

2. Si quiero lograr algo difícil, sé esperar el momento justo para ello.
3. Reflexiono acerca de cómo puedo llevar a cabo mejor mis planes.

#### *Compensación*

1. En cosas importantes, valoro si es necesario dedicar más tiempo o esfuerzo.
2. Cuando las cosas no me salen bien, acepto ayuda de otros.
3. Cuando algo no me sale como siempre, miro cómo lo hacen otros.

**Absentismo** (T2) Adaptación al español de la Escala RAS-6 (Rijeka Absenteeism Scale; Lalic y Hromin, 2012).

1. A veces pido una baja por enfermedad, aunque me

resultaría posible evitarlo.

2. A veces pido una baja por enfermedad para tomarme un necesario descanso.
3. A veces pido una baja por enfermedad relacionada con una lesión de trabajo, incluso aunque no sea totalmente necesario.
4. A menudo me lesiono en mi trabajo.
5. Tuve muchas bajas por enfermedad debido a problemas en mi salud en el último mes.
6. Si tengo derecho a ello, agotaría mi baja por enfermedad para rehabilitarme, incluso durante largo tiempo.

## **OLDER WORKER IDENTITY AND ABSENTEEISM: MODERATION OF SELECTION, OPTIMIZATION AND COMPENSATION**

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### **Extended Summary**

#### **Introduction**

Population aging poses a challenge for human resource management, as the number of older workers in organizations steadily increases (Lytle, Clancy, Foley, & Cotter, 2015). On the one hand, this group faces the need to adapt effectively to their work, taking into consideration the physical and cognitive changes associated with the age that these people daily experience (Barnhoorn, Döhring, Van Asseldonk, & Verwey, 2016; Ka-

gan & Meléndez-Torres, 2015). On the other hand, it is important for organizations to retain these workers, who have valuable experience and knowledge (Carcel & Rodríguez, 2014; Stoddart, Bugge, Shepherd, & Farquharson, 2014). In addition, organizations need such workers to continue to be effective in the performance of their duties. This conjunction of personal and organizational interests highlights the current importance of successful aging at work (Cheung & Wu, 2014; Zacher & Schmitt, 2016; Zacher & Yang, 2016).

Hence, the present study focuses on the strategies of adaptation to the physical and cognitive changes that come with age and in the relationships between these strategies and other psychosocial variables, such as

identification with older workers. The main objective of this work is to explore the moderating role of Selection, Optimization and Compensation strategies in the relationship between Older Worker Identity and absenteeism.

## Theoretical Framework

### *Older Worker Identity*

Older Worker Identity (hereafter, OWI) consists of the internalization of negative beliefs and attitudes towards the aged employees by this people. At work, people can build their identity based on traits shared with others, such as age, gender or professional group, always looking for a positive social comparison (Aranda, Castillo-Mayénk, & Montes-Berges, 2015; Atewologun & Sealy, 2014; Elliott, Kennedy, & Raeside, 2015). But, at times, the identifications achieved are associated with negative traits. The experience of unfavorable treatment, discrimination in career opportunities and other repeated experiences can lead to the internalization of negative characteristics, such as low motivation, resistance to change and lack of interest or creativity, based on daily interactions with colleagues and supervisors (Ruggs, Hebl, Singletary, Walker, & Fa-Kaji, 2014). In the case of identification with older workers, this form of social identity may bring the internalization of these negative features as characteristics of themselves.

However, previous research has shown that identification promotes the likelihood of acting in a manner consistent with that category with which the person identifies himself. Therefore, identification is often considered an antecedent of positive behaviors at work, but may also be an antecedent of undesirable behaviors, such as absenteeism (Garstka, Schmitt, Branscombe, & Hummert, 2004). In this sense, previous studies have shown the existence of OWI and its influence on the attitudes and behaviors of aged workers. Specifically, research has found that it predicts declining of job satisfaction, such as commitment, or performance. Therefore, the present study is aimed to explore the predictive

power of OWI on absenteeism among workers over 55 years.

