

Self efficacy, perceptions of social context, job satisfaction and their relationship with absence from work. An integrated model founded on social cognitive theory

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KEY WORDS

Absenteeism; self-efficacy; job satisfaction

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Assenteismo; efficacia personale; soddisfazione lavorativa

SUMMARY

Background: *Absenteeism is a major concern for organizations and companies since it has negative repercussions on productivity and represents a huge cost due to sick pay and expensive temporary replacement of employees who are obliged to take long-term absences.* **Objectives:** *The current study aimed at focussing on absenteeism and its causes through the investigation of a conceptual model founded on social cognitive theory where self-efficacy and Perceptions of Social Context (PoSC, i.e., perceptions of immediate supervisor, colleagues and top management) concur to predict absence from work through the mediating role of job satisfaction.* **Methods:** *A group of 361 sales assistants and administrative staff employed by the Italian branch of a retail clothing multinational were administered a self-report questionnaire for measuring self-efficacy, PoSC and job satisfaction. We then matched the self-report answers with objective absence measures.* **Results:** *Structural equation modelling lent support to the presumed relationships between variables. We found that: 1) self-efficacy was positively related to the three PoSC; 2) PoSC had a positive relationship with job satisfaction; 3) job satisfaction was negatively related to absence from work; 4) job satisfaction mediated the relationship between PoSC and absence from work.* **Conclusions:** *Overall, our contribution offers a theoretical basis for further investigations on the role of individual characteristics and perceptions of social context in absenteeism studies via both observational and intervention studies and cost-effectiveness analysis.*

RIASSUNTO

«**Efficacia personale, percezioni di contesto sociale, soddisfazione lavorativa e loro relazione con le assenze dal lavoro. Un modello integrato sviluppato nell'ambito della teoria social cognitiva**». **Introduzione:** *L'assenteismo è una problematica rilevante per le aziende che ha evidenti ricadute sulla loro produttività, dal momento che rappresenta un costo enorme a causa dei giorni di malattia stipendiati e delle onerose azioni da mettere in atto per la sostituzione temporanea di coloro che sono assenti per lungo tempo.* **Obiettivi:** *Il presente studio mira ad approfondire lo studio sull'assenteismo e le sue determinanti, utilizzando la teoria social cognitiva quale quadro di riferimento teorico; secondo cui l'efficacia personale e le Percezioni di Contesto Sociale (PdCS; ovvero le percezioni di ca-*

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po diretto, colleghi e direzione) concorrono nel predire le assenze dal lavoro attraverso il ruolo di mediazione della soddisfazione lavorativa. **Metodi:** È stato somministrato a 361 commessi e dipendenti della sede italiana di una multinazionale nel settore dell'abbigliamento un questionario auto-compilativo per la misura di: efficacia personale, PdCS e soddisfazione lavorativa. In seguito, le risposte riportate sul questionario sono state incrociate con dati oggettivi sulle assenze. **Risultati:** I modelli di equazioni strutturali hanno dato conferma delle relazioni ipotizzate tra le variabili. È emerso che: 1) l'efficacia personale ha una relazione positiva con le tre PdCS; 2) Le PdCS hanno una relazione positiva con la soddisfazione lavorativa; 3) La soddisfazione lavorativa ha una relazione negativa con le assenze dal lavoro; 4) La soddisfazione lavorativa ha un effetto di mediazione tra le PdCS e le assenze dal lavoro. **Conclusioni:** In conclusione, il presente lavoro offre una base teorica per studi futuri sul fenomeno dell'assenteismo che tengano conto del ruolo delle caratteristiche individuali e delle percezioni di contesto sociale attraverso metodi osservativi, interventi studio e analisi dei costi.

INTRODUCTION

Absenteeism is currently a major concern for organizations and their employees. Preliminary results of the Fifth European Working Conditions Survey (20) revealed that in Europe the number of hours worked per week continues to decline due to absenteeism. This represents a huge cost for organizations, since absence from work involves sick pay and expensive temporary replacement of employees who are absent for long periods, and are strictly interrelated with a decrease in individual performance and overall productivity of the company (16).

Considering its widespread occurrence, a substantial body of research has been devoted to absenteeism by a wide range of disciplines such as sociology, psychology, management, and occupational health (36) to investigate which kind of factors have an impact on absenteeism, in order to provide organizations with practical suggestions for setting up interventions to reduce or prevent it.

Several studies theorized that absenteeism (but also withdrawal behaviour, such as turnover, lateness, etc.) is mainly related to the employees' attitudes towards their jobs or their organization, such as high dissatisfaction, low organizational commitment, low work involvement and intention to quit the organization (25, 36, 62). In particular, job satisfaction has been widely investigated, since the main reason inducing people to stay away from work is dissatisfaction with their job (36). Indeed, absenteeism could be considered the easiest way of escaping from a dissatisfying work situation (41).

