

The Impact of Social Capital on Sickness Absence in the Workplace: The Moderating Role of Perceived Health

BRAM LANCEE* & CLAARTJE TER HOEVEN†

Abstract. There is a growing interest in the relationship between social capital and health (e.g., Kim, Subramanian, & Kawachi, 2006; Mansyur, Amick, Harrist, & Franzini, 2008). Despite the interest in the health effects of social capital, the relation between social capital and sickness absence has not been investigated yet. Therefore, we examine to what extent social capital can explain sickness absence. In doing so, social capital is defined as participation in civic institutions that can yield positive returns for the individual (e.g., Putnam, 2000, Coleman, 1990). Building on the theoretical framework of social exchange proposed by Siegrist (2000), we test a conceptual model explaining sickness absence considering perceived health, social capital, as well as interactions between perceived health and social capital.

For the measurement, we used the 1996 wave of the German Socio-Economic Panel Study. The data on sickness absence were collected in the consecutive year (i.e., 1997). For the analyses, we dropped non-working respondents and subsequently made use of Tobit regression analysis.

The results confirmed both the negative relation between perceived health and sickness absence as well as the negative relation between civic participation and sickness absence. Furthermore, an interaction effect was found between participation in civic institutions and perceived health. Simple slopes analysis revealed that the effect of civic participation is more pronounced for people who perceive themselves as unhealthy ($b = -17,17, t = -6.49, p = .00$) as opposed to healthy ($b = 3, 87, t = 1.53, p = .13$).

The findings show the importance of social participation outside the workplace for people at work, especially when they do not feel physically well. It looks like participation in civic institutions gives people something to look forward to, which can help to overcome physical barriers to get active.

* Bram.Lancee@eui.eu, European University Institute, department of Political and Social Sciences. Via dei Roccettini 9, 50014 San Domenico di Fiesole, Italy.

† C.L.terHoeven@utwente.nl, University of Twente, department of Technical and Professional Communication, P.O. Box 217, 7500 AE Enschede, The Netherlands.