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# The Job Satisfaction/Absenteeism Relationship: Gender as a Moderating Variable

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By K. Dow Scott and Dennis A. Mabes

Absenteeism has long been considered a significant and pervasive problem in industry. As a result, theories have been developed and numerous studies conducted to identify the causes of absenteeism [15, 22, 28]. Probably one of the most common theories is the notion that absenteeism is caused by employees avoiding a painful or dissatisfying work situation. By the same token this hedonistic theory would predict that employees who find their job more challenging, more interesting, or more pleasurable in other ways will be absent less often than employees who find their work less pleasurable. Although it is recognized that absenteeism may be caused by the employee's inability to come to work, motivation to attend work is assumed to be a major factor determining how often an employee is absent.

Most empirical studies designed to test this theory examine the relationship between some measure of job satisfaction and absenteeism. Indeed, a number of such studies have found an inverse relationship between job satisfaction and absenteeism as predicted by the theory [3, 14, 20, 29, 30]. Based on reviews of absenteeism literature, Muchinsky [21] and Steers and Rhodes [28] concluded that employee attitudes toward their work have a major influence on attendance.

Recently, however, the inverse relationship between job satisfaction and absenteeism has been questioned. Nicholson, Brown, and Chadwick-Jones [23], Ilgen and Hollenback [12], and Chadwick-Jones, Nicholson, and Brown [4] have found a weak relationship, at best, between these two variables. Chadwick-Jones, *et al* [4] contend that the inconsistent findings and low amount of explained variance indicates that the relationship is either weak/non-existent or that some moderating variable exists that can explain these inconsistencies.

Alternatively, Steers and Rhodes [28], Cheloha and Farr [5], and Clegg [6] interpreted these mixed findings as evidence that the job satisfaction-absenteeism relationship is not a direct one but instead is moderated by biographical or situational variables such as job involvement. Steers and Rhodes [28] conclude their review of the absenteeism literature by suggesting that the relationship between job satisfaction and absenteeism should receive a more thorough examination.

A simple tabulation of the job satisfaction/absenteeism studies reported by Chadwick-Jones, *et al* [4] in which gender of the population/sample is given suggests that employee gender may be a moderator. A negative relationship between job satisfaction and absenteeism was found in 13 of the 17 studies where the samples were men only. (Where multiple measures of job satisfaction were reported, split outcomes were placed in the category in which the majority of the scales fell. In only one case was the multiple measures of satisfaction split equally between negative and zero relationships.) In 5 out of 7 studies conducted with population/samples that were exclusively female, no relationship was found between job satisfaction and absenteeism. Mentzer and Mann [20] found an inverse relationship between job satisfaction and absenteeism for two subsamples of males, but no relationship was found for a subsample of females. Finally, in a more recent study not reported

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by Chadwick-Jones, *et al* [4], Adler and Golan [1] found no relationship between job satisfaction and absenteesim for a sample of female telephone operators. Although this data is not conclusive, it certainly supports Hulin and Smith's contention that "investigators must draw distinctions between male and female workers when discussing functional relatioships between job satisfaction and other variables" [10, p210].

## *DIFFERENCES BETWEEN MEN AND WOMEN*

Attitudinal and behavioral differences have long been assumed to exist between men and women. In recent years these differences have often been attributed to the socialization process, which affects job opportunities, family relationships, and cultural expectations regarding men and women [24]. As a result, one could expect women to react differently to their jobs than would men. Smith, Kendall, and Hulin [27] reported that men claim greater satisfaction from work than women. Golembiewski [9] and Keaveny, *et al* [16] also found job satisfaction differences between men and women. However, Smith and Plant [25] found only two of the five measures of job satisfaction (Job Description Index) were significantly different for 51 male-51 female matched pairs of university professors. In addition, variance for the two significant relationships was low. They concluded that either no significant sex differences existed, or if there were significant differences, those differences were not psychologically meaningful.

Yet, even if men and women do not indicate different levels of job satisfaction, the outcomes of job satisfaction/dissatisfaction may differ. Women with low job satisfaction may respond differently to that condition than do men. For example, Hunt and Saul [11] found that job satisfaction was more closely associated with tenure for men and with age for women. For men, significant U-shaped relationships were found between age and satisfaction with supervision and working conditions, and between tenure and satisfaction with supervision and working conditions. For women, the only significant U-shape relationship was between tenure and satisfaction with working conditions. Hulin and Smith [10] also found differences between men and women with respect to job satisfaction and other variables. In two samples, significant relationships between work and pay satisfaction and number of correlates (e.g., age, job tenure, company tenure, job level, and worker salary) were found for a subsample of men. However, no such consistent relationships were found for women.