Absenteeism has also been broadly linked to several contextual aspects, such as climate, social context, task characteristics, and physical features (36, 46). Several reasons led researchers to include contextual factors in the study of absenteeism's causes. First of all, the need for including context in Industrial/Organizational studies was recently stressed in order to provide better predictions of individual and organizational behaviour (33, 35, 61), since context may affect the occurrence and meaning of behaviour (14, 26, 31). Secondly, although there is evidence for several links between absence from work and contextual aspects, such as management style, leadership, task characteristics and interactions with colleagues (17, 43, 69), this relationship is still under-explored by empirical studies (56). Thirdly, processes through which the context may impact on absence behaviour are still unclear. There is evidence that context affects a variety of organizational behaviour, such as withdrawal behaviour (36, 62). Nevertheless, context may have a proximal or even a distal influence on organizational behaviour (35), such as absenteeism. Distal influence means that it impacts behaviour through different variables or time, including job satisfaction (25, 67). A substantial body of research indicates that employees' perceptions of environmental features have an impact on their job attitudes (i.e., job satisfaction, job involvement, organizational commitment) and, through them, on organizational behaviour (e.g., withdrawal behaviour and counterproductive behaviour; 12, 35, 54).

Lastly, individual characteristics were also frequently considered to predict worker absenteeism. Among the demographic variables, gender, age and tenure were the most common characteristics reported in the literature that have a direct association with absenteeism (35, 41). However, the role of psychological variables such as personality traits and individual characteristics has rarely been observed as directly determining absenteeism (46), but only via interaction or via the mediating role of other variables. In particular, although self-efficacy is a variable closely connected with individual wellbeing and it may be an important predictor of absenteeism as well as of other forms of organizational behaviour (75), few studies investigated its relationship with absence from work (2, 59). From a social cognitive perspective (3), self-efficacy may have a direct or an indirect influence on behaviour, particularly through affective disposition and perception of obstacles and opportunities inherent in the context (4).

On the basis of these findings, the present study aimed at investigating the determinants of absenteeism, through a conceptual model founded on social cognitive theory (3, 76), where individual and contextual variables concur to predict absence from work through the mediating role of job satisfaction. Particularly, we hypothesized a model in

which self-efficacy (4) plays a key role in shaping the Perceptions of Social Context (PoSC; 9, 12), namely perceptions of the immediate supervisor, perceptions of colleagues and perceptions of top management. That is because self-efficacious people approach their social environment in a more positive frame of mind which helps them to develop better relationships in their context and form more positive impressions of the social constituents (12). Moreover, we posit that perceptions of social context may have an impact on absence behaviour through the mediating role of job satisfaction. Although there is evidence of the relationship between self-efficacy and PoSC in previous studies (12, 11), further investigations on the process through which individual and context influence absence behaviour are needed.

In the light of these arguments, the main goals of the study were: (a) to corroborate the positive relationship between self-efficacy and the three Perceptions of Social Context; (b) to verify the positive relationship between PoSC and job satisfaction; (c) to confirm the negative relationship between job satisfaction and absence from work; (d) to explore the indirect relationship between PoSC and absence from work through job satisfaction (figure 1).

