



CDI
18,5

440

Received 14 March 2013
Revised 3 June 2013
1 July 2013
Accepted 3 July 2013

A cross-cultural examination of presenteeism and supervisory support

Luo Lu

*Department of Business Administration, National Taiwan University,
Taipei City, Taiwan*

Cary L. Cooper

*Lancaster University Management School, Lancaster University,
Lancaster, UK, and*

Hui Yen Lin

*Department of Business Administration, National Taiwan University,
Taipei City, Taiwan*

Abstract

Purpose – The aim of this study was two-fold: first, to examine the noxious effects of presenteeism on employees' work well-being in a cross-cultural context involving Chinese and British employees; second, to explore the role of supervisory support as a pan-cultural stress buffer in the presenteeism process.

Design/methodology/approach – Using structured questionnaires, the authors compared data collected from samples of 245 Chinese and 128 British employees working in various organizations and industries.

Findings – Cross-cultural comparison revealed that the act of presenteeism was more prevalent among Chinese and they reported higher levels of strains than their British counterparts. Hierarchical regression analyses showed that presenteeism had noxious effects on exhaustion for both Chinese and British employees. Moreover, supervisory support buffered the negative impact of presenteeism on exhaustion for both Chinese and British employees. Specifically, the negative relation between presenteeism and exhaustion was stronger for those with more supervisory support.

Practical implications – Presenteeism may be used as a career-protecting or career-promoting tactic. However, the negative effects of this behavior on employees' work well-being across the culture divide should alert us to re-think its pros and cons as a career behavior. Employees in certain cultures (e.g. the hardworking Chinese) may exhibit more presenteeism behaviour, thus are in greater risk of ill-health.

Originality/value – This is the first cross-cultural study demonstrating the universality of the act of presenteeism and its damaging effects on employees' well-being. The authors' findings of the buffering role of supervisory support across cultural contexts highlight the necessity to incorporate resources in mitigating the harmful impact of presenteeism.

Keywords Job satisfaction, Cross-cultural comparison, Exhaustion, Presenteeism, Supervisory support

Paper type Research paper



Following the global economic depression and the financial crisis, a significant number of organisations have conducted downsizing or re-engineering, attempting to do more with less. The work environment has thus changed dramatically, giving rise to a new phenomenon dubbed “presenteeism”. Presenteeism occurs when people are physically present in the workplace but are functionally absent (Cooper, 1996). Absenteeism has long been seen as a cost to employers; now some scholars claim that being excessively present could prove even costlier (Burton *et al.*, 2006; Hemp, 2004; Robertson and Cooper, 2011). Though the significance of presenteeism as a fact of modern day work life has been established with large scale surveys in the developed economies such as the Scandinavia countries (e.g. Aronsson *et al.*, 2000; Demerouti *et al.*, 2009), related research in non-Western countries is non-existent. The thrust of the present study is to contrast an Eastern culture against a Western one in examining the prevalence of presenteeism and its consequences to the individual. Such an effort would generate valuable evidence supporting the universality of the phenomenon and generalizability of established Western findings to a vastly different socio-cultural-economic society.

As presenteeism was initially construed as a negative phenomenon (Cooper, 1996), nearly all of the existing studies have focused on either its damaging consequences or antecedents in the work context which might trigger the act (Johns, 2010). Positive personal and work-related factors such as hardy personality and work support which might perform protective roles in the presenteeism process have been overlooked. Thus, our second aim of the study is to examine the role of supervisory support, an important work resource, as a stress buffer for people working in different cultural contexts.

Presenteeism and its consequences on the individual: east vs west

In the present study, we focus on sickness presenteeism, designating the phenomenon of people who despite complaints and ill health that should prompt rest and absence from work, are still turning up at their jobs (Aronsson *et al.*, 2000). This operationalisation of presenteeism is consistent with the typical definition and focus of the broader presenteeism literature (Johns, 2010). From the time that presenteeism was first identified, epidemiological and medical researchers have investigated the impact of health on productivity loss allegedly attributable to the act working while ill (e.g. Collins *et al.*, 2005; Turpin *et al.*, 2004). More recently organisational researchers have demonstrated that having controlled for health status, psychosocial (e.g. neuroticism) and organisational factors (e.g. ease of replacement) could account for substantial variances in participants’ responses to self-reported presenteeism-related productivity loss (Johns, 2011). This fact highlights the necessity to expand the narrow focus on health to include psychosocial and organisational factors in order to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of presenteeism. We thus focused our measure of sickness presenteeism on its behavioural act, while separately assessing job satisfaction and exhaustion as two indicators of work outcomes (strains).

As observed by Johns (2010), the research and speculation concerning presenteeism have been markedly atheoretical. The emerging organisational research has attempted to map out personal and organisational contextual correlates/antecedents of presenteeism, and have found the act of presenteeism to be negatively related to employees’ health (Aronsson and Gustafsson, 2005; Baker-McCleary *et al.*, 2010;

Demerouti *et al.*, 2009; Hansen and Andersen, 2008; Johns, 2011; Löve *et al.*, 2010). We believe that the alleged detrimental effects of presenteeism on health can be explained by the recovery theory (Meijman and Mulder, 1998). The main tenet of the theory is that employees need adequate rest after exertion of efforts, physical and cerebral, at work, to recover and recharge both physically and psychologically. If opportunities for recovery, e.g. from work-related fatigue during the non-working period, are insufficient, one's psychobiological system remain activated and recovery to homeostatic levels may not be achieved. The employee, who is still in a sub-optimal state, will thus have to make additional efforts to cope with subsequent work demands and further lead to prolonged strain. Applying the recovery theory to presenteeism, when people are sick, they should take time to rest and stay away from work. Attending work while ill deprives people of opportunities to recuperate from illness thus may cause accumulating tiredness and distress. Bergström and associates (Bergström *et al.*, 2009) found that presenteeism was a significant risk factor for future sick leave among Swedish employees, indicative of serious health problems. Findings from a longitudinal study (Demerouti *et al.*, 2009) corroborate this claim of health risk, namely exhaustion was found to have a reciprocal relation with presenteeism in a sample of Dutch nurses. It seems that the act of presenteeism does carry a health risk for employees.

