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Absenteeism in Israeli schoolteachers: An organizational ethics perspective

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ABSTRACT

Two studies are presented with the purpose of investigating teacher absences in Israel from the perspectives of organizational normative behavior (Study 1) and organizational ethical climate (Study 2). Study 1 posits that absence may represent shirking behavior, and tested this hypothesis by investigating temporal absence trends of the entire public teacher population in Israel around weekends, holidays, and days of heavy workload. Results provide evidence which supports our theoretical expectations. Study 2 proposes that teachers' work absences are associated with the school's ethical climate. Using a sample of high-school teachers, our results supported this hypothesis, particularly for low-seniority and non-tenured teachers. We suggest that the normative behavior and ethical climate perspectives offer new vistas for advancing our understanding of absence behavior in organizations.

1. Introduction

Work absence has been traditionally considered a major problem of human resource management (HRM) in a wide range of sectors and organizations (Bycio, 1992; Harrison & Martocchio, 1998). A small but growing volume of research on teachers' absence behavior indicates that this problem is particularly severe among schoolteachers in underdeveloped (Alcázar et al., 2006; Chaudhury, Hammer, Kremer, Muralidharan & Rogers, 2006), as well as developed countries (Bowers, 2001; Rosenblatt & Shirom, 2005). There are several reasons explaining why in schools — as work organizations — teachers' absence behavior represents a major problem for HRM practitioners. Unlike many other employees whose job tasks can be delayed if needed, absent teachers need to be immediately substituted. Substitution is costly in schools because it means double pay for the same working hours. It also implies significant indirect costs, because absent teachers influence their school absence norms and may thus affect shirking behavior on the part of their colleagues (Bradley, Green & Leeves, 2007). Teachers are often looked upon by their students as role models, so their students may imitate the display of negative work norms by missing classes or other negative behavior. Indeed, Ehrenberg, Ehrenberg, Rees and Ehrenberg (1991) showed that teacher's work absence affected their students' absence from school. In addition, because absent teachers are typically replaced by less qualified substitutes, teacher absences impact their students' level of achievement, particularly if these absences are unexpected (Miller, Murnane, & Willett, 2008a,b). A study by Woods and Montagno (1997) demonstrated that teacher absence had an impact on students' academic achievements.

In Israel there is increasing public concern about teachers' absences. In a large-scale study commissioned by the Ministry of Education, Globerson and Ben Yishai (2002) reported that between 1989 and 1991, 29% to 42% of the surveyed teachers in post elementary education were absent in at least one of the 7 time points sampled in this study. Later, in a 2003 audit of the Ministry of Education, the State Comptroller concluded that teachers' absence was becoming a burden on schools, as reflected by the

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significant over-expenditures on hiring substitutes for absent teachers. For example, in the year covered by the Comptroller's report, 32% of schools exceeded the budget allotted for substitute teaching by 1.5%–6.1%. Consequently, the Comptroller's Report called for increased government focus on the containment and prevention of teachers' absences. Following this report, another large-scale study of teachers' absences was commissioned by the Ministry of Education (Rosenblatt & Shirom, 2004). This study, in contrast to the previous one, covered the full population of public-school teachers in elementary and middle education during the 2001 and 2002 academic years and calculated teachers' absenteeism in terms of each teacher's individual work schedule. Rosenblatt and Shirom (2004) found that on an annual basis in the 2002–2003 school year, teachers were absent from work 5.77% of the actual hours they had to teach, the average number of absence episodes was 5.16 per teacher, and the average number of days per absence episode was 1.83. Furthermore, they found that the number of days absent on average was 8.65, and that these teacher absence figures were comparable or higher than absence rates in other developed countries: In the US, the absence rate is 5–6% of the days schools are in session (Miller et al., 2008a,b; Scott & McClellan, 1990), whereas in the UK absence rate is 3.15% (Bowers, 2001) and in Australia (Queensland) 3.12% (Bradley et al., 2007). Although the above two Israeli studies used different methods, their major findings lead to the same conclusion — that work absence among Israeli schoolteachers has been relatively high, and did not change for the better in the past decade.

We define absenteeism as the failure to report for scheduled work (Johns, 1997), and we focus on the voluntary aspect of this failure. We draw on the theoretical perspective of school ethics because schools constitute ethical environments (Starratt, 1991), where teachers are looked upon as moral agents (Higgins, 1995). Therefore it would be particularly informative to investigate, on one hand, the extent to which teachers' absences represent organizational opportunistic behavior that may affect school ethics, and, on the other hand, the extent to which teachers respond to school ethics with work absences. Accordingly, and based on the above set of findings of past studies in Israel, our study focuses on two research questions. The first is whether teachers' absenteeism in Israeli schools represents shirking or organizational misbehavior. Our Study I, described below, responds to this question. The second research question is whether teacher absence is related to the school's ethical environment. Our Study II below is an attempt to answer this question.

2. Study 1: schoolteachers' work absence as misbehavior

2.1. Introduction

There is no doubt that all employees have the basic right to be absent from work for what is socially considered legitimate reasons (e.g., sickness, jury duty, reserve duty). In many countries, including Israel, this basic right is formally covered by collective bargaining agreements that specify the conditions under which certain types of absences are considered legitimate and the procedures for being remunerated for these absences. We argue that as a direct result of these formal absence regulations, teachers' decisions to use or refrain from using the days permitted to be absent involve ethical considerations and could become, in some cases, a form of organizational misbehavior (Shapira-Lishchinsky, in press; Vardi & Weitz, 2004) such as shirking. For example, teachers may decide to report sick while actually avoiding an excessive workload or extending their holidays for recreational purposes. The absenteeism literature provides examples of such opportunistic behavior on the part of teachers, where teachers misuse their absence allowance (Alcázar et al., 2006). We will explain the theoretical perspective viewing absence as partially representing work misbehavior in the following steps. First, based on the concepts of voluntary absence and work misbehavior, we examine the extent to which teachers are absent around specific dates (weekends and holidays). Second, using the notion of work stress, we study absence patterns related to high vs. low-load days. We then combine the above three foci of teachers' absence behaviors to advance our understanding of the extent to which these behaviors represent shirking behaviors or a form of organizational misbehavior that implicates ethical considerations.