Research has shown that rates and patterns of absenteeism differ between men and women (women often having higher absenteeism rates) [8, 17, 19, 20]. Numerous reasons for these differences have been proposed, which include: 1) differences exist in the social roles (women assume more responsibility for taking care of family needs/problems) [8]; 2) cultural differences between men and women encourage or condone absence behavior [23]; 3) differences exist in health and physical ailments between the sexes [7]; or 4) a higher proportion of females are in lower level occupations, which tend to be associated with higher absenteeism rates [13]. Both Isambert-Jamati [13] and Fitzgibbons and Moch [8] conclude that differences in absence patterns indicate that women and men are absent for different reasons.

Baumgartel and Sobol [2] also found differences between employee background factors and two measures of absenteeism for men and women who held blue collar jobs. For men, significant negative relationships were found between wage rate and seniority and absenteeism. They also found that blue collar men who held jobs of higher status (such jobs being associated with more responsibility and freedom) were absent significantly less than men who held jobs that had lesser amounts of these attributes. On the other hand, no such relationships were found for women except for a significant positive relationship between age and absence frequency.

Thus, based on the attitudinal/behavioral differences between men and women, differences in expressed satisfaction with their jobs, and differences in absenteeism rates, gender is examined as a moderating variable between job satisfaction and absenteeism. It is hypothesized that 1) men will be more job satisfied with their jobs than women; 2)women will be absent more than men; and 3) there will be an inverse relationship between job satisfaction and absenteeism for men, but no such relationship will be found for women.

## *METHODOLOGY*

The data were collected in a large retail department store that serves a major metropolitan area in the Middle Atlantic States. The store has 181 hourly employees in sales (71%) and nonsales (29%) positions. Men hold 42 of these positions and women hold the other 139 positions. Ninety-seven (54%) of the employees work less than 35 hours a week and eighty-four (46%) work over 35 hours a week. These employees have a mean wage of $4.77 and can receive on average up to 9.6 days of paid absenteeism. Employees were absent 6.8 days (3.4%) during the past year. The average age was 38 and the average educational level was 12 years. Only 8 minority employees were employed by this organization.

Absenteeism was defined as the employee failing to come to work when regularly scheduled. Vacations, holidays, funerals, and jury duty were excluded. Two common measures of absenteeism were taken from empolyee records: the frequency (or incidence) of

absenteeism and the total hours absent. The frequency measure, for example, would count an employee who was absent forty consecutive work hours as having one incident of absenteeism, while an employee who missed five nonconsecutive eight hour days would have five incidents. Thus, one method gives an absolute measure of the amount of absenteeism and the other indicates how many times the person is absent.

A questionnaire that included the Job Description Index (JDI) was distributed to the 125 hourly employees who reported for work on a single work day. (Because the store is open 6 days a week and a number of employees are part-time, not all employees are scheduled to work each day.) Completed questionnaires were returned by 78 employees, which represents a 62% response rate. Absenteeism data and certain demographic information was taken from employee records. The employees who responded to the questionnaire did not differ significantly from the total population in terms of wage rates, absenteeism rates, and other demographic characteristics that were collected for all employees from employee records.

The JDI is a widely used and respected tool for measuring employee job satisfaction [31]. The JDI asks employees about five aspects of job satisfaction (satisfaction with work, supervision, workmates, pay, and promotional opportunities). A more detailed description of the content and psychometric properties of this scale can be found in Smith [26] and Yeager [31].

Male and female differences between job satisfaction and absenteeism levels were analyzed with a basic t-test correcting for unequal cell size. A Z score transformation was used to compare subsample correlations.

## *RESULTS*

Hypothesis 1, which predicted that men would express higher levels of job satisfaction than women, is not supported as shown in Table 1. Not only were there no significant differences found between five job satisfaction mean scores, but also job satisfaction is lower for men than for women on 4 of the 5 scales, which is not in the predicted direction.

As predicted in hypothesis 2, women had a significantly higher absenteeism rate ($x = 3.68\%$) than did men ($x = 2.55\%$), as is shown in Table 1. However, even though women were absent more frequently than men ($x = 2.88$ and $x = 2.14$), the difference was not significant. It should be noted that total sample size is small for this study and there is a large difference in the number of men ($n = 15$) and women ($n = 63$) within the sample. As a result, large differences in mean scores for both measures of job satisfaction and absenteeism were required in order to empirically find significant differences.

