A dialectical theory of the decision to go to work: Bringing together absenteeism and presenteeism

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ABSTRACT

The decision to not attend work (absenteeism) has been the focus of a great deal of inquiry; however, research is emerging on the importance of the decision to attend work when ill (presenteeism). Interestingly, despite being the outcome of the same decision, these constructs have developed relatively independently. We argue that absenteeism and presenteeism are strategies employees use to navigate the dialectical tensions in the supervisor–subordinate relationship. Thus, understanding the nature of those tensions, their context, and the strategies employed to manage the tensions can inform employees’ decision to attend work.

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1. Introduction

Absenteeism is one of the most studied constructs in organizational behavior and human resources (Harrison & Martocchio, 1998). Interestingly, a related employee phenomenon has emerged over the past few years, owing largely to changes in the workplace environment that result in employees carrying increased workloads with fewer resources and organizational support (Pilette, 2005). Employers are increasingly concerned about presenteeism, which occurs when employees come to work despite medical or mental illness that should keep them away from work (Aronsson, Gustafsson, & Dallner, 2000; Bungum, Satterwhite, Jackson, & Morrow, 2003; Gosselin, Lemyre, & Corneil, 2013), because the cost and productivity loss associated with presenteeism may be significantly greater than that of absenteeism (Goetzel, Hawkins, Ozminkowski, & Wang, 2003; Hemp, 2004; Schultz & Edington, 2007). Absenteeism and presenteeism are the result of a single decision point: the choice between going to work and not going to work is the common thread in the constructs. However, absenteeism and presenteeism have developed from different literatures and have been explained using different theories. We propose that a theory of one’s relationship with his or her supervisor, relational dialectics theory, helps us unite these two constructs into a more clear understanding of how employees manage the decision to go to work.

Dialectical theories are based on a foundation of opposing forces, or tensions, that act on social relationships (Baxter, 1990). Because the opposing forces are “interdependent and mutually negating” (Bantham, Celuch, & Kasouf, 2003, p. 266), they lead to uncertainty that employees and supervisors respond to by bringing the tensions closer to equilibrium (Baxter, 1988, 1990). Further, as individuals respond to the tensions they experience, they grow and change (Montgomery, 1993). We utilize dialectical theories to extend the literature in two meaningful ways. First, we propose that dialectical theories can be applied to understand one’s relationship with one’s supervisor. Dialectical theories have been widely applied in organizational theory (Benson, 1977), particularly in the context of organizational change (Van den En & Poole, 1995). To a much more limited extent, dialectical theories have been proposed for social relationships in the workplace, specifically the relationship between coworkers (Bridge & Baxter, 1992; Halbesleben, 2012). To this point, one’s relationship with his or her supervisor has been largely driven by theories of social exchange (Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchison, & Sowa, 1986; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002).

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Examining workplace relationships through the exchange lens has contributed a great deal to our understanding of workplace attitudes and behavior. Favorable exchange relationships between employees and supervisors have been linked to a number of positive individual and organizational outcomes (Armeli, Eisenberger, Fasolo, & Lynch, 1998; Eisenberger, Armeli, Rexwinkel, Lynch, & Rhoades, 2001; Kinnunen, Feldt, & Makikangas, 2008; Lee & Pecce, 2007; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). Since employees tend to ascribe the organization humanlike characteristics, an employee will consider the actions of the supervisor, the organizational agent, to be indicative of the organization’s intent (Eisenberger et al., 1986). Exchange theories suggest that an employee will engage in reciprocity or retaliation based on his or her perceptions of the supervisor’s orientation towards him or her (Blau, 1964; Gouldner, 1960). Relationships with reciprocal exchanges will likely persist while relationships with retaliatory exchanges will likely cease.

We argue that, while valuable, exchange theories do not fully account for the dynamics of the supervisor–subordinate relationship. An assumption of exchange theories is that the relationship should “progress” or change in a linear growth pattern; research suggests that such models of relationships do not capture the true essence of relationships (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). A growth model implies that if progress is not being made in the relationship, it is somehow broken (Wiseman, 1986). However, as relationship researchers in other contexts have suggested, relationships are better conceptualized as “flexible” rather than “fragile” (Becker et al., 2009). In other words, relationships fluctuate in their closeness; however, that does not mean the relationship ends.

As an illustration of how dialectical theories can be applied to understand one’s relationship with one’s supervisor, we apply dialectical theories and, in particular, the management of dialectical tensions to the absenteeism and presenteeism literatures. The literatures on absenteeism and presenteeism have grown from quite different foundations and researchers have yet to bring these two concepts together under one theoretical framework. This is peculiar, however, as the experiences of absenteeism and presenteeism can be boiled down to a single decision — the decision to attend work or not when experiencing physical or psychological illness. We propose that this decision can be explained by understanding the dialectical tensions experienced by the employee within their specific work context and the strategies used to manage those tensions. One key element of relationships is one’s involvement in them. We argue that the decision to attend work is a reflection of one’s desire to be more or less involved in a relationship with his or her supervisor.

Prior to explicating our dialectic theory of the decision to attend work, we must clarify several assumptions we will make moving forward. Theories of relational dialectics are inherently interpersonal and we will focus on the supervisor–subordinate relationship in this paper. However, we are also describing a decision that is ultimately the employee’s alone. As a result, we will focus primarily on the manner in which the employee experiences and addresses the dialectic tensions inherent in his or her relationship with his or her supervisor. We will briefly examine the supervisor’s experience of these tensions later in the paper, acknowledging that the dialectical processes are interpersonal, but maintaining an emphasis on the intrapersonal elements that drive an employee’s decision to attend work.

### 2. The decision to attend work: absenteeism and presenteeism

#### 2.1. Sickness absenteeism

As one of the most common workplace problems, absenteeism is a complex phenomenon (Johns, 2003). Sickness absenteeism, in particular, constitutes the main cause of absence from work and accounts for over four percent of organizational productivity loss, or an average of 10.4 days lost per employee per year (Goetzel et al., 2004). Sickness absenteeism refers to missed time from work due to health and disease conditions (Goetzel et al., 2004; Harrison & Price, 2003). Voluntary absenteeism occurs when an employee chooses to withdraw or escape from aversive work circumstances (Schaufeli, Bakker, & Rhenen, 2009), or as a means of protest against unpleasant work conditions (Chadwick-Jones, Nicholson, & Brown, 1982). These voluntary “skip days” are generally one-day absences and are operationalized in terms of the frequency rather than duration (Chadwick-Jones, Brown, Nicholson, & Sheppard, 1971; Schaufeli et al., 2009).

Involuntary absenteeism occurs as “a reaction to distress caused by job demands” (Schaufeli et al., 2009, p. 896). An employee may engage in absence behavior to cope with job stressors such as work overload (Dwyer & Ganster, 1991), high burnout levels (Iverson, Olekalns, & Erwin, 1998), and work–home conflict (Goff, Mount, & Jamison, 1990). Such stressors may involuntarily render the employee unable to perform work tasks (Chadwick-Jones et al., 1982). In contrast to voluntary absenteeism, involuntary absenteeism is operationalized in terms of the duration of the absence rather than the frequency (Schaufeli et al., 2009; Steel, 2003). Because the focus of our theory is to bring together absenteeism and presenteeism, which share a common thread of illness, we will focus on involuntary (or sickness) absenteeism in this paper. That said, while the term used in the literature has been involuntary, that refers more to the underlying reason for the absence. In this context, involuntary should not be taken to mean that the employee has no control over his or her decision to attend work. Instead, it is meant to suggest that the absence is not due to an employee simply skipping work, but that the employee is indeed suffering from physical or mental illness. More recently, researchers have referred to it as “sickness” rather than “involuntary” absenteeism. Clearly, the very existence of presenteeism (presenting to work despite being sick) is evidence that both sickness absenteeism and presenteeism are subject to the same level of discretionary control by the employee and there is still a decision regarding whether or not to attend work.

