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How Time and Perceptions of Social Context Shape Employee Absenteeism Trajectories

Abstract

Although the impact of social influence on employee absenteeism is well established, almost nothing is known about the dynamic, temporal accrual of this influence. Latent growth modeling was used to trace absenteeism trajectories over 4 years for employees who differed in years of organizational tenure. As expected, higher-tenure employees exhibited flat trajectories while those with lower tenure (1-3 years) gradually increased their absenteeism to conform to the dominant norm of the organization. However, as predicted by theories of identification and social exchange, perceptions of social context moderated the latter effect. The more positive an employee's perceptions of top management, the lower his or her rate of increase in absenteeism. The more positive an employee's perceptions of work colleagues, the higher his or her rate of increase in absenteeism. Perceptions of supervisors were unrelated to rate of change. The study clarifies how employees learn and adapt to organizational absence cultures.

Keywords: Absenteeism; social norms; social context; latent growth modeling

1. Introduction

The majority of research into the correlates and causes of absenteeism has focused on individual characteristics such as work attitudes and experiences, personal traits, and illness (Johns, 2008). However, during recent years an especially vibrant stream of research has revealed the strong impact of social context in the domain of absenteeism. Although such influence has been illustrated at levels of analysis as high as nations, societies, and social classes (Daniels, Tregaskis, & Seaton, 2007; Virtanen, Nakari, Ahonen, Vahtera, & Pentti, 2000), unit-level and cross-level studies in organizations have provided the most abundant evidence for the role of social influence in attendance decisions. Verified social influence mechanisms (examples and references are illustrative, not exhaustive) include organizational or work-unit absence norms (Gellatly, 1995; Markham & McKee, 1995), peer-referent absence norms (Bamberger & Biron, 2007), supervisor support (Biron & Bamberger, 2012), work group climate (Hiller & Vance, 2001), group cohesiveness (Xie & Johns, 2000), group demography (Gellatly & Allen, 2012), group affective tone (Mason & Griffin, 2003), and shared attitudes (Dineen, Noe, Shaw, Duffy, & Wiethoff, 2007).

As Johns (2008) explains, there are two features that set the stage for social influence on absenteeism. First, it is modally viewed as a mildly deviant form of work behavior (Robinson & Bennett, 1995). Thus, people underreport their own absence levels (Johns, 1994a), see their own attendance record as being superior to that of colleagues (Harrison & Schaffer, 1994; Johns & Xie, 1998), and occasionally give the behavior a more socially acceptable label (e.g., mental health day, Hackett, Bycio, & Guion, 1989). Second, absence rates vary greatly across social units and settings, and the behavior has many causes, some unobservable or random. Consequently, it is not exactly obvious what might constitute a normal or typical level of absence in a particular setting or what an acceptable cause might

be. In combination, these two factors mean that people are sensitive to social cues concerning acceptable attendance behavior.

In line with the purposes of the current study, it bears emphasis that both of these features would be particularly salient for more recently hired employees. That is, lower-tenure employees are likely to be sensitized to the deviant connotations of absence given their more tenuous organizational status, especially if there is a formal or quasi-formal probationary period. At the same time, those with lower tenure are unlikely to have a well-developed understanding of the ambient absence culture of their new organization (e.g., how much absence is actually acceptable here, and for what purposes?). As a consequence, more newly hired, lower-tenure employees should be susceptible to changing their absence behavior over time to approximate that of more experienced colleagues. However, as will be seen, other elements of social influence also affect the trajectory of this change.

If contemporary research has paid considerable homage to the notion of the social context affecting attendance behavior, the same cannot be said for the longitudinal examination of changes in absence over time. In a review of the absence literature organized around the concept of time Harrison and Martocchio (1998) rightly bemoaned this state of affairs. Years later, multi-year longitudinal studies of absenteeism by a fixed cohort are still a rarity in the domain of organizational behavior and psychology (e.g., Mason & Griffin, 2003; Rentsch & Steel, 1998). Time is a particular missing link with regard to the impact of social context on absence, because we lack a good picture of how social influence unfolds, how it accrues. In turn, we lack a true dynamic understanding of how ambient absence rates and absence cultures develop, not a good prescription for trying to reinforce or change them. Given the foregoing, the purpose of the present study was twofold: to investigate change in absence from work over time and to explore the role of social context in determining this change. We conducted a rare longitudinal study at the individual level of analysis.