### *Absenteeism*

Absenteeism has been a concern for organizations for a long time and is one of the most researched topics in work psychology, as summarized in a recent meta-analysis (Johns & Miraglia, 2015). Among other reasons, this fact is due to its negative impact on business productivity. According to the models that explain absenteeism as a behavior that results, at least in part, favored by the identification of workers with social categories, the present study is interested in exploring the influence of OWI on absenteeism.

### *Successful aging: selection, optimization and compensation strategies*

Although aging is part of the evolutionary development of the human being and does not directly cause organic damage by itself, it is a fact that is associated with an increased likelihood of disease. Successful aging means the adoption of strategies that result in a positive balance between the gains and losses associated with age (Nosraty, Enroth, Raitanen, Hervonen, & Jylha, 2015). Among others, the model of selection, optimization and compensation (SOC) has been proposed as a successful aging mechanism. According to this approach, the person initiates three types of strategies. First, the person selects the aspects of her/his life that are important for him/her. And then, the person optimizes the resources and tools that help her/him achieve success in those selected aspects. And, finally, she/he compensates the losses in those aspects adapting to the vital and environmental changes. All this creates a context for positive life development, through the effective management of losses and impairments. While selection is oriented towards the choice of objectives and tasks, both compensation and optimization allude to the means to maintain or improve the chosen objectives.

In addition, while selection can be proactive or reactive, optimization and compensation come into play when the means necessary to achieve goals are lacking. Existing empirical research is scarce (Demerouti, Leiter, & Bakker, 2014), but suggests that strategies can play a modulating role in the relationships between the psychosocial context and older employees' behavior at work.

In summary, the main objective of the present study is to explore the relationship between OWI, SOC strategies and absenteeism among employees over 55 years. The specific objective is to evaluate the relationship between OWI, assessed at Time 1, and absenteeism, assessed at Time 2, and the possible modulating role of SOC strategies (assessed at Time 1) in this relationship. The potential findings will allow us to know if those workers with reduced use of SOC strategies show a higher impact of OWI on absenteeism, while those who resort to a high use of SOC strategies show a lower impact of OWI on absenteeism.

## Method

### *Participants*

There was a final sample of workers over 55 years ( $N = 116$ ) who provided data in both moments of the study. The average age at Time 1 was 58.4, of whom 50.9 % were males and the median number of people in charge economically was 1.2.

### *Evaluation instruments*

Identification with older workers (T1): The Self Descriptive Component of the Older Worker Identity Scale was used, which includes seven items. SOC (Selection, Optimization and Compensation, T1): the SOC-12 version, based on the SOC Questionnaire, was used, which contains four subscales with three items each: Elective Selection, Selection by Loss, Optimization and Compensation. Absenteeism (T2): evaluated with the Spanish version of the RAS-6 scale.

Statistical analysis of the data was carried out using the SPSS 22.0 program and the PROCESS macro for SPSS (Hayes, 2013).

## Results

Regarding correlational analysis, age is negatively related to OWI, and positively to the elective selection strategy. Likewise, OWI is negatively related to the strategy of elective selection and optimization, albeit with different levels of statistical significance, while it is positively related to selection by loss. On the other hand, OWI has positive relations with the compensation strategy and with absenteeism, but they are not statistically significant. Finally, all strategies of the SOC model are related to each other in a statistically-significant and positive way. As for the relationship with absenteeism, all strategies show positive relationships, although very low, except for compensation, which shows a negative relationship.

The results concerning the linear regression analysis, in which the PROCESS procedure has been applied, yield different results depending on the different SOC strategies. First, the results do not support the moderation of elective selection strategies in the relationship between OWI and absenteeism. The results indicate that the probability level associated with the interaction term is not significant and that the increase of the variance explained is not significant either. In addition, the confidence interval contains zero. Second, results show that selection by loss strategies also does not moderate the relationship between OWI and absenteeism. Third, the results show that there is a moderation of the optimization strategy in the relationship between OWI and absenteeism. The interaction term has associated a statistically significant probability level and the increase of the explained variance that is linked to the interaction term is also significant. In addition, the confidence interval for the coefficients does not contain zero in any case. The results of the analysis show that the conditional effect of OWI on absenteeism is significant when the optimization strategies are low [Low optimization strategy (M-1DT);  $B = .26$ ,  $EE = .09$ ,  $t = 2.75$ ,  $p < .00$ ] but loses its significance when strategies are high [High optimization strat-