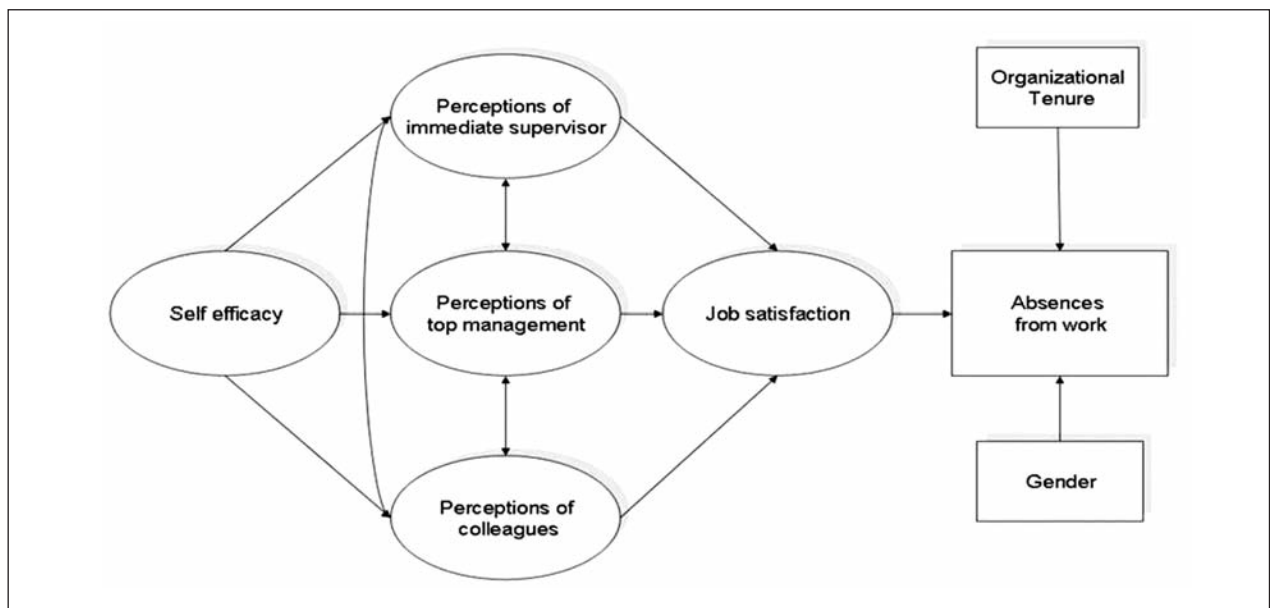


Figure 1 - The posited structural model

Furthermore, in accordance with the literature (25, 6), we controlled absenteeism for two socio-demographic characteristics, namely gender and organizational tenure, to investigate the impact of individual differences in absenteeism behaviour.

Two novel elements are proposed: The first is that we offer a model grounded in the theoretical framework of social cognitive theory to investigate absenteeism determinants, in which the role of both individual and contextual factors are included. The second is that the study was based upon objective measures of absence from work, data which are generally difficult to obtain from employers. As Johns (37) suggested, absenteeism measures are typically collected as self-reported data and they tend to be less accurate than data provided by organizations, since they are related particularly to respondents' subjectivity and the tendency to under-report the number of lost working days (58). Accordingly, our study reports attitudes, perceptions and evaluations provided by respondents with an objective measure of absence from work.

The role of self-efficacy in shaping perceptions of social context

As mentioned above, we proposed to study context and its relationship with organizational behaviour in the reference framework of social cognitive theory (3, 76). According to Bandura (5), individuals are active agents in their context and are able to interact with it. Particularly, with reciprocal triadic determinism (3), Bandura progressed to the interactionism perspective (45, 64) to consider the individual, the environment and behaviour as implicated in a dynamic exchange in which each element has a bidirectional relationship with the others. In this exchange, individuals are both producers and products of their environment. At the same time, their role in shaping their context (26) is crucial, since they assign a "personal" meaning to the context by means of their human cognitions. Finally, a person can have a transformative effect on his or her context both symbolically, by forming a better impression of it, and physically, through his/her behaviour. As Bandura asserted (4), the main self-regulatory process responsible for this dynamic

transaction between individual, environment and behaviour is self-efficacy. It is defined as "people's beliefs in their capabilities to mobilize the motivation, cognitive resources, and courses of action needed to exercise control over their lives" (76, p. 364). It has been widely demonstrated that self-efficacious people are more confident about control of circumstances than inefficacious individuals. Thus, they are able to exploit the opportunities inherent in their context and see obstacles as avoidable, and are thus more confident in their ability to produce the desired results and perform well. Our rationale is that high self-efficacy allows people to form more positive impressions of their social context, as they approach their environment in a different frame of mind that helps to develop positive relationships with the main organizational social constituents. This is supported by previous studies (3, 13) in which self-efficacy beliefs were positively related to the perceptions of the immediate supervisor, colleagues and top management in several types of organizations and professional roles (e.g., school, armed forces, white collar workers in the service sector).

Hence, we tested the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: Self-efficacy will be positively related to the perceptions of the immediate supervisor, colleagues, and top management.

From context to behaviour: the indirect effect of Perceptions of Social Context on absence from work through job satisfaction

Perceptions of social context → Job satisfaction

There is a variety of evidence that an individual's perception of contextual features influences human responses, particularly job satisfaction (54, 15). Indeed, job satisfaction is an individual's evaluation of his/her job, but is also a response to a more general job situation, such as the work environment and its features (42, 53).

Recent research (3, 13) investigated the role of Perceptions of Social Context (PoSC; 9) in job attitudes (such as job satisfaction and organizational commitment). They have been defined as the per-

ceptions of the major social constituents within the organization (namely immediate supervisor, colleagues, top management), as well as of the prototypical behaviour and the social roles that these constituents foster within organizations, and their reciprocal interaction at work (3).

Findings suggested that the three Perceptions of Social Context, namely perceptions of the immediate supervisor, perceptions of colleagues, and perceptions of top management, are positively related to job satisfaction (3).

According to these findings and in agreement with traditional leadership and group literature (3, 71), we argue that a positive perception of the immediate supervisor leads people to be more satisfied in their work, because the supervisor provides support to employees, takes care of their professional growth, communicates aims and standards, and encourages employees' participation in the organizational objectives. Moreover, cooperation with colleagues provides support and cohesiveness and contributes to the creation of a positive and supportive climate in the organization (68). Finally, top management plays a key role in enhancing employees' satisfaction, by clearly communicating organizational vision and mission, highlighting strategies, policies and routines, and efficiently conveying information among groups and individuals.