The recovery theory (Meijman and Mulder, 1998) also predicts other forms of strain resultant from coming to work when ill. No matter whether employees perform presenteeism due to their over-commitment to work (Hansen and Andersen, 2008), or due to fear of damaging consequences, because of inadequate recuperation, employees may develop negative attitudes towards their work (Demerouti *et al.*, 2009). A qualitative study (Baker-McCleary *et al.*, 2010) in Britain noted that employees who had experienced frequent presenteeism had a tendency to describe their jobs as being stressful and unsatisfying. In Sweden, presenteeism is found more common among medical staff with lower job satisfaction resulting from both the nature of their job and high attendance requirement (Aronsson *et al.*, 2000). Although existing Western studies have demonstrated the negative consequences of presenteeism for work outcomes, more evidence is clearly needed to establish any such effects with diverse occupational groups and across different cultural contexts. Recent empirical studies have supported the generic proposition of the recovery theory in the Chinese work context for both manual and non-manual workers (e.g. Chang and Lu, 2013; Lu and Kao, 2013), thus there is no *a priori* theoretical basis to predict that Chinese and British employees would suffer qualitatively different strains resultant of the act of presenteeism. We hypothesised that:

- H1. Presenteeism would be negatively related to job satisfaction and positively related to exhaustion for both Chinese and British employees.

However, the prevalence of the act of presenteeism may be different for Chinese and British employees due to their diverse cultural backgrounds. In the Chinese tradition, hardworking has long been praised as a virtue and taught very early on to children as an admirable personal character to acquire (Lu, 2009). A related quality of "persistence" has featured in a center place in the "Confucian work dynamism" which has been linked to the striking economic growth in the Greater China region (The Chinese Culture Connection, 1987). Both "hardworking" and "endurance" again

featured prominently in the Chinese work-related value system as embedded in the Confucian tradition (Huang *et al.*, 1998). Such work values (e.g. endurance, persistence, and hard work) may help to create dedicated, motivated, responsible workers, with a strong sense of commitment and loyalty to organizations/employers (Kahn, 1979). While research has confirmed that these effort-related work values lead to enhanced work outcomes among Chinese workers (Lu *et al.*, 2011), they may also help to fuel the conspicuous "long-hour working culture" in the Greater China region. A recent survey with a national representative sample in Taiwan revealed a striking work week of 48.96 hours (Lu, 2011a) and on a rising trend (Council of Labor Affairs, Executive Yuan, Taiwan, 2010). As there has been no survey on presenteeism in any of the Chinese societies, what proportion of this long working hour is contributed by the act of presenteeism is unknown. It is reasonable though to speculate that in keeping with the cultural imperative of hardworking and perseverance, Chinese employees are more likely to report to work even when ill, compared to their Western counterparts. Although there has been evidence showing that the long working hour culture exists in the UK too (Peiperl and Jones, 2001), official figures of weekly working hours put Taiwan in the third place worldwide, following Korea and Japan (Council of Labor Affairs, 2010). Furthermore, an exploratory study combining the use of an open-ended online survey with interviews revealed that Chinese employees sometimes commit sickness presenteeism as a career-promoting tactic, serving an impression management function of showing loyalty to co-workers and employers (Lu, 2012). We thus hypothesized that:

- H2. Sickness presenteeism would be more prevalent among Chinese employees than the British.

The role of supervisory support in the presenteeism process

As stated earlier, a few recent organisational studies have revealed that features in the work contexts (e.g. ease of job replacement) and personality traits (e.g. neuroticism, internal health locus of control) were related to the act of presenteeism (Johns, 2011; Löve *et al.*, 2010), their potential roles as buffers/vulnerability factors in mitigating/exacerbating the impact of presenteeism on employees have never been explored. We thus focused on perceived supervisory support as a vital pan-cultural work resource that may buffer the negative impact of presenteeism on work and well-being outcomes.

According to the job demands-resources (JD-R) model (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007), job resources are positively associated with work engagement. Such resources are those physical, social, or organisational aspects at the workplace that may reduce job demands and the associated physiological and psychological costs; be functional in achieving work goals; or stimulate personal growth, learning, and development. Job resources have motivational potential which not only lead to higher work engagement, low cynicism and excellent performance, but also offset the health damaging potential of job demands, namely, acting as buffers (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007; Bakker and Evangelia, 2008). Supervisor support is one such vital job resource which is positively associated with work engagement (Mauno *et al.*, 2007) and further buffers the relationships between job demands and strains (Xanthopoulou *et al.*, 2007). Supervisor support may satisfy employees' needs to belong, to be cared for and valued, which vitalizes their resilience to cope with hardship (e.g. working with physical discomfort).

There is unequivocal evidence demonstrating the beneficial effect of perceived supervisory support at work in the West and the East (Kamerman and Kahn, 1987; Lu, 2011b; Thomas and Ganster, 1995).

Our proposed moderating effect of supervisor support in the context of presenteeism may also be explained in the generic social support/resources framework such as the conservation of resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989), which states that people seek to acquire and maintain resources. Recent research has found that supervisory support not only enhanced job satisfaction, but also mitigated strains caused by work and family conflict for both Taiwanese and British employees (Lu *et al.*, 2009). As there is no *a priori* theoretical basis to predict that Chinese and British employees would benefit qualitatively differently from supervisory support, we thus hypothesised that:

- H3.* Supervisory support would buffer the relationships between presenteeism and strains (i.e. job satisfaction, exhaustion) for both Chinese and British employees. Specifically, the negative relationship between presenteeism and job satisfaction would be weaker when the level of supervisory support is high; the positive relationship between presenteeism and exhaustion would be weaker when the level of supervisory support is high.

