



Absenteeism, turnover intention and inequity in the employment relationship

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In this field study a preliminary social exchange model was proposed that related perceived inequity in the employment relationship to subsequent absenteeism and turnover intention. From an equity perspective, it was hypothesized that absenteeism and turnover intention are indirectly related to perceived inequity in the exchange relationship with the organization, mediated by feelings of resentment and poor organizational commitment. By employing covariance structure modelling, the model was tested among mental health care professionals ($N = 90$). The results demonstrated that the relationship between perceived inequity and turnover intention was fully mediated by poor organizational commitment, which was, in turn, partially triggered by feelings of resentment that were associated with perceived inequity. In contrast, there was a strong direct link between inequity in the employment relationship and absenteeism, not mediated by resentment and poor organizational commitment. It was concluded that absenteeism and turnover intention can both be considered to be withdrawal reactions to perceived inequity but that the two reactions differ in their underlying dynamics. The implications of these findings were discussed.

1. Introduction

A recent trend in empirical research on absenteeism and turnover is to study these behaviours from the perspective of social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) and equity theory (Adams, 1965, Walster, Walster, and Berscheid, 1978). From this perspective, two assumptions can be made. First, an equitable exchange between what employees invest in their relationship with the organization and what they receive back in return is a key element in the employee-organization relationship. Second, absenteeism and turnover are important means available to employees to restore equity in the employment relationship. In the current study, the authors propose a preliminary social exchange model that relates perceived inequity in the employment relationship to both absenteeism and turnover intention. The purpose of this study is to investigate the underlying dynamics in these

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relationships by addressing some possible intervening variables. First, it is assumed that perceived inequity generates a negative emotional state (i.e. feelings of resentment) that, in turn, triggers various withdrawal reactions. Second, in addition to absenteeism and turnover intention as behavioural withdrawal reactions, poor organizational commitment is considered to be a psychological withdrawal reaction that, in turn, is likely to result in behavioural withdrawal. Accordingly, the authors' central hypothesis is that the relationship of perceived inequity in the employee-organization relationship with absenteeism and turnover intention is mediated by feelings of resentment and poor organizational commitment. This hypothesis is in line with recent studies that have provided support for the intervening role of affective reactions between inequity perceptions in the work situation and withdrawal reactions (Kohler, and Matthieu, 1993; Aquino, Griffeth, Allen, and Hom, 1997; Hendrix, Robins, Miller, and Summers, 1999).

1.1 *Inequity in the employment relationship*

From the perspective of social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) and equity theory (Adams, 1965, Walster *et al.*, 1978), employees pursue equity in their exchange with the organization. Employees agree to make specific contributions to an organization (e.g. talents, experience, time and effort), for which they expect benefits in return (e.g. payment, fringe benefits and promotion prospects) that are proportional to their contributions. Building on this perspective, the notion of a psychological contract (Rousseau, and Parks, 1993) between employees and employers conveys the expectations held by employees about the reciprocal nature of their employment relationship. Expectations concern both concrete issues (e.g. payment and workload) and less tangible matters (e.g. esteem and dignity). Classic equity theory (Adams, 1965) assumes that people's evaluations of the balance between investments and benefits are primarily based on social comparisons (i.e. comparisons with, real or hypothetical, others). Pritchard (1969), however, has argued that inequity could easily well arise from an imbalance between investments and benefits relative to one's internal standard. The internal standard, which is similar to Thibaut, and Kelley's notion of 'comparison level' (1959), may depend upon, for example, the benefits that are salient because they have been recently experienced or vividly recalled by the occurrence of certain reminders. In the current study, following Pritchard's line of reasoning, equity is defined as the equality of perceived investments and benefits relative to one's internal standards (cf. Schaufeli, van Dierendonck, and van Gorp, 1996). Inequity, or a violation of the psychological contract, is experienced when one's expectations of reciprocity remain unfulfilled because the costs of the exchange with the organization outweigh the benefits received back in return.

