



# The stratifying role of job level for sickness absence and the moderating role of gender and occupational gender composition



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## ABSTRACT

The study investigates whether sickness absence is stratified by job level - understood as the authority and autonomy a worker holds - beyond the association with education, income, and occupation. A second objective is to establish the moderating role of gender and occupational gender composition on this stratification of sickness absence. Four competing hypotheses are developed that predict different patterns of moderation. Associations between job level and sickness absence are estimated for men and women in three groups of differing occupational gender composition, using data from the German Socio-Economic Panel Study (SOEP). For the purpose of moderation analysis, this study employs a new method based on Bayesian statistics, which enables the testing of complex moderation hypotheses. The data support the hypothesis that the stratification of sickness absence by job level is strongest for occupational minorities, meaning men in female-dominated and women in male-dominated occupations.

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## 1. Introduction

The persistence of health inequalities despite the health care provision of modern welfare states is a well-established finding (Mackenbach, 2012). One point of discussion is the importance of the labor market in creating not only social inequalities, but also health inequalities (Hannes Kröger, et al., 2015; Mackenbach and Bakker, 2003). One particular aspect that closely links labor market-related inequalities and health inequalities is sickness absence, which reflects both the health of the individual worker, but also their labor market-related health behavior (Marmot et al., 1995; North et al., 1993). While other dimensions of health inequality are often related to education, occupation, and income, sickness absence has been attributed more than other aspects of health to the job level within an occupation (Beemsterboer et al., 2009), with job level understood as the degree of an employee's autonomy and authority in everyday work, regardless of their occupation.

A crucial aspect in the relationship between job level and sickness absence is the role of gender, because there are considerable differences between men and women both with regard to job level

and sickness absence. Women have a higher degree of sickness absence and typically occupy lower status jobs (Alexanderson et al., 1994; Baxter and Wright, 2000). We therefore surmise that the stratifying mechanisms linking job level to sickness absence are different for men and women. However, not only gender, but also occupational gender composition (Fried et al., 2002; Mastekaasa and Melsom, 2014) has a considerable influence on the behavior of employees, and we will show it is actually a combination of these two factors that best explains differences in the stratification of sickness absence.

This study makes three important contributions to the social science literature. First, the stratification of sickness absence by job level is estimated for workers on the German labor market. Second, four competing hypotheses regarding the moderating effect of gender and occupational gender composition on the relationship between job level and sickness absence are theoretically developed and empirically tested. Third, we introduce a new Bayesian method (Hojtink et al., 2008; van de Schoot et al., 2013), developed in psychometric literature, which is well suited for testing complex moderation hypotheses.

### 1.1. Previous research on sickness absence and job status

Many studies have examined the gender gap in sickness absence

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between men and women. It is usually agreed that men have fewer days of sickness absence, but there is little agreement on the explanations for this gender gap (Bekker et al., 2009). Another approach to the relationship between gender and sickness absence is to focus on occupational gender segregation. Most studies find some support for a U-shaped correlation of gender composition and sickness absence, meaning that lowest levels of sickness absence are found in mixed occupations (Alexanderson et al., 1994; Bekker et al., 2009; Evans and Steptoe, 2002; Knutsson and Goine, 1998; Leijon et al., 2004).

Another strand of research consistently confirms that different measures of job level such as job control, autonomy, skill-level, wages, or job security are strongly related to the incidence and duration of sickness absence. The higher the level or the better the conditions for the employee are, the lower the rate of sickness absence is (Beemsterboer et al., 2009; Johns, 2010; Pines et al., 1985; Sharp and Watt, 1995; Vahtera et al., 2000).

However, there has been no systematic investigation of the moderating effect of gender and gender composition on the relationship between sickness absence and job status, which is the purpose of this study.

## 2. Theoretical framework

### 2.1. Explanations for the association between job level and sickness absence

We define job level as the level of autonomy – achieved through expertise and skill – and authority within the production process that is attributed to the position that an individual worker occupies. The rationale behind the expectation of superior outcomes in sickness absence (lower rates of absence) for higher levels of job level is based on three general mechanisms. First, higher job levels correspond to stronger pressure for workers to monitor themselves to be more productive. Employees' feelings of goals shared with their employer or the company itself are much higher than at lower levels of authority and autonomy (Wright and Perrone, 1977). Furthermore, high pressure, workload, and responsibilities for workers in high status positions can encourage presenteeism, which is the tendency to show up at work despite an acute illness. As these pressures and demands are accompanied by considerable rewards, be they financial or otherwise, the balance between job-related efforts and rewards (Siegrist, 1996, 2009) is maintained and commitment strengthened. Higher rewards counteract job strain (Karasek, 1979), which is more prevalent at lower job levels and might induce absenteeism (Kuper and Marmot, 2003).