Method

Participants

The participants in our study were full-time employees working in different organisations of diverse industries in Britain and Taiwan. We recruited participants from executive training programs in two prestigious universities in Taiwan and Northern England to maximize the heterogeneity of the sample. Participants completed structured questionnaires at their training classes (Taiwan sample) or through web transmission in their free time (British sample). At the end of the study, a total of 245 (Chinese, response rate = 92.7 per cent) and 128 (British, response rate = 74.9 per cent) participants returned usable questionnaires. The high response rate in Taiwan is probably attributable to the fact that the survey was conducted in class sessions. As a precaution, we systematically examined differences between responses given to the hardcopy and the electronic version of questionnaires in the mean scores within each sample. Analyses revealed no significant differences whatsoever. We thus concluded that no serious response set problems had occurred due to different forms of data collection.

The Chinese sample was 55.40 per cent male and 44.60 per cent female, with a mean age of 37.44 (SD = 7.69), and mean job tenure of 6.89 years (SD = 9.45). Over half of the sample (56.80 per cent) was married. Over half of the respondents (59.70 per cent) were managers at various levels. More people worked in service (42.70 per cent), and manufacturing (32.20 per cent) than other industries (e.g. education and medical/health care).

The British sample was 61.40 per cent male and 38.60 per cent female, with a mean age of 38.36 (SD = 10.02), and mean job tenure of 6.71 years (SD = 6.98). Over half of the sample (66.90 per cent) was married. Over half of the respondents (73.40 per cent) were managers at various levels. Although industry information was not available for the British respondents due to a clerical error, the university record showed that these respondents worked in diverse industries across Britain.

Instruments

The questionnaire survey was administered in English in Britain and in Chinese in Taiwan. All measures we used have established Chinese versions validated in previous studies with satisfactory reliability and validity. These references will be given along with the original English version when every scale is introduced in the following.

Presenteeism. We developed two items (listing in the Appendix) to access the act of “sickness presenteeism” (Aronsson *et al.*, 2000). We conducted exploratory factor analysis (EFA) in an independent sample of Chinese workers ($N = 307$) and confirmed that these two items represent a single construct, accounting for 88.30 per cent of the total variance. The question stem on the presenteeism scale was “Have you experienced the following in the last six months?”. Each item was rated on a four-point scale (1 = never, 4 = more than five times), with high scores representing more frequent act of presenteeism. The internal consistency α was 0.87 in the Chinese sample and 0.81 in the British sample.

Supervisory support. This was measured with four items employed by O’Driscoll *et al.* (2004; Siu *et al.*, 2010 for the Chinese version). Respondents were asked how often they had received four different types of support from their supervisors: helpful information or advice, sympathetic understanding and concern, clear and helpful feedback, and practical assistance. Each item was rated on a six-point scale (1 = never, 6 = very frequently), with higher scores indicating higher supervisor support. The internal consistency α was 0.94 in the Chinese sample and 0.92 in the British sample.

Job satisfaction. Job satisfaction was measured with three items (Cammann *et al.*, 1979; Lu *et al.*, 2009 for the Chinese version; e.g. “All in all, I am satisfied with my job”). Each item was rated on a 6-point scale (1 = never, 6 = very often), with higher scores indicating higher job satisfaction. The internal consistency α was 0.87 in the Chinese sample and 0.85 in the British sample.

Exhaustion. Exhaustion was measured with four items (Maslach and Jackson, 1986; Lu *et al.*, 2005 for the Chinese version; e.g. “I feel emotionally drained from my work”). Each item was rated on a seven-point scale (0 = never, 6 = every day), with high scores representing high levels of exhaustion. The internal consistency α was 0.87 in the Chinese sample and 0.85 in the British sample.

In addition, information on sex (coded female = 0, male = 1), marital status (coded married/cohabiting/remarried = 1, single/separated/widowed = 0), tenure on the job, and position (coded managers = 1, non-managers = 0) were recorded. These were intended as control variables.

Scale equivalence

It is necessary to establish the equivalence of measures before any inter-cultural comparisons. Following procedures recommended by Cheung and Rensvold (2002), we conducted Multigroup Confirmatory Factor Analysis (MGCFA) to test for the measurement equivalence in the two samples. MGCFA is a powerful procedure for detecting a range of cross-group differences, and provides an elegant way to examine a large number of issues via a single procedure, rather than many separate procedures. The analysis was conducted with Amos 16.0, which allows for a comparison of constraint/unconstraint model. Cheung and Rensvold (2002) suggested that ΔGFI or ΔCFI are superior to $\Delta\chi^2$ because these indices were not easily affected by sample size. As shown in the upper portion of Table I, the values of ΔGFI and ΔCFI did not meet the requirements of measurement invariance ($\Delta\text{GFI} > 0$; $\Delta\text{CFI} \leq -0.01$). As responses to

Models	χ^2	df	<i>p</i>	GFI	Δ GFI	CFI	Δ CFI	RMSEA
Unconstraint	505.27	180	<0.001	0.91		0.91		0.06
Constraint	120.17	11	<0.001	0.91	0.00	0.90	0.01	0.06
Measurement model (Chinese sample)								
Four-factor model ^a	128.12	59	<0.001	0.94	–	0.98	–	0.06
Three-factor model ^b	539.00	62	<0.001	0.77	–	0.83	–	0.16
One-factor model ^c	1951.38	65	<0.001	0.28	–	0.31	–	0.31
Measurement model (British sample)								
Four-factor model ^a	68.72	90	<0.001	0.93	–	0.99	–	0.04
Three-factor model ^b	172.75	62	<0.001	0.82	–	0.88	–	0.12
One-factor model ^c	563.82	65	<0.001	0.31	–	0.43	–	0.25

Table I. Summary of the measurement equivalence analysis and measurement models comparison

Notes: ^aThe four-factor model assumes that presenteeism, supervisory support, job satisfaction, and exhaustion are four distinct factors. ^bThe three-factor model assumes that presenteeism and supervisory support are distinct factors, but all items for job satisfaction and exhaustion loaded on the same factor. ^cThe one-factor model assumes that all items for presenteeism, supervisory support, job satisfaction, and exhaustion loaded on the same factor

psychosocial constructs are susceptible to cultural conditions, a slight deviation from measurement equivalence is allowed in social science research. To be on the safer side though, we proceeded with hypothesis testing based on correlation patterns (*H1*, *H3*) separately for the Chinese and British samples.