2.1.1. The concept of voluntary absence

There is a consensus in the absence behavior on a traditional distinction between voluntary and involuntary absences (Dalton & Mesch, 1992; Farrell & Stamm, 1988; Sagie, 1998; Scott & Taylor, 1985; Steel, 2003). Obviously, this classification focuses on the volitional content of absence. Voluntary absence refers to missing work for reasons under the employee's control, such as taking time off for leisure activities or to search for new job options. This type of absence is of major concern to management in its efforts to contain and reduce work absence. Voluntary absence is normally measured by its frequency, such as the number of absence episodes or spells, and the duration of each absence event is disregarded. Researchers agree that episodic absence may be an indicator of negative work attitudes (Hanisch & Hulin, 1991; Mathieu & Zajac, 1990; Sagie, Birati, & Tziner, 2002). A high score on voluntary absence measured by frequency would typically reflect multiple short-period absences ('skip days'), indicating a desire to stay away from work. In contrast, involuntary absence is missing work for reasons beyond the employee's control, such as sickness or family events (mourning, marriage). Involuntary absence is characterized by longer spells than those of voluntary absence, and is typically measured by time lost. An absence spell of 20 days is counted as higher involuntary absence than a spell of two days, while the latter would indicate a possibly higher voluntary absence than the former. On the other hand, when using the frequency measure both are scored equally as one absence episode (Shapira-Lishchinsky & Rosenblatt, in press).

Nevertheless the lines between voluntary and involuntary absence are somewhat fuzzy, and may be easily crossed in practice. The decision whether and when ill health justifies absence from work (involuntary absence) is in fact in the employee's hands, and is not always clear cut. Thus, the same health condition (e.g., slight cold) may keep some people at home, while others will show

up for work. When a given employee decides to stay home from work for a reason most other employees or management would consider as illegitimate, is when absence turns into shirking behavior.

2.1.2. Absence as work misbehavior

Work absence, particularly when considering those that are voluntary, may be viewed as shirking behavior. Yet work shirking differs from strictly deviant behavior because it may conform to an alternative work norm which is accepted by employees, sometimes even by employers. Shirking in the form of work absence would be considered potentially unethical when it also violates moral codes in addition to organizational norms (such as, for example, causing attending colleagues to work harder).

Organizational misbehavior (Vardi & Weitz, 2004) constitutes a conceptual framework that complements the notion of organizational shirking. Vardi and Wiener (1996) defined organizational misbehavior as "any intentional action by members of organizations which defies and violates (a) shared organizational norms and expectations, and/or (b) core societal values, mores and standards of proper conduct" (p. 151). The tendency to misbehave may be triggered by negative emotions, feelings of frustration and job dissatisfaction. These are major affective forces that fuel people's intentions to engage in misconduct such as work absence (Spector, 1997; Staw, Sutton, & Pelled, 1994).

Work absence is a misbehavior that primarily benefits the self, while victimizing the employing firm or its members (Vardi & Weitz, 2004). Work absence at school may benefit the absent teacher in the short run, but it disrupts the work of colleagues and the teaching flow for students. Unjustified work absence is one of the most prevalent "production misbehaviors" (Hanisch & Hulin, 1991; Sagie, 1998; Vardi & Weitz, 2004) since it may negatively affect motivation, work relations and the organization's financial situation (Sagie et al., 2002; Vardi, 2001). In other words, work absence represents misbehavior that is dysfunctional to the organization (Sagie, Stashevsky & Koslowsky, 2003). The "misbehave" element in employees' absences was noted by Westman and Etzion's (2001) in their study on absenteeism among Israeli blue-collar employees as a choice: employees often choose to be absent.

Shirking behavior in the form of work absence may be explained by social exchange (Blau, 1964) mechanisms. Often, work absence seems to be a retaliatory behavior on the part of employees, responding to work frustrations. For example, Dalton and Mesch (1992) found that employees who were denied work transfers against their will were more likely to be absent after these decisions were made than employees whose requests to be transferred were granted. Also, in a comparison of absence rates between Israeli employees who were promoted and those who were not, the latter were found to have higher absence rates (Schwarzwald, Koslowsky & Shalit, 1992). The methodology of both studies allowed a causal inference; namely, absence was affected by organizational decisions, and not vice versa. Klaas, Heneman and Olson (1991) showed that absenteeism of union employees went up after filing policy-related grievances, signaling their perception of injustice on management's part. In education, studies of excessive teacher absence in developing countries have shown that absence was linked to low school infrastructure (Chaudhury et al., 2006), poor working conditions, and contract teaching (Alcázar et al., 2006). These studies indicate a high likelihood that attendance/absence behavior reflects a response to employees' perception of the way they are treated more than any real inability to show up for work.

A number of studies indicate that absence rates are also influenced by the social environment. Bradley et al. (2007) showed that teacher absence in Australian public schools was not random, but was influenced by prevailing group absence behavior at the schools. Because work policies and procedures in the Australian system are highly standardized, the authors' conclusion was that these absence trends represented shirking behavior. Similarly, Gaziel (2004) showed that the absences of Israeli teachers were attributed, among others, to the school's absence culture (amount of leniency toward voluntary absences). These results are consistent with studies on Israeli production workers where employees' absences were influenced by absence-related norms of work-based referent others (Bamberger & Biron, 2007). We claim that when such norms within work groups legitimize work absence (but contradict work rules), work absence may be viewed as shirking behavior.

Because a key indicator of shirking is the non-random nature of absence, one way to test the extent to which absence behavior reflects a form of shirking behavior would be to investigate the extent to which employees tend to be absent on specific days. If absences tend to occur on days adjacent to weekends and holidays, when teachers (like other employees) often take family vacations, it may indicate misbehavior on the part of the absent teachers. In other words, such temporal trends may reflect shirking behavior if they are not randomly distributed across a teacher's work week and work year. Results of studies examining absence distribution are not conclusive, although there are some indications that teachers tend to be absent on Mondays and Fridays, and in specific months — November, January and April (Norton, 1998). We will test the possibility that teachers tend to extend their weekends by timing days of absences that either precede or follow official holidays and weekends. The above theoretical arguments and empirical evidence led us to formulate our first and second hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1. Absence trends will not be distributed evenly by weekly work days: Teachers will tend to be absent in days preceding or following the weekend.