Theory-based studies of absenteeism are rare (Harrison & Martocchio, 1998). One of the most widely-cited frameworks (Steers & Rhodes, 1978, 1984) suggests that attendance is indirectly influenced by an employee’s demographic characteristics through proximal constructs of motivation (job satisfaction and other pressures to attend) and ability to attend (constraints that may impede an employee’s choice). Absenteeism researchers also have relied on decision-making theories to explain work absence. A number of researchers have framed absence as the result of a process of choosing between absence and attendance...
(Chelius, 1981; Harrison, 1995). That is, absenteeism is the employee’s decision regarding how much work he or she chooses to supply (Chelius, 1981; Martocchio & Harrison, 1993). Additionally, some researchers have turned to theories of motivation to explain an employee’s decision to attend work (Fichman, 1984; Nicholson, 1977). These studies frame absence as a behavior that can be adapted based on the needs and goals of an employee and situational norms and constraints.

More recent studies have applied alternative theories in an effort to better understand sickness absence. Virtanen, Nakari, Ahonen, Vahtera, and Pentti (2000) invoked Bourdieu’s (1984) theory of practice to explore sickness absence as a social construct. Virtanen et al. (2000) proposed interpreting local sickness absence practices in the workplace as a manifestation of the sickness habits and customs of the community. Sickness absenteeism is essentially a “conscious reflection of whether to take into account those coercions in the dilemmatic situation where the subject feels not so fit and where he or she has to decide whether to go to work or to the doctor” (Virtanen et al., 2000, p. 38). Schaufeli et al. (2009) integrated sickness absenteeism into the job-demands resources (JD-R) model. They call attention to the presence of a strain and motivation process in the sickness absence phenomenon and their findings indicate that involuntary absenteeism results from job strain while voluntary absenteeism results from a lack of motivation. Moreover, they note that the duration of the absence is related to the strain process, while the frequency of absence is related to the motivational process.

It is notable that despite being one of the most commonly studied constructs in the management literature, there is surprisingly little psychological theory regarding the decision to attend work (Johns, 2010). In this paper, we position absenteeism in terms of a decision not to attend work due to illness. Interestingly, there is a growing literature that suggests that the decision not to attend work is not particularly straightforward: there are many instances where an ill employee still chooses to attend work. Thus, in order to understand the decision not to attend work, one must also understand the decision to attend work under conditions of illness.

2.2. Presenteeism

Presenteeism refers to the phenomenon of employees presenting to work despite medical or mental illness that should prompt absence from work (Aronsson et al., 2000; Bungum et al., 2003; Johns, 2010). In recent years, the discussion on workforce productivity has shifted its focus away from employee absence to presenteeism. Presenteeism is the measurable extent to which diseases, conditions, and symptoms negatively affect the work productivity of employees who choose to work through the illness (Chapman, 2005). Studies have suggested that factors such as poor or no health care benefits (Athey, 2009), perceptions of the work environment (Pilette, 2005), perceived pressures from supervisors or coworkers (Grinyer & Singleton, 2000), fear of disciplinary action or risking promotion opportunities (McKevitt, Morgan, Dundas, & Holland, 1998), job insecurity (MacGregor, Cunningham, & Caverley, 2008), or the employees’ belief that their illness or medical condition is not severe enough to warrant staying home (Johns, 2010) may result in employees presenting to work when sick. Thus, employees may feel well enough to present to work, but their presence is merely physical.

Research also has suggested that presenteeism results from employees’ perceptions of their workload (Athey, 2009). Some employees work through the sickness because they feel they have too much work to do, need to meet deadlines, feel morally obligated, or feel there is inadequate coverage to handle their job responsibilities (Aronsson & Gustafsson, 2005; Athey, 2009; Johns, 2010). As expected, presenting to work when ill negatively impacts the quantity and quality of an employee’s productivity as well as that of his or her coworkers. Attendance by unhealthy employees can result in the exacerbation of existing medical conditions, accidents or errors due to impaired functions, additional time needed to complete tasks, irritability, fatigue, poor concentration, and decreased motivation (Aronsson et al., 2000; Hemp, 2004; Johns, 2010; Pilette, 2005). Presenteeism decreases output, negatively affects work group productivity, and in certain cases puts coworkers or clients at risk of infection (Aronsson & Gustafsson, 2005; Demerouti, Le Blanc, Bakker, Schaufeli, & Hox, 2009; Hemp, 2004).

Thus far, research concerning presenteeism has been largely atheoretical (Johns, 2010). Aronsson et al. (2000) invoked human service organizations theory (Hasenfeld & English, 1974) to examine the external forces and motives of sickness presenteeism among employees in various industry sectors. The authors suggest that employees who work in health services and education sectors are more likely to present to work when sick noting that in these occupations, work outcomes are largely dependent on relationships with client groups that are vulnerable and dependent. Demerouti et al. (2009) extend conservation of resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989, 2001) to examine how job demands (i.e., workload) influence sickness presenteeism and eventually lead to a loss spiral. Job demands draw on employees’ valued resources and result in a loss. As employees strive to meet the demands, they will invest resources to adapt (Demerouti et al., 2009). Thus, employees may choose to work despite illness in order to prevent resource loss. Engaging in presenteeism to meet job demands, however, may lead to burnout as sick employees invest more effort in reaching desired performance levels.

3. Bringing absenteeism and presenteeism together

Despite being considered “mutual alternatives” (Aronsson & Gustafsson, 2005, p. 964), scholars have yet to combine sickness absenteeism and sickness presenteeism under one theoretical umbrella that explains the process by which an employee chooses between absence and presence when sick. Aronsson and Gustafsson (2005) propose a conceptual model that offers a set of demands that an individual suffering from illness, disease, or loss of capacity will consider when making the decision whether or not to present to work. The model distinguishes these demands between those that are personally related (individual boundarylessness and private-financial demands) and those that are work-related (replaceability, sufficient resources, conflicting demands, control, and time pressure). The authors also question sickness presenteeism and absenteeism’s effect on an employee’s
health. The model proposes that sickness presenteeism may result in either destructive or salutogenic outcomes. Presenting to work when ill may either make the illness worse and lead to sickness absenteeism, or serve as therapy if the workplace denotes a healthy social environment. Contrarily, being absent from work due to sickness may have unexpected negative consequences on an employee’s health due to being excluded from the labor market or a host of issues related to returning to work.