From this standpoint, we believe that positive perceptions of social context are connected to a positive evaluation of the job itself and the overall context, since positive perceptions of social context give people the opportunity to satisfy personal needs (65). Thus, we believe that the more positive the perceptions of the three PoSC, the more satisfied employees will be with their jobs.

Hence, the following hypothesis was tested:

Hypothesis 2: Perceptions of the immediate supervisor, perceptions of colleagues and perceptions of top management will be positively related to job satisfaction.

Job satisfaction → Absence from work

Absenteeism is a major concern for organizations in relation to the number or frequency of ab-

sences from work and calls for in-depth investigations on the determinants in order to identify interventions to reduce or prevent absenteeism. (46). Several variables were studied in relation to absenteeism in past and recent literature, such as demographic characteristics of individuals, job attitudes and motivation for absence (30, 32). Among job attitudes, there is agreement in considering job satisfaction as the variable most often associated with absenteeism (18, 33, 37). Job satisfaction was defined as an individual's cognitive and affective evaluation of his/her job and the overall work context with its multiple features (39).

Among the first authors who included job satisfaction in the study of absence from work, Steers and Rhodes (69) suggested a model in which job attendance was primarily determined by motivation to attend, which is in turn related to the individual's job satisfaction. Therefore, they posited a distal relationship between job satisfaction and absenteeism. However, in a subsequent meta-analysis of studies on absence from work, Hackett (28) revealed a direct negative relationship between overall job satisfaction and absenteeism (29). Subsequent studies corroborated the existence of a direct relationship (37, 18), since dissatisfied employees have negative evaluations of their jobs that lead them to be more inclined to enact withdrawal behaviour, such as absence from work (34).

From this standpoint, we argue that the more satisfied individuals are the less they are absent from work.

Hence, we investigated the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3: Job satisfaction will be negatively related to absence from work.

Perceptions of social context → Job satisfaction → Absenteeism

As mentioned above, a wide range of contextual aspects, including several relative to social context, have been associated with absenteeism (17, 46). In particular, social context showed a strong relationship with absence from work due to the social nature of work attendance dynamics that is strongly connected to social control (36). Accordingly, sev-

eral aspects relative to social context, such as social support (51, 54), cohesiveness, conflicts and integration in groups (77), and direct supervisor's behaviour (i.e., communication, leader member exchange behaviour and conflict management (73)) were analyzed in relationship with absenteeism. There is evidence that absenteeism is more frequent when groups and organizations are felt to be less supportive and cohesive, when social integration is lacking (77), and employees' perceptions of managers' capability to lead (i.e., support, feedback, information, clarity) are negative (43).

Moreover, a substantial body of literature provided evidence of the connection between employees' perceptions of their work context and satisfaction with their work (12, 15). Given the strong link with both variables that was observed in past and recent literature, we believe that job satisfaction can exert a mediating role in the relationship between PoSC and absence from work. There is evidence from climate literature (40) that the impact of climate perceptions on several types of individual and organizational behaviour (e.g., withdrawal behaviour, performance) might be mediated by cognitive and affective evaluation and states, such as job satisfaction, job involvement, and organizational commitment. Moreover, previous studies showed that PoSC have an indirect relationship with significant types of behaviour, such as job performance (12), through the mediating role of job satisfaction.

From this standpoint, we believe that PoSC have a distal effect on absence behaviour through the mediating role of job satisfaction. We argue that people with positive perceptions of the three social constituents experience more positive emotions in their job and in the work context itself that will lead them to make a more positive evaluation of their job and be more satisfied with their work. Consequently, they will be less likely to be absent from work.

Hence, we hypothesized the following:

Hypothesis 4: Perceptions of immediate supervisors, perceptions of colleagues and perceptions of the top management will be indirectly and negatively related to absence from work through the mediating role of job satisfaction.

METHOD

Participants and Procedures

We collected data from a multinational retail organization operating since 1947 in 41 countries and employing around 87,000 people worldwide. The Italian branch, which was the focus of our study, was established in 2003, opened its first store in Milan and currently has over 77 stores and employs 1,575 workers including sales assistants and administrative staff. All employees were invited to participate in the research by means of a letter they received with their pay check asking them to complete an on-line self-report questionnaire. The project aimed at investigating the quality of working life and personal wellbeing. Participation was voluntary and the questionnaire guaranteed privacy of personal details. Employees needed a personal code assigned by the Human Resources department to complete the on-line questionnaire. Through the encrypted code each questionnaire was matched with the respondent's absenteeism and socio-demographic data, provided by the Human Resources department in conformity with the privacy law. We collected data from 361 employees (a 23% response rate). Of these, 71.3% were females. The mean age of the respondents was 30.5 years ($SD=5.72$); 22% of the respondents were aged between 18 and 25 years, 57% between 26 and 35 years, 20% between 36 and 45 years and 1% were aged over 46 years.