Hypothesis 2. Absence trends will not be distributed evenly by holiday vacations: Teachers will tend to be absent in days preceding or following holidays than on days not close to holidays.

2.1.3. A work stress perspective of work absence as a shirking behavior: work avoidance

One of the earliest models that linked stress and absenteeism was proposed by Steers and Rhodes (1978). They viewed stress as influencing an employee's motivation to be present which in turn influences actual attendance. Both links in this chain are moderated by one's ability to attend. This model has received some support (Rhodes & Steers, 1990).

Yet another theoretical thread linking stress and absence behavior views absenteeism as reflecting avoidance behavior of employees exposed to high levels of stress, or as a form of escapism from noxious work situations (Harrison & Martocchio, 1998). Most models of work stress that regard absenteeism as a response to stress (for a review of these theories see Cooper, 1998) have based their theoretical arguments on Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) transactional stress model. This transactional model views stress as arising from certain person–environment interactions. The environmental stimuli leading to stress appraisals are referred to as stressors and include a variety of unfavorable working conditions such as job insecurity, high workloads, lack of information regarding major work demands, and adverse physical conditions (e.g., excessive noise). When employees appraise stressors as exceeding their coping resources, they will perceive them as representing threats. These threat appraisals are defined as stressors in the transactional stress theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The theory posits that stressors could lead to psychological, physiological, and behavioral dysfunctions. Absence behavior represents a dysfunctional form of work behavior resulting from stress.

Three theoretical approaches converge in positing that stressors lead to absence: via its effects on motivational factors (Steers & Rhodes, 1978), coping behavior (Harrison & Martocchio, 1998), or directly, as argued by several occupational stress theories, based in part on transactional stress theory (e.g., Beehr, 1998). In our research we posit that work-related stressors, as defined above, could lead to work absence behavior, viewed as a stress outcome. Several meta-analytic studies provide support for this theoretical argument. An early meta-analytic study (Farrell & Stamm, 1988) based on four studies found meta-correlations of $r = 0.32$ and $r = 0.18$ between stress and absence frequency and time lost, respectively. A more recent meta-analytic study that focused on sickness absence (Duijts, Kant, Swaen, van den Brandt, & Zeegers, 2007) found, based on 20 prospective studies, that the odds ratio of being on sick leave for more than three days was significant for several possible stresses, including experiencing unfairness at work.

More recent prospective studies that used stress to predict subsequently assessed absence behavior support the above findings. Because the majority of teachers are women, it is worth noting that a recent study of frequency and time lost in absences of 5470 female and 1464 male municipal employees in Finland found psychosocial stress to similarly influence both indices of absences across both genders (Laaksonen, Martikainen, Rahkonen, & Lahelma, 2008). In a study of 890 human service workers followed-up for three years, role conflict, emotional demands, and threats were found to predict sickness absences (Rauhala et al., 2007). Several types of psychosocial stressors were found to predict frequency of absences and time lost in a study of 1919 employees in Denmark (Nielsen, Rugulies, Christensen, Smith-Hansen, & Kristensen, 2006). Two large-scale prospective studies based on samples of more than 10,000 French employees reported similar findings concerning the effects of work-related stressors on absence behavior (Melchior et al., 2005; Melchior, Niedhammer, Berkman, & Goldberg, 2003).

Thus accumulated evidence lends weight to the following argument: work-related stressors could lead teachers to misuse their absence prerogatives. Previous studies showed that stress emanating from perceived heavy workload led employees to absence (Rauhala et al., 2007). Similarly, we argue that teachers will tend to avoid long working days compared to short days, to avoid stress. In other words, we believe that teachers, who as indicated above have some personal discretion in using their absence allowance, may misuse it to accommodate their specific needs and interests. Following the above rationale, we hypothesize that

Hypothesis 3. Teachers will tend to be absent on days characterized by a heavier workload (in number of daily working hours) than on easier-workload days.

2.2. Method

2.2.1. Population and sample

The study sample included 52,056 teachers in elementary and middle public-school teachers in Israel (out of a total population of approximately 60,000 public-school teachers). Only teachers in the Jewish sector (about 80% of the entire teaching population) were included in the present study. We excluded teachers whose position scope was less than 30% and more than 160%, and who had been working for less than 6 months. This exclusion reflects the recurrent findings that part-time employees and new entrants into the labor market exhibit widely different absenteeism behavior relative to their colleagues (Johns, 1997). We also excluded teachers employed in schools located near the country's borders (where Israeli citizens face security problems, being exposed to terror and military attacks, work absence may generally be higher for security reasons). The remaining teachers worked in 2098 schools.

2.2.2. Variables and measures

2.2.2.1. Absence trends by day of the week. These were measured by examining the number of absence episodes starting on each day of the work week (Sunday, Monday, etc.), in relation to the expected absences on that day. The proportion of week-day absences were calculated by dividing the average absence percentage on each of day of the week by the average percentage of working days that day of the week. The result of this division; namely, the proportion of absence episodes to working days indicates a trend above or below the expected absences (the higher the proportion, the higher the tendency to be absent on a specific day, relative to the other days of the week). The expected factor for the day of the week absence rate is denoted as 1.00.

2.2.2.2. Absence trends by holidays. This variable represents the proportion of absences on specific days before and after holidays, compared to the absences expected on these days of the week on days that do not precede or follow a holiday. The

proportion of before/after absences was calculated by dividing the number of absence days on each of the before/after specific dates by the number of the average absence days reported for the same week day (Sunday, Monday, etc) that year. The results of this division; namely, the proportion of before/after absence episodes to absences on those week days indicate the trend above or below the rate of absenteeism expected for these dates (the higher the proportion, the higher the tendency to be absent, relative to the same week days that do not precede or follow holidays). The expected factor of absence before or after a holiday is denoted as 1.00.

