

ABSTRACT

This study proposes the use of a set of scales and measures to assess employee attitudes and behaviors with respect to absenteeism. These scales are drawn from a number of different theories in the absenteeism literature. Scale reliabilities from a population of 900 workers are given. Validity coefficients between the scales and individual absenteeism rates are reported. This questionnaire is unique in that it was designed specifically to assess employee perceptions and attitudes toward absenteeism.

PERCEPTIONS AND ATTITUDES TOWARD ABSENTEEISM:
AN ASSESSMENT OF MEASUREMENT RELIABILITIES AND VALIDITIES¹

The purpose of this study is to develop a set of measures for assessing employee attitudes and behaviors with respect to absenteeism. When compared to other traditional research topics such as job satisfaction or leadership, it is surprising that no such instrument exists in light of the amount of research that has been done concerning absenteeism.

Fitzgibbons & Moch (1980) noted that absenteeism research seldom considered simultaneously more than just a few predictors of absenteeism. Johns (1978) reinforced this point about the use of a limited set of predictors coupled with zero-order correlation analysis. This approach has created a situation where absenteeism theory is fragmented among a number of disciplines including management, psychology, education, and economics. Fitzgibbons & Moch (1980) have conducted the most comprehensive multivariate study to date which included 11 scales or demographic items measured over two time periods. There were, however, a number of other variables, theoretically related to absenteeism, which were not considered in this study.

THEORIES OF ABSENTEEISM

Although there are a number of absenteeism literature reviews which report the massive empirical work that has been done on absenteeism, far less effort has been focused on theoretical concerns (As, 1962; Gibson, 1966; Nicholson, 1977; Muchinsky, 1977; and Chadwick-Jones, 1982). These basic theories of absenteeism are briefly reviewed below.

Withdrawal Theory: Porter and Steers (1973), Steers and Rhodes (1978),

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Brayfield and Crockett (1955), and other industrial psychologists characterize absenteeism as the efforts of employees to avoid a work situation that is painful or dissatisfying. This theory predicts a negative relationship between job satisfaction and absenteeism. As a corollary of this relationship, turnover is also predicted to be coterminous with absenteeism. Variables that are associated with this theory include: job dissatisfaction, job pressure, working conditions, danger, and inappropriate supervisor behavior.

Labor/Leisure Decision Theory: Theorists in labor economics and expectancy motivation psychologists conceptualize work attendance as a rational decision process directed toward the attainment of valued goals (Allen 1981,1982). This decision is based on the value that an employee gets from coming to work versus the value or cost of being absent. Absence rates can be lowered by making absenteeism more costly or by making attendance more rewarding for the individual employee. Although this theory focuses on individual decision-making, labor economists tend to examine this process in terms of national economic variables. Variables that are associated with this theory include: wage rates, job security, unemployment rates, work hazards, work injuries, the presence of a paid absence program, and union/non-union work situation.

Attendance Motivation/Barriers Theory: Nicholson (1977), As (1962), and Knox (1961) contend that absenteeism is determined by an interaction between the internal motivation of an employee to come work and the situational barriers that prevent work attendance. According to Nicholson (1977), an employee's motivation to attend work is determined by the effect and consequences of being absent, the beliefs and values of the employee within the context of his/her social milieu, and the organization's policies and practices of responding to absence behavior. Variables often associated with this theory include: organization commitment, number of dependents, personality traits & work ethic, regular-

ity of personal habits, employment relationship, responsibility for childcare, weather conditions, and the presence of a paid absence program.

Adjustment/Maladjustment Theory: In this theory absenteeism is conceptualized as an outcome of socialization of the employee to job demands (Hill & Trist 1953; 1955). Part of this socialization occurs when the employee learns what is acceptable in terms of absenteeism. Similarly Argyris (1960) views absence as one of several alternative adjustment responses (others being: promotion seeking, psychological adjustment of expectations, and informal sanctioning behavior). An extension of this adjustment theory is that absenteeism might be considered an outcome of socialization processes that occur in the home, school, and early work experiences. The development of the work values at these earlier stages of life will determine how a person views an organization and a job. This predisposition is also associated with the ability to cope with life in general, and it will determine the type of situations which hinder regular attendance. Variables in this theory include: socialization to the organization, expectations about attendance, ability to cope with pressure, and general adjustment to life.