Results

Descriptive statistics

Prior to the hypotheses testing, bi-variable correlations were computed and results shown in Table II. Presenteeism correlated positively with exhaustion in both samples, and negatively with job satisfaction in the British sample. The correlations were generally stronger in the British than in the Chinese sample.

Hypothesis testing

To ensure that all research variables in the present study were distinct constructs and the results were not caused by potential bias of common method variance (CMV), we compared separate measurement models for the measures employed separately in the British and Chinese samples. We compared a hypothesised four-factor model (presenteeism, supervisory support, job satisfaction, and exhaustion are four distinct factors) with two alternative models (three-factor and one-factor, see the notes for Table I for details). The results presented in the lower portion of Table I suggest that the four-factor model fitted the data better than the alternative models in both samples, thus supporting the construct validity of our research model.

Our *H1* and *H3* were then tested with a series of hierarchical regression analyses. We first entered all the control variables in the regression models. We then entered presenteeism (P), followed by supervisory support (Sup). At the final step, the interaction term (P X Sup) was entered. The results are reported in Table III (Chinese sample) and Table IV (British sample). Having controlled for demographic effects, presenteeism significantly predicted exhaustion for both the Chinese and British employees. Thus, *H1* was partially supported pertaining to exhaustion. More importantly, supervisory support did moderate the presenteeism-exhaustion relation

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Sex ^a	1								
Age	0.11	0.20*	0.03	0.03	0.11	-0.11	-0.05	0.01	-0.14
Marriage ^b	0.14*	1	0.27**	0.48***	0.30***	-0.25**	-0.20*	-0.13	0.20*
Tenure	0.40***	0.42***	1	0.33***	0.31***	-0.09	-0.01	0.04	0.16
Position ^c	-0.04	0.60***	0.22**	1	0.24**	-0.11	-0.11	-0.03	0.13
Presenteeism	-0.10	0.42***	0.30***	0.09	1	-0.09	-0.09	0.09	0.08
Supervisory support	-0.02	-0.05	-0.06	-0.13*	0.14*	1	-0.11	0.45***	-0.26***
Exhaustion	-0.12*	-0.08	-0.02	-0.01	0.01	0.01	1	-0.26**	0.38***
Job satisfaction	0.02	-0.10	-0.08	-0.07	-0.09	0.25***	-0.05	1	-0.39***
		0.21***	0.24***	0.07	0.15	-0.04	0.27***	-0.43	1

Notes: ^aSex: 0 = female, 1 = male. ^bMarriage: 0 = single separated/widowed, 1 = married/cohabiting/remarried. ^cPosition: 0 = non-manager, 1 = manager. The upper triangle is the correlation matrix for the British sample, the lower triangle is the correlation matrix for the Chinese sample. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Table II.
Correlation matrices for all variables in two samples

Table III.
Hierarchical regression
analysis predicting job
satisfaction and
exhaustion: results for the
Chinese sample

Step	Predictor	Job satisfaction		Exhaustion	
		β	ΔR^2	β	ΔR^2
1	Sex ^a	-0.01		-0.12	
	Age	0.06		-0.04	
	Marriage ^b	0.23**		-0.03	
	Seniority	0.09		0.01	
	Position ^c	0.05	0.08**	-0.13	0.05*
2	Presenteeism (P)	-0.03	0.00	0.28***	0.08***
3	Supervisory support (Sup)	0.34***	0.11***	-0.09	0.01
4	P × Sup	0.04	0.00	-0.13*	0.02*
	R ²	0.20		0.15	
	F (df)	6.78*** (8, 221)		4.96*** (8, 221)	

Notes: ^aSex: 0 = female, 1 = male. ^bMarriage: 0 = single separated/widowed, 1 = married/cohabiting/remarried. ^cPosition: 0 = non-manager, 1 = manager. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Table IV.
Hierarchical regression
analysis predicting job
satisfaction and
exhaustion: results for the
British sample

Step	Predictor	Job satisfaction		Exhaustion	
		β	ΔR^2	β	ΔR^2
1	Sex ^a	-0.17		0.05	
	Age	0.23*		-0.19	
	Marriage ^b	0.13		0.11	
	Seniority	-0.05		0.04	
	Position ^c	0.01	0.08	0.09	0.06
2	Presenteeism (P)	-0.14	0.05*	0.36***	0.13***
3	Supervisory support (Sup)	0.40***	0.14***	-0.22*	0.05*
4	P × Sup	-0.01	0.00	-0.18*	0.03*
	R ²	0.27		0.27	
	F (df)	4.53*** (8, 99)		4.61*** (8, 101)	

Notes: ^aSex: 0 = female, 1 = male. ^bMarriage: 0 = single separated/widowed, 1 = married/cohabiting/remarried. ^cPosition: 0 = non-manager, 1 = manager. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

for both the Chinese and British employees. Regarding the moderating effect of supervisory support on the presenteeism-exhaustion relationship for the Chinese employees (see Figure 1), the simple slopes were not different between the high and low support groups ($t = 0.98, ns$). Regarding the moderating effect of supervisory support on the presenteeism-exhaustion relationship for the British employees (see Figure 2), the simple slopes were statistically different between the high and low support groups ($t = 2.11, p < 0.05$). Figure 2 thus shows that the positive relationship between presenteeism and exhaustion was weaker for employees with higher level of supervisory support. Thus, *H3* was partially supported pertaining to exhaustion.