More recently, Johns (2010) proposed a model of absenteeism and presenteeism that seeks to address “the serious gaps in our understanding of how absence episodes start and how decisions to return to work are effected” (p. 532). The model assumes that fully engaged attendance is disrupted by one of three types of health events: acute (e.g., a cold), episodic (e.g., migraines), or chronic (e.g., asthma). Johns argues that to some degree, the nature of the medical condition will determine whether an employee engages in absenteeism or presenteeism (the more severe or extreme the medical condition, the likelier the employee is to be absent). In less severe cases, contextual factors (e.g., job demands, job security, reward system, absence policy, absence/presence culture, etc.) will moderate the decision to either go to work ill or stay home. The model also proposes that personal factors (e.g., personality) will moderate the decision. A number of possible cumulative individual consequences that can result from both absenteeism and presenteeism are offered including effects on productivity, how others interpret one’s behavior, and the effects on health status, attendance, and tenure in the organization. Johns (2010) is quite clear in presenting his model that it is merely a model, and not a theory. In other words, he has presented variables that researchers should consider when studying absenteeism and presenteeism, but he has not offered an explanation of why an employee would decide to stay home or go to work when ill.

As we consider the two streams of research together, it is interesting that there has been so little integration of the two. As Johns (2010) notes, any theory of presenteeism would need to account for absenteeism, largely because they are the result of the same decision: the decision to attend work. Given the thousands of studies of absenteeism and the quickly emerging literature on presenteeism, we believe the time is right to bring these two literatures together under a single theory.

Also, we cannot help but wonder with the multitude of studies linking favorable supervisor–subordinate relationship to positive organizational and individual outcomes, why this relationship has not been more closely examined to determine its impact on an employee’s decision whether or not to attend work when sick. Despite the widespread emphasis in the management literature denoting supervisory behaviors as an antecedent of employee absenteeism, only a few studies have directly investigated this link (Van Dierendonck, Le Blanc, & Van Breukelen, 2002). The results of these studies, however, are mixed (see Landeweerd & Boumans, 1994; Tharenou, 1993; Zaccaro, Craig, & Quinn, 1991). In a study examining a model linking supervisory behavior and supervisory–subordinate reciprocity to subordinate absenteeism, Van Dierendonck et al. (2002) found that subordinates’ feelings of reciprocity mediates the relationship between supervisory behavior (i.e., leader–member exchange and conflict management behavior) and subordinate absenteeism. However, the authors were surprised to find that subordinates’ feelings of reciprocity were positively related to their absence frequency; that is, more reciprocity resulted in more frequent absenteeism. This finding seems to be at odds with the belief that favorable supervisor–subordinate exchanges curb absenteeism. Therefore, we suggest that a closer look into the supervisor–subordinate relationship using dialectical theory may help to better explain how an employee manages the decision to attend work when sick.

4. Dialectical theories of workplace relationships

In this paper, we propose that the specific dialectical approach to personal relationships advocated by Baxter and Montgomery (1996), Baxter (2010), which was drawn from Bakhtin (1981), can be extended to understand one’s relationship with his or her supervisor. Further, we propose that extending this dialectical approach can lead to a better understanding of employees’ decisions to attend work.

4.1. Assumptions of dialectical theories

Dialectical “theory” is better positioned as a meta-theory in the sense that the dialectical perspective is less about specific propositions but rather focuses on a limited set of conceptual assumptions related to contradiction, change, praxis, and totality (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2006; Baxter & Montgomery, 1996; Benson, 1977). We summarize these assumptions briefly because they form the foundation from which we build our dialectical theory to explain the decision to attend work.

4.1.1. Contradiction

Contradiction is defined as “the dynamic interplay between unified oppositions” (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996, p. 8). Dialectical theorists argue that contradictions are a central assumption of dialectical theories because contradictions are a natural element in social life. In most dialectical theories, the focus is on functionally defined opposites, where each element of the contradiction is functionally unique, yet they negate each other in some way. This differs from a logically defined contradiction, where one examines “X” and “not X” (Altman, Vinsel, & Brown, 1981). For example, a common relational dialectic is autonomy–connectedness (Baxter, 1988). The autonomy–connection dialectic refers to the struggle between the connection required for a relationship to exist and the desire for autonomy that most people have in creating their identity (Baxter, 1990; Cupach & Metts, 1986; Roberts, 2007). The opposition is functional in that a lack of autonomy does not imply a connection. Thus the opposite of “X” in this case is different from “not X.”

A related issue is that the oppositions are unified in the sense that they are interdependent and part of a greater social context. Returning to the autonomy–connection dialectic in the context of relationships, we understand autonomy in the context of connection (and vice versa). Relationships that are highly connected maintain a certain degree of autonomy of the individuals
4.1.3. Praxis

dialectics change is important to note.

will be more clear when we discuss the specific strategies for addressing dialectic tensions below, but the assumption that the
might be desired by an employee, it may take time before that autonomy is

employees and supervisors that may shift the experience or importance of a given tension. For example, whereas autonomy
tension takes on a very different form than a situation where the supervisor emphasizes connection.

interdependence of the employee and his or her supervisor. If the supervisor will readily grant greater autonomy, then the
looking for more autonomy may be experiencing some tension; however, that tension is only understood by recognizing the

describes change. If we position this in terms of the contradictions described earlier, one bases his or her decisions about how to
address a preference for autonomy based on the manner in which the relationship has previously developed. If an employee
argued that change cannot really be separated from contradiction due to the natural effect contradiction has on change. As a
result, in many dialectical theories, the specific choice of dialectics is not all that significant. The assumption is that the
contradictions exist and the research question is how they fluctuate and how this is associated with change in the relationship
(Altman & Rogoff, 1987; Brown, Altman, & Werner, 1992). Thus, while we will propose a number of dialectics that characterize
the relationship between employee and supervisor, it is the impact that those dialectics have on the employee's relationship with
the supervisor, and particularly how the employee manages the dialectics in order to navigate the relationship, that are of primary
importance to the theory.

Further, the manner in which the dialectics change is important to consider. As relationships mature, the experience of
dialectical tensions and strategies to address them change (Braithwaite & Baxter, 1995). There is a natural give-and-take between
employees and supervisors that may shift the experience or importance of a given tension. For example, whereas autonomy
might be desired by an employee, it may take time before that autonomy is “earned” in the eyes of the supervisor. And there may
be times when, while the autonomy is valued, the employee would like to reestablish some connection with the supervisor. This
will be more clear when we discuss the specific strategies for addressing dialectic tensions below, but the assumption that the
dialectics change is important to note.

4.1.4. Totality

Dialectical theories explicitly acknowledge the necessity of explaining a phenomenon or process as it is embedded within a
larger social context (Berger, 1977). Particularly when we consider relationships, it is impossible to understand the dialectical
tensions without acknowledging the interdependence in that relationship. For example, the employee described above who is
looking for more autonomy may be experiencing some tension; however, that tension is only understood by recognizing the
interdependence of the employee and his or her supervisor. If the supervisor will readily grant greater autonomy, then the
tension takes on a very different form than a situation where the supervisor emphasizes connection.

We must also consider the likelihood that a relationship involves multiple contradictions that may be related. For example, we
have focused on the autonomy–connection dialectic for consistency of examples. But other dialectics exist in relationships, such
as the openness–closedness dialectic, or the tension between sharing information and the perceived risk of sharing information
(Baxter, 1988). One potential strategy for the employee seeking autonomy is to talk with his or her supervisor about the situation;
however, if that relationship has developed such that sharing is minimized or risky, it may make the autonomy–connection
dialectic more difficult to navigate. Thus, one dialectic has impacted another; such a situation is referred to as an internal
contradiction (cf., Ball, 1979; Mao, 1965).