Mean organizational tenure was 2 years ($SD=1.571$). In particular, 51% of the respondents had worked in the organization for less than one year; 29% from 2 to 3 years; 19% from 4 to 5 years, and the remaining 1% longer than 6 years. Although the sample size was rather limited in comparison to the company's overall staff, it was likely to be representative of the company as regards its characteristics (i.e., gender, age, organizational tenure).

Measures

Self-reported measures

The self-reported questionnaire consisted of 26 items to investigate (1) self-efficacy, (2) the three

Table 1 - Sample and entire company staff characteristics

	Company (Italian branch)	Sample
Total N	1,575	361
Gender		
Female	71%	71.3%
Male	29%	28.7%
Age (years)		
18-25	28%	22%
26-35	57%	57%
35-45	13%	20%
over 45	2%	1%
Organizational tenure		
0-1 y	57%	51%
2-3 y	25%	29%
4-5 y	17%	19%
Over 6 y	1%	1%

PoSC dimensions, namely perceptions of the immediate supervisor, perceptions of colleagues and perceptions of top management, and (3) job satisfaction. All statements were measured on a 7-point Likert type scale (from 1=*Never* to 7=*Always*). Items were randomized to minimize the occurrence of response set phenomena.

Self Efficacy. Six items were adapted for the present study from a pool of items validated in previous research (12, 19) by changing the wording of some statements in order to maximize the contextualization of the content to the specific work sector. Sample items were “In my work, I am confident I can successfully solve any kind of problem”; or, “In my work, I am confident I can minimize all conflicts with colleagues, even the most heated”.

Perceptions of Social Context. Participants’ perceptions of three organizational social constituents (namely immediate superior, colleagues, and top management) were assessed. Two focus groups were, i.e. two independent groups consisting of 10 representatives of the organization (including managers, administrative staff and sales assistants) by adopting the critical incident technique (23). The

participants were asked several questions about certain events considered to be critical in their work. Specific situations were analyzed to identify people’s prototypical behaviour, but also particularly to identify contextual features characterizing their organization and the most typical behaviour adopted by others. (e.g., “My immediate supervisor encourages ideas and proposals from co-workers”; “In my team, people trust each other”; and, “Top management conveys information in a clear way”).

Job satisfaction. We assessed employee job satisfaction by means of the six-item scale by Judge, Locke, Durham and Kluger (39). The total scale comprised 5 items, of which two are reported here: “*I feel fairly well satisfied with my present job*”; “*Most days I am enthusiastic about my work*”.

Objective data

Absenteeism. In accordance with traditional studies on absenteeism (47), we decided to consider the total number of absences from work, which included scheduled days of absence (e.g., sickness, family obligations, vacations, and other justified reasons). Data on absence from work were provided by the company, which recorded all missed days over a period of 6 months during the same year of the survey. These data were not normally distributed and they showed a very high level of skewness and kurtosis (skewness=4.95, SE=0.128; kurtosis=29.81, SE=0.256). According to Muthen and Kaplan (49; but also 22), we decided to transform the continuous variable into a three-category ordinal variable by calculating the percentiles. Thus we had three equal groups, (corresponding to the 33th, 66th and 99th percentile), which were respectively labelled as 1=“low absenteeism”, 2=“medium absenteeism” and 3=“high absenteeism”. The number of workers who took no days off accounted for 44.3 % of the sample.

Control variables. According to previous studies, we decided to control absence behaviour for gender and organizational tenure. Both characteristics were shown to be related with absence behaviour (36, 74). The organization provided us with both gender and organizational tenure of the respondents as continuous variables.

Statistical Analyses

All analyses were run by means of the Mplus Version 5.1. statistical programme (50), which allowed us to perform structural equation modelling on both continuous and categorical data, using the Maximum Likelihood with Robust standard errors estimator (MLR).

To evaluate the goodness of fit of each model, we used multiple indexes. In particular, the following indexes were considered: the significance of chi-square, in view of the large sample size. This means that the larger the sample the lower the probability that the chi-square will be significant (8, 48); the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA; 70); the Tucker-Lewis index (TLI; 72); the Comparative Fit Index (CFI; 7) and the standardized root mean square residual (SRMR; 38). Lastly, we considered the Weighted Root Mean Square Residual (WRMR; 79), which is recommended to assess the fit of models with observed categorical variables.

A two-step approach was followed (1): 1) we tested a measurement model in which all items were loaded on the posited latent variable. In this model the objective data, namely absence measures, were excluded and all latent variables were allowed to correlate with each other. The fit of the posited model was compared with a one-factor alternative model; 2) we then tested a structural model in which the posited relationships between all the variables were examined, by adding structural paths

to the measurement model and including absenteeism. In this model, gender and organizational tenure were included as co-variates. The final model was compared with an alternative model with a reverse relationship between self-efficacy and Perceptions of Social Context to further corroborate the posited relationship between variables.