Social Theory: Chadwick-Jones, et al. (1982) proposed that absenteeism is one outcome of a social process between members of a work or occupational group and the employing organization. They contend that absenteeism can be understood in terms of an occupational group or work unit in that a group will develop norms about absenteeism which they will informally enforce. While variables concerning this theory would include expectations about appropriate levels of absenteeism, employee inputs, and organizational rewards, the key research expectation is that absenteeism within cohesive work units groups will vary less than absenteeism between groups.

In summary there are a large number of competing theories to explain absenteeism. Besides the conceptual overlap, there is also overlap of the opera-

tional measures of these constructs. For example, employee expectations about what constitutes an acceptable level of absenteeism could be viewed as (1) a reflection of group norms, (2) a result of socialization, or (3) a part of an internal calculus when deciding the relative costs of an absence incident. Regardless of the overlap in the domain of variables, it is clear that a large number of measures must be considered simultaneously if these theories are to be compared empirically. These theories have not been compared empirically and have largely remained in the domain of the discipline in which they originated.

EMPIRICAL MULTIVARIATE STUDIES

Fitzgibbons & Moch (1980) have operationalized the most comprehensive multivariate study of absenteeism to date. In this study, they selected four major categories of measures. These include: (1) social factors, (2) organizational factors, (3) individual context factors, and (4) intrinsic satisfaction factors. Each of these was operationalized with a number of measures. Social factors were measured with three variables: employee sex, number of dependents, and status as primary wage earner. Organizational factors were measured with employee seniority and shift work. Individual context factors, referring to the problems that employees think they confront, were measured by supervisory support, role overload, and the intent to leave the firm. Finally, intrinsic satisfaction was defined as satisfaction with rewards employees obtain as a direct result of their work. While this study represents an improvement over previous research, there is still an important research issue that was not considered: The psychometric justifications for their scaling were not included in their article.

To attempt to include all or most of these constructs and their corresponding measures derived from the above conceptual and empirical work into a single study of absenteeism poses some major problems. Based on previous research, it is not clear just how many measures would contain unique information and would

therefore be valuable in predicting absenteeism, or how many would be redundant and therefore in need of collapsing and scaling. The present study has been designed to address these technical issues.

METHODS AND MEASURES

Site: Data for this study were collected as part of a larger field experiment which is being conducted to compare the effects of a number of different positive attendance programs on absenteeism. These programs, which include a financial incentive program, a lottery program, a recognition program, and an attendance feedback program as well as two control groups have been established at 6 geographically dispersed sewing plants. The corporation owning these plants specializes in sewing uniforms and women's clothing. It maintains a total employment of approximately 1800. This organization has not suffered the typical ill-effects caused by the recent recession. It experiences a 6.5% absenteeism rate and a 40% turnover rate. The employees are primarily female (about 96%). They earn on average \$4.50 an hour for piece-work, which is slightly higher than average for this industry and for the region. Employees are not paid when they are absent. There is no union.

Prior to the initiation of the treatments, employees completed a questionnaire which assessed their attitudes toward their supervisors, their jobs, and their expectations about appropriate levels of absence, along with the costs of and reasons for absence. Employee questionnaire data was then matched up with absenteeism data from employee records which had been collected for a one-year period prior to the administration of the questionnaire in order to establish a baseline against which the attitudinal variables could be compared.

Protocols: The questionnaire was pre-tested on a sample of 35 blue-collar workers in a hospital setting. A number of items were dropped or reworded based on this experience. In the actual administration of the survey,

all employees at five of the six locations were asked to participate. In each case, the entire plant was shut down for a half hour for this purpose and employees were paid for their time. A team of 12 university staff members distributed the survey and picked it up to insure that confidentiality was maintained. Employees were requested to put their names on the survey so as to match it with organizational records. About 97% of the employees chose to fill out the survey.

Analytic Procedures: Correlations were computed for all items. Factor analysis was used to initially screen items that were thought to form scales. Although the factor rotations are not reported here, the scale correlation matrices are reported along with coefficient alphas.