To test for *H2*, we compared scores on presenteeism, supervisory support, job satisfaction, and exhaustion between the two samples. As shown in Table V, Chinese employees reported much more frequent act of presenteeism than their British

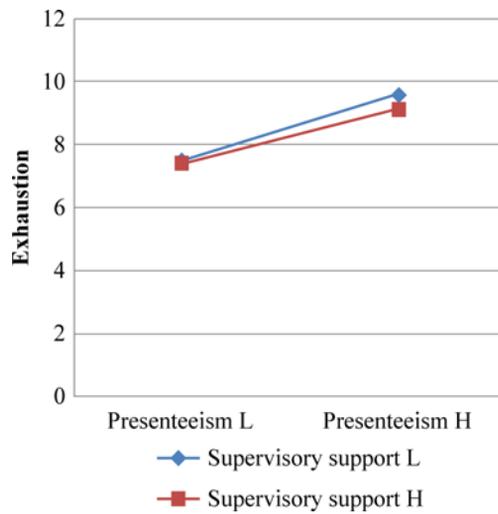


Figure 1. The moderating effects of supervisory support on the relationship between presenteeism and exhaustion in the Chinese sample

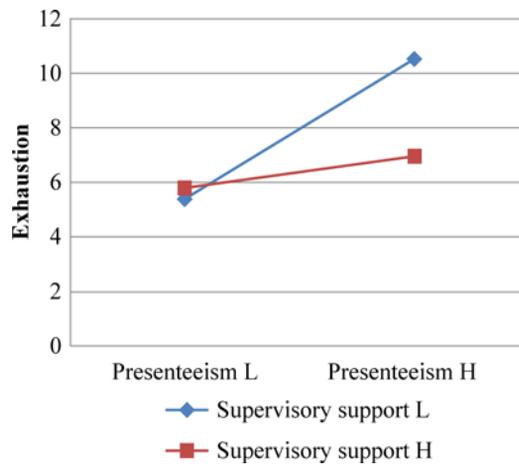


Figure 2. The moderating effects of supervisory support on the relationship between presenteeism and exhaustion in the British sample

Variable	Chinese			British			<i>t</i>	df
	<i>M</i>	SD	α	<i>M</i>	SD	α		
Presenteeism	5.52	1.91	0.87	4.81	1.99	0.81	3.40**	428
Supervisory support	15.32	5.09	0.94	14.52	5.40	0.92	1.44	425
Job satisfaction	10.87	2.48	0.87	11.70	2.60	0.85	-3.13**	428
Exhaustion	8.53	4.89	0.87	7.27	5.16	0.85	2.41*	429

Notes: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Table V. Comparison of means on presenteeism, supervisory support and work outcomes across nations

counterparts. Thus, *H2* was fully supported. However, it is also interesting to note that Chinese employees reported higher levels of strains as well, in the form of lower job satisfaction and higher exhaustion than their British counterparts.

Discussion

The aim of the present study was two-fold: to examine the impact presenteeism had on employees' work well-being across the Eastern and Western work contexts, and to incorporate supervisory support as a stress buffer in the presenteeism process. For both the Chinese and British employees, we found a positive association between presenteeism and exhaustion. We also found that supervisory support attenuated the relationship between presenteeism and exhaustion. In addition, we discovered that the Chinese employees committed more frequent act of sickness presenteeism and suffered greater strains than their British counterparts. The following discussion will be organised around two themes, contrasting the darker side of presenteeism with potential protectors against its impact in today's working world.

The darker side of presenteeism: hardworking with a price

The thrust of our study is that we used a cross-cultural design to systematically examine the effects of presenteeism on both health and work attitudes. We found a culturally uniformed damaging effect of presenteeism on exhaustion. Our findings corroborate results from some existing Western studies that found presenteeism to be negatively related to employees' health (Aronsson *et al.*, 2000; Caverley *et al.*, 2007; Claus and Johan, 2008; Elstad and Vabo, 2008; Johns, 2011), reciprocally related to exhaustion (Demerouti *et al.*, 2009). Our findings extend the damaging effect of presenteeism on strains to Chinese employees working in a very different socio-cultural-economic environment as the Scandinavian and North American societies surveyed in the previously mentioned studies. It is worth pointing out that we have taken significant steps in purifying the conceptualisation of presenteeism to relate to *only* the act of sickness presenteeism, and measured it as a continuous variable. Our research thus contributes to the field in establishing some cultural generalizability of its existing findings, and developing a more viable measure of the focal behaviour.

Our results generally support the hypothesis pertaining to health, which can be explained by the recovery theory (Meijman and Mulder, 1998). Our findings of Chinese employees committing even more frequent presenteeism should ring a warning bell to the "long-hour working culture" prevalent in the Chinese societies. Indeed, Chinese employees reported higher levels of strains, both exhaustion and job dissatisfaction, than their British counterparts. It seems that excessive hardworking, whether willingly practiced as a work ethics, or acted as a career-promoting tactic (Lu, 2012) to conform to the cultural imperative, brings a price tag of health consequences. Thus, attending work while ill deprives people of opportunities to recuperate from strains and illness, and fuels the dynamism of presenteeism and strain in the long run (Demerouti *et al.*, 2009). Namely, if employees go to work in spite of ill health, depriving themselves of recovery opportunities, they might pay the cost of suffering more from the accumulated tiredness and fatigue. With evidence of the damaging effects of presenteeism on health for employees in Western and Chinese work settings, the portrayal of "bad presenteeism" in contemporary literature is largely substantiated by empirical research. It is imperative now to find out ways to mitigate or contain the

health damages caused by the act of presenteeism. A wide array of resources should be explored, especially when over-working seems inevitable in a tough worldwide economic climate (Peiperl and Jones, 2001).