2.2.2.3. Absence trends by week-day teaching load.   This variable was measured by the number of personal working hours each day of the week. For each level of teaching work load (one teaching hour per day, two teaching hours per day, etc., up to eight teaching hours per day), the number of working days and their percentage out of the total number of days, as well as the number and percentage of absence days were recorded. Days exceeding eight working hours were rare, and therefore were excluded from the analysis. The tendency to be absent as a function of daily work load was calculated by dividing the percentage of absence hours in each daily workload level by the percentage of actual working hours that day of the week. The expected factor of absence on each working day, regardless of its length, is denoted as 1.00.

The basic unit for absence calculation was hours, because absence is reported in the government archives in both days and hours (when absence constitutes a fraction of the day). The absent hours sums were converted into absent days using averages of teaching schedules.

2.2.3. Database

Almost full access to government data on teachers' absence rates and teachers' demographic and occupational backgrounds was granted to the researchers. These were elementary and middle-level schools (Israeli secondary-level schools are predominantly run by the local authorities). Absence episodes were used as a unit of analysis. The data included 314,557 absence episodes for the 2001–2002 school year, representing on average 6.04 absence episodes per teacher. The total number of absence days for that year was 7,060,869. Our method of analysis was to link each absence episode with the day of the week or days in which it occurred and with individual personal working schedules. We will report on findings only with respect to the Jewish sector, because it is the largest of all the national sectors of Israeli schoolteachers (others being Arab and Druze), covering approximately 80% of all teachers in Israel.

2.2.4. Study description

Israeli teachers at the elementary and middle level are required to teach between 30 and 24 h a week, respectively, and are often exempt from some of this teaching load in exchange for administrative duties and special responsibilities. The number of individual working hours fluctuates greatly from day to day, depending on the daily work schedule of each teacher. The average number of teaching hours for a given teacher in our sample was 4.61 per day. Normally, teachers work for five days a week, but because the school week is six days long, each teacher has a different free day per week.

With regard to absence rules, Israeli collective agreements, negotiated by two powerful teachers' unions, state that teachers are entitled to thirty paid sick-day absences per year, duly attested to by a sick certificate signed by a physician. Additionally, after signing a form stating that they were sick, they are entitled to four more days of paid sick leave per year. According to the collective agreements in force during the period of our study, these four additional days of sickness leave did not require medical confirmation. In 2002–2003, about 71% of teachers' absences in Israel were related to a "certified" sickness, and an additional 11% were attributed to "non-certified" sickness (Rosenblatt & Shirom, 2004). When teachers retire, they are entitled to be paid for up to one fifth of these un-used sick days, but only if more than 65% of sick days were not used.

Schools (as well as most other organizations) in Israel are normally open Sunday through Friday. Saturday (the Sabbath) is observed as a mandatory rest day in the Jewish sector. Friday is normally a shorter day in the public schools (elementary and middle levels) — students leave schools around noon time (while on other days they normally leave between 13:00 and 15:00). On holidays schools are closed. Because Jewish holidays are determined by lunar months, holiday calendar dates change every year. The holidays used for the data analysis in the present study (the 2001–2002 school year) and their respective dates were the following: New Year ("Rosh Ha'shana"), September 17–19, Day of Atonement ("Yom Kippur"), September 26–27, "Succoth", October 1–10, "Pu'rim", February 25–27, and "Passover", March 19–April 6. Traditionally, the New Year, Day of Atonement and Passover are considered "holy" (the first two are sometimes referred to as "high holidays"), when Jews tend to celebrate at home with families. The other holidays — Succoth, Hanukah and Pu'rim are considered as relatively less "holy", and provide opportunities for Jews to leave home and go on vacation.

2.3. Results

2.3.1. Absence trends by day of the week

The results pertaining to absence trends by day of the week, as well as the data used to calculate these trends are presented in Table 1. An example of the method (described above) used for this calculation is the following: the average absence rate of 17.20% on Mondays (column 4) was divided by 17.97% (column 2), which is the average for working days on Mondays, yielding a factor rate of 0.96 (column 5), where the expected factor rate is 1.00. We also present the average length of absence episodes for each day (column 6).

The results show that Sunday is the day preferred by Jewish teachers (who only have one day off per week — Saturday) to start a period of absence (a proportion 1.13, i.e., 0.13 above the expected rate of for starting a period of absence). The next preferred day

is Thursday, while Friday (a short day compared to all other working week days) is the least preferred for starting an absence. These results suggest a tendency to associate an absence with the day off (Saturday), or to the shortest day (Friday). In other words, there was a tendency on the part of teachers to extend weekends. More evidence for this trend is depicted in column 6 of Table 1. It shows that absences that start on Sundays are the longest. These results partially support H1.

2.3.2. Absence trends by holidays

The results pertaining to absence trends by holidays, as well as the data used to calculate these trends are presented in Table 2. An example of the method (described above) used for this calculation is the following: the 1346 absence days (column 2), representing the number of absence episodes starting Thursday, December 18, 2001, a day after the Hanukkah holiday, was divided by 942 (column 3), which is the average number of working days on Thursdays in 2001–2002, yielding a factor rate of 1.43 (column 4) — in other words, a high tendency to be absent a day after this holiday, compared to the expected factor rate of 1.00 for that day of the week.

The results show that there is a clear consistent tendency for Jewish teachers to be absent on the days following some holidays, at a rate higher than the expected rate. This tendency is particularly obvious after Hanukkah and Pu'rim, and less obvious for the "high holidays", such as the New Year (Rosh Ha'sha'na) and Passover. In contrast, there is a lower tendency to be absent on days preceding holidays, compared to the respective week days. These results partially support H2.

2.3.3. Absence trends by week-day teaching load

The purpose of analyzing absence trends by week-day teaching load was to examine whether absence episodes were connected to the number of working hours on a given day (workload); the hypothesis being that the number of absence episodes would be evenly distributed for each day, regardless of the number of teaching hours scheduled that day of the week.

The results are presented in Table 3. An example to the method (described above) used for the calculation of absence on a given work day by load is the following: On 3-hour work days, we divided 9.86 (percentage of yearly absences on 3-hour days, column 5) by 12.10 (percentage of yearly 3-hour work days, column 3). This division yielded a result of 0.81 (column 6), which is lower than the expected factor rate of 1.00; in other words, signaling a low tendency to be absent.