The second mechanism that drives the systematic association between job level and sickness absence is selection of employees for advancement to higher job levels in a company. Employers prefer to give positions of elevated authority and autonomy to those employees who identify more strongly with the company and do not see themselves in a structural opposition of interests to their employer. Therefore, the degree of sickness absence is not only a more easily observable indicator of productivity due to the actual time that is missed at work, but also a proxy for motivation and commitment (Mastekaasa, 1996). This mechanism will also increase stratification of sickness absence according to job level, as it selects those with already low levels of absence to higher job levels.

Third, workers at higher job levels might be healthier in general and therefore simply need to take fewer days off than workers in lower status jobs. We control for this mechanism in our empirical analysis, as it is not specific to sickness absence, but represents general patterns of health inequalities. The interesting aspect in distinguishing between the first two mechanisms is to investigate how they might be moderated by gender and occupational gender

composition, which allows for predictions about the degree of stratification in different groups on the labor market to be made. The literature has mostly treated occupational gender composition separately from individual gender, but we argue that a joint view helps in understanding complex patterns of job status stratification.

### 2.2. Four hypotheses about the moderating effect of gender and occupational gender composition

For the purpose at hand, we identify four larger strands of theoretical literature that help guide specific hypotheses about the moderating effect of gender composition on the stratification of sickness absence by job level.

First, gender roles lead to different expectations about the focus that men and women should have in life (Eagly, 1987). Traditionally, men are expected to be wage earners, while women are traditionally expected to care for home and family, but often have to face the double burden of both paid employment and unpaid domestic work. As a self-regulatory mechanism, men with higher job levels are likely to allow themselves less absence than both women at similar job levels and men with lower job levels, based on gendered role expectations (Eagly et al., 2000, p. 149).

Second, we draw on the idea of different masculinities to hypothesize that, in male-dominated occupations, a male culture of presenteeism will become part of a hegemonic masculinity (Raewyn W Connell, 1987, pp. 184–188) to which women also adapt in order to further their career (R. W. Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 847).

Third, we turn to theories that posit that numerical minority status can be the defining characteristic for interactions within groups (Blau, 1977; Kanter, 1977a). This theoretical view is symmetric, expecting the same consequences for men in female-dominated as for women in male-dominated settings. It proposes visibility, polarization, and assimilation as the three core mechanisms that distinguish how the minority is treated in contrast to the majority (Kanter, 1977b).

Fourth, minority status can be thought of not as a numerical concept limited to workplace, but in terms of subordinate groups within the larger societal structure (Blalock, 1967), which would here apply to women in the labor market context. Conversely, men in female-dominated occupations might not only be free of the negative consequences of their token status, but could actually benefit from their structurally superior status.

We develop four hypotheses ( $H_{1a}$ – $H_{1d}$ ) for the moderating effect of gender and gender composition on the relationship between sickness absence and job level, based on these theoretical observations.

The *gender role hypothesis* refers to the individual's gender, and predicts that the stratifying effect of job level will be stronger for men than for women ( $H_{1a}$ ). The hypothesis is rooted in differences in gender roles. A great deal of research has shown that women put more emphasis on maintaining a healthy lifestyle and treating illnesses or mental problems than men do (Cockerham, 2005; Dean, 1989), while men more often have a dismissive attitude towards health risks (Peate, 2004). As a result, men are more likely than women to go to work even when they are ill, which also conforms with gendered role expectations of men as the primary wage earners. This difference will manifest itself particularly clearly in higher status positions, where absence is generally lower and job demands are high (Demerouti et al., 2009; Kuoppala et al., 2008). Furthermore, employed women often face a double burden in which they have to take care of the household and children or are much more often primary care takers of the elderly than men are (Bratberg et al., 2002; Doress-Worters, 1994; Mastekaasa, 2000).

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