Specifically, we investigated temporal variations in absence from work over a 4 year period among employees in three different groups that varied in organizational tenure.

1.1. Investigating absenteeism over time and tenure

Although the role of social influence on absenteeism is well established, what is lacking is a dynamic, temporal understanding of how this influence emerges. A good starting point for thinking about time and absence is Hill and Trist's (1955) classic and prescient steelworks study, which presented a phase-like model of employee learning of the organizational absence culture. Their research revealed that different withdrawal behaviors characterized different stages of employment, indicating the importance of considering organizational tenure in absenteeism studies and the need to look for both linear and curvilinear relationships over time. Specifically, they found that over the first few weeks or months there was a high degree of turnover behavior. Then, there was an increase in absenteeism until two and one-half years of service that, from then on, remained constant. The authors explained their findings referring to employees' progressive conformity to the absence culture of the organization. They conceptualized absence as a withdrawal behavior that served to reduce work-related stress; as such, it was not known by newcomers and took some time to be learned. Accordingly, newcomers left their job as a withdrawal response to stress, whereas the tendency to go absent increased with the length of organizational tenure and the subsequent learning of the social norms regarding absenteeism. In a more recent cross-level study of German civil servants, Schmidt (2002) reported conceptually similar findings, determining that tenure interacted with office-level absence norms such that those individuals with less tenure were less inclined to be norm-compliant.

Following this reasoning, we were interested in exploring whether different tenure groups showed different temporal patterns of absence, reflecting the progressive learning of the informal social norms of conduct within an organization. It is well recognized that the

decision to attend work is affected by absence norms (Gellatly, 1995; Harrison & Shaffer, 1994; Johns, 1994b), and commonly believed to reflect one aspect of an organizational or work unit absence culture (Chadwick-Jones, Nicholson, & Brown, 1982; Johns & Nicholson, 1982; Harrison, Johns, & Martocchio, 2000). It is also well established that work group or organizational absence rates are commensurate behavioral manifestations of subjectively measured absence norms, and at least five independent samples reveal that mean perceived absence norms correspond to mean absenteeism levels as indicated by organizational records (Gellatly, 1995; Gellatly & Luchak, 1998; Johns, 1994a; Johns & Xie, 1998).

We assumed that short-tenured employees would show an increasing trajectory in absenteeism, because they would require time to internalize and conform to organizational norms of acceptable absenteeism (Chadwick-Jones et al., 1982; Johns & Nicholson, 1982; Geurts, Schaufeli, & Buunk, 1993). Thus, short-tenured employees would gradually approach the absence behavior of longer-tenured colleagues. On the contrary, no significant change would occur for medium- and longer-tenured workers, likely because they have reached equilibrium as reflected in the larger organization's absence norms.

A generic prediction here would simply be that shorter-tenured employees would *converge* on the absence norm. However, our knowledge of the local context led us to predict *ascent* to the norm for the majority of them. This is because the short-tenure employees studied were recent graduates who were in probationary positions. Although virtually all would subsequently receive permanent contracts, avoiding excessive absence during a period of socialization would be prudent for one's career. In fact, several investigations (reviewed by Johns, 2010) reveal that non-permanent and probationary employees are less likely to be absent than permanent employees.

Given the preceding logic, our hypotheses were the following:

Hypothesis 1: Over time, an increasing trajectory of absenteeism toward the organizational norm characterizes short-tenured employees.

Hypothesis 2: Over time, no change in absenteeism (i.e., flat trajectory) occurs among medium- and long-tenured employees.

1.2. Absenteeism and perceptions of social context

Scholars are increasingly acknowledging the role of context in influencing organizational behavior (Johns, 2006; Rousseau & Fried, 2001). The present study considers perceptions of the social context (PoSC), which has been defined as a set of perceptions by employees of the behaviors enacted by the more relevant social constituencies internal to the organization (i.e., top management, immediate supervisor, and colleagues) (Borgogni, Dello Russo, Petitta, & Vecchione, 2010). These perceptions refer to both task- and relationship-oriented behaviors, particularly those that have been identified as recurrent or prototypical of each social constituency across several diverse organizational contexts (Borgogni, Dello Russo, Di Tecco, Vecchione, & Alessandri, 2011). Consistent with the authors' deductive and inductive approach for identifying such prototypical behaviors, each constituency respectively enacts the following behaviors when positive perceptions are observed: (a) in the case of colleagues, supporting one another, creating a positive atmosphere, collaborating, and integrating each other's competencies; (b) in the case of immediate supervisors, treating employees equally, fostering employees' participation, and supporting their professional development; (c) in the case of top management, clearly defining tasks, goals, and activities, encouraging employees' professional development, and supporting employees' needs. The three dimensions of PoSC have been consolidated using meta-analytic procedures (Borgogni et al., 2011), and there is empirical evidence from various sectors (e.g. public and private organizations, schools, the military) that members' perceptions of social context affect work