The results of these analyses showed that H3 was largely supported. Generally, teachers absence increased as the length (in hours) on their work day increased. This tendency clearly reflects teachers' avoidance of long working days. Yet this trend was not perfectly symmetrical (fewer teachers were absent on 2-hour days than 1-hour days), but altogether, all three shortest working days (1, 2, 3 h) were least-absented by teachers (a factor rate of less than 1.00).

2.4. Discussion

The results of Study 1 showed that the temporal patterns of Israeli teachers' absences did not seem to be random. The distribution of absent days as a function of day of the week and after specific holidays (hypotheses 1 and 2) reveals a consistent tendency to opportunistically extend weekends and holidays beyond normal times. We suggest that this pattern represents work misbehavior, possibly indicating shirking on the part of the absent teachers.

Nevertheless, the results should be examined with caution, because there may be reasons other than misbehavior for teachers to be absent on certain days. For example, absence that starts on the first working day of the week (Sunday, in Israel) may be a result of sickness starting on Saturday (the one day off in Israel). It would be more likely, then, for employees to report sick on Sunday than any other day of the week. Likewise, a tendency to be less absent on days following holidays may also have a practical explanation. This tendency was conspicuous on holidays which are less "holy" — Hanukkah and Pu'rim, times that teachers traditionally use for family vacations (while on the "high" holidays Jewish people tend to celebrate at home and in the synagogue). In comparison, the tendency to be absent was lower than normal on days preceding holidays. The explanation for this finding may be attributed to the Israeli school tradition to focus on national and religious holidays, and teachers' responsibility to prepare students for holiday celebrations, when Jewish people tend to reflect and reexamine national values. Also, an alternative

Table 1
Week-day absence (Jewish sector only) in 2001/2002 school year.

Day of the week	Working days		Starting absence episode		5	6
	1	2	3	4	Proportion between % absences and % working days (4/2)	Average length of absence starting this day
	Yearly number	Average percent	Yearly number	Average percent		
Sunday	1,420,083	20.11	46,954	22.80	1.13	2.07
Monday	1,268,994	17.97	35,391	17.20	0.96	1.78
Tuesday	1,130,130	16.01	32,027	15.50	0.97	1.74
Wednesday	1,078,716	15.28	33,133	16.10	1.05	1.67
Thursday	1,135,803	16.09	36,421	17.70	1.10	1.59
Friday	1,027,143	14.55	22,050	10.70	0.74	1.61
Total	7,060,869	100	205,976	100	–	–

Table 2
Absence by holidays (Jewish sector only) in 2001/2002 school year.

Holiday vacation	1 Weekly day before and after the holiday	2 No. of absences reported this specific date	3 Average no. of absences for that weekly day (Sun. Mon., etc.) in 2001–2002	4 Proportion of average no. of absences for that weekly day of the number of absences reported that date (3/2)
New Year (Rosh Ha'sha'na) Sep. 17–19	Sep 16 (Sun.)	623	1173	0.53
	Sep 20 (Thur.)	851	942	0.90
Atonement Day (Yom Kippur) Sep. 26–27	Sep 25 (Tue.)	604	942	0.64
	Sep 28 (Fri.)	629	580	1.08
Su'koth Oct. 1–10	Sep. 30 (Sun.)	893	1173	0.76
	Oct. 11 (Tue.)	1007	1040	0.97
Ha'nu'ka Dec. 11–17	Dec. 10 (Mon.)	747	938	0.79
	Dec. 18 (Thur.)	1346	942	1.43
Pu'rim Feb.25–27	Feb.24 (Sun.)	453	1173	0.38
	Feb.28 (Tue.)	1490	942	1.58
Passover Mar.19–Apr.6	Mar.18 (Mon.)	756	938	0.80
	Apr.7 (Sun.)	1007	1173	0.86

explanation for the reason teachers tend to be less absent on short days, such as Friday (Table 1) and days consisting of one to three working hours (Table 3) may be related not to avoidance but the contrary — a special effort on their part to attend work in spite of a medical or another problem. While such problems may prohibit a teacher from working a long day, it may allow him/her to be at school for a short day.

However, the cumulative results of the three analyses indicate a common trend that may suggest the possibility of work misbehavior. This possibility needs to be explored in future studies by direct methods, such as in-depth interviews with absent teachers. The current study does not include data pertaining to reasons and intentions of absent teachers. Only studies that combine objective data, such as the ones used in the current study, with subjective reports from teachers can validate our claim that absenteeism reflects misbehavior and shirking behavior.

A combined approach will also test the theories suggested earlier as a possible background for the trends found in this study. We argued that exchange theory (Blau, 1964) may explain the motivation behind shirking behavior: teachers may be absent to reciprocate for sub-optimum working conditions, as suggested in previous research (Alcázar et al., 2006; Chaudhury et al., 2006). We also argued that the reason teachers tend to be absent in long rather than short days may be attributed to work stress. Teachers' avoidance of long working hours may indicate a response to work stressors. Again, this argument has been supported by previous research (Antoniou, Polychroni & Vlachakis, 2006; Cinamon, Rich & Westman, 2007). Stressors that are typical to the teaching profession (student discipline, professional burnout, work-family conflicts) tend to compound in time, sometimes in a matter of hours, so that teachers' irritation and frustration tend to increase throughout the day. Only rigorous research into the exact motives and cognitive processes involved can shed light on the ethical nature of absence.

A contextual approach to the absence trends identified in the present study may draw on teachers' labor relations, in particular, work absence rules. As mentioned earlier, these rules allow for an extended (over 30 days annually) number of paid absences. This system seems to positively reinforce work absence behavior. Work rules that allow for easy use of absence days with little incentive for attendance promote a decision making bias on the part of employees where they believe that work absence is largely legitimate. The extensive use of non-certified (11% of all reasons) and medically certified (71%) absences mentioned above may provide evidence for contextual norms legitimizing absence.

The link between contextual absence procedures and actual absence behavior has been documented by several authors. Norton (1998), for example, observed that teacher absences were closely tied to school district leave provisions. Another example is

Table 3
Absence episodes by week-day teaching load.