1.2 *Affective and withdrawal reactions to inequity in the employment relationship*

A long history of equity research (Adams, 1965, Walster *et al.*, 1978, Mowday, 1991) as well as recent studies on psychological contract violation (Rousseau, and Parks, 1993, Robinson, and Rousseau, 1994) reveal that behavioural withdrawal might result when employees perceive a lack of reciprocity in their employment relationship. Several studies have consistently shown that employees who experience a negative imbalance between their contributions to and profits from the organization and who feel that their psychological contract has been violated because of unfulfilled job expectations, report sick more often (Dittrich, and Carrell, 1979; Oldham, Kulik, Ambrose, Stepina, and Brand, 1986, Hendrix, and Spencer, 1989, Geurts, Buunk, and Schaufeli, 1994a, 1994b), and are more inclined to leave the organization (Rosin, and Korabik, 1991; Guzzo, Noonan, and

Elron, 1994; Robinson, and Rousseau, 1994; Van Yperen, Hagedoorn, and Geurts, 1996) From the perspective of equity theory (Adams, 1965), behavioural withdrawal (or in equity terms 'leaving the field') is one of the means available to restore an equitable employment relationship. Indeed, employees may perceive time away from work as being instrumental in decreasing their investments and in attaining other more valued non-work outcomes simultaneously (Morgan, and Herman, 1976, Hackett, Bycio, and Guion, 1989). In a similar vein, Hill, and Trist (1962) assumed that when employees experience conflicts of satisfactions and obligations in their work situation, they tend to express them by leaving the organization or by being absent (with turnover being the preferred reaction early in the process of socialization within the organization, and absenteeism being the preferred reaction in a later stage). Gibson (1966) was one of the first to relate absenteeism to the concept of an informal contract between the employee and the organization. He suggested that employees would legitimize their absences to themselves when negative aspects to the work situation outweighed the positive aspects. The notion that absenteeism is part of social exchange between the employee and the organization was taken a step further by Chadwick-Jones, Nicholson, and Brown (1982). In their social theory of absenteeism they argued that absenteeism should be considered to be negative exchange behaviour, with employees withholding their presence from work to make up for work load pressures, stress or other negative aspects of their jobs.

Traditional equity theory (Adams, 1965), with its roots in cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957), has postulated that the presence of inequity creates an unpleasant emotional state, for example resentment. It is this tension that is supposed to be the primary motive for a person to reduce inequity and the associated negative feelings. The results of various studies indeed show that when expectations of reciprocity remain unfulfilled or a violation of one's psychological contract is experienced, employees develop feelings of resentment, grievance, betrayal and mistrust (Konovsky, and Pugh, 1994; Robinson, and Rousseau, 1994) that, in turn, trigger various behavioural withdrawal reactions (Oldham *et al.*, 1986, Buunk, and Janssen, 1992; Rutte, and Messick, 1995). Following this line of reasoning, in the current study feelings of resentment are expected to play an intervening role in the relationship between perceived inequity in the employment relationship and both types of behavioural withdrawal responses. Accordingly, it is hypothesized that the more inequitable employees perceive their employment relationship to be, the more resentment they will experience (*hypothesis 1*), that, in turn, will trigger subsequent absenteeism (*hypothesis 2*) and turnover intention (intention to leave) (*hypothesis 3*). Although it is recognized that intentions may change over time and are not necessarily predictive of future behaviour, a review and meta-analysis of longitudinal studies by Steel, and Ovalle (1984) consistently showed that an individual's thoughts and intentions of leaving are the strongest predictor of an actual decision to leave (Tett, and Meyer, 1993; Hendrix *et al.*, 1999).

In addition to behavioural withdrawal reactions to perceived inequity in the employment relationship, various studies have also demonstrated that employees may respond by psychological withdrawal, for instance, by reducing their level of organizational commitment (Pearce, and Porter, 1986, Folger, and Konovsky, 1989, Syroit, Lodewijkx, Franssen, and Gerstel, 1993). Organizational commitment, which can be described as the strength of one's identification with and involvement in a particular organization (Mowday, Steers, and Porter, 1979), is a response that is based on a rational exchange of benefits and rewards (Etzioni, 1961). From a social exchange perspective it can be assumed that the more employees feel that their investments into the organization outweigh the benefits received in return, the less attached they will feel to the organization and the more