Criterion Measures: The criterion items used in this study included four types of absenteeism measures: (1) the absence rate for the past 12 months ($x = 4\%$, $s.d.=.05$), (2) the absence rate for the most recent 6 months ($x = 4\%$, $s.d.= .06$), (2) the total number of absence incidents for the past 12 months ($x = 7.07$, $s.d.= 6.30$), and (4) the number of absence incidents for the most recent 12 months ($x = 3.50$, $s.d.= 3.38$). The corporation defined absenteeism to include any occasion a worker did not come to work, regardless of excuse, with the exception of days when there was not enough work or when the plant was closed due to inclement weather.

Predictor Measures: Items for the questionnaire were initially developed/adopted based on a close examination of the constructs underlying the theories listed above. Some constructs were not measured because they were not meaningful for this site. For example, job hazard was not relevant because it would have been invariant; almost all workers were sewing machine operators. There are numerous ways of grouping these measures. For the sake of simplicity, The ordering from Fitzgibbons & Moch (1980) has been adopted.

RESULTS

Internal Reliability

The items from the questionnaire are listed in Table 1 along with their means and standard deviations. Various scales, along with the inter-item correlations, are also presented. Items which are phrased as statements had six response categories, ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Items which are followed by a question mark required a fill-in answer, such as amount of average wages. They are grouped according to the Fitzgibbons & Moch (1980) ordering with the exception of a separate "economics" category.

Insert Table 1 about here

I. Social Factors:

A. Family Pressure was measured with four items, including the number of dependents supported by the employee. The internal reliability estimate of .40 indicates that there is some intercorrelation among the items, but not enough to justify considering this a "finished" scale. All of the items except for the number of dependents were correlated with the total absence rate, as shown in the last column of the table. Thus, there is some predictive validity for these items.

B. Group Pressure was measured with a single item which did not correlate with the total absence rate. However, for the theories of absenteeism which hypothesize group or unit effects, the simple raw correlation might not be the most important statistic. Rather, an F test comparing between-unit and within-unit variation might be more important.

II. Labor Leisure/Economics:

C. Economic Level was measured with two attitudinal measures (Items

17 & 18) along with self-reports of average wages for the past month and preference for number of hours worked. Items 17 & 18 seem to significantly correlate: the rest of the matrix is marginal. However, the last two items, average wages and preference for work, correlate with the total absence measure. Thus, these items should not be scaled, but they should be retained as single items in a future analysis.

D. Wage Dependence was measured with a single item asking if the respondent was the primary source of support in the household. This item did not correlate with the total absence rate.

III. Organizational Factors:

E. Seniority was a single item measure taken from the organizational records. The average tenure with the company was 6.4 years. This item predicted absenteeism as hypothesized by a number of theories.

F. Organization Sanctions was a new set of items that tried to identify the ways in which the organization might discipline or punish poor performers. Even though all of the items had significant intercorrelations and a coefficient alpha of .53, none of the items predicted absenteeism.

G. Organizational Control was measured with three new items that had an acceptable level of internal reliability, .72, but did not predict absenteeism.

III. Individual Context:

H. Attendance Expectations, mentioned in a number of theories, but never operationalized, was measured with four new items that captured employee perceptions about management's expectations for attendance. This scale had only moderate internal consistency (.37), but all of the individual items predicted absenteeism.

I. Supervisory Support was measured with three items (the first two from the LBDQ XII). Of all the scales, this had the highest alpha (.82), but it

did not correlate significantly with absenteeism.

J. Supervisory Control was measured with items that asked about the behavior of the supervisor in checking up on absence incidences. It had low internal reliability (.20). Only the last item was correlated with the criterion variable.

K. Personnel Control was analogous to the above scale except that it referred to the role of the personnel department in controlling absenteeism. It was neither internally reliable nor predictive.

L. Transportation was measured with a single item referring to car trouble. It was significantly correlated with absenteeism.

M. Health was measured with a single item that was also significantly correlated with absenteeism ($r=.20^{***}$).

N. Age was the last single item measure. It was taken from the questionnaire, and it was also significantly correlated with absenteeism.

E. Satisfactions:

O. Job satisfaction was measured with items taken from the Minnesota Satisfaction Questionnaire (MSQ). This scale had the second highest internal reliability (.77), and three of the four items were significantly correlated with the criterion variable.