1 Work hours per day (daily workload)	2 Work days		4 Absence days		6 Days absent as percent of work days (5/3)
	Yearly number	% of all days	Yearly number	% of all days	
1	161,033	2.28	3188	1.57	0.69
2	559,110	8.48	12,380	5.10	0.60
3	854,266	12.10	30,033	9.86	0.81
4	1,820,777	25.77	48,150	23.71	0.92
5	1,824,231	25.83	56,246	27.69	1.07
6	1,281,957	18.16	46,164	22.73	1.25
7	344,841	4.88	12,363	6.09	1.25
8	137,845	1.96	3998	1.97	1.00

Jacobson's (1991) observation that teachers who had accumulated the maximum number of sick days tended to use them indiscriminately rather than lose them (Jacobson, 1991). However, Ehrenberg et al. (1991) argued that school districts that allowed for unlimited accumulation of leaves had a somewhat lower usage of sick leave than others. Together, these examples underline the importance of understanding the context in which voluntary absence occurs, in the presence of clear tendencies to abuse the absence allowance.

3. Study 2: absence as a response to an organizational unethical workplace

3.1. Introduction

Recent reviews of the absence literature show clearly that attendance behavior is related to the organizational environment (Felfe & Schyns, 2004; Martocchio & Jimeno, 2003). More specifically, a number of studies in various organizations indicate that employees respond to ethical cues in their working environment (such as managers' behavioral integrity, e.g., Prottas, 2008) by a variation in their absence rate. In education, when teachers perceive their workplace as characterized by injustice or a low emphasis on ethics, they tend to respond with increased absences (Bowers & Mclver 2001; Imants & Van Zoelen, 1995; Myburgh & Poggenpoel, 2002; Norton, 1998). Together, these studies show that employees react to undesired ethics-related elements in their workplace by staying away from work.

In the present study, we focus on ethical climate — a concept that has been developed and tested in a variety of organizations in general (Victor & Cullen, 1988), and in educational institutions in particular (Rosenblatt & Peled, 2002). However little has been written on teacher attendance rates with regard to their ethical environment at work. Consistent with the research mentioned above, we expect teacher absenteeism to increase when they perceive their schools' climate to be unethical. The purpose of Study 2 is to present a conceptual framework that links voluntary absence with schools' ethical climate and test this theoretical model.

3.1.1. Organizational ethical climate

In this section we argue that when teachers perceive their school's ethical climate as poor or unsatisfactory, they may respond by work absences. Victor and Cullen (1988) conceptualized ethical climate as the shared perceptions of what constitutes ethically correct organizational behavior, and how ethical issues should be handled, as defined by the organization. Their definition of ethical climate derives from the intersection of two conceptual frameworks. One framework represents basic ethical approaches, taken from Kohlberg (1981): egoism, benevolence, and principle. The second represents basic levels of analysis: individual, local, and cosmopolitan. This conceptualization was used to develop a theoretical model of the work environment defined at its different levels using ethical elements. The various ethical dimensions derived from this structure were collapsed into a few dimensions that were measured by instruments developed through this model (Victor & Cullen, 1988; Weber, 1995). We will focus on one such dimension — caring, which derives from a combination of egoism and benevolence. A caring ethical climate is one where employees have genuine interest in each other's welfare. Such a climate, where organizational members are sensitive and willing to assist each other, is likely to be characterized by high cohesiveness among organizational members (Cullen, Parboteeach & Victor, 2003). The "ethic of care" is a major component in teachers' professionalism, including the commitment to promote caring relations with students, parents and peers (Shacklock, 1998). In a study on Israeli teachers, where Victor and Cullens' (1988) model was tested, the caring climate emerged as the most significant and meaningful for teachers (Rosenblatt & Peled, 2002).

The theory of *social exchange* may provide basic support to the argument that employees respond to an unethical work climate with counter-productive behavior including work absences (Dalton & Mesch, 1992). Assuming that ignoring the "ethic of care" on the part of management constitutes a breach of contract (Rousseau, 1995), absenteeism can be seen as a reciprocating behavior, where the employee reneges on his/her part of the psychological contract. This may be a way to restore justice in cases where lack of caring at the workplace is viewed as a miscarriage of justice based on individual needs.

Empirical support for the presumed relationship between ethical climate and voluntary absence can be found in several studies. Wimbush and Shepard (1994) showed that an unethical organizational climate was related to negative organizational outcomes, including absenteeism. In a study on schoolteachers, Hutchison, Sowa, Eisenberger and Huntington (1986) suggested that when schools focus on high morality, schoolteachers respond by refraining from voluntary absences. Finally, Peterson (2002), who tested Victor and Cullen's (1988) ethical climate model, demonstrated that an organizational climate characterized by caring for employees was negatively related to their work absence. Based on these studies, we expect a caring climate to be negatively related to schoolteachers' voluntary absence. The fact that a caring climate is dominant is not surprising in an educational context, where care for students is a leading value (Husu & Tirri, 2001; Colnerud, 1997). This brings us to our hypothesis:

H4. A caring ethical climate in a school will be negatively related to teachers' work absences.

In addition, we looked into the controlling effects of three individual-level factors: gender, seniority and age on absence, because previous literature has pointed at inconclusive results in this area.

3.1.2. Background characteristics: gender, age, seniority

Previous studies indicate that women and men have distant absence cultures, and separate normative views about the legitimacy of absence (Johns, 2003; Johns & Nicholson, 1982). Most studies indicate that women are more often absent than men

(Hendrix, Spenser, & Gibson, 1994; Johns, 1997) due to the brunt of childcare responsibilities, or because women are more likely than men to use absence as a means of coping with stress (Melamed, Ben-Avi, Luz, & Green, 1995). Empirical evidence for women's likelihood to be absent is mixed. Rosenblatt and Shirom (2005) and Shirom and Rosenblatt (2006), for example, did not find a gender influence on absence frequency among Israeli teachers.

Age is usually negatively related to the frequency of absences, with older workers having fewer spells of absence (Hackett, 1990; Thomson, Griffiths, & Davison, 2000; Rosenblatt & Shirom, 2006). Explanations for this relationship include the fact that older workers have a greater need for regularity, have greater family and financial responsibilities, and are more job-satisfied than younger workers (Johns, 1997). However, this negative relationship is far from consistent since other studies have reported positive, U-shaped and inverted U-shaped and non-significant relationships (Nicholson, Brown, & Chadwick-Jones, 1977; Rhodes, 1983).