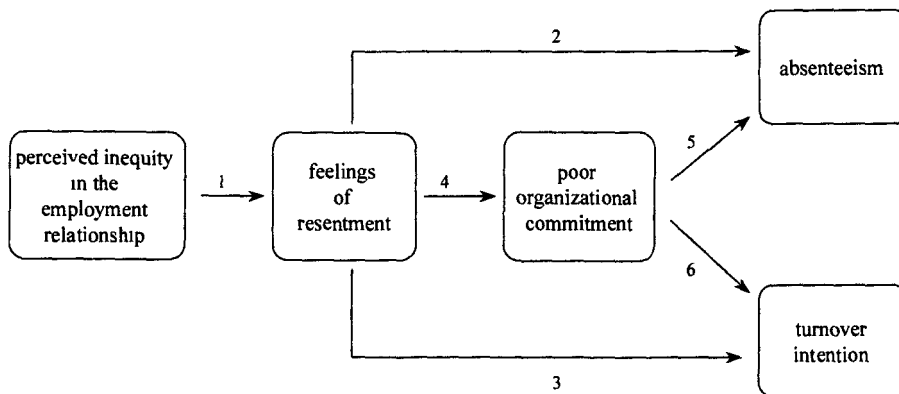


Figure 1 The hypothetical model

they will reduce their level of commitment with it (Folger, and Konovsky, 1989). Various studies on organizational fairness have also provided empirical support for poor organizational commitment as reaction to perceived unfairness in organizations (Lind, and Tyler, 1988; Rutte, and Messick, 1995, Schaufeli *et al.*, 1996). In line with traditional equity theory, the authors hypothesize that the more feelings of resentment employees experience, the lower is their level of organizational commitment (*hypothesis 4*).

Previous studies have demonstrated that poor organizational commitment affects withdrawal behaviour in general (DeCotiis, and Summers, 1987). A study by Rosin, and Korabik (1995) showed that poor organizational commitment was one of the strongest predictors of turnover intention among both men and women managers (Angle, and Perry, 1981; Guzzo *et al.*, 1994). Also, meta-analytic studies conclude that poor organizational commitment may lead to turnover-related intentions and actual turnover (Mathieu, and Zajac, 1990; Randall, 1990) In addition, various studies have provided support for a direct linkage between organizational commitment and absenteeism (Mowday *et al.*, 1979; Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchinson, and Sowa, 1986; Gellatly, 1995, Johns, 1997; Meyer, and Allen, 1997; Sagie, 1998) It is, therefore, hypothesized that the lower one's level of organizational commitment, the more often one will report sick (*hypothesis 5*) and the higher one's inclination to leave the organization (*hypothesis 6*). The expectation that organizational commitment might serve as an intervening variable between perceived inequity and associated feelings of resentment, on the one hand, and behavioural withdrawal, on the other, is supported by various previous studies. For example, in an extensive review of the literature on absenteeism, Brook (1986) found support for a mediating role of organizational commitment in the relationship between inequity perceptions and absenteeism. In addition, Rosin, and Korabik (1991, 1995) demonstrated that when managers felt that their expectations of the job had not been met, their level of commitment to the organization was reduced, which, in turn, predicted intention to leave.

1.3 Hypothetical model and sample

The conceptual model that guides the present research is illustrated in figure 1. With respect to absenteeism, a prospective design was featured by using objective recordings of absences for each individual employee. The model was tested among mental health care professionals. Burnout is recognized as a chronic and extensive problem in the mental health field; in addition high turnover rates have also been reported, exceeding 60% each

year (Ben-Dror, 1994). The absence percentage in the field of mental health care is currently the highest in The Netherlands (i.e. 9%), compared to other areas of health care. Nevertheless, hardly any research has been carried out on absenteeism and turnover in the mental health field. Studying these behaviours from a social exchange perspective might be particularly relevant among human service professionals, because they often have high expectations of their jobs (e.g. about autonomy, support or collegiality at work, contacts with people) (Cherniss, 1980). When these expectations clash with harsh reality (e.g. low autonomy and support, aggression and violence, and disablement of co-workers), mental health care workers might be particularly vulnerable to perceptions of inequity in the employee-organization relationship and violations of the psychological contract.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedure

The current study was conducted among 90 health-care professionals who were employed in a Dutch community mental health centre (33 males, 53 females, and 4 participants whose gender was unknown). The response rate was 85%. Among them were 7 psychiatrists, 20 psychologists and psychotherapists, 7 paediatricians, 37 social workers, and 15 supporting assistants. The mean age was 40.9 years ($SD = 7.35$ years; range = 26–61 years), and the mean duration of employment was 8.0 years ($SD = 6.6$ years; range = 0–26 years). All subjects participated voluntarily in a survey. Questionnaires were filled in and returned by mail. It was strongly emphasized that the questionnaires would be treated confidentially.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. *Perceived inequitable employment relationship*: This was measured by five survey items: (1) 'I invest more in my work than I get out of it'; (2) 'I exert myself too much considering what I get back in return'; (3) 'For the efforts I put into the organization, I get much in return' (reversed); (4) 'If I take into account my dedication, the organization ought to give me a better practical training'; and (5) 'In general, the benefits I receive from the organization outweigh the effort I put in it' (reversed). Participants responded on a 5-point scale, ranging from 'I disagree completely' (1) to 'I agree completely' (5) ($M = 2.03$; $SD = .64$). The internal consistency was sufficient ($\alpha = .76$). Similar measures of perceived inequity have been employed in research on burnout (Schaufeli *et al.*, 1996, Van Dierendonck, Schaufeli, and Buunk, 1996).

2.2.2. *Feelings of resentment*. Feelings of resentment were measured by seven survey items concerning feelings of (1) 'indignation', (2) 'rancour', (3) 'anger', (4) 'unfairness', (5) 'disappointment', (6) 'grievance', (4) and (7) 'hurt'. Participants indicated on a 7-point scale, ranging from 'not at all' (1) to 'very strongly' (7) to what extent they experienced these feelings ($M = 2.4$; $SD = 1.1$). The internal consistency was good ($\alpha = .93$). The same measure has been used in a previous study of Geurts *et al.* (1994b).

2.2.3. *Poor organizational commitment*. This was measured by a selection of four items from the Organizational Commitment Questionnaire (Mowday *et al.*, 1979): (1) 'I talk up this organization to my friends as a great organization to work for' (reversed); (2) 'I could just as well be working for a different organization as long as the type of work was similar'; (3) 'It would take very little change in my present circumstances to cause me to leave this organization, and (4) 'Deciding to work for this organization was a definite mistake on

my part'. A 5-point scale was used ranging from 'I disagree completely' (1) to 'I agree completely' (5) ($M = 2.28$; $SD = .80$). The internal consistency was satisfactory ($\alpha = .70$).

2.2.4. *Turnover intention.* Turnover intention was measured using the two survey items that were based on Spector, and Jex (1988; cf. Sagie, 1998): 'With what level of certainty do you intend to leave this organization within the next year for another type of job (item 1)/for a similar type of job (item 2)?' Participants indicated on a 6-point rating scale their level of certainty, ranging from '0% (certainly not)' (1) to '100% (certainly)' (6) ($M = 1.77$; $SD = 1.09$). The internal consistency was acceptable ($\alpha = .65$).

2.2.5. *Absenteeism:* Absenteeism was measured objectively by calculating the number of absence occurrences from organizational records for each individual worker during a full 12-month period immediately following the survey ($M = 1.79$, $SD = 2.17$). The absence frequency measure had a skewness and a kurtosis of above 1 (skewness = 1.78; kurtosis = 4.08). In order to approach a normal distribution of this measure, a log 10 transformation was performed (Aiken, and West, 1991), resulting in an acceptable skewness and kurtosis of .36 and -1.00 , respectively.

2.3. Data analysis

In order to assess the hypothesized mediating role of resentment and poor organizational commitment, as presented in figure 1, three regression models were tested. A variable functions as a mediator if (1) the relationship between the independent variable and the mediator is significant, (2) the relationship between the independent variable and dependent variable is significant, and (3) when controlled for the impact of the mediator, a previous significant relationship between the independent and dependent variable is no longer significant (complete mediation), or is substantially reduced but still significant (partial mediation) (James, and Brett, 1984; Baron, and Kenny, 1986). In the current study the first two conditions for mediation were tested using correlational analyses. The third condition was tested by a series of three stepwise regression analyses with (1) 'poor organizational commitment', (2) 'absenteeism' and (3) 'turnover intention' as dependent variables, respectively.

