School ethical climate and teachers' voluntary absence

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to offer a theoretical framework for linking school ethical climate with teachers' voluntary absence. The paper attempts to explain this relationship using the concept of affective organizational commitment.

Design/methodology/approach – Participants were 1,016 school teachers from 35 high schools in Israel. Data were collected by self-report questionnaires and tested against archival data. The GENMOD procedure of SAS was applied. This procedure enables regression models for variables which are not necessarily normally distributed – such as absence – to be fit and also to account for the intraclass-correlations within schools. Absence was measured by frequency of absence events, and ethical climate was measured by two dimensions: caring and formal.

Findings – Results show that caring and formal ethical climates are both related to teacher absence. Affective commitment was found to mediate the relationship between formal ethical climate and absence frequency. This is not true for the ethical climate of caring.

Practical implications – School principals may reduce voluntary absence by creating an ethical climate focused on caring and clear and just rules and procedures.

Originality/value – Whereas past research on work absence focused primarily on personal antecedents, the present study addresses factors embedded in school ethics. The results contribute to knowledge of the influence of organizational context on absence behavior.

Keywords Ethics, Affective psychology, Absenteeism, Teachers, Israel

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Work absence is a conspicuous problem in educational institutions. In 2000, pay for absent teachers was estimated as $2 billion per year in the USA, and €300 million in the UK (Bowers and Mclver, 2000). In a recent large-scale study in Israel, the site of the present study, the number of absence days of teachers in the public system (approximately 60,000 teachers) was estimated as 8.65 days on average (Rosenblatt and Shirom, 2005). In another study of 200 Israeli school teachers, Gaziel (2004) reported that the average number of teacher absence days within a three month period ranged from 3.40 to 6.00. The overall cost of teacher absenteeism in Israel in 2002-2003 was US$53 million, estimated by aggregating the salaries of absent teachers with those of the teachers used to replace them (Rosenblatt and Shirom, 2003). Although exact comparisons are almost impossible to make, because of differences in definition and criteria of absenteeism, these numbers indicate the scope of the problem.

Work absence is "the lack of physical presence at a behavior setting when and where one is expected to be" (Harrison and Price, 2003, p. 204). Sagie (1998) distinguished between two basic types of absence:

(1) voluntary absences, which are normally under the direct control of the employee and are frequently utilized for personal issues, such as testing the market for alternative prospects of employment; and

(2) involuntary absences, which are usually beyond the employee's immediate control (e.g. bereavement leave).

The present study focuses on voluntary absence, because this type is more likely to be amenable to legitimate managerial intervention.

Recent reviews of the literature emphasize absence as a variable related not only to demographic characteristics of individuals but also to organizational environment and social context (Felfe and Schyns, 2004; Martocchio and Jimeno, 2003; Xie and Johns, 2000). In educational research, teacher absenteeism was found to be related to a culture consisting of attendance norms (Bowers, 2001; Myburgh and Poggenpoel, 2002), and principals' supportive leadership style (Imants and Van Zoelen, 1995; Scott-Norton, 1998). These studies showed that teachers react to undesired social elements in their workplace context by staying away from work.

In the present study we extend the previous work to include ethical climate, that direct the moral conduct of school teachers. Consistent with the above line of research in educational institutions, we expect teacher absenteeism to increase when they perceive their schools' climate to be unethical. The rationale for this argument dates back to Simpson (1976, p. 14), who drew attention to the "repeater phenomenon", linking employees' frequent absences to "the moral structure of an organization" (Simpson, 1976, p. 15) rather than to the employees' health or personalities. Subsequent research also showed that some aspects of ethics and morality have a detrimental effect on employee absenteeism (De Boer *et al.*, 2002; Staw *et al.*, 1994; Vardi, 2001). The reasons for this relationship, however, have not been thoroughly investigated.

Based on a rich body of research on organizational commitment (Meyer and Allen, 1997; Cohen, 2003), we suggest that work commitment may offer some explanation to the relationship posited between school ethics and absenteeism. The purpose of this article is to offer a framework that links voluntary absence with schools' ethical climate and explain this relationship using the concept of affective organizational commitment.

Theoretical background
Ethical climate in school
A substantial amount of research on organizational ethical climate has been conducted in the last two decades, primarily driven by Victor and Cullen's (1987, 1988) pioneering work. Victor and Cullen (1988) conceptualized ethical climate in terms of employee perceptions of organizational norms regarding work behaviors and decisions with ethical content. Ethical climate is a reflection of ethical elements in the work environment as perceived by its individual members. It serves as a perceptual lens through which employees assess situations that help them identify ethical issues and solve ethical problems (Cullen *et al.*, 2003).