Cross-sectional studies generally confirm the existence of a negative association between seniority and absence, in particular voluntary absence (Chadwick-Jones, Nicholson & Brown, 1982; Nicholson et al., 1977). However, several studies have found no significant relationship between these two variables (Hackett, 1990; Johns, 1997; Rosenblatt & Shirom, 2006). Others (Thomson et al., 2000) found curvilinear relationships between seniority and absence that were U-shaped for non-certified absence and inverse U-shaped for certified absence.

Finally, *school size* was also included as a control variable, because previous research showed that in large schools teachers experience anonymity, low contact with supervisors and low responsibility for colleagues (Barmby & Stephan, 2000). In Israel, Rosenblatt and Shirom (2006) showed that the larger the school size, the higher the teachers' rate of absence.

3.2. Method

3.2.1. Study sample and population[3]

The participants were 1016 teachers (67% response rate) from 35 schools belonging to a large technological high-school network (comprising 52 schools) throughout Israel. The average number of teachers in each school was 54.74 (SD = 25.54). Only teachers who had worked in the school for more than one year were included in the study to ensure that all respondents had sufficient time to develop perceptions and attitudes about their schools. The sample breakdown consisted of 68% women and 32% men with an average age of 43.19 years (SD = 9.42). Average school seniority was 12.60 years (SD = 8.48). The majority of the teachers (86.1%) were tenured (tenure is granted to teachers after 3 years of service); the others were employed through temporary contracts. These characteristics represent roughly the composition of teachers in the network under study and in Israeli high schools in general (e.g., Rosenblatt & Inbal, 1999).

3.2.2. Data collection and analysis

Data were collected via self-report questionnaires. To determine whether the self-report data were indeed consistent with school records, we obtained school absence data (only school-level duration data were available). We aggregated our teacher-level self-report scores by schools and correlated these data with the school-record data for each school. We found that the average duration of absence in the self-report data was $M_{\text{self report}} = 11.91$ (S.E = 4.30), whereas the average duration of absence in the school record was somewhat higher ($M_{\text{school record}} = 12.28$, S.E = 5.54). However, the correlation between these two sources of data was positive and significant ($r_s = .524$, $p = .002$). Because no significant differences were found between the data sources regarding the average duration of absence (Wilcoxon test, $Z = -.392$, $p = 0.695$), we concluded that the self-report data agreed with school records and could be used confidently. Because of the data's hierarchical nature (teachers nested within schools) we applied the GENMOD procedure of the SAS Mixed model.

3.2.3. Variables and measures

3.2.3.1. Absence behavior.   Teachers were asked to record the total number of their absences in the preceding five month period. We chose this length of time to obtain a valid picture of teacher absences because it equals half a school year (one semester) in Israel, and because it is reasonable to expect that teachers are able to recall their absences during this period (Johns, 1994). Calendars were provided to help refresh respondents' memory. Absenteeism was measured by frequency of incidents of absences (number of absence incidents over five months).

3.2.3.2. Caring ethical climate.   This 1–5 Likert-scale measure was based on Victor and Cullen's (1988) conceptualization, and adopted from Rosenblatt and Peled's (2002) study of Israeli school teachers. A sample item is "In this school, people look out for each other's good."

3.2.3.3. Background variables: gender, seniority, age and school size.   The following background characteristics were used as controls: Age (in years). Gender (0 = men, 1 = women), school seniority (classified into 5 categories, 1, 2 and 3 years — all pre-tenure, 4 years and 10 years-all tenure). School size (in number of students).

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[3] The present study is part of a larger research project on teacher withdrawal syndrome and school ethics.

3.3. Results

The results of a series of multi-level regression analyses applied to each one of the independent variables appear in Table 4. Caring ethical climate was significantly related to teacher absence, and so were the control variables: gender, age, seniority and school size. Further multi-variable regression analyses were performed to investigate the unique contribution of caring ethical climate, as well as possible interactions between this variable and the control variables. The results are shown in Table 5.

The findings show that caring ethical climate was a relatively strong ($B = -.268$, $p < .001$) predictor of absence frequency (reverse relationship), supporting H4. Gender and age are also related to absence (unlike seniority and school size): women tended to be absent more than men, and older teachers were absent less frequently than younger teachers. Although seniority was not directly related to absence, an interaction analysis indicated that seniority influenced the relationship between caring climate and absence frequency (Table 5). This interaction is illustrated in Fig. 1. All five levels of seniority were included in the analysis. The results showed that in high levels of seniority (5 years and above) the negative relationship between caring ethical climate and absence frequency was weaker than in lower levels of seniority (3 years and below). No other interaction of ethical climate with any of the background variables was found. Discussion of these results follows.

3.4. Discussion

The results of Study 2 showed that teachers who perceive their school ethical climate to be caring tended to be absent less than teachers in less caring environments.This result is consistent with previous studies showing that absence behavior is sensitive to school climate in general (Bowers, 2001; Imants & Van Zoelen, 1995; Norton, 1998). The link between ethical climate and absence has been explained using exchange theory, which posits that teachers will reciprocate to a positive climate with constructive behavior on their part. This is also consistent with a study conducted by Avey, Patera and West (2006) showing that positive psychological capital reduced absence levels. The link between caring climate and employees' behavior is expected to be particularly conspicuous for schoolteachers because caring is normally a particularly relevant value in their working environment.

The relationship between caring ethical climate and absence was particularly true for low-seniority levels (3 years and less). Apparently, high-seniority teachers (10 years) did not respond to a caring ethical climate with reduced absence. While these senior teachers are all tenured, a considerable number of the lower-seniority teachers are not (those with less than 3 years of seniority). The vulnerable employment position of these teachers may make them more sensitive to an ethical environment that treats employees with care while the perks that come with seniority make the senior teachers less sensitive to ethical care (see also Johns, 1997).