In the first regression analysis 'perceived inequity' in the employment relationship was entered in Step 1, followed by the proposed mediating variable 'feelings of resentment' in Step 2. In the second and third regression analyses, 'perceived inequity' in the employment relationship was entered as independent variable in Step 1, followed by 'feelings of resentment' in Step 2 and 'poor organizational commitment' in Step 3 as proposed mediating variables. To assess the overall fit of the empirical model that resulted from the previous regression analyses, a covariance structure analysis was performed (LISREL-8, Joreskog, and Sorbom, 1993), using a mixture of fit-indices (Bollen, and Scott Long, 1993, Joreskog, 1993): (1) the chi-square statistic (χ^2), (2) the Adjusted Goodness-of-Fit Index (AGFI; Joreskog, 1993), with values equal to or greater than .95 indicating a close fit (Browne, and Cudeck, 1993), (3) the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA, Browne, and Cudeck, 1993), with values lower than .05 indicating a close fit (Browne, and Cudeck, 1993), (4) the Non-Normed Fit Index (NNFI; Bentler, and Bonett, 1980), indicating the incremental fit of a particular model as compared to a null model that assumes zero relationships among the variables. Values less than .90 usually mean that the model can be improved substantially, and (5) the Comparative Fit Index (CFI, Bentler, 1990), with a 0-1 interval, in which the value 1 stands for a perfect model

fit This index seems to be one of the best indices in the context of model misspecifications and variations in sample size.

3. Results

3.1. Correlational analyses

Table 1 shows the Pearson zero-order correlations of all variables included in the hypothetical model. Table 1 shows that both preconditions for the proposed mediating role of *feelings of resentment* were met: (1) perceived inequity in the employment relationship (independent variable) was significantly related to feelings of resentment (mediating variable) ($r = .56, p < .001$); and (2) perceived inequity in the employment relationship (independent variable) was significantly related to both absenteeism ($r = .34, p < .01$) and 'turnover intention' ($r = .24, p < .05$) (dependent variables). Also both preconditions for the proposed mediating role of *poor organizational commitment* were met: (1) perceived inequity in the employment relationship and feelings of resentment (independent variables) were significantly related to poor organizational commitment (mediating variable) ($r = .48, p < .001, r = .47, p < .001$, respectively); and (2) in addition to perceived inequity, the variable feelings of resentment was also significantly related to both absenteeism ($r = .23, p < .10$) and turnover intention ($r = .22, p < .05$).

3.2. Stepwise regression analyses

Next, the proposed mediating roles of both feelings of resentment and poor organizational commitment were tested by a series of three stepwise regression analyses. The results are presented in table 2. In the first stepwise regression analysis the proposed mediating role of feelings of resentment was tested by regressing *poor organizational commitment* (dependent variable) on both perceived inequity (independent variable) and feelings of resentment (mediating variable). The results show that the previously significant relationship between perceived inequity and poor organizational commitment ($r = .48, p < .001$) was substantially reduced, when the variable feelings of resentment was entered in the regression equation. The results of Step 2 show that both perceived inequity ($\beta = .32, p < .01$) and feelings of resentment ($\beta = .29, p < .01$) contributed significantly to the variance explained in poor organizational commitment, indicating that the relationship between perceived inequity and poor organizational commitment was *partially mediated* by feelings of resentment.

In the second stepwise regression analysis the proposed mediating roles of feelings of resentment and poor organizational commitment were tested by regressing *absenteeism* (dependent variable) on perceived inequity (independent variable), feelings of resentment and poor organizational commitment (mediating variables). The results show that the

Table 1 Zero-order correlations

	1	2	3	4
1 Perceived inequity	1.00			
2 Feelings of resentment	.56***	1.00		
3 Poor organizational commitment	.48***	.47***	1.00	
4 Absenteeism	.34**	.23†	.15	1.00
5 Turnover intention	.24*	.22*	.56***	.09

† $p < .10$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$ (two-tailed tested)

Table 2 Results (standardized β -coefficients) of three stepwise regression analyses

Predictor variables	Criterion variables					
	Analysis 1 Poor organizational commitment		Analysis 2 Absenteeism		Analysis 3 Turnover intention	
	Step 1	Step 2	Step 1	Step 2	Step 1	Step 2
Perceived inequity	48***	32**	.34*	.30*	.24*	.18
Feelings of resentment	-	.29**	-	.07	-	.12
Poor organizational commitment	-	-	-	-	-	-
% of variance explained	22	27	11	12	6	7
Type of mediation	Partial mediation by 'feelings of resentment'		No mediation		Full mediation by 'poor organizational commitment'	
						31
						.58***

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$ (two-tailed tested)
 Step 1 The proposed independent variable 'perceived inequity' is entered in the regression analysis.
 Step 2 The proposed mediating variable 'feelings of resentment' is entered in the regression analysis.
 Step 3 The proposed mediating variable 'poor organizational commitment' is entered in the regression analysis.