Results

Descriptive statistics, correlations, and reliabilities of all scales are reported in table 2. The zero-order correlations revealed strong associations, particularly between job satisfaction and Perceptions of Social Context. Absence from work was significantly correlated with perceptions of the immediate supervisor, perceptions of colleagues and particularly with job satisfaction. No significant correlations were found between absence from work and self-efficacy, or perceptions of top management.

Cronbach's alpha coefficients of all the scales exceeded the cut-off value for sufficient reliability (70), ranging between 0.903 and 0.756. This revealed an acceptable level of internal consistency for all factors.

Measurement model

The measurement model fitted the data well and confirmed the appropriateness of each item related to the hypothesized latent factor and to the

Table 2 - Means, standard deviations, correlations between variables, and Cronbach's alphas

	Means	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Self Efficacy	5.14	0.77	(0.756)							
2. Perceptions of immediate supervisor	4.92	1.55	0.248**	(0.903)						
3. Perceptions of colleagues	4.94	1.21	0.384**	0.575**	(0.877)					
4. Perceptions of top management	4.93	1.24	0.251**	0.313**	0.356**	(0.884)				
5. Job satisfaction	4.95	1.07	0.430**	0.490**	0.508*	0.508*	(0.839)			
6. Absence from work	-	-	-0.075	-0.164**	-0.134**	0.006	-0.245**	-		
7. Gender	-	-	0.016	0.044	-0.096	0.126	-0.074	0.103*	-	
8. Organizational Tenure	2	1.57	-0.021	0.003	-0.117**	0.085	-0.127**	-0.140**	0.978**	-

Note. **Correlations are significant at $p < 0.01$. Values on the diagonal show scale reliability. Mean and standard deviation are reported for all variables with the exception of category (absenteeism and gender).

content validity of the scales: $\chi^2 (69)=92.09$; $p<0.00$; CFI=0.957; TLI=0.955; RMSEA=0.044; SRMR=0.059; WRMR=0.966. The only exception was the significance of chi-square, probably due to the large sample size. The factor loadings were all significantly different from zero and greater than 0.30 in all scales, ranging from 0.345 to 0.931.

A one-factor alternative model was tested to explore the reasonable attribution of items to one latent factor and to investigate the presence of common method bias (i.e., the amount of covariance shared among variables due to the common method used in collecting data).

All good fit indexes indicated that an alternative model yields an unacceptable fit: $\chi^2 (73)=342.233$, $p<0.00$; CFI=0.503; TLI=0.509; RMSEA=0.147; SRMR=0.148. WRMR=1.798, providing support for the factorial validity of the posited model.

Structural model

A structural model was tested in order to investigate the posited relationship between all the vari-

ables. Findings suggest that the model fitted the data adequately, $\chi^2 (54)=73.772$, $p<0.00$; CFI=0.918; TLI=0.917; RMSEA=0.064; SRMR=0.084; WRMR=0.927 (all parameter estimates are reported in figure 2).

As expected, self-efficacy confirmed its positive relationship with the three PoSC (Hypothesis 1), namely perceptions of the immediate supervisor ($\beta=0.35$, $p<0.01$), perceptions of colleagues ($\beta=0.41$, $p<0.01$) and perceptions of top management ($\beta=0.31$, $p<0.01$), which in turn were significantly related to job satisfaction (Hypothesis 2). In particular, perceptions of management showed a stronger relationship with employee job satisfaction ($\beta=0.38$, $p<0.01$) rather than perceptions of immediate supervisor ($\beta=0.28$, $p<0.01$) and perceptions of colleagues ($\beta=0.26$, $p<0.01$). Job satisfaction was in turn negatively related to absenteeism ($\beta=-0.21$, $p<0.01$; Hypothesis 3).

Moreover, neither control variables (gender and organizational tenure) were significantly related to absenteeism. Overall, the model explained the 49% variance in job satisfaction and the 6% variance in absence from work.