This conceptualization of ethical climate is one feature of psychological climate, which is "a moral construct comprising an individual's psychological meaningful representations of proximal organizational structures, processes, and events" (Parker

et al., 2003). Distinct from social climate, psychological climate is a property of the individual rather than of the organization, yet as mentioned by Brown and Leigh (1996), organizational features (as well as individual features) may be responsible for individual variations in the perceptions and evaluations that constitute psychological climate. Normally, psychological climate would be measured at the individual level of analysis. That way, it could explain individual level attitudes and behaviors, such as job involvement and performance (Brown and Leigh, 1996). We propose that ethical climate is essentially psychological climate, focused on ethical features in one's school environment.

Victor and Cullen (1988) have proposed a two-dimensional model of ethical climates. One dimension represents basic ethical approaches: egoism, benevolence, and principle. The second represents levels of analysis: individual, local, and cosmopolitan. The intersections of these two dimensions produce nine potential ethical climates. In a factor analysis performed by these authors, the nine factors were collapsed into five ethical climate factors:

(1) caring;

(2) instrumental;

(3) rules;

(4) law-and-code; and

(5) independence.

This classification (or variations thereof) was used in numerous studies that tested the original theory of Victor and Cullen (e.g. Appelbaum *et al.*, 2005; Kelly and Dorsch, 1991; Peterson, 2002; Upchurch and Ruhland, 1996; Wimbush and Shepard, 1994).

A study conducted by Rosenblatt and Peled (2002) investigated these five dimensions of ethical climate in Israeli schools. They identified two conspicuous climate types: caring and formal (the latter characterized by both rules and law-and-code). The two climates emerged as the most powerful and valid predictors of school outcomes. Because of their relevance to the Israeli educational system, we will adopt Rosenblatt and Peled (2002) constructs in our study.

Caring climate is characterized by the employees' genuine interest in each other's welfare inside and outside the organization. At work, a caring group shows concern for all organizational stakeholders affected by their decisions. A caring climate is particularly relevant in professional, service, or public organizations, where the value of caring is intrinsic to the type of work and relationships with clients, and permeates other facets of organizational life. A typical example is the educational institution, where training and education are often provided with caring, support, and nurturing.

A formal climate emphasizes organizational rules and professional codes, and encourages respect for them. In such a climate employees are expected to follow the rules of the organization and adhere to the codes and regulations of their profession. It is through ethical rules that everyone in the organization learns how to behave, which values are held in high esteem, and which behaviors are rewarded (Appelbaum *et al.*, 2005). Because a formal ethical climate is based on fair resource distribution and transparent procedures, it is perceived as protecting employees from abusive treatment by management and others. This type of climate is characteristic of educational systems in the public sector, which tend to be bureaucratic in their adherence to a firm set of rules, thus protecting teachers from violation of their rights.

Ethical climate and voluntary absence in schools
We maintain that teachers who perceive their school climate as focused on either caring or formal ethics are more likely to attend work than to be absent. The theory of psychological contract may provide basic support to this argument. Rousseau (1989, p. 125) defined psychological contract as "a set of individual's beliefs regarding the terms and conditions of a reciprocal exchange agreement". From the employee's point of view, a breach of the psychological contract is a perception that one or more of the employer's obligations are unfulfilled (Dabos and Rousseau, 2004; Pate *et al.*, 2003; Rousseau, 1995). Because contracts are so fundamental to individuals' employment-related beliefs and experiences (Morrison and Robinson, 1997), individuals are expected to respond to violations of psychological contracts with compensatory mechanisms to restore equity. Compensatory mechanisms may include work violations of their own, such as work absence.

Empirical support for the presumed relationship between organizational ethics and voluntary absence can be found in several studies. In a study on school teachers, Hutchison *et al.* (1986) suggested that when schools focus on high morality, school teachers respond by refraining from voluntary absence. Wimbush and Shepard (1994) showed that an unethical organizational climate was related to negative organizational outcomes, including absenteeism. 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. Finally, Gonzalez-Roma *et al.* (2005), pointed at a negative relationship between rule orientation and sickness absenc. Based on these studies, and on the psychological contract theory, we expect that both caring and formal climates to be negatively related to schoolteachers' voluntary absence, leading to our first hypothesis:

H1. Teachers' perceptions of ethical climate (caring/formal) in school will be negatively related to voluntary teacher absence.