Further, we cannot consider the relationship between employee and supervisor without considering the external connections
that impact that relationship, such as the employee’s relationship with his or her family role, the relationships the employee has
with other people in the organization, or the supervisor’s relationship with other employees. These external contradictions are
important for understanding the totality of the dialectical experience (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996), particularly in the case of
absenteeism and presenteeism, where social norms play a significant role in such decisions (Biron & Bamberger, 2012; Dello
Russo, Miraglia, Borgogni, & Johns, 2013).

The assumptions regarding contradictions, change, praxis, and totality are shared by dialectical theorists regardless of context
(Baxter & Montgomery, 1996; Benson, 1977). Thus, our dialectical theory regarding the decision to go to work relies on these
assumptions as well. Where dialectical theories diverge is the nature of the dialectics studied and variations on the assumptions.
In this paper, we will draw upon and extend the relational dialect perspective that evolved in the communication literature
4.2. Relational dialectics

We propose that extending relationship dialectics to understand one's relationship with his or her supervisor can yield unique insights into that relationship and opportunities for future research. Baxter (1988, 1990, 2010) proposed a dialectical perspective of relationship development that included three key contradictions: autonomy–connection, openness–closedness, and predictability–novelty. As noted above, the autonomy–connection dialectic refers to the tension between the closeness of the bond required for a relationship to exist and the desire to maintain a unique identity. The openness–closedness dialectic highlights the tension between sharing information and the power that comes from having information that others do not have (Baxter, 1990). Finally, the predictability–novelty dialectic refers to the natural tension that comes from the comfort that comes from stability and predictability in one's life and the desire for personal growth through new experiences (Baxter, 1990).

As we have emphasized throughout, dialectical theory is flexible in that the specific dialectics are not the critical issue in the theories, but rather how individuals navigate those dialectics. As a result, other relationship dialectics have been presented that go beyond Baxter's (1990) work in interpersonal relationships and are more customized for workplace relationships. For example, Bridge and Baxter (1992) suggested additional dialectics that impact friendships at work, including instrumentality–affection (evaluations vs. attraction resulting from affective connection), impartiality–favoritism, and judgment–acceptance (evaluations vs. cooperation of coworkers). In order to maintain a common link with previous theories on relational dialectics, we will focus on the core dialectics described by Baxter (1988, 1990) of autonomy–connection, openness–closedness, and predictability–novelty. That is not to say there are not other important dialectic contradictions that employees experience in their relationship with their supervisors; however, these three core dialectics are almost certainly experienced by all employees at some point in their relationship and also have the most relevance for explaining the decision to attend work.

We believe that the dialectics that govern interpersonal relationships are similar to the tensions involved in an employee's relationship with his or her supervisor (Bullis & Bach, 1989).

To start, connection is necessary at some level to be considered an employee or participant in the functioning of the organization. That connection forms a major part of an employee's identity (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Bullis & Bach, 1989; Curry, 2003; Dutton & Dukerich, 1991). An employee's connection with his or her supervisor in particular has been found to be a desirable element of one's job (SHRM, 2009). When a high quality connection exists, both the employee and the supervisor report higher levels of satisfaction and overall effectiveness (Gerstner & Day, 1997; Maslyn & Ulh-Bien, 2001). However, employees frequently seek autonomy at work, and finding such autonomy is associated with positive organizational and individual outcomes (Mathisen, 2011; Spector, 1986; Volmer et al., 2012). The autonomy–connection dialectic has been the source of study, without perhaps labeling it as such, for many years in the work–life balance literature. Boundary theory (Ashforth, Kreiner, & Fugate, 2000) suggests that we perceive a boundary between different roles, in particularly work and family/life (Nippert-Eng, 1996a,b; Zerubavel, 1991). The extent to which those roles are distinct or integrated, and specifically the extent to which employees engage in behaviors to manage those boundaries (Kreiner, 2006), is quite similar to employee management of autonomy versus connection.

The link between the autonomy–connection and absenteeism and presenteeism is logical. An employee will strive to achieve a balance between connection with his or her supervisor and some level of autonomy. When favorable relationship exists with the supervisor, the employee will use absenteeism as a way of seeking autonomy. Although Van Dierendonck et al. (2002) considered only voluntary absenteeism in their study examining the influence of supervisor–subordinate reciprocity on subordinate absenteeism, we believe that their findings may be applicable here. Following the authors' supposition that employees who experience high levels of reciprocity with their supervisors may likely consider absence every once in a while to be acceptable to the supervisor, an employee who experiences a favorable connection with his or her supervisor may perceive that absence when sick is acceptable. Empirically, the inverse relationship between absenteeism and autonomy is well-established (Spector, 1986), suggesting that those who have less autonomy are more likely to be absent. In the dialectical perspective, absenteeism acts a mechanism for regaining autonomy from the supervisor.

On the other hand, employees will use presenteeism as a means to regain connection with their supervisor. Attendance while ill could be a way employees show their commitment to a supervisor, so presenteeism may be particularly likely early in one's tenure in a company as he or she seeks to demonstrate commitment to the organization (Ng & Feldman, 2011; Simpson, 1998; Somers, 2010).

The openness–closedness dialectic has a communicative focus, as it focuses on the extent to which the employee shares information with his or her supervisor and seeks a similar level of sharing by the supervisor. As noted by Baxter (1988), relationships depend on sharing of information; however, doing so creates vulnerabilities (Rawlins, 1983, 1992). This dialectic is one of the main contributors to conflict in interpersonal relationships (Baxter, 2010; Baxter & Erbert, 1999; Erbert, 2000), suggesting that it could play a key role in the relationship between employee and supervisor.

The openness–closedness dialectic has clear application to the decision to attend work. Given that employees desire a favorable relationship with their supervisors, employees will experience conflict between remaining open and divulging information to their supervisor and maintaining some degree of privacy. For an employee that wants to retain closedness by not revealing his or her illness to the supervisor, as the communication of illness can lead to uncertainty in the employment relationship (Brashers, 2001), presenteeism is more likely until the illness becomes serious enough that disclosure is unavoidable. In cases where the employee's illness is serious enough that attending work will make the illness obvious, if he or she desires closedness, he or she will engage in absenteeism. Thus, in this dialectic, absenteeism and presenteeism can both be used to maintain closedness. They both could be used to maintain openness as well: presenteeism through showing up for work with visible symptoms and absenteeism if the employee clearly discloses why he or she is missing work.
The predictability–novelty dialectic relates to an employee’s desire for stability in the work that he or she does, in the communication with a supervisor, and the treatment by the supervisor and the innate desire to experience new things in life. In interpersonal relationships, there is some comfort in the stability of the relationship; however, many individuals in relationships like to try new things in order to keep the relationship "fresh" (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996).

When considering one’s relationship with his or her supervisor, a number of research streams suggest that employees navigate this contradiction in the workplace. The extensive literature on organizational justice, and particularly the impact of violations of perceived justice, suggests that employees desire consistency in their interactions with their supervisor (Konovsky, 2000). On the other hand, creativity research suggests that employees and organizations benefit from creative endeavors, which necessarily require novelty (Shalley, Zhou, & Oldham, 2004). Just as partners in an interpersonal relationship seek a balance between the predictable and the novel, employees seek such a balance in their relationship with a supervisor.