P. Life Adjustment was measured with two new items. Their intercorrelation was significant, but the internal reliability was low (.24). However, they were both correlated with absenteeism.

Q. Job Pressure was measured with two items from Kahn's Job Stress Index. The alpha was acceptable (.65) and both items correlated with absenteeism.

R. Rationalization was measured with three new items. This construct has not been previously operationalized. The internal reliability was barely mod-

erate (.45), and only one of the items correlated with absenteeism.

Discriminant Validity

Another way of looking at the conceptual clarity of the above listed measures and scales is by examining the correlations between the scales. Ideally, scales and measures should have lower between-scale correlations than within-scale correlations.

Insert Table 2 about here

Table 2 shows the between-measure correlations. While family pressure and peer pressure are significantly correlated, the correlation is lower than the within-scale alpha for family pressure. For the organizational context variables, the correlations between scales are lower than within-scale reliabilities. For the variables within the individual context category, a problem exists in that the supervisor control scale and the personnel control scale are significantly correlated ($r=.44^{**}$) at a higher level than within either scale. For the general satisfaction construct, no between-scale correlation is higher than the corresponding alphas.

Predictive Validity

All of the measures from Table 2 are repeated in Table 3, which shows the correlations of these measures with four forms of absenteeism: (1) the total absence rate for the past 12 months, (2) the absence rate for the last 6 months, (3) the number of absence incidents for the last 12 months, and (4) the number of absence incidents for the last 6 months.

Insert Table 3 about here

In the social category, it can be seen that there exists a significant positive relationship between family pressure and all four absenteeism measures, while group pressures appear to have no effect. The economics scale is significantly correlated with all four absence measures such that higher paid, more industrious workers have lower absence rates and incidents; yet it appears not to matter whether the employee is the primary wage earner appears.

In considering organizational factors, it was found that workers with the least seniority have significantly higher absence rates; however, neither the organizational sanctions scale nor the organizational control scale correlated significantly with absenteeism. Within the individual context grouping, the attendance expectations scale has the highest correlations with all criterion measures. Supervisor control is correlated with the most recent six months's rate and frequency. The three single item measures, transportation, health, and age are also significantly correlated with absenteeism. Finally, in the satisfactions category, all four scales are significantly correlated with all four absenteeism measures.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study are both frustrating and encouraging. On one hand, the psychometric characteristics of the scales in this study are not as positive as in other fields of study. This, in turn, suggests that one alternative explanation for the low amount of variance explained in many absenteeism studies could stem from measurement problems. On the other hand, there were a number of items and scales from each category of absenteeism measures which did predict absenteeism. This suggests that there is some merit in each of various theories of absenteeism, and that there is justification for looking at these theories simultaneously in one study.

New scales which have moderate internal reliability and predictive validity include: family pressure, attendance expectations, job pressure, and

rationalization. New scales which have predictive items but no internal consistency include: life adjustment and economics. Scales which had high reliability but no predictive validity include: organizational sanctions, organizational control, and supervisory support. Single items which should be included in future studies on the basis of their predictive validity include: age, seniority, wage rate, transportation, health, and sex.

There are a number of possible explanations for the lack of adequate performance of the some of the items and scales that absenteeism theories posit. For example, it may be that there are pre-existing differences between the plants used in this study such that there would be too much heterogeneity with respect to the organizational sanction and control measures to allow for a significant relationship. Alternatively, there may be major differences between supervisory groups which might be affecting the results as suggested by Chadwick-Jones, et al. (1982). It is also possible that test-retest information will be crucial to assessing the strength of these scales, and should be collected. Finally, the conceptualizations of absenteeism might need to be refined so as to clarify them, to allow for more refined operationalizations, and to eliminate some of the overlap between them.

This research has reported basic psychometric information on absenteeism attitudes measures, which has not been done before. This is a necessary first step in conducting empirical research which pits each theory against each other for comparison purposes in hopes of better understanding the complex phenomenon of absenteeism.