attitudes, such as job satisfaction and organizational commitment, as well as job performance (Borgogni, Dello Russo, Petitta, & Latham, 2009; Borgogni et al., 2010). Here, we argue that PoSC will affect how employees respond to prevailing absence norms. Two assumptions underlie what follows. First, it is assumed that a more favorable perception of a social constituency (i.e. colleagues, supervisor, management) will lead to greater identification with and acceptance of the standards espoused or enacted by that constituency. Second, it is assumed that supervisors and managers will typically espouse lower absence levels than employees, a notion which has direct empirical support (Johns, 1994b; Markham & McKee, 1995) and indirect empirical support as seen in the work arbitration literature concerning absenteeism (reviewed by Johns, 1997)

We predicted that positive perceptions of colleagues and of some crucial aspects characterizing peer relationships at work, namely reciprocal support and trust, collaboration, and competencies' integration, would stimulate gradual conformity to prevailing absence norms by lower-tenure employees. Consistent with social learning theory (Bandura, 1997), people engage in vicarious learning processes, observing and modeling others who are viewed positively, before adopting a particular behavior. Moreover, according to social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1985), individuals identify with their employee group and internalize its values and norms, leading to homogeneity in attitudes and behaviors (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Social identification is particularly relevant in the organizational socialization of newly hired employees, because newcomers are concerned with understanding organizational policies and procedures, comprehending their role, and exhibiting appropriate behaviors and attitudes (Ashforth, 1985). Thus, newcomers identify with their group and progressively accommodate its organizational values, beliefs, and norms (Ashforth & Mael, 1989), most especially when this group is perceived in a positive light. In particular, work group and organizational norms have been demonstrated to play a key role in explaining

absenteeism (Bamberger & Biron, 2007; Biron & Bamberger, 2012; Gellatly, 1995; Xie & Johns, 2000). Given this logic, and in line with the hypothesized change trajectories of absence from work (Hypotheses 1 and 2), we expected that:

Hypothesis 3: In the group of short-tenure employees, positive perceptions of social context concerning colleagues are positively related to an increasing trajectory of change in absenteeism over the 4-year period.

Perceiving a supervisor as able to provide emotional and instrumental support in times of need may work as a buffering mechanism against the stress and other negative experiences that could elevate absence (Biron & Bamberger, 2012; Väänänen, Toppinen-Tanner, Kalimo, Mutanen, Vahtera, & Peirò, 2003). In fact, perceived support from leadership was found to be positively associated with employees' motivation, organizational commitment (Mayfield, Mayfield, & Kopf, 1998), job satisfaction (Weiss, Suckow, & Cropanzano, 1999), and performance (Cropanzano, Rupp, & Byrne, 2003) and inversely associated with stress, work-related health problems (Stephens & Long, 2000), and absenteeism (Cropanzano et al., 2003). In addition, attendance behavior is affected by conflicts with superiors. Such conflicts, in fact, increase absenteeism both directly and indirectly via changes in personal absence standards (Geurts et al., 1993). In light of such research, we assumed that positive perceptions of one's immediate supervisor would be associated with a smaller increase in absenteeism over time.

Similarly, if workers perceive that the organization, embodied by top management, is treating them well, they would feel obliged to "pay back" by becoming more committed to the organization and exhibiting attendance behavior even in face of obstacles (Biron & Bamberger, 2012). In fact, because of the reciprocity norms underlying social exchange (Blau, 1964), employees seek to reciprocate that positive treatment and avoid being absent in order to reduce the potential adverse effects of absenteeism on supervisors, top management,

and the overall organization (Bacharach, Bamberger, & Biron, 2010; Biron & Bamberger, 2012). On the other side of the coin, several studies have found a positive relationship between employees' perceptions of inequity and subsequent absenteeism (Geurts, Buunk, & Schaufeli, 1994; Oldham, Kulik, Ambrose, Stepina, & Brand, 1986). In equity theory terms, if employees perceive unfair treatment by the supervisor or top management in comparison to their colleagues, they are likely to increase their rate of absenteeism. For one thing, staying away from work alleviates resentment and negative feelings caused by the work situation (Geurts et al., 1993). Also, a day off from work represents an attempt to restore an equitable exchange relationship with the organization, through a reduction of work inputs (Johns & Nicholson, 1982). Accordingly, we expected that:

Hypothesis 4: In the group of short-tenure employees, positive perceptions of social context concerning (a) the direct supervisor and (b) top management are negatively related to an increasing trajectory of change in absenteeism over the 4-year period.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedure

The present study was part of a broader longitudinal project conducted in one of the largest companies in Italy, privatized in 1998. Relevant changes in the domain of human resource (HR) management have occurred, and particularly newly hired employees holding a degree go through a three year socialization program, during which they have the chance to rotate over various job positions and geographical locations in order to know the organization as well as possible. After the three years, provided they have a good performance record, their contract is transformed into a permanent contract.

The first survey (2007) of the longitudinal project solicited 1656 employees and 1160 responded, for a 70% response rate. The sample for the analyses reported here consisted of

744 people who responded to that survey and for whom it was possible to match 4 years of absence data. They worked in the Rome headquarters of the organization and performed white collar office tasks in a variety of functional areas. Participants were 55% male, and their ages ranged from 26 to 60 years old ($M = 41.7$, $SD = 8.6$). The mean organizational tenure was 11.8 years ($SD = 10.4$). Moreover, 32% had an organizational tenure of 3 or fewer years ($n = 236$), 35% had a length of service ranging from 4 to 18 years ($n = 260$), and 33% had worked in the organization for more than 19 years ($n = 248$).

Participants were administered an Italian paper-and-pencil questionnaire in meetings during normal working hours. Participation was voluntary, and each respondent was assigned a code by the HR department in order to match answers with absenteeism rates and, at the same time, to guarantee privacy.

2.2. Measures

Perceptions of social context (PoSC). Participants' perceptions of three organizational social constituencies, colleagues, the immediate supervisor, and top management, were assessed using a 15-item scale previously validated in the same and other organizational contexts (Borgogni et al., 2010; 2011), as alluded to earlier. For each statement respondents rated their agreement on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

a) *Perceptions of colleagues*. Five items measured the perception of relationships among colleagues with regard to social cohesion, reciprocal trust and respect, mutual support and cooperation in facing obstacles, and the integration of each member's competencies to complete tasks (e.g., "In my office we work in a friendly atmosphere"; "In my group there is a good collaboration, even during periods of difficulty and overload"). The Cronbach alpha reliability was .89.

b) *Perceptions of immediate supervisor*. Five items measured the perception of the immediate supervisor in supporting co-workers, encouraging their involvement, and treating them equally (e.g., “My immediate supervisor guarantees all the assistance I need in order to best carry-out my job”; “My immediate supervisor takes care of my professional growth”). The alpha reliability was .91.

c) *Perceptions of top management*. Five items measured the perception of top management’s actions in terms of orientation toward employees’ development and growth, the communication of organizational goals, procedures and policies, the integration of different units, and the fair treatment of workers (e.g., “Top management provides clear guidelines”; “Top management is interested in employees’ well-being”). Coefficient alpha was .90.

A confirmatory factor analysis was employed to test for the three latent factors, perceptions of colleagues, immediate supervisor, and top-management, which were allowed to correlate. The model exhibited good fit, $\chi^2(86) = 338.451$, $p < .001$, CFI=.964, TLI=.956, RMSEA=.063, SRMR=.038.

Absences from work. From personnel records, the HR department provided yearly time lost absenteeism data (the sum of days of absence from work) covering four consecutive years (2006-2009). The social mechanisms discussed earlier would likely shape the absolute volume of absenteeism exhibited by individuals more so than the pacing and spacing of absence episodes. Also, both Hill and Trist (1955) and Schmidt (2002) implicated tenure in time lost absence. As is typical, the absenteeism data were positively skewed. Hence, we applied a square root transformation to approximate normality.

Demographic variables. Data on organizational tenure, age, and gender were made available by the HR department. Age and gender were employed as controls because they are known correlates of absenteeism (Hackett, 1990; Côté & Haccoun, 1991).