We would expect presenteeism to be consistent with a strategy for seeking greater novelty because it involves missing work, which, for most employees, is the more unusual scenario. That said, there could be some novelty from attending work while ill, especially if it invokes sympathy from the supervisor or other employees. Thus, like openness–closedness, both absenteeism and presenteeism can be used to move the relationship toward either pole in the dialectic.

4.3. Strategies for managing contradictions and their relationship with absenteeism and presenteeism

Above, we argued that the dialectical tensions associated with one's relationship with his or her supervisor cause uncertainty in the relationship. Dialectical theories assume that those experiencing the tensions will undertake steps to reduce those dialectical tensions (Baxter, 1988). Thus, when one is experiencing an imbalance in a contradiction, for example, desiring more connection and feeling autonomy has grown too high, he or she will engage in behaviors meant to reduce the tension (e.g., initiating more contact with the supervisor; Baxter & Simon, 1993). Baxter and Montgomery (1996) provided a taxonomy for strategies that individuals use to manage contradictions. In this section, we propose that by applying those strategies for addressing relational contradictions, we can develop predictions regarding the choice to attend work (see Table 1). That said, consistent with the dialectical perspective, the predictions are dependent on quite a few factors (both partners, the totality of the context, etc.), so we must recognize that strategies are just one portion of the decision process.

4.3.1. Denial

The first of the responses to contradictions is denial that they exist. Most commonly, this takes the form of denying one pole in the contradiction (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). For example, a supervisor may ask an employee to work on a task independently. This employee, however, may believe that all work should be done collaboratively, with full interdependence between him or her and his or her supervisor and coworkers. Such an approach not only conflicts with the desires of the supervisor, but it denies the reality (in most jobs anyway) that not all work requires collaboration and, at times, collaboration can be counterproductive (Ellemers & Rink, 2005). Denial is considered a dysfunctional approach to managing relational dialectics because it tends to be unsustainable over time (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996); eventually, the person will be forced to acknowledge the existence and plausibility of the other pole in the contradiction.

The denial strategy involves denying the validity of one of the poles. With regard to whether it leads to absenteeism (the choice not to attend work) or presenteeism (the choice to attend work) depends on where they stand with regard to the poles (which one they deny). If they deny autonomy, presenteeism is far more likely. If they deny connection, absenteeism is far more likely. For example, perceived overqualification for one’s job may lead one to believe that he or she does not need to work with others and should be granted more autonomy; that would fit with Maynard and Parfyonova’s (2013) finding that such individuals tend to engage in more withdrawal behaviors. In effect, those who perceive they are overqualified are denying the connection pole, leading them to respond to pressures to move toward that pole by exerting more autonomy through withdrawal.

**Proposition 1.** Employees who utilize denial to address dialectical tensions will utilize absenteeism and presenteeism to address dialectics. Specifically, if they deny connection, closedness, and predictability, they will utilize absenteeism. If they deny autonomy, openness, and novelty, they will utilize presenteeism.

4.3.2. Disorientation

Disorientation involves a similar response to denial, but rather than denying a pole in the contradiction, it is the fatalistic denial that the dialectic can be navigated (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). For example, an employee who values novelty but whose supervisor values predictability and structures tasks and responsibilities accordingly may have a difficult time fully addressing tension with his or her supervisor, since he or she may feel "trapped" in a boring job, especially if there was heavy investment or barrier to entry to that job such that changing jobs would subject the employee to too great a personal cost. Instead, he or she may send mixed messages about what he or she values; at times suggesting that he or she values the job and thus its predictability, while at other times engaging in activities that attempt to bring spontaneity in the job, but within the boundaries acceptable to the supervisor.

Disorientation involves a fatalistic view that there are contradictions that simply cannot be overcome. For employees that employ such a strategy to address contradictions, presenteeism is more likely — the easiest way to not deal with it is to just keep going to work. This proposition is built on the finding that avoidance is a common manifestation of the disorientation strategy.
As absenteeism forces an employee to address the illness head-on – at the very least the employee has to call in sick – presenteeism is a more logical mechanism for avoidance, assuming the employee can avoid disclosure about the illness while at work.

As an empirical example, Demerouti et al. (2009) found that when employees are faced with higher job demands, employees utilize presenteeism to meet these higher job demands. Those employees may believe the contradiction can’t be navigated as their work places higher demands on them. As this develops, the employee eventually experiences exhaustion, and continues to utilize presenteeism. Further, the reciprocal relationship the authors found between presenteeism and emotional exhaustion

<table>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Denial</td>
<td>Lack of acknowledgement of one pole in a dialectic contradiction.</td>
<td>An employee who denies connection, closedness, and predictability will utilize absenteeism. An employee who denies autonomy, openness, and novelty will utilize presenteeism.</td>
<td>An employee may believe that all work should be done collaboratively. Such an approach denies the reality (in most jobs anyway) that not all work requires collaboration and, at times, collaboration can be counterproductive. Since denial is considered a dysfunctional approach to managing relational dialectics, the employee will eventually be forced to acknowledge that some tasks should be done independently.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disorientation</td>
<td>Denial that a dialectic contradiction can be navigated.</td>
<td>Since avoidance is a common manifestation of this particular strategy, an employee will utilize presenteeism to manage the contradiction.</td>
<td>An employee may value novelty but have a supervisor who values predictability and structures tasks and responsibilities accordingly. S/he may have a difficult time fully addressing tension with the supervisor and may feel “trapped” in a boring job. S/he may send mixed messages; at times suggesting that s/he values the job and thus its predictability, while at other times engaging in activities that attempt to bring spontaneity in the job, but within the boundaries acceptable to the supervisor.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spiraling Inversion</td>
<td>Behavior that shifts toward poles depending on time-based need.</td>
<td>An employee may engage in presenteeism when high levels of connection are needed and engage in absenteeism when greater autonomy is needed.</td>
<td>A tax accountant engaging in high levels of connection with his or her supervisor during tax season and emphasizing autonomy at other points.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Segmentation</td>
<td>Behavior that shifts toward poles depending on context-based need.</td>
<td>Employees will utilize absenteeism and presenteeism to address dialectics and will switch between absenteeism and presenteeism depending on the nature of the dialectic in a specific context.</td>
<td>An employee who believes illness discussions are off-limits may engage in presenteeism (as long as symptoms are not visible) so as not to have to discuss the illness with his or her supervisor. If the illness is more visible and the employee still prefers to retain closedness, he or she may switch to absenteeism in order to avoid showing symptoms to the supervisor. When an employee feels that the supervisor is pushing him or her toward more openness than he or she is comfortable with, the employee may engage in absenteeism. Recognizing the legitimacy of the supervisor’s position, the employee may engage in presenteeism and share some information to feel as though he or she has moved the dialectic toward a compromise position between openness and closedness.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Balance</td>
<td>Compromise between the poles in a dialectic contradiction.</td>
<td>Employees who utilize balance to address dialectical tensions will utilize absenteeism and presenteeism to address dialectics and will switch between absenteeism and presenteeism depending on the nature of the dialectic in a specific context.</td>
<td>Largely dependent on which contradiction the integration is occurring in. For example, for the autonomy—connection dialectic, we might expect a unique pattern where the employee is absent, but works from home. Thus, he or she retains autonomy by staying at home but simultaneously maintains a connection by completing work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integration</td>
<td>Addressing two poles simultaneously and fully.</td>
<td>Employees who utilize integration to address dialectical tensions will utilize absenteeism and presenteeism to address dialectics and will switch between absenteeism and presenteeism depending on the nature of the dialectic in a specific context.</td>
<td>An employee who feels too connected with his or her supervisor, may engage in absenteeism by justifying it as a means to renew his or her relationship with his or her supervisor and as a result, become more connected with the supervisor.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recalibration</td>
<td>Reframing the dialectic poles to be less contradictory.</td>
<td>Employees who utilize recalibration to address dialectical tensions will utilize absenteeism and presenteeism to address dialectics tensions in a manner that adjusts the poles so that there is less conflict between them.</td>
<td>This strategy simply acknowledges the contradiction with little attempt to address it. As a result, employees who utilize this strategy to navigate their relationship with a supervisor are less likely to utilize either presenteeism or absenteeism in relationship management.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Afifi & Guerrero, 2000)
further adds to the disorientation, making it less likely that the employees feel that he or she can address the demands. As a result, presenteeism becomes even more likely.