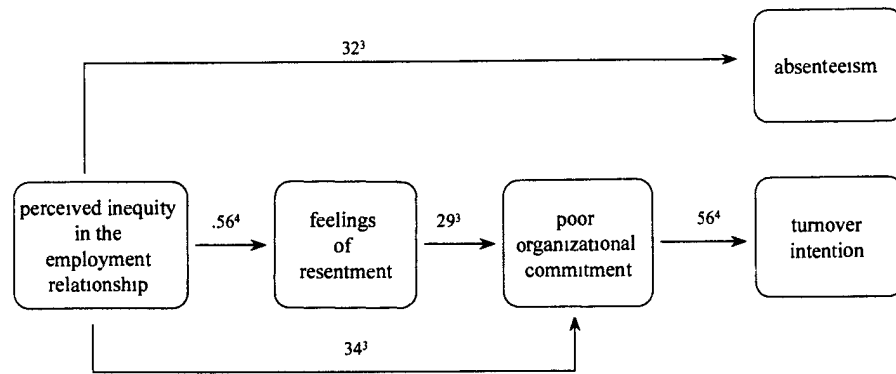


Figure 2. The empirical model (standardized regression coefficients) ² $p < .05$; ³ $p < .01$, ⁴ $p < .001$ (two-tailed test)

significant relationship between perceived inequity and absenteeism ($r = .34, p < .01$) was not substantially reduced when the variables feelings of resentment (Step 2) and poor organizational commitment were entered in the regression equation (Step 3). The results of Step 3 show that only perceived inequity ($\beta = .31, p < .01$) contributed significantly to the variance explained in absenteeism, indicating that the relationship between perceived inequity and absenteeism was *not mediated* by feelings of resentment nor by poor organizational commitment.

In the third stepwise regression analysis similar steps were taken as in the second regression analysis, but with *turnover intention* as dependent variable. The results show that the previously significant relationship of perceived inequity with turnover intention ($r = .24, p < .01$) was reduced when the variable feelings of resentment was entered in the regression equation (Step 2). However, neither perceived inequity nor feelings of resentment contributed significantly to the variance explained in turnover intention. The results of Step 3 show that the previously significant relationships of perceived inequity ($r = .24, p < .05$) and feelings of resentment ($r = .22, p < .05$) with turnover intention were no longer significant when poor organizational commitment was entered in the regression equation. Only poor organizational commitment ($\beta = .58, p < .001$) contributed significantly to the variance explained in turnover intention, indicating that the relationships of perceived inequity and feelings of resentment with turnover intention was *fully mediated* by poor organizational commitment.

3.3. Integral test of the empirical model

Finally, a covariance structure analysis was performed to assess the overall fit of the empirical model that resulted from the previous regression analyses. The goodness-of-fit measures indicated that the empirical model fitted the data very well ($\chi^2(2) = .70, p = .98$, AGFI = .99, RMSEA = .00, NNFI = 1.00, CFI = 1.00). All modification indices were below the value of 1, indicating that the fit could not be further improved. Figure 2 shows the standardized regression coefficients of the empirical model. The results show that three out of the six hypotheses were supported by the data collected from mental health care professionals. The more inequitable they perceived their exchange relationship with the organization to be, the more feelings of resentment they experienced (hypothesis 1: $\beta = .56, p < .001$). Feelings of resentment were positively associated with poor

organizational commitment (hypothesis 4: $\beta = .29$, $p < .01$), which was, in turn, positively associated with turnover intention (hypothesis 6: $\beta = .56$, $p < .001$). There was no support for the assumption that the more feelings of resentment were experienced, the more often employees would be absent (hypothesis 2) and the more likely they would be to leave the organization (hypothesis 3). Nor was there any evidence for a positive relationship between poor organizational commitment and absenteeism (hypothesis 5). In addition, two unexpected relationships appeared to be significant. The more inequitable employees perceived their exchange relationship with the organization to be, the more often they were absent ($\beta = .32$, $p < .01$), independent of feelings of resentment or their level of commitment to the organization. Furthermore, perceived inequity in the employment relationship was directly and positively related to poor organizational commitment ($\beta = .34$, $p < .01$)