2.3. Analyses

We employed latent growth modeling (LGM, Lance, Vandenberg, & Self, 2000), an advanced application of structural equation modeling that requires measurement of the variables one intends to model on at least three occasions. Through LGM the variable of interest is regressed on two latent factors representing time, namely the intercept and the slope, defining the initial status and the rate of change, respectively. Since in our case absenteeism is an observed variable, the intercept and the slope were two first-order latent factors.

The sample was divided into tertiles on the basis of organizational tenure in order to create three different groups for analyses: short- (employees with organizational tenure of 3 years or less), medium- (employees with a length of service between just over 3 years to 19 years), and long-tenured employees (who had worked in the company for over 19 years). To compare the three tenure groups, we adopted a multi-group approach in LGM, as multi-group analysis is a well-established and commonly accepted method for detecting group differences in structural equation modeling (Eggert, Hogreve, Ulaga, & Muenkhoff, 2011).

The analyses, conducted with Mplus software (Muthén & Muthén, 1998), followed the two-step procedure recommended by Chan and Schmitt (2000), in that first we identified the model that most adequately depicted the change trajectory in each group and then we augmented it by including the hypothesized predictors. In the first step, two nested multi-group LGM models were compared: a strictly linear model, obtained by fixing the slope factor loadings at -1, 0, 1, and 2, for the years 2006-2009 respectively, and an optimally estimated model, in which the first two factor loadings of the slope were fixed at -1 and 0 and the last two factor loadings were freely estimated. The intercept of the LGM (identified with 0) was fixed in 2007 because this was the starting point of the research and perceptions of social context were measured in that year.

3. Results

The descriptive statistics and correlations are presented in Table 1.

----- Insert Table 1 about here -----

The results of the analyses that tested alternative multi-group LGM models, namely strictly linear versus optimal latent change functions, indicate that the optimal change function was preferred, as it improved the model fit significantly (the test of chi square difference yielded a value of 34.831 for 4 df, $p < .001$). Thus, the optimal change function was retained for the subsequent augmented model.

The LGM parameter estimates (factor means, variances, and covariances) in the selected model were used to understand the shape of the growth trajectories of the three tenure groups (see Table 2). The three groups demonstrated differential growth trajectories over time, and these mean change trajectories are plotted in Figure 1.

----- Insert Table 2 about here -----

----- Insert Figure 1 about here -----

In support of Hypothesis 1, the slope (i.e., change) factor mean of absenteeism in the short-tenured group was positive and statistically significant; that is, short-tenured employees' rates of absences from work increased significantly from 2006 to 2009. The slope factor variance was also statistically significant, indicating that there was meaningful inter-individual variability in this increase. Furthermore, both the intercept (i.e., initial status) factor mean and the variance were positive and statistically significant, revealing that significant inter-individual differences in absence existed at the initial status; that is, some employees had higher mean days of absence than their colleagues in 2007. However, the factor covariance between the intercept and the slope was non-significant. This means that an individual's initial status in terms of absence was not systematically related to the increase in absence from work he or she experienced over the period of the study, indicating that there is scope to examine other potential predictors of the ascending trajectory.

With respect to the other two groups (i.e., medium- and long-tenured employees), the slope factor means were not statistically significant, as reported in Table 2, indicating that absenteeism had a level trajectory; in addition, no inter-individual differences emerged concerning this stable trajectory, as evidenced by the non-significant slope variances. Both intercept factor mean and variance were statistically significant for the two groups, showing that there were significant individual differences in absenteeism both within the medium- and long-tenured groups with regard to the initial status in absenteeism. These findings together supported Hypothesis 2.

The last LGM model tested the relationship between antecedents (i.e., perceptions of colleagues, direct supervisor, and top management) and change in absenteeism, controlling for age and gender. The model exhibited good fit, $X^2(34) = 22.86$, $p = .927$, $TLI = 1.079$, $CFI = 1.000$, $RMSEA = .000$, $SRMR = .021$. Table 3 presents the standardized structural parameter estimates of the direct effects from this augmented model for the short-tenured employees group, the only one reporting a significant change and inter-individual differences over time.

----- Insert Table 3 about here -----

In line with Hypothesis 3, perceptions of colleagues showed a positive and significant association with absenteeism slope. Moreover, perceptions of colleagues had a non-significant connection with absenteeism intercept.