**Proposition 2.** Employees who utilize disorientation to address dialectical tensions will utilize presenteeism to address dialectical tensions.

### 4.3.3. Spiraling inversion

Spiraling inversion involves somewhat radical shifts between poles in the contradiction. To manage a contradiction, the relational partners go through time-based phases where they emphasize one pole of the dialectic over the other and then shift to the other pole (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). For example, an employee may engage in high levels of connection for a while and then pull away toward greater autonomy at other times. This may be a natural progression that is managed by the employee, or driven by an external factor (e.g., a tax accountant engaging in high levels of connection during tax season and emphasizing autonomy at other points). In a dyadic sense, the supervisor might also expect (or at least accept) such patterns as well, where the employee is highly connected during key periods and independent when connection is less necessary. Baxter and Montgomery (1996) characterize this strategy as functional in the sense that the relational partners are attempting to manage the dialectic in some way that is mutually acceptable to the partners.

In spiraling inversion, the strategy for addressing the dialectic shifts as the contradiction shifts poles, with some sort of temporal relationship. For example, during periods when the supervisor expects high connection with the employee (e.g., tax season for accountants or regular academic year for teachers), the employee will utilize presenteeism. Presenteeism allows the employee to maintain that connection. In periods when the supervisor accepts higher levels of autonomy (e.g., summer sessions for teachers), the employee will utilize absenteeism. Such shifts are common in service and education jobs (Aronsson et al., 2000). Thus, consistent with dialectical theories in general, the context of the relational dialectic, in this case, seasonality, governs the decision to attend work, with the strategy informing that decision.

**Proposition 3.** Employees who utilize spiraling inversion to address dialectical tensions will utilize absenteeism and presenteeism to address dialectics and will switch between absenteeism and presenteeism depending on the nature of the dialectic during a given period of time. Specifically, they will use presenteeism in time periods where the supervisor signals that connectedness is needed and utilize absenteeism during periods when the supervisor signals that autonomy is acceptable.

### 4.3.4. Segmentation

Segmentation is a very similar strategy to spiraling inversion; however, segmentation is not temporally based, but instead based on a specific domain (e.g., a specific task at work; Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). Consider the openness–closedness dialectic, there may be certain issues that are simply “off-limits” to discuss at any point. For example, employees may be generally open, but believe talking about their children or romantic relationships with their supervisors is strictly off-limits and emphasize the closedness pole when those topics come up.

Absenteeism and presenteeism may be used as a means to address segmentation in the context of dialectical tensions. For example, an employee who believes illness discussions with his or her supervisor are off-limits may engage in presenteeism (as long as symptoms are not visible) so as not to have to discuss the illness. When the employee reaches a point where the illness is more visible and still prefer to retain closedness with his or her supervisor, the employee may switch to absenteeism in order to avoid having the supervisor notice symptoms. If the supervisor emphasizes connection during certain tasks (e.g., idea generation), presenteeism may be more likely as the employee seeks to participate in those tasks. The bottom line is they can utilize their decision to come to work to tailor how they address the dialectic contradiction for a very specific situation.

The relationship with the supervisor may combine with social context to help govern how segmentation plays out among employees. Biron and Bamberger (2012) found that when supervisors were perceived to be less supportive, employees were more likely to default to peer norms regarding absenteeism when deciding whether to attend work. When supervisors were more supportive – perhaps enhancing perceptions of connection – employees were more likely to attend work regardless of norms.

**Proposition 4.** Employees who utilize segmentation to address dialectical tensions will utilize absenteeism and presenteeism to address dialectics and will switch between absenteeism and presenteeism depending on the nature of the dialectic in a specific context.

### 4.3.5. Balance

Balance is tantamount to compromise in dialectic management strategies (Baxter, 1988, 1990). The two poles in a contradiction are seen as opposite ends of a spectrum and the goal is to land in the middle. The end result is a compromise by the employee. He or she might feel that the supervisor is pushing him or her toward more openness than he or she is comfortable with. Recognizing the legitimacy of the supervisor’s position, the employee might share some information to feel as though he or she has moved the dialectic toward a compromise position between openness and closedness, but not any more than he or she has to. Interestingly, particularly in the context of the openness–closedness dialectic, this strategy appears to lead to dissatisfaction with relationships (Baxter, 1990). The role that absenteeism and presenteeism play in balance, like the other strategies discussed, depends on their perceived position within the dialectic tension. If the employee, for example, believes he or she is very connected to work but would prefer autonomy, he or she may view presenteeism (coming to work but perhaps less productive as usual) as a compromise position.
Further, since the goal is compromise, they may alternate the use of absenteeism and presenteeism, for example, coming to work when the illness starts but being absent as the illness becomes more serious.

Aronsson and Gustafsson (2005) found that chronic health problems, difficulty in replacing oneself at work, and poor financial status were all associated with presenteeism. This supports a balance strategy in that it suggests that contextual factors might limit the ability to be absent (e.g., difficulty in replacement; see also Johns, 2011), so employees use presenteeism to balance the tensions despite chronic health problems. It is likely that at some point those employees would miss work when their health conditions became serious enough, but for the time being they are balancing health with work-related needs.

In a similar fashion, Schaufeli et al. (2009) found an interesting give-and-take approach to absenteeism in the face of job demands and resources. They found that as demands increased, absenteeism increased and as job resources increased, presenteeism decreased. This applied not only to frequency of absence, but also duration. These findings suggest that employees balance the use of absenteeism and presenteeism based on when they have the resources to do their work and when their demands exceed their capacity to do the work.

**Proposition 5.** Employees who utilize balance to address dialectical tensions will utilize absenteeism and presenteeism to address dialectics and will switch between absenteeism and presenteeism depending on the nature of the dialectic in a specific context.

### 4.3.6. Integration

Integration is arguably the least common strategy employed to address relational dialectics (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). It involves addressing two poles simultaneously and fully (e.g., not addressing one pole by actively or vocally subjugating the other; Bridge & Baxter, 1992). Werner and Baxter (1994) highlight the role of ritual as a manifestation of this strategy (see also Baxter, 2010; Turner, 1969). For example, supervisors can manage the autonomy–connectedness contradiction by holding sales meetings that emphasize the connectedness of the sales team in generating revenue for the organization while also highlighting individual accomplishments.