4. Discussion

4.1 Major findings and conclusions

The aim of the present study was to test a social exchange model that relates perceived inequity in the employee-organization relationship with subsequent absenteeism and turnover intention. From the perspective of equity theory, the perception of inequity would generate an unpleasant emotional state, like feelings of resentment, that, in turn, would result in absenteeism and turnover intention. In addition to both behavioural withdrawal reactions to feelings of resentment, poor organizational commitment was included as a psychological withdrawal reaction, and was supposed to precede both behavioural withdrawal reactions. The authors' central hypothesis was therefore that both feelings of resentment and poor organizational commitment would play an intervening role in the relationship between perceived inequity in the employment relationship and subsequent absenteeism and turnover intention.

The results showed that, as was expected (hypotheses 1 and 4), the relationship between perceived inequity and *poor organizational commitment* was partially mediated by feelings of resentment. This result suggests that mental health care professionals cope with feelings of resentment by reducing their level of identification with and involvement in the organization. This finding is consistent with the stress-strain-coping framework of Lazarus, and Folkman (1984), where perceived inequity can be viewed as stressor, feelings of resentment as a particular strain, and poor organizational commitment as a way of coping. Although the experience of resentment was a sufficient condition for the occurrence of poor organizational commitment, it was not a necessary condition. Poor organizational commitment was also a direct response to perceived inequity in the employment relationship, independent of feelings of resentment. From an equity perspective (Adams, 1965, Walster *et al.*, 1978), poor organizational commitment should, therefore, not only be regarded as a way of coping with an unpleasant emotional state, but also as a direct attempt to reduce one's contributions to the organization in order to restore an equitable exchange relationship.

The results further showed that the relationship of perceived inequity in the employment relationship with *turnover intention* was not mediated by feelings of resentment, as was expected (hypotheses 1 and 3). Poor organizational commitment, however, did play the expected intervening role in this relationship (hypotheses 4 and 6). In fact, the relationship of perceived inequity and associated feelings of resentment with turnover intention was fully mediated by this intervening variable, indicating that poor organizational commitment was not only a sufficient, but also a necessary, condition for turnover intentions to

develop. This is in line with previous studies that demonstrated that poor organizational commitment was not only a strong precursor of turnover intention, but also a crucial intervening variable in the relationship between perceived unfulfilled expectations of reciprocity in the employee-organization relationship and turnover intentions (Rosin, and Korabik, 1991, 1995).

Finally, no support was found for the proposed mediating role of both feelings of resentment (hypothesis 2) and poor organizational commitment (hypothesis 5) in the relationship between perceived inequity in the employment relationship and *absenteeism*. In fact, there appeared to be a strong direct linkage between perceived inequity and absenteeism, suggesting that absenteeism should be considered as a direct attempt to restore an equitable exchange relationship rather than a way of coping with an unpleasant emotional state. The lack of a significant relationship between poor organizational commitment and absenteeism in this study adds up to previous research in which inconsistent findings and often modest correlations were found concerning this relationship (see for a critical review, Fitzgibbons, 1992). Some recent studies suggest that this might be explained by the use of different concepts of organizational commitment. There are indications that affective commitment (referring to one's emotional attachment to the organization) is a more consistent and strong precursor of subsequent absenteeism than continuance commitment (referring to a general awareness of the costs associated with leaving the organization) (Gellatly, 1995, Somers, 1995). The measure used in the current study probably reflects more the latter type of commitment. In addition, a study conducted by Sagie (1988) demonstrated that only voluntary absenteeism (e.g. uncertified sickness), as opposed to involuntary absenteeism (e.g. certified sickness and family obligations), was predicted by poor organizational commitment. Absence registration in The Netherlands, however, does not allow the authors to make such a distinction.