The mediation effect of organizational commitment
Evidence for the relationship of teachers' perceptions of ethical climate with voluntary absence has been outlined above, but we must still identify the inner mechanisms that explain why teachers who perceive their work environment as unethical (particularly with regard to caring and formality) tend to be absent from schools. We suggest that the relationship of ethical climate with absence is explained by the notion of organizational commitment.

Organizational commitment has emerged as a leading construct in organizational research because of its relationship with important work-related concepts. Meyer and Allen (1991) have identified three types of organizational commitment: affective, normative, and continuous. Affective commitment refers to the employees' emotional attachment to the organization, and their identification and involvement with it. Normative commitment reflects a sense of obligation to continue working for the organization. Continuous commitment refers to people's external reasons for staying with the organization, such as the cost associated with leaving it (Meyer and Allen, 1997).

Numerous studies have investigated the association of organizational commitment to various measures of organizational outcomes. The general consensus is that organizational commitment is strongly related to work outcomes and job performance

(Luchak and Gellatly, 2007; Meyer and Allen, 1991, 1997; Meyer *et al.*, 2002). Nevertheless, the relationship between organizational commitment and work outcomes may not be universal for all types of commitment. Of the three types outlined above, continuous commitment and normative commitments are perhaps least likely to correlate positively with performance. Employees whose tenure in the organization is based primarily on obligation (normative commitment) or on a rational individual cost-benefit analysis (continuous commitment) may see little reason to do more than is required to maintain their membership in the organization (Meyer *et al.*, 1989). Studies showed that affective commitment has been found to positively affect work outcomes, including absenteeism, whereas normative and continuous commitment showed little or negligible relationships of this type (Luchak and Gellatly, 2007; Mathieu and Zajac, 1990; Meyer *et al.*, 2002). These conclusions were reiterated by Cohen (2003, p. 23), who pointed out that in organizational behavior literature affective commitment was more dominant than normative and continuous commitment. Based on these arguments we chose to investigate only affective commitment as a potential mediator in our study model. Next we will explore the relationship of ethical climate with affective commitment, and of affective commitment with voluntary absence.

Ethical climates and affective commitment. When teachers perceive their organizational climate to be caring, they are likely to feel more secure in their own welfare, and more responsible toward others in the school (students, parents, and colleagues). These reactions can produce a bond with the school, which encourages cooperation and attachment and ultimately leads to a higher degree of affective organizational commitment. Studies show that individuals in a caring climate are more committed to attaining group goals (Cullen *et al.*, 2003; Kelly and Dorsch, 1991; Trevino *et al.*, 1998).

Similar processes can be observed in the area of formal ethical climate in organizations at large and schools in particular. In schools characterized by a climate that transforms professional principles into clear and formal rules teachers appreciate these rules, perceiving them as conducive to the state of belonging to a well-defined workplace or occupation. Such feelings can increase their affective commitment to the school. Cullen *et al.* (2003) indicated that when people identify with the values and standards of the organization they are more likely to develop higher levels of commitment. Similarly, in their study of purchasing executives, Kelly and Dorsch (1991) found a significant relationship between rules and commitment, and suggested that these executives had clear ideas of what the organization expected and required of them. Therefore, we believe that affective commitment in schools increases when a rule-based ethical climate is more pronounced.

Affective commitment and voluntary absence. Our expectation that organizational commitment is related to voluntary absence is based on well-documented research on organizational commitment and various facets of organizational performance (Cohen, 2003; Wasti, 2003; Wong *et al.*, 2002). Consistent with psychological contract theory (Rousseau, 1995), teachers who feel attached to their organization (affective commitment) exert efforts on its behalf and are interested in contributing to its success by reducing their voluntary absence. Gaziel (2004) found that teachers who express a high level of commitment to their school, tend to voluntarily absent themselves from school less frequently. Meyer *et al.* (2004) argued that employees who show high affective commitment set or accept relatively difficult goals and strive to

achieve a maximum level of performance. This line of thought was applied to work absence by Luchak and Gellatly (2007), who showed that employees who display high affective commitment had a lower rate of absence frequency. More direct evidence for the relationship between affective commitment and work absence/attendance was provided by Cohen (2003), Somers (1995) and Meyer *et al.* (2002). Following these studies, we believe that teachers who feel attached to their schools (affective commitment) are also more likely to minimize their work absence. Because teacher absence is perhaps more strongly felt in the classroom than absence of employees in many other work settings, teachers may invest greater effort in avoiding absences.