Mobilizing resources in the presenteeism process: the role of supervisory support

Jointly informed by the JD-R model (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007) and COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989), we found that supervisory support had a pan-cultural buffering effect on the presenteeism-exhaustion relation for both the Chinese and British employees. Very few existing Western studies have examined the role of supervisory support in presenteeism, all have viewed it as an antecedent to the act. For instance, Caverley *et al.* (2007) found that supervisory support was related to presenteeism. Baker-McCleary *et al.* (2010) discovered in a qualitative study in the UK that supervisory support was pivotal for employees deciding not to come to work when ill. In the West, an understanding supervisor presumably relieves subordinates from fear of leaving a bad impression when taking sick leaves, thus there is no need to use presenteeism as either a career-protecting or a career-promoting tactic. However, factors involved in deciding to turn up to work while ill may be very different for the Chinese employees. As the Chinese culture puts so much emphasis on hardworking and perseverance, even with a sympathetic direct supervisor, employees may still push themselves to work to present a good image to a wider audience, including co-workers, managers of higher levels, and even customers. Namely, corroborating what was revealed in Lu's exploratory study (2012), sickness presenteeism may be used as either a career-protecting or a career-promoting tactic in the Chinese work context. It is also possible that an understanding supervisor would instill the desire to pay back ("*bao*" as a Chinese virtue) which drives employees to come to work despite illness, as a show of loyalty. These culture-bound psycho-social processes need to be further explored to highlight the universality of the presenteeism phenomenon along with its cultural specificities.

Our findings of the buffering effect of supervisory support advance research of the JD-R model and COR by extending the protective effect of this crucial job resource to the context of presenteeism. The stress buffering role of supervisory support on health also compliments the protective role of team support as found in a New Zealand study (Dew *et al.*, 2005). When these researchers interviewed nurses in focus groups about their experiences of presenteeism, some nurses used a metaphor of "sanctuary" and described their teams as "family". Those nurses were highly engaged in their jobs and with the help of their "family", they worked through mild sickness, and eventually felt better or ignored discomfort altogether. It thus seems that with sufficient social support at work, from supervisors or coworkers, the damaging effects of attending work while ill may be ameliorated.

However, we did not find any buffering effects of supervisory support on job satisfaction for British or Chinese employees. Our results support the "matching hypothesis" in research of the JD-R model. De Jonge and Dormann (2006) argued that buffer effects should occur when similar types of demands (e.g. emotional demands) match with similar types of resources (e.g. emotional support), and produce similar types of outcomes (e.g. emotional exhaustion). The supervisory support is construed mainly as a form of psychosocial support, which matches more closely to exhaustion as an emotional work outcome than job satisfaction as an attitudinal work outcome. Our results advance research of the JD-R model by providing empirical support for the

“matching hypothesis” in the pan-cultural presenteeism context. Unlike the unequivocal support for the motivational path driven by job resources (main effects) in the JD-R model, various reviews have found only modest and inconsistent support for its buffering hypothesis (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007; Bakker and Evangelia, 2008; De Jonge and Dormann, 2006; Xanthopoulou *et al.*, 2007). One way forward for this line of research is to focus on testing the “matching hypothesis” in different work stress contexts (e.g. presenteeism or job insecurity) and different cultures (e.g. hardworking Chinese or happy-go-lucky South Asian societies). Future research is also needed to delineate the exact mechanisms of the buffering effects of supervisory support, for example, through satisfying employees’ needs to belong, to be cared for and valued, or through consolidating employees’ identification with the job and loyalty to the employer or organisation. Indeed for Chinese workers, loyalty or *bao* (paying back) has been identified as an effective stress buffer (Lu *et al.*, 2010).

Limitations and implications

It should be kept in mind that there are limitations in this study. Firstly, our survey was conducted using the self-report scales which may raise questions of CMV (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003). However, the results of confirmatory factor analyses showed that all variables could be empirically distinguished and thus not subject to CMV. It would have been desirable if data from multiple sources were available, for instance the supervisors’ reports on support provided to their subordinates. Second, to our knowledge, this is the first study on presenteeism involving Chinese workers in a cross-cultural comparison. However, the convenient samples we had in Taiwan and Britain may limit the generalisation of our findings. Indeed, taking an executive education/training may be a sign of high work commitment, and our samples may not represent the general population in both countries. Although our use of business school alumni ensured some heterogeneity of the samples, the small size of the British sample may constrain the statistical power for hypothesis testing. Future studies should strive for larger and more representative samples to establish the generalizability of findings in the present study and those from Western studies. Finally, our study is cross-sectional, which precludes any causal inferences.

Even with the previously mentioned limitations, our perspective is unique as we focused on the effects of presenteeism and the role of supervisory support as a buffer across the cultural divide of the East and the West. What we found in the present study bears implications for managerial practices. As we have demonstrated, presenteeism had a negative impact on employees’ health regardless of the cultural context. Thus, we suggest that organisations and managers should be more vigilant to employees’ act of presenteeism, especially in the hardworking Chinese societies. Although the act helps to get work done, the wear and tear will show on employees’ cumulative exhaustion, which in longer term lead to increased organisational costs on health care and turnover management. Nurturing an organisational culture of support, practicing adequate absence management, and establishing job replacement mechanisms should lessen the work context pressure on employees which force them to work when ill. Giving employees adequate opportunities to recover from illness and stress is in the interest of the organisations.

For supervisors, supporting subordinates when they come to work with personal discomfort will help mitigate the noxious health effects of presenteeism. Meanwhile the

support may help to build a protective team/work environment which can satisfy employees' various psychosocial needs such as belonging, care, and value, to cultivate their personal resilience to future challenges.

For individual employees, coming to work while ill may present a resilient and diligent image which might protect and even promote one's career, presenteeism may ultimately be counterproductive as it will lead to a deterioration of well-being. Employees thus should be aware that presenteeism may be good for career in the short-term but in the long term it will create more problems. As such employees better approach presenteeism as a health risk, namely with both prevention and mitigation strategies. Taking necessary leave of absence when ill may be more beneficial to one's career than pushing oneself to work.

To conclude, we have undertaken the first step to investigate the act of presenteeism in a cross-cultural context. We have clarified that there are indeed negative effects of the act of presenteeism on strain for both the Chinese and British employees. We have also established supervisory support as a critical work resource attenuating the effects of presenteeism on exhaustion.