The third hypothesis, which predicted there would

TABLE 1

JOB SATISFACTION AND ABSENTEEISM DIFFERENCES BETWEEN MEN AND WOMEN[1]

| Job Description Index | Men (N=15) | Women (N=63) | Difference |
|---|---|---|---|
| Work Satisfaction | 26.87 | 29.27 | -2.40 |
| Satisfaction with Supervisor | 35.93 | 41.21 | -5.27 |
| Satisfaction with Workmates | 40.60 | 41.60 | -1.00 |
| Pay Satisfaction | 13.73 | 17.40 | -3.67 |
| Satisfaction with Promotional Opportunities | 16.93 | 13.27 | 3.66 |
| Abbsenteeism: | | | |
| Frequency | 2.06 | 2.78 | -.72 |
| Absence Rate | 1.67% | 3.25% | -1.98%* |

[1]T-test procedure controlling for unequal cell size. Mean scores are reported.

*p <.05

be an inverse relationship between job satisfaction and absenteeism for men but no such relationship for women, received support. In Table 2, correlations between 5 job satisfaction scales (as measured by the Job Description Index) and two measures of absenteeism are shown. For the total sample, significant inverse relationships between only two measures of satisfaction (pay and promotion) and absence frequency and satisfaction with pay and absenteeism rate were found. However, when the sample was divided by gender, the data indicated that relationships between the job satisfaction scales and absenteeism were not uniform between men and women. The correlations between each of the job satisfaction measures and absence frequency were significant for men. On the other hand, for women only pay satisfaction and absence frequency were significantly correlated, and even in this case the relationship was weaker for women ($r = -.24$) than for men ($r = -.46$).

However, the effect of gender is less clear when the relationship between job satisfaction and absence rate

TABLE 2

JOB SATISFACTION AND ABSENTEEISM AS MODERATED BY GENDER

| Variables | Absence Frequency (r) | Absence Rate (r) |
|---|---|---|
| Satisfaction With Work (n = 78) | -.1763 | -.0716 |
| Women (n = 63) | -.1121 | -.0487 |
| Men (n = 15) | -.5195* | -.2954 |
| Satisfaction With Pay (n = 78) | -.2641* | -.1991* |
| Women (n = 63) | -.2445* | -.2178* |
| Men (n = 15) | -.4570* | -.2481 |
| Satisfaction With Promotional Opportunities (n = 78) | -.2404* | -.0397 |
| Woman (n = 63) | -.1541 | .0613 |
| Men (n = 15) | -.5528* | -.3798 |
| Satisfaction With Supervisor | -.0825 | .0230 |
| Women (n = 63) | -.0311 | .0471 |
| Men (n = 15) | -.5115* | -.3861 |
| Satisfaction With Workmates | -.0341 | .0610 |
| Women (n =63) | .0654 | .1508 |
| Men (n = 15) | -.7216* | -.6221* |

*significant at .05 level (2-tail)

is examined. Even though the correlations are consistently higher for men than for women, in only one case is the relationship between workmates satisfaction and absence rate significant ($x = -.6221$) for men. The one case where pay satisfaction is significantly related with absence rate for women is consistent with the significant relationship found between pay satisfaction and absence frequency.

A Z score transformation was used to compare subsample correlations. Significant differences ($p < .05$) between the subsample correlations (men and women) were found for supervisory and workmates satisfaction and absence frequency, and workmates satisfaction and absence rate. Differences between the measures of work and promotional satisfaction and absence frequency were found at $p < .071$ and $p < .069$, respectively. Promotional satisfaction and absence rate were significant at $p < .061$ level. Although large differences were apparent between correlational scores between the subsamples of men and women, the small number of men ($n = 15$) greatly limited the number of statistical tests that could be used.

## *DISCUSSION*

Finding that absences rates are higher for women than for men is certainly consistent with the findings of Markham, *et al* [19], Fitzgibbons and Moch [8], and Mentzer and Mann [20]. However, research conducted by Smith, Kendall and Hulin [27], which reported that men were more satisfied with their jobs than women, was not supported. Even though the differences in job satisfaction scores were not significantly different between men and women, the scores were higher for women on 4 of the 5 measures of job satisfaction, which is in the oposite direction of those predicted by hypotheses 2. Because retail sales poisitions have been traditionally filled by women in this industry, the difference between this study and the study conducted by Smith, et al [27] could be a function of the perceptions of retail sales work being most appropriate for women. The one situation where a job satisfaction scale was higher for men than women was for promotional opportunities. It might be noted that top management has been and still is primarily male, even though the work force is mostly female in this store.