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TABLE 1

ITEM DESCRIPTION: MEANS, STANDARD DEVIATIONS
CORRELATIONS, AND COEFFICIENT ALPHAS

ITEM DESCRIPTION	x	s.d.	Items						Total Absence Rate
			(4)	(14)	(16)	(10a)	(10a)	r=	
I. SOCIAL FACTORS									
A. Family Pressure:									
4. How many children and other adults to you support?	9.64	3.11	X					.21**	
14. My spouse or family asks me to take a day off work once in a while.	1.36	1.36 (4)	X				.40	.06	
16. Sometimes family problems make it impossible to get to work.	2.41	1.41 (14)	.02	X				.09*	
10a. A feeling that your job tends to interfere with your family.	4.15	1.52 (16)	.19**	.20**	X			.20**	
B. Group Pressure:	1.71	.36 (10a)	.13**	.13**	.19**	X		.17**	
34. Other employees put pressure on me to show up for work.	2.39	1.28						-.01	
II. LABOR LEISURE FACTORS									
C. Economics									
17. It would be difficult for me to find another job as good as this one.	49.73	7.26	(17) X	(18)	(7)	(6)		-.11**	
18. I am satisfied with the wages I am paid for the work I do.	3.28	1.55 (17)	X				.33	-.03	
7. For the past month, what was your average pay?	2.99	1.60 (18)	.43**	X				-.02	
6. At your current pay rate, how many hours would you like to work a week if you could decide?	4.18	.84 (7)	.05	.08**	X			-.12**	
D. Primary Wage Earner?	39.28	6.56 (6)	.05	.03	.00	X		-.10	
III. ORGANIZATION FACTORS									
E. Seniority									
F. Organization Sanctions									
1. Employees with good attendance get better work than those with poor attendance.	6.4	5.9	(1) X	(19)	(20)			-.14**	
19. A poor attendance record increases the chance that I will be clocked out.	11.64	3.20					.53	.02	
20. Employees with poor attendance records are likely to lose their jobs.	3.43	1.62 (1)	X					.07	
G. Organizational Control	3.61	1.56 (19)	.33**	X				-.04	
4. My supervisor encourages good attendance.	4.60	1.26 (20)	.18**	.31**	X			-.02	
5. The personnel assistant encourages good attendance.	15.07	2.48	(4) X	(5)	(6)			.03	
6. The plant manager encourages good attendance.	4.85	1.18 (4)	X				.72	.04	
	4.99	1.03 (5)	.51**	X				.04	
	5.23	.88 (6)	.36**	.52**	X			-.00	

*P <.05

**P <.01

TABLE 1

(Continued)

	\bar{x}	s.d.	Items						Total Absence Rate r=
IV. INDIVIDUAL CONTEXT FACTORS									
H. Attendance Expectations	18.43	9.57	(3)	(9)	(5)	(6)		.21**	
3. Management's standards for attendance are too high.	2.87	1.40	X					.12**	
9. Perfect attendance for a whole year is really not possible.	3.50	1.54	.16**	X	α	=	.37	.13**	
5. In your view, what is an acceptable level of absenteeism here?	9.89	8.58	.11**	.14**	X			.17**	
6. What do you think management's goal for absenteeism is for you?	2.16	1.29	.05	.13**	.18**	X		.11**	
I. Supervisory Support	10.22	3.21	(8)	(9)	(28)			.03	
8. How much personal consideration and help do you get from your supervisor?	2.82	1.08	X		α	=	.82	.05	
9. How much does your supervisor help you solve job-related problems?	3.02	1.24	.73**	X				.04	
28. My supervisor is an excellent person to work for.	4.38	1.44	.53**	.54**	X			-.00	
J. Supervisor Control	6.24	1.31	(4)	(4a)	(5b)			.06	
4. My supervisor encourages good attendance	4.85	1.81	X		α	=	.20	.04	
4a. When you were last absent, did your supervisor talk about it?	1.36	.40	.09**	X				.03	
5b. Does your supervisor keep track of your absences?	.04	.19	.05	.09**	X			.13**	
K. Personnel Control	6.31	1.13	(5)	(4c)	(5c)			.07	
5. The personnel assistant encourages good attendance	4.99	1.03	X		α	=	.18	.04	
4c. When you were last absent, did the personnel assistant talk about it?	1.26	.35	-.02	X				.07	
5c. Does the personnel assistant keep track of your absences?	.07	.25	.05	.18**	X			.07	
L. Ability to Attend									
3l. I am absent sometimes because of car trouble or my ride doesn't come.	3.11	1.53						.10**	
M. Health									
1l. I would describe my health as: (excellent to poor) (4 categories).	2.06	.76						-.23**	
N. Age	36.4	11.64						-.18**	
V. SATISFACTION									
O. Job Satisfaction	15.84	4.04	(25)	(27)	(30)	(33)		-.12**	
25. I find real enjoyment in my work.	3.78	1.37	X					-.13**	
27. I am sorry that I ever took this job.	4.72	1.19	.44**	X	α	=	.77	-.06	
30. I am satisfied with my job.	4.25	1.23	.64**	.51**	X			-.10**	
33. I would change jobs if I were offered a little extra money.	3.09	1.47	.37**	.35**	.41**	X		-.09**	