Based on the above, we propose that organizational commitment mediates the relationships, outlined above (see *H1*), between ethical climate and work absence. We maintain that perceptions about positive organizational ethical climate lead to higher organizational affective commitment which in turn leads to low work absence.

H2. The relationship of teachers' perceptions of ethical climate (caring/formal) in school with work absence (*H1*) will be fully mediated by affective commitment, so that: (a) ethical climate will be positively related to affective commitment, and (b) the latter will be negatively related to work absence.

The model of the study is depicted in Figure 1.

Method
Study sample and population
Participants were 1,016 teachers (67 percent response rate) from 35 schools belonging to a large 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 more than one year were included in the study to ensure that all respondents had had sufficient time to develop perceptions and attitudes about their schools. The sample was 68 percent women[1]. Participants' average age was 43.19 years (SD = 9.42). Average school seniority was 12.60 years (SD = 8.48), and average teaching seniority was 17.90 years (SD = 9.39). The majority of teachers (86.1 percent) were tenured; the others were employed through temporary contracts. A little over half (53.7 percent) of the teachers had a Bachelor's degree, and 35.7 percent held a Master's degree. The rest had non-academic degrees. These characteristics, roughly, represent
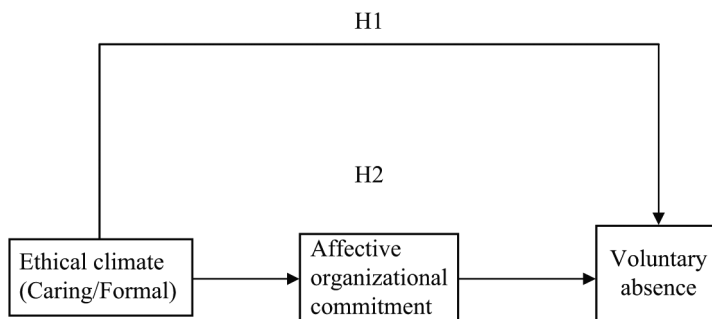

Figure 1.
Summary of the study model

the composition of the teacher body in the network under study, and in Israeli high schools in general (Israel Central Bureau of Statistics, 2005).

Data collection
Letters explaining the objectives and methods of the study were sent to all 52 schools in the network. The 35 schools included in the study were those whose principals agreed to cooperate. Data were collected using questionnaires that were voluntarily self-reported by teachers during their free time on school premises. Previous research showed that self-report absence data correlated highly with record-based measures ($r = 0.64$, Johns, 2003). Anonymity of the respondents was a condition for allowing us to collect data, and was strictly observed.

To determine whether the self-report data were indeed consistent with school records, we obtained school absence data (only school-level duration data was 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 $M_{selfreport} = 11.91$ (SE = 4.30), whereas the average duration of absence in the school record was $M_{schoolrecord} = 12.28$ (SE = 5.54). Because no significant differences were found between the data sources regarding the average duration of absence (Wilcoxon test, $Z = -0.392$, $p = 0.695$), we concluded that the self-report data agreed with school records and could be used confidently.

Study measures
Absenteeism behavior. Teachers were asked, "How many workdays did you miss in each of the last five months?". We further asked teachers to report each absence incident separately.

For example: Absence incidents in October:

Incident 1. Number of absence days: ____

Incident 2. Number of absence days: ____

Incident 3. Number of absence days: ____

(Repeated for each of the five months.)

We attached calendars to all the questionnaires to refresh the teachers' memory regarding their absences in the preceding five months. Because the school day in Israel is relatively short, and the normal workday of an Israeli teacher is accordingly short (roughly four teaching hours a day on average), partial absence (part of a day) is rare, and was not considered in this study.

The measure used was absence frequency (not duration), that is, the number of times a teacher was absent during the reporting period, regardless of the number of days lost. It is generally believed that absence frequency is the best measure of voluntary absence, whereas absence duration (total number of days lost) is the best reflection of involuntary absences Thus, studies show that an absence of one-two days is considered as voluntary, whereas an extended period of days of absence is considered involuntary regardless of the reason give for the absence (Blau *et al.*, 2004; Gellatly, 1995; Sagie, 1998). In the present study we chose absence frequency as our dependent variable because our purpose was to investigate the relationship between

ethical climate and absenteeism in the context of the teachers' psychological contract, which reflects their choice to attend or not to attend (voluntary absence).