In support of Hypothesis 4b, perceptions of top management had a significant negative relationship with the absence slope, as well as with its initial status. Less supportive of expectations were the findings regarding perceptions of direct supervisor (Hypothesis 4a). As shown in Table 3, positive perceptions of the immediate supervisor were not significantly associated with initial status and change in absenteeism.

In the medium- and long-tenure groups, perceptions of social context were not related to absenteeism (neither to the initial status nor to the stable slopes). This finding, combined with the fact that there was no inter-individual variability in their trajectories over time, further attests to our assumption that perceptions of social context can shape an individual's absence behavior in the early stages of the socialization process, whereas later on these perceptions no longer have an impact, as the norms are learned and the behavior crystallizes.

4. Discussion

In support of the hypotheses 1 and 2, employees with organizational tenure lower than 3 years showed an increasing trajectory of absenteeism, as they started with lower levels of absences from work (on average 2 days) but gradually adopted the absence behavior of medium-tenured colleagues (about 4.5 days). Additionally, this increase was independent from individual differences in absenteeism at the initial status. This means that regardless of whether an individual initially had a relatively lower or higher mean of absence days, he or she experienced an increase in absences from work over the 4-year period of the study. Conversely, medium- and longer-tenured employees had reached equilibrium in their absence behavior, evidently grounded in the organizational absenteeism norms and culture; thus, they displayed a flat trajectory over the 4 year period of the study. Notably, controlling for age ruled out the possibility that the different trajectories of the three tenure groups were spurious due to aging effects (e.g., via increased family responsibilities or health issues).

Our study, a rare longitudinal study of individual absenteeism, is not only in line with previous research but also contributes an innovative and dynamic perspective on the development of the absence habits of shorter-tenured employees. This extends Hill and Trist's (1955) prescient observations, based on cross-sectional descriptive statistics and rather static comparisons among groups of employees, and provides an additional test of the

absence culture thesis (Chadwick Jones et al., 1982; Johns & Nicholson, 1982) by clarifying the trajectories of learning of social norms concerning absence.

With regard to the second purpose of the study, namely specifying the predictors of change trajectories in absences, we found that positive perceptions of top management had a negative effect not only on the initial absence means, but also on absenteeism change, indicating that the more positive an employee's perceptions of the organizational top management the lower his or her rate of increase in absenteeism. Consistent with the literature concerning perceived organizational support (Biron & Bamberger, 2012; Cropanzano et al., 2003), this finding suggests that the perception of top management as being more supportive, in terms of encouraging employees' personal and professional development, enhancing integration and collaboration among work units, and providing clear guidelines for procedures and practices, is likely to reinforce attendance behavior over time. According to social exchange theory (Blau, 1964; Cropanzano, Rupp, Mohler, & Schminke, 2001), this is likely because employees who feel that upper management is treating them fairly and positively display a lower increase in absenteeism over time in order to reciprocate the positive treatment and to avoid the high cost of absenteeism to the organization (Bacharach et al., 2010; Biron & Bamberger, 2012).

We did not find a significant relationship between positive perceptions of the supervisor and change in absences from work over time (Hypothesis 4a), revealing that, at least in the present sample, upper management had a greater impact on absence trajectories than did direct supervisors. A venerable theme in the leadership literature has called attention to the first level supervisor's status as "the 'man' in the middle" (Gardner & Whyte, 1945), subject to role ambiguity and inter-sender role conflict emanating from disparate demands from organizational superiors and subordinates (Roethlisberger, 1945; Wray, 1949). In the matter of attendance, top management demands control from supervisors, while subordinates

demand flexibility from them. In this case, the anticipated salutary effects of a generally positive view of a supervisor may be offset by his or her need to enforce attendance policy “on the ground,” negating any expected effect on absence trajectories.

As predicted, we detected a positive link between perceptions of colleagues and change in absence behavior, revealing that short-tenured employees who perceived their colleagues more positively experienced a higher increase in absences from work over time. This finding can be explained by group-based sense making processes that shape employees’ absence behavior over time (Bamberger & Biron, 2007; Biron & Bamberger, 2012). More specifically, short-tenured employees who view their work group more positively, who trust and respect their colleagues, and who mutually cooperate in the face of difficulties, are more likely to identify with their work group and to internalize group norms in order to reduce uncertainty and satisfy their needs for inclusion (Xie & Johns, 2000). Consequently, these employees increased their rate of absenteeism over time and approached the absence behavior of longer-tenured colleagues, consistent with the concepts of group absence norms and organizational absence culture (Harrison et al., 2000; Xie & Johns, 2000) that prescribe the maximum number of absences accepted by the organization (Chadwick-Jones et al., 1982; Geurts et al., 1993; Johns & Nicholson, 1982).