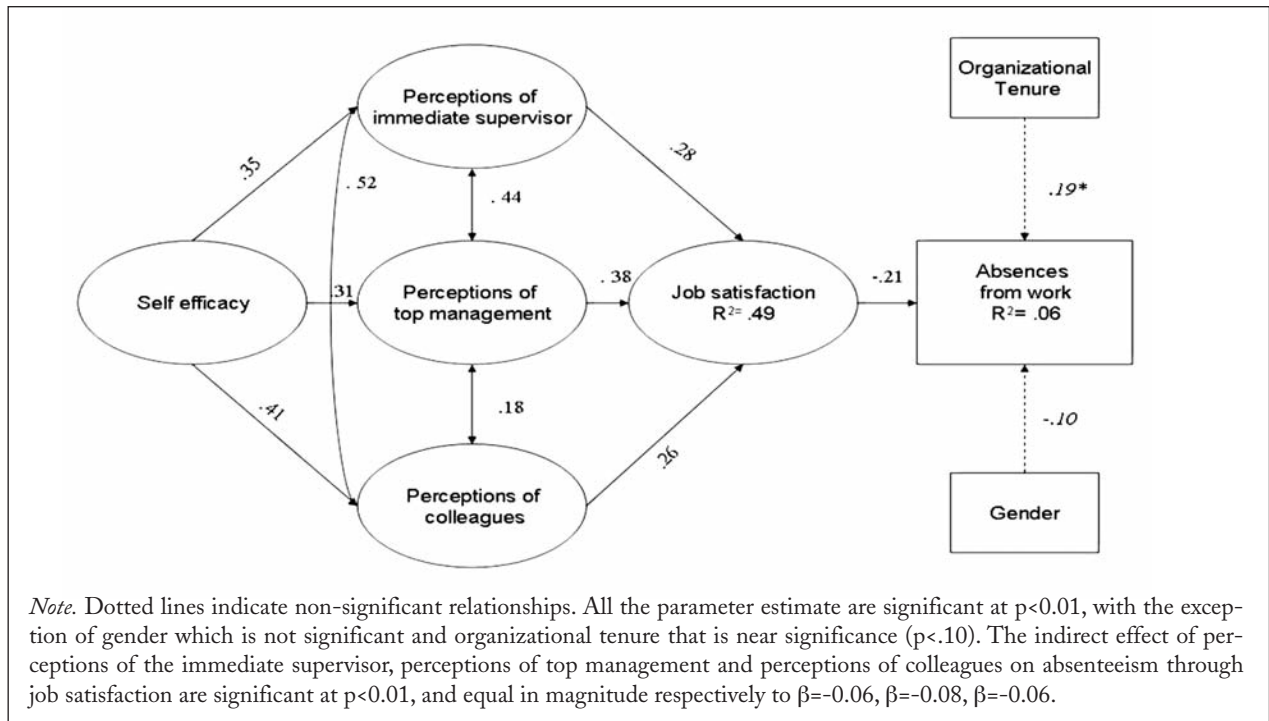


Figure 2 - The posited structural model: parameter estimates

The indirect effects of perceptions of context on absenteeism were investigated using Sobel's approximate significance test (66). Findings revealed that all three Perceptions of Social Context contributed to the dependent variable through the mediating role of job satisfaction (Hypothesis 4). In particular, perceptions of management ($\beta = -0.08$, $p < 0.01$), perceptions of the immediate supervisor and perceptions of colleagues (both $\beta = -0.06$, $p < 0.01$) were indirectly related to absence from work. It is worth noting that, although no significant zero-order correlation between perceptions of management and absence from work was found, an indirect effect between these variables through the mediating role of job satisfaction emerged. According to MacKinnon, Fairchild & Fritz (44), since both perceptions of management and absence from work had a statistically significant relationship with the mediation variable (namely job satisfaction), there was evidence of mediation and we can consider the significance of the indirect effect.

Lastly, an alternative model was tested, by positing a reverse relationship between self-efficacy and Perception of Social Context and specifying a direct path from the three PoSC to self-efficacy. This model provided a worse fit than the posited one, $\chi^2(54) = 94.951$, $p < 0.00$, CFI = 0.831, TLI = 0.828, RMSEA = 0.092, SRMR = 0.103, WRMR = 1.167.

DISCUSSION

The findings of the present study fully supported our hypotheses. First of all our study corroborated the significant role of self-efficacy beliefs in shaping one's perception of the social context (PoSC) (10, 12), as we posited in Hypothesis 1. According to Social Cognitive Theory (4, 76), our results suggested that the more employees believe themselves able to impact their context, the more positive are their context representations. This leads them to form more positive perceptions of the social constituents within their organization, because they believe they have the capability of actively interacting with them.

The positive relationship between PoSC and job satisfaction was corroborated (Hypothesis 2), by

confirming that job satisfaction, namely the cognitive and the individual's affective evaluations related to his/her job and work context, is modelled by the three perceptions of social context (12, 15, 55).

In comparison with previous studies (12), in this contribution perceptions of top management showed a stronger-connection with job satisfaction as compared to perceptions of colleagues and perceptions of the immediate supervisor. According to Johns' recommendations (33, 35), this might be interpreted in the light of the specificity of the organizational context where the study was conducted. The present study involved the Italian branch of a multinational retail organization characterized by a young staff, in which the top management, called "Support Office", strives to build up friendly and supportive relationships with employees. Considering the specific organizational context, we argue that employees' perceptions of top management played a crucial role in satisfaction with their job, because top management promotes employees' professional advancement and their participation in the decision process by supporting stores and offices so as to facilitate cooperation between them and the achievement of common goals. Hence, the way in which employees perceive top management determines their affective and cognitive evaluation as related to their job.