We chose a five-month period to obtain a valid picture of teacher absence because it represents half a school year in Israel (one semester), and because it is reasonable to expect that teachers are able to recall their absences during this period (Johns, 1994). Time span is important because it may be associated with both random error and systematic bias in absence self-reports. Increasing the time frame of the self-report would increase reliability but at the same time jeopardize validity and accuracy because of potential memory decrement, systematic bias, or both.

The decision to measure work absence retroactively was based on the assumption that teacher absence rates are relatively stable. We tested this assumption by examining school records of absence rates over the preceding five years. The data for this test were based on teacher reports from the 35 schools participating in the study. We found that between 1999 and 2004 the change rate of absent days per school was 0.09 percent (SD 0.00413), showing that absence fluctuation was minimal. This conclusion is consistent with the findings of Rosenblatt and Shirom (2005), who studied individual background predictors of absenteeism in the entire population of Israeli teachers. They reported that the strongest predictor of teacher absenteeism in 2002 was teacher absenteeism in 2001, indicating absence stability.

Ethical climate. This variable explored teachers' perceptions of how ethical issues were considered and handled in their respective schools. Accordingly, the measure tapped into teachers' individual views of their ethical environments. Aiming to reproduce the two ethical dimensions we selected for our study, we replicated authors' factor analysis of Victor and Cullen's (1988) original 26-item measure. We used the Obvarimax procedure, which allows interdependence between variables, and selected the items that loaded above 0.3. This process yielded six factors, the first two of which were adopted for the present study for the following reasons: First, each one of these two factors had above 15 percent explained variance, while the next factors had smaller levels of explained variance. Second, we were theoretically interested in these two factors because they proved to be strong predictors in another study on Israeli schoolteachers (Rosenblatt and Peled, 2002). These factors were:

(1) "Caring" climate, defined as a climate of concern for the welfare of all school members (corresponding to the "friendship" and "social responsibility" dimensions of the original index). This factor included six items, with a reliability of $a = 0.86$, and 15.87 percent explained variance. Sample items are: "In this school people look out for each other's interest" and "In this school it is expected that you always do what is right for the public".

(2) "Formal" climate, defined as a climate of compliance with professional and social codes and with school rules and regulations (corresponding to the "rules and procedures," "law-and-code," and "efficiency" dimensions of the original index) (nine items, $a = 0.87$, 15.68 percent explained variance). Sample items are: "Everyone is expected to stick to school rules and procedures," and "In this school the law or ethical code of the profession is a major consideration".

The remaining four factors were found to be relatively low (6.85-9.61 percent explained variance). Response options for the caring and formal measures ranged from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree.

Affective commitment. This variables addressed teachers' perceptions of the affective (emotional attachment, identification, involvement) reasons for wanting to remain in their school. The measure represents one of Meyer and Allen's (1997) original three-way organizational commitment construct (seven items, $a = 0.88$, 21.54 percent of explained variance). This dimension was selected for the present study on theoretical grounds (see above), a decision that was further supported by its factorial explained variance, which was considerably larger than the explained variance of normative and continuous commitment (13.66 percent and 10.27 percent, respectively). A sample item: "I really feel as if this school's problems are my own."

Background characteristics. The following background characteristics were measured: age, gender, school seniority, teaching seniority, tenure, and education. Only gender correlated (modestly) with our dependent variable (M = 1.35 and 1.00 for women and men respectively, $r = 0.137$, $p < 0.05$).

Data analysis strategy

Since voluntary teacher absence is a discrete count variable, Poisson regression models were used to assess its relationship with the other variables. The study is based on individual-level analysis, trying to capture teachers' perceptions about the ethical climate in their respective schools, and the relationship of these perceptions with their absence behavior. However, because of the data's hierarchical nature (teachers nested within schools) the usual assumption of independence of all observations was not applicable. Following Hoffman's (1997) work, we maintain that teachers are organized in schools physically, but also through their perceptions and attitudes. The GENMOD procedure of SAS was therefore applied. This procedure enabled us to fit regression models for variables which are not necessarily normally distributed (such as Poisson), and also to account for the intraclass-correlation within schools.

In regard to our mediation hypothesis, we looked into several approaches to mediation analysis. MacKinnon *et al.* (2004) identified and compared 14 methods, which they categorized into three frameworks. The first, which is the causal step approach (Kenny *et al.*, 1998), is the most commonly used, we applied it in our analysis. By this approach, to demonstrate full mediation one estimates four different models, which is typically done by least squares estimation. First, the dependent variable is regressed on the independent variable, to demonstrate that variations in the independent variable significantly account for variations in the dependent variable. Second, the mediator is regressed on the independent variable, to demonstrate that variations in the independent variable significantly account for variations in the presumed mediator. Third, the dependent variable is regressed on the mediator, to demonstrate that variations in the mediator significantly account for variations in the dependent variable. Finally, the dependent variable is regressed on both the independent variable and the mediator. Full mediation is considered evident if the relationship of the independent to the dependent variable is no longer significant in the presence of the mediator.