TABLE 1

(CONTINUED)

	\bar{x}	s.d.	Items	$r=$
P. Life Adjustment	8.52	1.98	(22) (32)	-.18**
22. I lead a well-ordered life.	4.41	1.16 (22)	X	.24
32. It is easy for me to wake up in the morning.	4.11	1.45 (32)	.14** X	-.19**
Q. Job Pressure	4.49	1.85	(10c) (10d)	-.09**
10c. A feeling that job pressures are too much for anyone.	2.32	1.10 (10c)	X	.14**
10d. A feeling that the job makes you very nervous.	2.17	1.05 (10d)	.48** X	.10**
R. Rationalization	7.17	2.82	(2) (10) (12)	.14**
2. It doesn't bother me to be absent because when I don't work, I don't get paid.	2.30	1.47 (2)	X	.10**
10. Sometimes I need to be absent to get some rest.	2.70	1.41 (10)	.15** X	.16**
12. Being absent occasionally is one of the benefits of this job.	2.18	1.22 (12)	.22** .26** X	.04
			$\alpha =$.45

TABLE 2
SCALE AND MEASURE CORRELATIONS
(N = 960)

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	
I. SOCIAL.																			
A. Family Pressure	X																		
B. Group Pressure	.10**	X																	
II. ECONOMIC																			
C. Economics	-.02	.01	X																
D. Primary Wage Earner	.01	.06	.08**	X															
III. ORGANIZATION CONTEXT																			
E. Seniority	-.16**	.00	.03	.03	X														
F. Sanctions	.05	.06	.13	-.02	-.15**	X													
G. Control	-.02	-.01	-.11**	-.04	-.01**	+.12**	X												
IV. INDIVIDUAL CONTEXT																			
H. Attendance Expectations	.20**	.01	-.13**	-.04	-.12**	-.01	-.09**	X											
I. Supervision Support	-.12**	-.04	.18**	.02	-.05	.16**	.31**	-.14	X										
J. Supervisor Control	.01	.01	.14**	-.02	-.04	.10**	.76**	-.10**	.38**	X									
K. Personnel Control	.02	-.01	.11**	-.01	-.00	.12**	.76**	-.04	.20**	.44**	X								
L. Transportation	.23**	.18**	-.04	.11**	-.06*	.07*	-.03	.12**	-.06*	.01	-.00	X							
M. Health	-.13**	-.02	.06	-.08**	.02	.00	-.01	-.17**	.06*	-.03	.01	-.10**	X						
N. Age	-.19**	-.04	.07*	.10**	.48**	-.03	.06	-.20**	.02	.05	.02	-.07*	-.14**	X					
V. SATISFACTION																			
O. Job Satisfaction	-.25**	-.04	.31**	.01	.15**	.10**	.23**	-.25**	.34**	.20**	.17**	-.13**	.05	.26**	X				
P. Life Adjustments	-.18**	.04	.07*	-.00	.13**	.06*	.01	-.14**	.05	.03	.01	-.05	.02**	.26**	.24**	X			
Q. Job Pressure	.20**	.07*	-.21**	-.01	-.04	-.10**	-.12**	.20**	-.27**	-.10**	-.09**	.10**	-.14**	-.13**	-.50**	-.16**	X		
R. Rationalization	.25**	.21**	-.17**	-.02	.00	.03	-.09**	.18**	-.10**	-.05	-.J5	.23**	-.08**	-.06*	-.26**	.01	.18**	X	

*p < .05

**p < .01