of full-time employees within a team was found to be positively related to frequency of informal meetings and to cohesiveness but was not related to closeness of informal relationships. Although this result was not in line with what we expected, it confirms our assumption that the number of working hours can be seen as an amount of time to develop informal meetings. The positive relationship between the percentage of full-time employees and informal meetings is in line with that assumption. Employees with

more working hours have in general more time for informal meetings than do employees with less working hours. Closeness of relationships does not seem to be related to this time argument, but it seems to be more related to similarities between people, as is proposed by the homophily principle.

Our finding that social cohesiveness is related to short-term absenteeism as a form of anticooperative behavior (Sanders et al., 2002; Van Dierendonck et al., 2002) supports the idea that cooperative behavior is characterized by a norm of reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960; Hechter, 1987) and is dependent of informal relationships with other employees within the team. The more cohesive a team, the more cooperatively the employees behave with each other and the lower the short-term absenteeism.

However, short-term absenteeism can also be seen as a form of cooperative behavior: coming back to work as quickly as possible to avoid forcing the other employees to do the work. In this case, short-term absenteeism should be positively related to cohesiveness: the more cohesive the team, the more members avoid leaving their colleagues and the more short-term absenteeism should be seen instead of long-term absenteeism. The results of the current study, however, did not confirm this reasoning. This study confirms that short-term absenteeism can be seen as an indicator of black or illegal absenteeism (Allegro & Veerman, 1998).

In this article, no attention was paid to the work ethics of employees or to the norm concerning work ethics within a team. Work ethics can be defined as a collection of values and behavior related to the workplace that people feel are moral. In general, work ethics are called strong if workers feel that they have to fulfill all the formal responsibilities that come with a job and weak or low if people are more tolerant to the fulfillment of formal responsibilities. One can assume that work ethics of employees are negatively related to short-term absenteeism: the more intolerant employees are concerning illegal absenteeism, the lower their short-term absentee rate. This assumption was confirmed in a number of empirical studies (Judge & Martocchi, 1996; Martocci & Jimeno, 2003; Van Yperen et al., 1994). In addition, the assumption can be made that informal relationships with a team and the norm concerning illegal

absenteeism within a team are related: the more employees within a team are informally related to each other, the stronger the group norm will be. Furthermore, given the fact that employees within a team are more or less dependent on each other for doing their work, the assumption can be made that the work ethics of employees is an important social stimulus for the creating of an in-group. Further research is needed to examine the relationship between cohesiveness, work ethics, and short-term absenteeism.

Instead of using the often-used self-rating of absenteeism, in this study objective data were obtained from the organizations and were linked on an individual level to the data from the questionnaires. Although this method is sensitive to problems of privacy rules and therefore needs commitment from the organization, it has a number of strengths. First, objective data on absenteeism can be assumed to be more valid and reliable than self-ratings. Research (Schmitt & Kunce, 2002; Schmitt, Oswald, Kim, Gillespie, & Ramsay, in press) shows that most people have difficulties in answering the question: "How many days in total were you absent from work in the last year?" Respondents over- or underestimate their absent days, resulting in biased answers. Second, answers from a question of how many days an employee was absent in the last year do not provide data on short-term absenteeism. A question such as "Was your absenteeism in the last year mostly short-term?" can be expected to be invalid. Third, questions on absenteeism in a questionnaire can bias the other questions in the list. Answering that you were absent for many days the last year can change your mood and can affect the answering of the other questions (Fenton-O'Creevy, Winfrow, Lydka, & Morris, 1997).

A limitation of this study is the number of respondents. Although the response rate was high (90%), probably due to the internal position of the researcher at that time, the total number of respondents was only 56. Focusing on the team level, we were restricted to 8 teams. Further research should replicate the findings of this current research with more teams and within more organizations. It would be interesting to examine if the dependencies of tasks within the teams have an effect on informal relationships. In

this sense, a relationship can be made between formal and informal structure within organizations.

In sum, our study reveals that cohesiveness within teams deserves the attention of both researchers and practitioners because it appears to be an important impediment of the functioning of teams within organizations. When speculating on these results, the most logical way to decrease the absentee rate would be to change the composition of the teams without changing the winning teams that are homogeneously composed and already cohesive. Of course, this will not always be possible due to the special qualities of the employees and preferences for a special team. Nevertheless, given this conclusion, organizations can influence absentee rates by paying attention to the informal structure of their organizations. For instance, organizations can arrange informal activities, such as lunches, team parties, sporting events, or survival camps. When arranging these activities during working hours, employees have no reason to stay away. All of these activities give employees a chance to restore the balance between their own investments and returns. In this context, Wilson (1989) talks about "the sense of mission" of an organization. By clearly telling the employees within an organization what the goal of the organization is, what the goals for the future are, and what the responsibilities of the employees are in reaching these goals, employees will be more likely to become a part of the organization.

NOTES

1. For instance, 28% of the Australian labor force is working on a part-time basis (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2002).

2. This form of absenteeism is also known as sickness absenteeism (e.g., Cunningham & James, 2000; Harrison & Price, 2003; Pousette & Johansson Hanse, 2002).

3. The standard workweek (full-time employment) in this organization is 38 hours.

4. In this case, two of the six dyads connect employees who are similar with respect to gender, whereas four dyads do not concern similar employees.

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