For steps one, three and four, GENMOD was used to fit the Poisson regression models, while the Mixed procedure of SAS was used for step two. The latter procedure is applicable to fit a regression model where the dependent variable is normally distributed and the observations are not independent.

Results
The mean of absence frequency was 1.24 (SD 1.18). Table I displays the descriptive statistics for the explanatory variables in the study, (independent and mediator). Note that formal climate had a higher prominence (mean 3.88) than caring climate (mean 3.29). Also, findings (Table II, model 1) indicate that the relationship of formal climate with absence frequency was weaker ($B = -0.09$, $p = 0.04$)[2] than that of caring climate ($B = -0.14$, $p = 0.002$).

Hypotheses testing
H1 stated that school ethical climate (caring/formal) and teacher voluntary absence will be negatively related. Findings (Table II, model 1) indicate that both caring and formal ethical climates were negatively related to absence frequency. *H1* was therefore supported.

H2 stated that the relationship of school ethical climate (caring/formal) with work absence will be fully mediated by affective commitment. Results showed the following: both caring and formal ethical climate significantly and positively predicted affective commitment ($B = 0.576$, $SE = 0.028$; $p < 0.0001$ and $B = 0.505$, $SE = 0.037$; $p < 0.0001$, respectively). Affective commitment was directly related to absence frequency ($B = -0.115$, $SE = 0.044$; $p = 0.008$). These results showed then that affective commitment was related to both ethical climates (caring and formal) and to work absence.

When affective commitment was added to the regression equation of the relationship of the two ethical climates with work absence (Table II, model 2), findings showed that the relationship of caring climate with absence stayed significant ($B = -0.110$, SE 0.055, $p < 0.05$), but the relationship of formal climate with absence became non significant ($B = -0.037$, $SE = 0.048$). Added to the findings above (referring to H1) on the total relationships between the two ethical climates and absence

		M	SD	1	2	3
1	Caring ethical climate	3.29	0.73	(0.86)		
2	Formal ethical climate	3.88	0.60	0.543*	(0.87)	
3	Affective commitment	3.950	0.770	0.555*	0.411*	(0.88)

Notes: *$p < 0.01$; $n = 1,016$, Reliability coefficients (alpha Cronbach) in parentheses

Table I.
Means, standard deviations, correlations, and reliability coefficients of the study independent variables

	Model 1		Model 2 mediated effect with affective commitment	
Variable	B	SE	B	SE
Caring ethical climate	-0.141**	0.046	-0.110*	0.055
Affective commitment			-0.053	0.054
Formal ethical climate	-0.092*	0.0456	-0.037	0.048
Affective commitment			-0.097*	0.048

Notes: *$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$; $n = 1,016$ (GENMOD procedure)

Table II.
Mediation of the relationship between teachers' perceptions of ethical climate (caring/formal) and absence frequency by affective commitment

frequency, these results indicate a full mediation effect of affective commitment on formal climate (the *B* value became non-significant when affective commitment was present in the equation). No mediation effect was found for caring climate since the relationship between absence frequency and affective commitment became non-significant. *H2*, then, was partially supported (for formal but not for caring climate: see Table II). Gender-based separate analyses showed no significant mediation effect of affective commitment on caring and formal climate

Figure 2 summarizes the results for the mediation of affective commitment in the relationship of formal ethical climate with work absence.

Discussion

The present study aimed at predicting teachers' voluntary absence by the dimensions of ethical climate. Thus, the study follows previous research showing that absence behavior is related to perceptions of organizational climate (Imants and Van Zoelen, 1995) and organizational justice (e.g. Colquitt *et al.*, 2002; De Boer *et al.*, 2002). Taken together, the results of these previous studies were used as a foundation for the study hypotheses and model, while focusing on ethical climate.

Despite growing interest in the concept of ethical climate since its conceptualization by Victor and Cullen (1987, 1988), relatively little has been written on its relationship with absence behavior (one exception being Peterson's, 2002 study). The present study is an attempt to fill this gap and to take research in this area one step further. Focusing on two specific types of ethical climate – caring and formal – the present study sought to explain the relationship between these two ethical types on one hand and absence behavior on the other, using the notion of affective organizational commitment. The study model was tested in a school context.