The relationships we found between PoSC and absenteeism speak to the dynamics of the behavior, in that we were not predicting the number of absences over four year time, as in research designs that adopt lagged measures. Rather, we illustrated how the perceptions held by employees at a certain point in time predicted the gradual change in their absence behavior due to the posited gradual learning of organizational norms concerning absenteeism.

4.1. Limitations and future research

There are some limitations to our study that provide avenues for future research. Although absenteeism was measured longitudinally, its predictors were assessed cross-sectionally, as data on perceptions of social context were collected at only one point in time. Additional studies are needed to understand how perceptions of social context develop over time, especially among short-tenured employees, and to investigate, through LGM analysis, how potential changes in perceptions of social context are associated with changes in absence from work.

The absence levels exhibited by the medium- and long-tenured employees correspond to one very common conception of an absence norm. However, we did not tap the content of the absence culture that might underlie this ambient level of absence and explain the positive relations between perception of colleagues and the increasing trajectory in absences among short-tenured employees. In the future, it would be worthwhile to more fully explore the group dynamics of absence, measuring absence culture salience (Xie & Johns, 2000) and group or peer-referent absence-related norms (Bamberger & Biron, 2007; Biron & Bamberger, 2012) that may function as explanatory mechanisms of the relationship between perception of social context and absences.

Finally, some caution must be taken in generalizing the results of the present research to employees in other organizations and contexts. In this regard, we founded our analyses on a specific organization that had recently undergone a major privatization process with its related cultural change. The probationary period arguably sensitized new hires to issues concerning absenteeism. Nevertheless, we drew our conclusions based on a considerable sample from one of the largest Italian organizations.

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Table 1. Descriptive statistics and correlations between the study variables.

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Abs.T1 (2006)	4.86	12.06									
2. Abs.T2 (2007)	5.25	10.36	.41**								
3. Abs.T3 (2008)	5.04	10.28	.20**	.28**							
4. Abs.T4 (2009)	5.55	12.59	.25**	.27**	.30**						
5. PoSC colleagues	5.14	.99	-.06	-.05	-.01	-.05					
6. PoSC supervisor	4.88	1.27	-.09*	-.12**	-.03	-.10**	.58**				
7. PoSC top management	3.99	1.11	-.10**	-.11**	-.04	-.14**	.42**	.59**			
8. Age	41.68	8.56	.16**	.035	.01	.01	-.06	.01	.08*		
9. Gender	1.45	.50	.16**	.15**	.15**	.14**	-.10**	-.03	-.02	-.08*	
10. Tenure	2.02	.81	.19**	.09*	.04	.04	-.10**	-.01	.02	.78**	.08*

Note. Abs. = absenteeism; PoSC = perceptions of social context; gender was coded 1 for males and 2 for females; absenteeism means and standard deviations are raw, but correlations with absenteeism reflect a square root transformations.

** $p < .01$ * $p < .05$.

Table 2. Growth parameter estimates.

Groups	Initial status (Intercept - I)		Change (Slope - S)		Covariance I - S
	Mean	Variance	Mean	Variance	
Short-tenured employees	1.326**	0.542**	0.995**	1.011*	0.189
Medium-tenured employees	1.592**	0.724**	-0.045	-0.009	-0.052
Long-tenured employees	1.667**	2.041**	-0.031	1.075	-0.851

Note. All the reported values are unstandardized estimates. The intercept means are calculated on square root transformed absenteeism.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$

Table 3. Structural parameter estimates of the augmented LGM model for short-tenured employees.

Relationship	Unstandardized path coefficients
<i>Main variables</i>	
PoC colleagues → abs. change (S)	.37*
PoC colleagues → abs. initial status (I)	.09
PoC supervisor → abs. change (S)	-.15
PoC supervisor → abs. initial status (I)	-.07
PoC top-management → abs. change (S)	-.28*
PoC top-management → abs. initial status (I)	-.18*
<i>Control variables</i>	
Age → abs. change (S)	-.02
Age → abs. initial status (I)	-.00
Gender → abs. change (S)	.36
Gender → abs. initial status (I)	.27*

* $p < .05$