egy (M + 1DT);  $B = .02$ ,  $EE = .07$ ,  $t = 0.47$ ,  $p = .63$ ]. Fourth, the results show that there is a moderation of the compensation strategy in the relationship between OWI and absenteeism. The contrast statistic associated with the interaction term indicates that this is significant and that it is also the percentage of explained variance that increases with the addition of the interaction. The confidence interval for the interaction term does not include zero. The results show that the effect of OWI on absenteeism is strong and statistically significant when compensation strategies are low [Low Compensation Strategy (M-1DT);  $B = .21$ ,  $EE = .08$ ,  $t = 2.62$ ,  $p < .00$ ], but becomes weak and loses its significance when these are high [High Compensation Strategy (M-1DT);  $B = .02$ ,  $EE = .07$ ,  $t = 0.21$ ,  $p = .83$ ].

## Discussion

This study supports our proposal regarding the modulating role of SOC strategies in the relationship between OWI and absenteeism in older workers, but only for some strategies. The findings show that the overall objective of the study has been only partially achieved and raise new research questions that will encourage future work. This achievement, although partial, corroborates the basic assumption of the successful aging approach at work, by showing that some SOC strategies affect the impact that the negative working environment (OWI) can have on absenteeism of workers over 55 years of age. Up to the present, an important body of empirical research had been developed that supported the positive impact of social identification on the work – group, organizational and professional– on the attitudes and behaviors of organizational members. However, this study goes a step further, exploring the negative consequences of identification with a socially devalued category, such as older ones. Moreover, this study extended the existing research, since the moderation of SOC strategies in the relationship between psychosocial antecedents and employees' attitudes or behavior has not been little explored in Spanish samples. Although the results of our work do not guarantee that all strategies have modulating role, the findings regarding optimization and compensation do and deserve a more detailed discussion.

The use of optimization and compensation strategies reduces the negative impact of OWI on senior absenteeism. That is, workers using compensation and optimization strategies are able to keep their levels of absenteeism free from the negative effect of OWI, while those who do not use such strategies show a more intense relationship between OWI and absenteeism.

As for the theoretical implications of this work, we must point out, firstly, that the key assertion of the resource conservation theory (Hobfoll, 2001) seems to be confirmed, concerning the difficulty of people suffering negative assessments in their work environment to maintain optimum performance and recover from losses suffered, as other researchers stated (Topa, Jiménez, Valero, & Ovejero, 2016). Secondly, although both optimization and compensation are aimed at increasing people's resources, it seems that there are substantial differences between them. Optimization is the process that is aimed at acquiring necessary resources, such as developing new skills, modifying others that are already possessed to be more effective, using one's personal energy to achieve goals. When individuals' personal resources suffer a decline, or are lost, such as OWI, compensation and optimization strategies become essential to self-regulate performance and prevent deterioration in tangible outcomes, such as absenteeism. The role of compensation and optimization is consistent with the latest line of job crafting research, which shows that employees can proactively engage in the search for resources to improve their performance. However, attention should be drawn to the danger that these strategies may pose if applied in the long run. Strategies involving greater efforts to compensate for resource losses can lead to long-term fatigue and exhaustion.

## Implications for intervention

Finally, it is important to point out that this study offers interesting contributions to the intervention with older workers. On the one hand, organizations should take into account the preferential use of one strategy over others to adapt jobs to older workers in order to keep them active. On the other hand, counselors, professional

psychologists and HR managers can design counseling and guidance activities to show senior employees how to optimize and compensate for their workings, in order to reduce the undesirable effects of age-related impairment on outcomes. Finally, the workers themselves can actively seek and test various mechanisms to help reduce such effects of deterioration in their work behaviors. In this sense, the medium and long-term planning of one's career can be a useful tool to anticipate the changes that will affect the person and adapt to them more effectively.