References

- Aronsson, G. and Gustafsson, K. (2005), "Sickness presenteeism: prevalence, attendance-pressure factors, and an outline of a model for research", *Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine*, Vol. 47 No. 9, pp. 958-966.
- Aronsson, G., Gustafsson, K. and Dallner, M. (2000), "Sick but yet at work. An empirical study of sickness presenteeism", *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health*, Vol. 54 No. 7, pp. 502-509.
- Baker-McCleary, D., Greasley, K., Dale, J. and Griffith, F. (2010), "Absence management and presenteeism: the pressures on employees to attend work and the impact of attendance on performance", *Human Resource Management Journal*, Vol. 20 No. 3, pp. 311-328.
- Bakker, A.B. and Demerouti, E. (2007), "The job demands-resources model: state of the art", *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, Vol. 22 No. 3, pp. 309-328.
- Bakker, A.B. and Evangelia, D. (2008), "Towards a model of work engagement", *Career Development International*, Vol. 13 No. 3, pp. 209-223.
- Bergström, G., Bodin, L., Hagberg, J., Aronsson, G. and Josephson, M. (2009), "Sickness presenteeism today, sickness absenteeism tomorrow? A prospective study on sickness presenteeism and future sickness absenteeism", *Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine*, Vol. 51 No. 6, pp. 629-638.
- Burton, W.N., Chen, C.Y., Conti, D.J., Schultz, A.B. and Edington, D.W. (2006), "The association between health risk change and presenteeism change", *Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine*, Vol. 48 No. 4, pp. 252-263.
- Camman, C., Fichman, M., Jenkins, D. and Klesh, J. (1979), *The Michigan Organizational Assessment Questionnaire. Manuscript*, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI.
- Caverley, N., Cunningham, J.B. and MacGregor, J.N. (2007), "Sickness presenteeism, sickness absenteeism, and health following restructuring in a public service organization", *Journal of Management Studies*, Vol. 44 No. 2, pp. 304-319.
- Chang, Y.Y. and Lu, L. (2013), "The moderating effects of self-efficacy in the family-to-work conflict process", *Research in Applied Psychology*, Vol. 57, pp. 117-154.
- Cheung, G.W. and Rensvold, R.B. (2002), "Evaluating goodness-of-fit indexes for testing measurement invariance", *Structural Equation Modeling*, Vol. 9 No. 2, pp. 233-255.

- Claus, D.H. and Johan, H.A. (2008), "Going ill to work: what personal circumstances, attitudes and work-related factors are associated with sickness presenteeism?", *Social Science & Medicine*, Vol. 67 No. 6, pp. 956-964.
- Collins, J.J., Baase, C.M., Sharda, C.E., Ozminkowski, R.J., Nicholson, S., Billotti, G.M. and Berger, M.L. (2005), "The assessment of chronic health conditions on work performance, absence, and total economic impact for employers", *Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine*, Vol. 47 No. 6, pp. 547-557.
- Cooper, C. (1996), "Hot under the collar", *Times Higher Education Supplement*, Vol. 21, p. 15.
- Council of Labor Affairs, Executive Yuan, Taiwan (2010), "Labor statistics", available at: <http://win.dgbas.gov.tw/dgbas04/bc5/earning/ht456.asp>
- De Jonge, J. and Dormann, C. (2006), "Stressors, resources and strain at work: a longitudinal test of the triple match principle", *Journal of Applied Psychology*, Vol. 91 No. 5, pp. 1359-1374.
- Demerouti, E., le Blanc, P.M., Bakker, A.B., Schaufeli, W.B. and Hox, J. (2009), "Present but sick: a three-wave study on job demands, presenteeism and burnout", *Career Development International*, Vol. 14 No. 1, pp. 50-68.
- Dew, K., Keefe, V. and Small, K. (2005), "Choosing to work when sick: workplace presenteeism", *Social Science and Medicine*, Vol. 60 No. 10, pp. 2273-2282.
- Elstad, J.I. and Vabo, M. (2008), "Job stress, sickness absence and sickness presenteeism in Nordic elderly care", *Scandinavian Journal of Public Health*, Vol. 36 No. 5, pp. 467-474.
- Hansen, C.D. and Andersen, J.H. (2008), "Going ill to work: what personal circumstances, attitudes and work-related factors are associated with sickness presenteeism?", *Social Science and Medicine*, Vol. 67 No. 6, pp. 956-964.
- Hemp, P. (2004), "Presenteeism: at work – but out of it", *Harvard Business Review*, Vol. 82 No. 10, pp. 49-58.
- Hobfoll, S.E. (1989), "Conservation of resources: a new attempt at conceptualizing stress", *The American Psychologist*, Vol. 44 No. 3, pp. 513-524.
- Huang, H.J., Eveleth, D.M. and Huo, Y.P. (1998), "Chinese work-related value system: developing a 'GCF-LEACH' framework for comparative studies among Chinese societies", paper presented at The Inaugural Conference of the Asia Academy of Management, Hong Kong, PRC, October.
- Johns, G. (2010), "Presenteeism in the workplace: a review and research agenda", *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, Vol. 31 No. 4, pp. 519-542.
- Johns, G. (2011), "Attendance dynamics at work: the antecedents and correlates of presenteeism, absenteeism, and productivity loss", *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, Vol. 16 No. 4, pp. 483-500.
- Kahn, H. (1979), *World Economic Development: 1979 and Beyond*, Croom Helm, London.
- Kammerman, S.B. and Kahn, A.J. (1987), *The Responsive Workplace: Employers and a Changing Labor Force*, Columbia University Press, New York, NY.
- Löve, J., Grimby-Ekman, A., Eklöf, M., Hagberg, M. and Dellve, L. (2010), "Pushing oneself too hard: performance-based self-esteem as a predictor of sickness presenteeism among young adult women and men: a cohort study", *Journal of Environment Medicine*, Vol. 52 No. 6, pp. 603-609.
- Lu, L. (2009), "I or we': family socialization values in a national probability sample in Taiwan", *Asian Journal of Social Psychology*, Vol. 12, pp. 145-150.
- Lu, L. (2011a), "Working hours and personal preference among Taiwanese employees", *International Journal of Workplace Health Management*, Vol. 4 No. 3, pp. 244-256.