The relationship between integration and the decision to attend work is largely dependent on which contradiction the integration is occurring in. For example, for the autonomy–connection dialectic, we might expect a unique pattern where the employee is absent, but works from home. Thus, he or she retains autonomy by staying at home but simultaneously maintains a connection by completing work. A similar behavior would allow for integration of the predictability–novelty contradiction as it would allow for the novelty of working from home while retaining the predictable work that is normally performed.

**Proposition 6.** Employees who utilize integration to address dialectical tensions will utilize absenteeism and presenteeism to address dialectics and will switch between absenteeism and presenteeism depending on the nature of the dialectic in a specific context.

### 4.3.7. Recalibration

Recalibration is an attempt to reframe the contradiction such that it seems less contradictory. This is similar to the attitude change that is observed in the face of cognitive dissonance (Harmon-Jones & Mills, 1999), where individuals adjust their attitudes so that there is a match between attitudes and behavior. However, in the case of dialectics, the poles of the contradiction are temporally recalibrated to reduce the tension and move closer to equilibrium. For example, if an employee feels he or she is too connected with his or her supervisor, he or she might reframe autonomy to perceive it as an opportunity for connection. The employee might justify time away from work as a means to renew his or her relationship with his or her supervisor. Thus, the time away (autonomy) is seen as an opportunity to regroup and become more connected with the supervisor. Under this logic, one would expect presenteeism.

As an empirical example of this process, Staufenbiel and König (2010) found that the effect of job insecurity on presenteeism depended on how the employee thought about job insecurity. If he or she considered it a challenge stressor, it stimulated the employee to be at work (and in the case of illness, might be more likely to be associated with presenteeism). On the other hand, if he or she considered it a hindrance stressor, he or she was more likely to be absent from work. This suggests that if one were able to recalibrate how job insecurity is interpreted by the employee, it may shift the strategy employed. Supervisors can impact the manner in which job insecurity influences outcomes like absenteeism and performance (Loi, Ngo, Zhang, & Lau, 2011), suggesting that relationship may play a key role in recalibration.

Social norms may also play a role (Biron & Bamberger, 2012). Recently, Dello Russo et al. (2013) found that newer employees recalibrated their patterns of absence over four years to match the prevailing social norms. The same pattern was not found among longer-tenured workers, presumably because their patterns already met the norms. The absence patterns were reinforced by a more positive perception of work colleagues–employees who thought highly of their coworkers actually moved closer to the norm, even if that meant more absence. Thus, employees used social norms to recalibrate their thinking about the tensions driving their decision to attend work.

**Proposition 7.** Employees who utilize recalibration to address dialectical tensions will utilize absenteeism and presenteeism to address dialectics tensions in a manner that adjusts the poles so that there is less conflict between them.

### 4.3.8. Reaffirmation

Reaffirmation is similar to disorientation, but without the fatalistic acceptance that the two poles cannot be reconciled. Instead, in reaffirmation, the inability to reconcile the poles is acknowledged and embraced as a unique element of the
relationship (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). While it may be more rare than the previously-described strategies, some employees may embrace the fluctuations in their relationship with their supervisor, recognizing that it is an element of the relationship that makes it interesting and challenging. In fact, some people may be drawn to a workplace or occupation because of the contradictions inherent in it. In academia, many people enjoy the dialectical tension between research and teaching and accept it as an exciting aspect of the occupation.

Reaffirmation is a unique strategy in that there is little attempt to address the dialectical contradictions other than to acknowledge them. As a result, those who utilize this strategy to navigate their relationship with a supervisor are less likely to utilize either presenteeism or absenteeism in relationship management. Obviously, such individuals still experience illness and still have to make decisions about work attendance. We argue that they will utilize other means to make these decisions, such as a more objective consideration of the nature of their illness and its severity (Johns, 2010).

This approach fits the findings reported by Frayne and Latham (1987) regarding the effects of self-management training to reduce absenteeism. They found that after training, employees perceived greater self-efficacy; put another way, they realized they could manage the dialectical tensions they faced at work with strategies other than absenteeism.

**Proposition 8.** Employees who utilize reaffirmation to address dialectical tensions are less likely to utilize absenteeism and presenteeism to address dialectics tension.

4.4. The role of the supervisor

We acknowledge that as a dyadic relationship, both supervisors and employees experience similar tensions (though not necessarily in the same ways). As a result, both must address dialectics in a way that reduces the tension. To this point, our focus has been on how the employees decide to come to work or stay home. We emphasize this approach because of the inherent dependent connection the supervisor has with other people and our position that the decision to attend work ultimately lies with the employee. If the supervisor chooses not to come to work, the impact of that relationship is felt well beyond the employee (Shirom & Rosenblatt, 2006). As a result, while the supervisor experiences the tension, he or she likely approaches the strategies for managing the dialects differently. Supervisors might manage the tensions in ways that can encourage the employee to attend work; those strategies may change over time as the supervisor comes to understand the reasons the employee uses for missing work (Johns, 2011; Patton, 2011) and as the employee establishes his or her reputation with the supervisor (Zinko, Ferris, Humphrey, Meyer, & Aime, 2012).

For example, the supervisor can also use the denial strategy by dictating how work is completed. It is likely that supervisor’s use of denial can have the effect of shaping the employee’s response by perhaps denying autonomy. We do not assume that supervisors use the same approaches with all employees. More likely is the adjustment of strategies to push the employee closer to organizational goals to support the continued development of the working relationship. For example, if the supervisor believes that the employee is not spending enough time at work (in jobs where location is flexible), he or she might deny autonomy. On the other hand, if the supervisor believes a change in work setting might benefit the employee’s performance, he or she might deny connection. This might narrow the ways that the employee can manage the tension, in part by reducing the demands placed on the employee for self-control in deciding whether to attend work or not (Diestel & Schmidt, 2012). Such an approach would make absenteeism less likely.

The employee’s response to the supervisor’s strategy depends on the relationship with the supervisor, consistent with the concept of praxis described above. Early in a relationship, the employee might use the supervisor’s approach to dialectical tensions as signals about what he or she values and try to engage in strategies that are consistent with the signals sent by the supervisor. On the other hand, as the relationship develops, the employee may recognize times when he or she can deviate from the supervisor’s strategies without significant cost to the relationship. Trust could play a role as well. As employees have greater trust in the supervisor, they may be more willing to align their tension-management strategies with the supervisor (Van Dierendonck et al., 2002). Thus, while the supervisor clearly can impact the response of employees in how they manage relationship tensions, some aspects of the relationship will shape the manner in which employees respond to supervisor approaches to dialectical tension.

**Proposition 9.** Consistent with the praxis concept of dialectical theories, supervisor approaches to dialectical tensions shape employee responses to dialectical tensions. The impact of supervisor approaches varies based on characteristics of the relationship with the supervisor, including the length of the relationship and trust and thus are unique for each employee.

Of course that raises the issue of employees also having multiple connections. Employees do not work in a vacuum; in many jobs they are interdependent with several coworkers and experience the same dialectical tensions described above in each of their relationships (Halbesleben, 2012). Many of the propositions will apply similarly in situations where employees work interdependently with coworkers. However, we acknowledge that the power dynamics of those relationships are somewhat different and thus the strategies employed may differ; extension of the dialectical approach to work attendance decisions and coworkers may serve as a fruitful opportunity for future research, particularly in the context of teams (cf., Conway & Briner, 2012).