To conclude, in the current study the authors have tried to illuminate the dynamic relationships between perceived inequity in the employment relationship, an affective intervening variable and psychological and behavioural withdrawal reactions. It has been shown that the relationship between perceived inequity and turnover intention was fully mediated by poor organizational commitment, which was, in turn, partially triggered by feelings of resentment that were associated with perceived inequity. In contrast with expectations, there was a strong direct link between inequity in the employment relationship and absenteeism, not mediated by resentment and poor organizational commitment. Although absenteeism and turnover intention can both be considered to be behavioural attempts to restore an equitable exchange relationship with the organization, these reactions apparently differ in their underlying dynamics. Whereas absenteeism seems to be a calculative and direct response to perceived inequity, turnover intention is not. With poor organizational commitment being partially triggered by an unpleasant emotional state and being a necessary antecedent of turnover intention in reaction to perceived inequity, one might speculate that affective processes might underlie this relationship. A plausible explanation might be that reporting sick is a rather uncomplicated way of coping immediately with an inequitable situation, whereas developing thoughts about leaving the organization involves a long-term process of re-evaluating one's attachment to the organization, gaining emotional distance and making a major decision to actually leave.

4.2. *Limitations*

It has to be recognized that the present research has several limitations. First, although a prospective design was used with respect to absenteeism, all other variables were assessed

cross-sectionally. This means that, despite the use of covariance structure modelling, no firm basis is provided from which causal inferences among these variables can be drawn. A longitudinal design should be employed to provide more clarity about these points. A fruitful approach was followed by Van Dierendonck *et al* (1996) whose longitudinal analysis provided stronger evidence for inequity as an antecedent of burnout, rather than the other way around. Second, this study relied heavily on self-report measures that could increase the problem of common method variance. Unfortunately, one cannot test the strength of this type of variance, but several findings recently reported in the literature (Spector, 1992; Semmer, Zapf, and Greif, 1996) indicate that common method variance is not as troublesome as one might expect in this kind of study. A related issue concerns the way in which some measures have been operationalized. In future research the authors would recommend, for example, the use of the full Organizational Commitment Questionnaire (Mowday *et al*, 1979), rather than the four items included in the current study. In addition, the measure of inequity in the employment relationship could be improved, for instance by including investments and outcomes that are more specific to the particular workplace (Sparks, and Cooper, 1999). Finally, a rather small sample consisting of mental health professionals working in one specific community centre was used. Therefore, some caution must be applied in generalizing the results of this study until the empirical model has been cross-validated in similar and other occupational groups.

4.3 *Suggestions for future research*

At least three suggestions for future research can be made. First, the authors have focused primarily on withdrawal reactions to perceived inequity in the employee-organization relationship. These reactions can be considered both passive and (from an organizational point of view) rather destructive coping strategies. It would have been interesting to also include more active and constructive attempts to restore an equitable employment relationship, for instance, by discussing one's negative experience of inequity with the superior in order to reach some sort of agreement. This type of strategy can be referred to as considerate 'voice' in the exit-voice-loyalty model (Hirschman, 1970; Hagedoorn, Van Yperen, Van de Vliert, and Buunk, 1999). A related suggestion would be to include objective measures of performance as possible responses to perceived inequity. Previous research suggests, for instance, that performance might play a role in the relationships of inequity with withdrawal behaviours, for instance, as a consequence of organizational commitment and as an antecedent of turnover (DeCotuis, and Summers, 1987).

A second suggestion for future research would be to include variables that may operate as moderating factors in the relationship between perceived inequity, resentment and various reactions aimed at equity restoration. A study by Van Yperen *et al* (1996) has shown, for instance, that an intolerant group absence norm may operate as a buffer to reporting sick in response to perceived inequity. Moreover, various studies have shown that job satisfaction and job involvement may operate as moderating factors in the relationship between poor organizational commitment and absenteeism (Mathieu, and Kohler, 1990; Sagie, 1998).

A final suggestion for future research is to differentiate between various kinds of organizational commitment (e.g. affective and continuance commitment) in a model that relates perceived inequity to withdrawal behaviour.

To sum up, by addressing (1) other (more constructive and objective) behavioural reactions to perceived inequity, (2) the role of possible moderating factors, and (3) various

types of organizational commitment as possible intervening variables, our understanding of the dynamics that underlie the relationship between perceived inequity in the employment relationship and behavioural reactions could be further improved

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