Results largely supported the study's theoretical model. We showed that both the caring and formal aspects of ethical climate were related to absence frequency. Affective organizational commitment mediated the relationship between formal climate and absence frequency. In other words, results showed that teachers who perceived their work climate to be highly ethical by focusing on formal rules, increased their attachment to the organization, and it turn, tended to be absent less frequently.

The results of the study are related to the growing literature focusing on the importance of organizational context in understanding organizational behavior. Although most studies regard context as part of organizational structure (e.g. Clinebell and Shadwick, 2005; Kim and Lee, 2006), others consider organizational characteristics
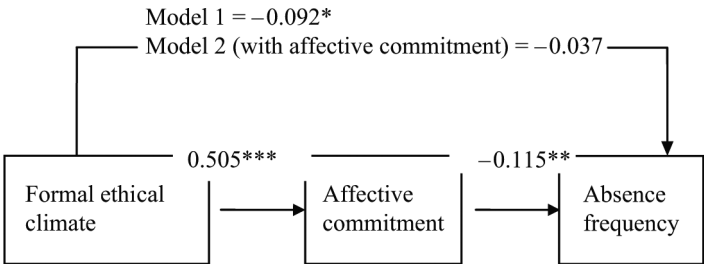
Figure 2.
Summary of coefficient modeling results

Model 1 = −0.092*
Model 2 (with affective commitment) = −0.037

Formal ethical climate — 0.505*** → Affective commitment — −0.115** → Absence frequency

Note: $n = 1.016$, *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001 (GENMOD procedure)

processes such as task significance and autonomy (Rousseau, 1989; Sosik and Lee, 2005). The present study also dwells on contextual processes not often addressed in research: ethical norms and values, as perceived by the schoolteachers. Results show the influence of an ethical environment on teacher attitudes (organizational commitment) and behavior (absence frequency), contribute to our understanding of the effect of perceived organizational context.

Nevertheless, our results seem to contradict the findings of studies on another form of organizational context: supportive work environment; in particular the relationship between supportive school environment and absence behavior. These studies (e.g. Gonzalez-Roma *et al.*, 2005; Rael *et al.*, 1995) showed that supportive work environment and sickness absence were positively related because supportive work environment contributed to an increased employee self-esteem and sense of control, encouraging employees to take time off knowing that their colleagues would fill in for them. In other words, a supportive work environment can be a facilitating mechanism leading employees to take time off from work.

The difference between the results of this line of research and our study may lie in the distinct socio-psychological processes on which they are based. A supportive environment, focused on responding to teacher needs, may increase the teachers' focus on their individual interests, leading to behavior intended to maximize individual gain (such as taking time off from work). By contrast, an ethical climate is based on moral values, and may thus increase the sense of social responsibility and shared work norms (as perceived by the individual), leading to increased teacher commitment and away from voluntary absence.

Caring climate came up as a strong predictor of low absence frequency, consistent with similar results in previous studies (Bowers, 2001; Imants and Van Zoelen, 1995; Scott-Norton, 1998). This finding is not surprising in an educational context, where care for students is a leading value (Husu and Tirri, 2001; Colnerud, 1997). But the finding that affective organizational commitment does not mediate the relationship between caring climate and absence frequency, while it does so for formal climate, has not been expected. Apparently, although a caring climate in school does correlate with affective commitment, this relationship does not go through organizational commitment. The reason that caring climate leads directly to low absence frequency may be the fact that caring is a universal value (Schwartz, 1997; Rice, 2001), and as such less related to feelings towards the focal organization. This is different from formality, which is normally linked to the focal organization, and therefore evokes a sense of organizational commitment, which in turn affects (or coincides with) absence behavior.

Although formal climate scored higher than caring climate, as reflected in the means, its relationship with voluntary absence was lower. The great importance attached to formal climate may be a characteristic of a bureaucratic educational system and of the teachers' response to bureaucratic formalism. It shows that a mechanistic form of organizations – the machine metaphor (Burns and Stalker, 1961) – probably characterizes the educational bureaucratic structure. In this case, rules and regulations do not necessarily symbolize rigidity, but serve as both functional and protective mechanisms in ensuring certainty, transparency, and fair treatment of the teachers involved. This may explain why teachers who perceive their school ethical climate as predominantly formal, tend to reduce their absenteeism. This is consistent with the

author study, in which formal climate (labeled "law-and-code") was also found to be a strong predictor of school outcomes. Yet, caring climate, although perceived as less prominent in school than formal climate, was found in the present study as a stronger predictor of non-absence than formal climate, While both types of ethical climate are important, apparently, ethical elements associated with care and concern for people, when perceived to exist, attract teachers to stay in school to a larger degree than ethical elements associated with formality.