5. Implications for theory and research

Baxter and Montgomery (1996) note a number of important qualifications in their discussion of strategies to manage dialectical tensions; it is worth noting some of the parallels with the absenteeism–presenteeism context. For example, they note that the strategies
assume a certain level of synchronicity between relational partners in the perception of the contradictions. If that synchronicity does not exist, the responses may be quite different. For example, a nurse may rely on disorientation to address dialectical tensions and may engage in presenteeism as a result. However, if his or her supervisor is very clear that work attendance while ill is unacceptable, the lack of synchrony will likely shift the decision of the nurse toward absenteeism. Similarly, if the workplace does not have paid sick leave or very limited sick leave that an employee has exhausted, he or she may utilize presenteeism in all circumstances.

Importantly, the praxis assumption in dialectical theories reminds us that while decisions are made based on the past, they change the relationship for the future. So, while someone seeking autonomy may choose absenteeism over presenteeism, such a decision could eventually require greater connection as he or she spends extra time getting caught up on the work that was missed and reconnecting with his or her supervisor. Thus, striving for autonomy may have inadvertently increased the likelihood of connection. This highlights the dynamic nature of the relational dialectic experience and the importance of considering the context within which decisions occur (Baxter, 2010).

Dialectical theorists emphasize the constant flux of the contradictions. This implies a necessity of longitudinal designs, since capturing a single dialectic moment will have limited value in understanding the full nature of the supervisor–subordinate relationship. As one employs a strategy to address a dialectical tension, it shifts that tension such that a different strategy may be required. One of the common techniques used in the relational dialectic literature is turning point analysis (cf., Baxter & Bullis, 1986; Becker et al., 2009; Bullis & Bach, 1989; Golish, 2000; Surra, 1985, 1987). Turning point analysis is based on the recognition that as the tensions in relational dialectics shift toward one of the poles, that shift can be conceptualized as a turning point in the relationship (Bolton, 1961). Turning point analysis involves working with the participant to graph aspects of a relationship over time (usually, the perceived closeness or commitment to the relational partner) and then examining the points where the trajectory of the relationship dimension shifts. This technique could be very useful to testing the theory we have proposed; researchers could examine shifts in the perceived relationship between employee and supervisor and examine the extent to which those shifts were associated with absenteeism and presenteeism. In addition to addressing the need for longitudinal designs,Halbesleben (2012) has noted that turning point analysis has the advantages of integrating multiple temporal components of theory into the testing of the theory, fitting with the already well-developed analysis techniques used to examine intra-individual experiences of employees, and incorporating the nonlinear modeling that has become increasingly recognized as key to studying organizations.

Relational dialectics highlight the context-bound, individual nature of each decision to attend work (Baxter, 2010). Measurement from multiple sources (and likely at multiple levels) is another necessary component to research designs to test the proposed theory. While the outcome in our theory is an individual decision, clearly there is a dyadic component to the theory, as the employee making the attendance decision is a partner in the supervisor–subordinate relationship (Baxter, 2004). Further, the dyad may span multiple levels depending on how the employee conceptualizes his or her supervisor. Theories of relationship dialectics in the workplace are necessarily individual and organizational level theories (Jameson, 2004) and thus must be tested as such (e.g., as multilevel models).

Much of the work in dialectical theory has grown out of the field of communication. That field offers opportunities to extend this theory. We have focused on the decision to attend work. However, there are communicative aspects of this that are beyond the scope of that decision but worth exploring. For example, we argued that presenteeism was a strategy for addressing the openness–closedness contradiction because absenteeism implies illness and thus discloses its existence. However, the manner in which the illness is communicated in the workplace may further impact the tension surrounding the openness–closedness dialectic. For example, if the employee starts to show symptoms while at work, the supervisor may ask about it and push the employee toward openness. The communication literature suggests a number of communication strategies that people use to address such situations, from strategic ambiguity about their illness (Eisenberg, 1984) where the person provides an intentionally vague response to such inquiries in order to avoid discussing it, humor (Baxter, 1988) or even irony (e.g., a nurse saying “yeah, it’s pretty odd that I’m here treating ill people while I’m feeling just as bad as they are;” Stohl & Cheney, 2001). Such research goes beyond the decision to attend work, but fits with the general dialectical perspective that we have developed.

While we believe that the present work contributes to our understanding of the influence that the supervisor–subordinate relationship has on an employee’s decision to attend work when sick, we acknowledge that a great deal more work is necessary. Given the increased tendency of organizations to rely on alternative employment modes, researchers may consider whether our propositions are applicable to less traditional supervisor–subordinate relationships such as temporary employees, float pool, contractors, or expatriates. Future research also may explore whether the dialectical model can be applied to daily as well as long-term decisions (e.g., whether or not to engage in helping behavior or take a promotion opportunity). Furthermore, researchers may consider how our ideas fit into broader frameworks. For example, presenteeism may incorporate “non absenteeism” options. As such, exploring how our model addresses the options proposed by Hirschl and M’s (1970) Exit, Loyalty, Voice, and Neglect model may offer greater insight into employees’ responses to tensions experienced.

Moreover, although we focused on the supervisor–subordinate relationship, future research may consider other workplace relationships such as coworkers and clients since the relationship with these groups is likely to drive the decision to attend work (Zimmermann, Dormann, & Dollard, 2011). Research on the work–family interface might also be particularly useful, since implementation of family-friendly policies (e.g., child care) shifts the relationship between employees and their supervisor, reduces absenteeism (Payne, Cook, & Diaz, 2012) and may change the approaches used to manage dialectical tensions. A more broad integration of this work with the work on how spouses impact work-related decisions (e.g., Baskerville Watkins et al., 2012) and how employees manage those boundaries (e.g. Kreiner, 2006; Kreiner, Hollensbe, & Sheep, 2009) would be a good starting point for this research.
Finally, we acknowledge that under certain circumstances, the dialectic tensions will play little to no role in the decision to attend work. Clearly, there are instances where illness is so severe that the decision is made for the employee. Alternatively, there may be instances where not showing for work, regardless of condition, might have severe consequences for the employee. We would argue that, while important, those situations are less common than the subtle decisions that have to be made more regularly by employees regarding work attendance. We also acknowledge that there are instances where jobs are flexible enough that working at home is an option and thus the decision to stay home is significantly easier to make. The dialectic tensions may play less of a role in those cases. Nonetheless, in many cases, it appears that an understanding of the dialectical tensions experienced by the employee and supervisor can shed light on the decision to attend work.

6. Conclusion

In this paper, we have argued that, in many cases, the decision to attend work may be associated with the nature of the relationship between an employee and his or her supervisor. Further, we argued that employees can use the decision to attend work to shape that relationship by moving themselves closer to a desired pole in a dialectic tension. We offered several means by which they might engage in such strategies (see Table 1 for a summary) that could lead to a decision to attend work while sick (presenteeism) or not attend work. Key to understanding this theory is to understand the fluctuation of the relationship over time as well as its dyadic nature — thus, prediction of a specific decision to attend work requires an understanding of how that relationship developed, its current state, and both the tensions experienced by both parties in the relationship.

In the contemporary employment-at-will context, employees make a voluntary decision to attend work prior to each working shift. Interestingly, absenteeism and presenteeism have developed along parallel paths without meeting despite being tied to a relationship developed, its current state, and both the tensions experienced by both parties in the relationship.

References