As with Study 1, these results should be examined with great caution. First, the statistical methods used (regression analyses) do not allow causality; thus we are not sure whether ethical climate leads to voluntary absence or whether absence behavior affects school climate. Also, school ethics may be measured by more ways than Victor and Cullen's (1998) ethical climate concept, such as the organizational justice climate (Naumann & Bennett, 2000) or individual work values (Miller, Woehr & Hudspeth, 2002). We suggest that future research look at a wide spectrum of organizational ethics in order to more strongly establish the relationship between it and work absence.

Finally, we have suggested that absence may be a reciprocal behavior in reaction to perceived deprivation of desired organizational conditions, and a way to restore justice. These mechanisms are not unique to absence, and may apply to any behavior representing "withdrawal" from work (Hughes & Bozionelos, 2007), such as tardiness (Shapira-Lishchinsky, 2007). It may also apply to extra-role behavior, where employees withdraw from citizenship behavior. We recommend that these possibilities be explored in future studies.

4. Summary and conclusions

The main goal of our paper was to discuss the problem of work absence among Israeli school teachers, situating it in an organizational ethics framework. We advanced two themes: viewing absence as misbehavior, and viewing absence as related to

Table 4
Regression analyses of absence frequency on gender, age, seniority, school size and school's caring climate.

	B	SE (B)
Gender	.21***	.06
Age	−.03***	.00
Seniority	.01**	.00
School size	−.0002*	.0001
Caring climate	−.14**	.05

The GENMOD procedure.
* $p < .05$.
** $p < .01$.
*** $p < .001$.

Table 5
Generalized estimating equation (GEE) analysis of gender, age, seniority, school size, and caring climate on absence frequency.

	B	SE (B)
Gender	.2023***	.056
Age	−.0286***	.004
Seniority	−.0182	.0041
School size	−.0002	.0157
Caring climate	−.2680***	.0682
Caring climate × seniority	.0102*	.0049

Note. The distribution of the criterion was hypothesized to be a Poisson distribution, and a log link function was used for this analysis (The GENMOD procedure).
*$p<.05$, ***$p<.001$.

school unethical climate. These two themes were examined in two separate studies. The first theme (absence as misbehavior) was illustrated by a study of temporal patterns of teachers' absences during the 2001–2002 school year. The results of this study showed that Israeli teachers tended to some degree to use their absence to extend their weekends and holidays and alleviate work load. The second theme (absence related to perceived poor ethics) was represented by a study on relationships between rate of absence and school ethical climate. The findings of this study showed that the higher the caring ethical climate, the lower the absence frequency, in particular for less senior teachers.

We believe that the two studies presented here allude to the possibility that absence contains an element of misbehavior, and that there is a link between work absence and workplace ethics. These results are compatible with previous studies in a variety of occupations and countries, showing that absence behavior has a voluntary aspect (e.g., Sagie, 1998), and that absenteeism is sometimes a response to an unethical work environment (e.g., De Boer, Bakker, Syroit & Schaufeli, 2002). Together, these studies provide some evidence for the relevancy of using an organizational misbehavior and ethical framework to study work absence.

This perspective may shed new light on our understanding of absence behavior, in particular the distinction between voluntary and involuntary absence. Our results raise the possibility of intentional and non-random absence, although some previous studies have questioned the voluntary/involuntary distinction (Avey et al., 2006). This leads to the need to better define the different sources of voluntary absence. While some voluntary absences may be partially legitimate and have no harmful repercussions (staying home for emotional anxiety and arranging for a substitute), other types of voluntary behavior may be illegitimate and destructive (being absent for a non-announced recreational cause, with no pre-arrangements). Because of the high sensitivity of these behaviors, it would be difficult to collect data based on self-report; thus, studies of the kind presented in Study 1 above may indicate the existence and direction of misbehavior in such events. This approach fine-tunes our methodological means of studying voluntary absence. However, additional methods should be triangulated to establish the absence-as-work-deviance argument.

Overall we believe that these results show the validity of exploring a larger research framework where organizational cues influence individual behavior, both explained by the interaction of organizational ethical environment, work stress, and organizational misbehavior. Ethical climate that violates a basic value such as care of employees may lead to employees' perception of injustice and frustration. This may elevate work stress, followed by avoidance behavior, such as work absence. Thus, organizational-level predictors can lead to individual-level predictors of work absence, creating a chain of influence factors.

This hypothetical model of absence predictors on both levels may be supported by literature on *absence culture*. Studies on work absence have shown that absence is affected not only by individual differences but by the social context, including attendance norms (Bowers & McIver, 2001; Myburgh & Poggenpoel, 2002), collegial relations (Xie & Johns, 2000) and principals' supportive leadership style (Imants & Van Zoelen, 1995; Norton, 1998). Absence culture may both direct and reflect individuals' voluntary absences and moreover, may legitimize it (Addae & Johns, 2002). We recommend that the potentially reciprocal relationship between workplace ethical culture and individual absence deviance be investigated in future research.
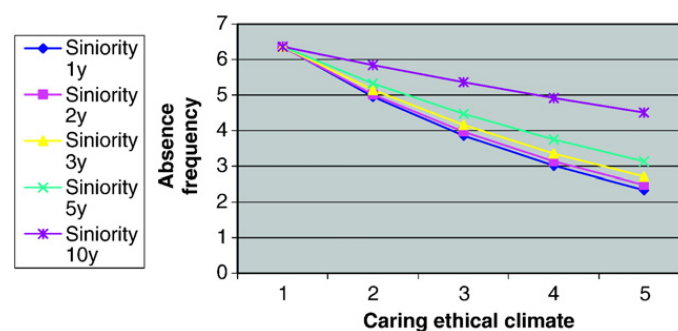

Fig. 1. The interaction effect of caring ethical climate and seniority on absence frequency.

Finally, we believe that the results of this study may provide practical guidelines for the way teacher absence should be managed in schools. The results of Study 1 suggest that managerial intervention is needed to reduce the voluntary and intentional element in work absence. Examples may include programs that buy out un-used absence days, improving teachers' work conditions, and paying individual attention to teachers exhibiting absence "proneness". The results of Study 2 suggest that a stronger focus on school ethical environment may lead to reduced teacher absence, or, alternatively, containing teacher absence may contribute to higher school ethical standards. In conclusion, both studies point to the importance of understanding the intricacies of ethical climate and ethical school norms to better understand a sensitive problem in most organizations — employee absence.

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