In line with the near consensus in literature regarding the significance of affective organizational commitment, our results reaffirm the connection found in previous research between affective commitment and work absence (Luchak and Gellatly, 2007; Meyer *et al.*, 2002; Somers, 1995). But in the case of Israeli schools, the significance of the affective commitment may be attributed to structural reasons. The low pay and inferior working conditions of Israeli schoolteachers (Israel Central Bureau of Statistics, 2002), similar to those of American schoolteachers (Ingersoll, 2004), lead to an "employee" rather than an "employer" labor market, namely, there is a shortage of good quality teachers. The results of the study show that what keeps teachers in their jobs (in our case – be present and not absent) is affect-based commitment and perception of the school as promoting organizational (caring and formal) ethics.

Limitation and future research

Our study had a few limitations, of which the first and foremost is its potential same-source bias. Although objective data of absence frequency were not available, precautions were taken to ensure data accuracy (individual data were aggregated by school and compared with average school absence records, which were accessible). It is recommended that the study be replicated using different data sources, including non self-report absence data (e.g. organizational records, supervisory reports, colleague reports). In addition, our same-source technique may include instances in which some of the absence data predate the climate data. Although our analyses of absence rates over years showed little fluctuation, we encourage future studies to use multi time-points techniques to strengthen predictability.

A second limitation of the study has to do with the fact that data were collected at one time point, precluding causal conclusion. The regression analysis, therefore, did not support clear causational conclusions. We suggest that future research investigate causation relationships between the study's main variables, ethical climate and absenteeism. This can be accomplished through longitudinal research methods, where data on perceptions, attitudes and behaviors (absences) are collected at multiple points in time.

Third, our data collection approach, in which absence data were measured retroactively, was based on the assumption (supported by previous results such as Baguma, 2001; Farrell and Stamm, 1988; Ones *et al.*, 2003) that teacher absence rates are relatively stable. Together with the use of self-report measures, this assumption may ignore memory failure that may artificially look like behavior stability. We tested this assumption by examining record data of absence rate fluctuations in previous years and found them to be relatively stable. Again, the use of longitudinal methods may eliminate dependence on retrospective data.

Fourth, the sample of the present study included only teachers, which limits the generalizability of the findings to other sectors of business and industry. Considering

the growing awareness and knowledge of the importance of workplace ethical
environment in the organizational literature in general (Wimbush and Shepard, 1994),
future research should attempt to replicate the framework of this study to other
occupational groups of public and private organizations, to permit generalization to a
broader segment of the workforce.

Finally, as absenteeism is only one component of the withdrawal syndrome
(Koslowsky and Krausz, 2002), future studies should test the model of the present
study on other withdrawal symptoms such as tardiness and intent to leave. Studies
showed that tardiness and intent to leave were moderately related to job satisfaction
and organizational commitment (Koslowsky *et al.*, 1997; Lee and Mitchell, 1994). It is
likely that these withdrawal symptoms are also related to ethical climate. Applying the
design of the current study to a range of these work withdrawal and dysfunctional
behaviors would allow a deeper understanding of the effect of ethical climate on
employee performance

Conclusions

The study describes the ethical framework of schoolteachers' work absence. Whereas
past research on work absence focused mostly on personal (demographic, medical,
work attitudes) antecedents (Johns, 1997), the present study addresses factors
embedded in organizational ethics. It contributes to our knowledge of both work
absence (focusing on voluntary absence), and of organizational ethics (focusing on
selective aspects of ethical climate). It also contributes to research on the dominance of
organizational context on absence behavior.

Practically, school principals can use the results of this study to reduce voluntary
absence by creating an ethical climate focused on the value of caring and on the values
of clear and just rules and procedures. Based on the study findings, school principals
can expect both types of ethical climate to reduce voluntary absence, and a formal
climate to also lead to increased commitment. Generally, a school climate based on
caring and formal structures can be created by introducing and maintaining a stable
set of ethical work norms and by working toward the adoption and internalization of
these values.

Notes

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

2. Because of the nature of the data (a dependent count variable and hierarchical data,
   standardized regression (denoted by beta) is not used since it. is unclear which variance
   components one should use for the standardization. Therefore we use B (not β).

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Further reading

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