Moreover, as we hypothesized (Hypothesis 3), a negative relationship was found between job satisfaction and absence from work (18), thus confirming a strong direct impact on absenteeism (36).

Overall, results lend support to the posited indirect effect of PoSC on absence from work, through the mediating role of job satisfaction (Hypothesis 4). Thus, the more positive the Perceptions of Social Context (namely immediate supervisor, colleagues and top management) the higher job satisfaction will be, and, in turn, the less frequent absence from work will be. Particularly, perceptions of top management, which refer to the way by which top management communicates organizational strategies, regulations and policies, identifies tasks and routines, and provides useful information to employees to facilitate cooperation between units, have the strongest indirect effect on absence from work. Results confirmed the crucial role of

the PoSC in indirectly predicting employees' absence behaviour in this context. Thus, our model supports the hypothesis that the effect of Perceptions of Social Context on behaviour is mediated by cognitive and affective evaluation related to the job, namely job satisfaction (40). Furthermore, we confirmed that PoSC have a distal relationship with absenteeism. This is likely because those who have a positive impression of their work social context feel their context is less hostile and more supportive. Accordingly, they will have a more positive evaluation of their job and the context itself that leads them to be less absent from work.

The control variables showed no significant relationships with absence behaviour. Hence, the significant relationship between gender, organizational tenure and absenteeism, generally found in previous studies (43, 56), was not confirmed.

Limitations and future perspectives

The study has of course some weaknesses that open up new perspectives that will need to be addressed in future research.

The main limitation is the cross-sectional nature of the data because self-reported data and absence from work data were collected at the same time and we presently have no access to data collected after the research was completed. Hence, we cannot affirm the presence of casual relationships among the variables, which call for further longitudinal studies. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that results concerning the alternative model tell us that the reverse relationship between self-efficacy and PoSC was not significant, giving further support to our posited model.

Another issue is related to the low explicative power of our posited model, due to the low percentage of overall explained variance in absenteeism. However, since previous studies already showed variance percentages ranging between 5% and 10% with objective measures of absenteeism (62, 63, 67), we can stress the value of our results, which were also confirmed by the degree of significance in the relationships explored. Moreover, weak relationships and thus weak statistical effects between explication variables and objective absence

measures are not uncommon (see 21, for a meta-analysis of the strength of the model with absenteeism). Moreover, it should be noted that objective absence measures are difficult to collect in organizations, due to management's resistance to share this kind of data that are considered sensitive as regards workers' privacy. However, we know that absenteeism is a complex phenomenon and the low level of variance explained may also be interpreted as a need for exploring other contextual variables strictly connected to absenteeism behaviour, such as further individual and contextual aspects (69) or health (78).

A third limitation is related to the sample size which represented 23% of the population. Whereas our sample fully represented the organization and seemed to have similar socio-demographic characteristics (e.g., gender, organizational tenure, and age) compared to the organization's total staff, this does not allow us to make inferences for the organization's entire staff. Moreover, considering the population characteristics, we can assert that the posited model fitted well in a context with a high number of female and young employees. Nevertheless, it would be interesting to explore the model in other contexts with different features in the future.

Regarding future perspectives, longitudinal research is needed to investigate the role played by the variables considered in this study in predicting absenteeism over time, in order to understand the likely direction of causality among variables and, moreover, to fully investigate the reciprocal dynamic exchanges between individual, environment, and behaviour (3, 4) that require further investigations on the reciprocal causation between person, context, and behaviour. This would be possible using data collected over time.

Another issue that should be considered in future research is related to our measure of absenteeism. We are aware that the measure is prone to bias, since we received an overall measure of absenteeism from the company, namely the records of time lost, including all types of absence (e.g., sickness absence, vacation, family obligations). Thus, we could not discriminate between the effects of health and work-family conflict and work social environment in testing our hypotheses. Although

previous contributions included this kind of measure (36), in the future we would like to use different objective measures, such as the frequency or the of absence as well as a more discriminating measure of absence from work, including the difference between sick absence and family care days lost (60), in order to thoroughly investigate a model for different aspects of absenteeism.

Lastly, it would be worthwhile investigating the relationship between context and absenteeism at group level, by means of multilevel models and cross-level interaction models, in order to explore to what extent shared perceptions of context and absence culture (56), characterized by established and legitimated norms on absence behaviour, may influence absence from work.

Practical implications

Attention is drawn to some practical implications.

The findings offer a theoretical basis for further investigation on the role of individual characteristics and perceptions of social context in absenteeism studies via both observational and intervention studies and cost effectiveness analysis.

Future studies in this direction could facilitate the setting up of interventions aimed at increasing employee job satisfaction and thus reduce absence behaviour and the associated costs for employers, including individual and contextual aspects, such as training to increase self-efficacy at work and better perceptions of the organizational constituents.

NO POTENTIAL CONFLICT OF INTEREST RELEVANT TO THIS ARTICLE WAS REPORTED

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