-
- Lu, L. (2011b), "A Chinese longitudinal study on work/family enrichment", *Career Development International*, Vol. 16 No. 4, pp. 385-400.
- Lu, L. (2012), *A Taiwan-British Comparison on Presenteeism Among Service Industry Workers: Motives, Antecedents and Consequences*, Sayling Wen Cultural & Educational Foundation, Taipei.
- Lu, L. and Kao, S.F. (2013), "The reciprocal relations of pressure, work/family interference, and role satisfaction: evidence from a longitudinal study in Taiwan", *Human Resource Management*, Vol. 52, pp. 353-374.
- Lu, L., Lee, H.M. and Shieh, T.Y. (2005), "Occupational stress, health and occupational burnout among dentists: a study of clinical dentists in Kaohsiung", *Research in Applied Psychology*, Vol. 27, pp. 59-80.
- Lu, L., Siu, O.L. and Lu, C.Q. (2010), "Does loyalty protect Chinese workers from stress? The role of affective organizational commitment in the Greater China region", *Stress & Health*, Vol. 26, pp. 161-168.
- Lu, L., Kao, S.F., Siu, O.L. and Lu, C.Q. (2011), "Work stress, Chinese work values, and work well-being in the greater China", *Journal of Social Psychology*, Vol. 151 No. 6, pp. 767-783.
- Lu, L., Kao, S.F., Cooper, C.L., Allen, T.D., Lapierre, L.M., O'Driscoll, M., Poelmans, S.A.Y., Sanchez, J.I. and Spector, P.E. (2009), "Work resources, work-to-family conflict, and its consequences: a Taiwanese-British cross-cultural comparison", *International Journal of Stress Management*, Vol. 16 No. 1, pp. 25-44.
- Maslach, C. and Jackson, S. (1986), *Maslach Burnout Inventory Manual*, 2nd ed., Consulting Psychologists Press, Palo Alto, CA.
- Mauno, S., Kinnunen, U. and Ruokolainen, M. (2007), "Job demands and resources as antecedents of work engagement: a longitudinal study", *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, Vol. 70 No. 1, pp. 149-171.
- Meijman, T.F. and Mulder, G. (1998), "Psychological aspects of workload", in Drenth, P.J., Thierry, H. and de Wolff, C.J. (Eds), *Handbook of Work and Organizational Psychology*, 2nd ed., Taylor & Francis, Hove, pp. 5-33.
- O'Driscoll, M.P., Brough, P. and Kalliath, T.J. (2004), "Work/family conflict, psychological well-being, satisfaction and social support: a longitudinal study in New Zealand", *Equal Opportunities International*, Vol. 23 Nos 1/2, pp. 36-56.
- Peiperl, M. and Jones, B. (2001), "Workaholics and overworkers: productivity or pathology?", *Group & Organization Management*, Vol. 26 No. 3, pp. 369-393.
- Podsakoff, P., MacKenzie, S., Lee, J. and Podsakoff, N. (2003), "Common method biases in behavioral research: a critical review of the literature and recommended remedies", *Journal of Applied Psychology*, Vol. 88, pp. 879-903.
- Robertson, I. and Cooper, C.L. (2011), *Well-being: Productivity and Happiness at Work*, Palgrave Macmillan, Hampshire.
- Siu, O.L., Lu, J.F., Brough, P., Lu, C.Q., Bakker, A.B., Kalliath, T., O'Driscoll, M., Phillips, D.R., Chen, W.Q., Lo, D., Sit, C. and Shi, K. (2010), "Role resources and work-family enrichment: the role of work engagement", *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, Vol. 77 No. 3, pp. 470-480.
- The Chinese Culture Connection (1987), "Chinese values and the search for culture-free dimensions of culture", *Journal of Cross-cultural Psychology*, Vol. 18 No. 2, pp. 143-164.
- Thomas, L.T. and Ganster, D.C. (1995), "Impact of family-supportive work variables on work-family conflict and strain: a control perspective", *Journal of Applied Psychology*, Vol. 80 No. 1, pp. 6-15.

Turpin, R.S., Ozminkowski, R.J., Sharda, C.E., Collins, J.J., Berger, M.L., Billotti, G.M. and Nicholson, S. (2004), "Reliability and validity of the Stanford Presenteeism Scale", *Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine*, Vol. 46 No. 11, pp. 1123-1133.

Xanthopoulou, D., Bakker, A.B., Dollard, M.F., Demerouti, E., Schaufeli, W.B., Taris, T.W. and Schreurs, P.J.G. (2007), "When do job demands particularly predict burnout? The moderating role of job resources", *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, Vol. 22, pp. 766-786.

Further reading

Johns, G. (2012), "Presenteeism: a short history and a cautionary tale", in Houdmont, J., Leka, S. and Sinclair, R. (Eds), *Contemporary Occupational Health Psychology: Global Perspectives on Research and Practice (Vol. 2)*, John Wiley & Sons, Malden, MA, pp. 204-220.

Appendix. Items assessing the act of sickness presenteeism

Have you experienced the following in the last six months?

- Although you feel sick, you still force yourself to go to work.
- Although you have physical symptoms such as headache or backache, you still force yourself to go to work.

About the authors

Luo Lu, DPhil, University of Oxford, UK, is currently the Distinguished Professor in Department of Business Administration, National Taiwan University, Taiwan. Her major research interests are: culture and self, stress and well-being, and organisational behaviours. She has published more than 150 papers in referred journals.

Cary L. Cooper is the Distinguished Professor of Organisational Psychology and Health at Lancaster University in England. He is Chair of the Academy of Social Sciences, President of the British Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy and Chair of The Sunningdale Institute (think tank) in the UK's National School of Government.

Hui Yen Lin is a doctoral student in the Department of Business Administration, National Taiwan University. The research fields of Lin include work stress, work values, and human recourses. Her research papers have been published in *Chinese Journal of Psychology* and *Taiwan Academy of Management Journal*.