The third hypothesis, that there is a negative relationship between job satisfaction and absenteeism for men and no such relationship for women, received mixed support. Significant relationships between all measures of job satisfaction and absence frequency were found for men, and only satisfaction with pay and absence frequency was significantly related for women. Although finding a relationship between job satisfaction measures and absence frequency does not support the theory statistically, it conforms to the theory by not contradicting it. For absent rate, satisfaction with workmates was found to be significant for men, and satisfaction with pay was found to be significant for women. Furthermore, the correlations were stronger for all measures of job satisfaction and absence rates for men than for women. This interpretation supports the notion put forward by Chadwick-Jones *et al* [4] and Steers and Rhodes [28] that the mixed empirical findings in the job satisfaction/absenteeism literature can be explained by a third moderating variable.

However, attempting to explain why gender moderates this relationship is more difficult to discern. One explanation for these findings could be the result of differences in how cultural roles have been defined for men and women [8]. If the social identity of men is more closely associated with their jobs than is that of women, it seems reasonable to conclude that attitudes that men hold about their jobs will be more likely to influence their behavior. As a result, men who are dissatisfied with their jobs would be more likely to be absent as a means of withdrawing from the work situation. Another possible reason for the differences found between men and women is the role women play as primary care givers. If women and society place a higher value on the role of homemaker than do men, women being absent for non-job related reasons would be more likely. It would seem that the homemaker role would often conflict with work demands (e.g., care of sick children, errands that must be handled during the workday, spring cleaning, etc.). Given that organizations place some limit on the amount of absenteeism that can be taken, if a woman must be home with sick children, she can not afford to be absent simply because she is unhappy with her job.

Finding that women are absent more than men and that the relationship between job satisfaction and absenteeism differs between them supports the hypothesis that women are absent for different reasons than men. If so, absenteeism solutions for these two groups could differ. For instance, a company sponsored day care center may be more likely to reduce the rate of absenteeism for an organization that employed large numbers of women than one that employed mostly men. However, not hiring women as a class because they have higher absenteeism would be illegal discrimination even though a disproportionate number of women could be terminated for excessive absenteeism.

If differences in absenteeism patterns between men and women can be attributed to culture, current changes in male and female roles may also affect absenteeism (e.g., more women in the work force, more involvement of the fathers in parenting, more single parents, etc.). As such, much of the early absenteeism research may not reflect the causes and patterns of absenteeism in the 1980's.

Certain limitations of this study should be noted. First, the sample size is small. This limited sample size

makes it impossible to do a more complex analysis that would allow one to test for other moderating variables. Difference in absence behavior between men and women could very well be moderated by the number and age of children, employee age or tenure, distance from work, and occupation of spouse. Second, this research has been done in only one research location. It is impossible to tell what effect such factors as type of work, policies and procedures, and other organization variables had on these findings. Third, even though this research gives some insight into differences in absenteeism behavior between men and women and also indicates that job dissatisfaction may be an important cause of absenteeism for men, we are still left with the question: "Why are women absent more than men?" Unfortunately, in absenteeism research the cause of absenteeism can often only be inferred from absenteeism patterns or by interpreting what the employee chooses to give as an excuse (or what is finally coded on the employee's record). Furthermore, this study, like most research on absenteeism, simply correlates absenteeism with an attitudinal measure and, as a result, can not indicate the direction of causality. Finally, job satisfaction and absenteeism have been measured in many different ways in the literature. How the measures used in the study influenced the results is impossible to determine.

Even with these weaknesses, this research does suggest that employee gender is a variable that moderates the job satisfaction and absenteeism relationship. Men and women differ on so many dimensions in our society (e.g., pay levels, parental role, job level, etc.) that not finding differences in absenteeism rates between men and women would be unexpected. Because of the importance of job satisfaction/absenteeism research in the literature, this study should be replicated. If we are going to develop a better understanding of the relationships between employee/job/organizaional variables and absenteeism, more emphasis must be placed on finding the actual reasons "why" employees are absent rather than using the categories of absences typically designated in company absenteeism records.

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