Employee Well-Being and Union Membership

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Abstract

Using a random telephone survey of 645 New Zealand employees in unionised workplaces, we compare union members with non-members on four dimensions of employee well-being: felt work intensification in terms of work demands on time and role overload, job-induced stress, work-life imbalance, and job satisfaction. We find no differences between unionists and non-unionists in respect of overall job satisfaction, although two facet-level aspects of satisfaction do predict union membership – promotion opportunities and recognition levels. Union members also report higher levels of work overload and pressure, greater stress, and greater work-life imbalance compared to non-union members. These findings are discussed in relation to theories of union belonging.

KEYWORDS: Unions; work intensification; job satisfaction; work-life balance; stress

Introduction

The relationship between employee well-being and union belonging is a controversial area of research. Much of the prior research has focused on global or overall job satisfaction as the primary well-being indicator when predicting union membership, although it is now recognised that we must also look at job satisfaction at the facet-level (Guest and Conway, 2004; Friedman, Abraham and Thomas, 2006). There is also a need, as Wood (2008) argues, to examine the relationship with union belonging of a much fuller range of the psychological and physiological indicators of employee well-being. In this vein, this paper's objective is to compare union members with non-members in respect of their reported levels of work intensification, job-induced stress, work-life imbalance, and job satisfaction, both globally and at facet level.

The context of the research is one of declining union membership in the Anglo-American world, together with evidence of a growing intensification of work (Allan, Brosnan and Walsh, 1999; Green and McIntosh, 2001; Green, 2004). The data is gathered in New Zealand, a country in which pro-union reforms of employment legislation in 2000 have helped to halt union decline but have not stimulated union renewal (Boxall, Haynes and Macky, 2007). Union density remains around one in five of wage and salary earners (Charlwood and Haynes, 2008). The general aim of this paper is, therefore, to explore New

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Zealand workers' experiences of work, and the relationship these may have with their motivations to join or not join a union.

We report a large-scale, random telephone survey of New Zealand worker attitudes conducted in 2005. The paper is conventionally organised. We first set out the theoretical background and establish our hypotheses. We then describe our data and variables, and report our analytical strategy and results. The paper finishes with discussion and conclusions.

Union belonging: theory and hypotheses

The theoretical background to this research is an extensive body of literature that seeks to explain why employees do or do not join unions (e.g. McClendon, Wheeler and Weikle, 1998; Guest and Dewe, 1988; Charlwood, 2002; Guest and Conway, 2004). Individual motives for union belonging can be grouped into three broad, interconnected areas: dissatisfaction-threat (e.g. Kaufman, 2004), utility-instrumentality (e.g. Peetz, 1998), and ideological beliefs or feelings of group identity (e.g., Blackwood, Lafferty, Duck and Terry, 2003; Schnabel, 2003).

In brief, the dissatisfaction-threat model posits that employees join unions when their interests are threatened and/or aspects of the employment relationship are so dissatisfying that they seek to engage in collective voice. In the case of threats to their wages or working conditions, union belonging is perceived as providing individuals with a more credible defence through the exercise of collective voice and, potentially, industrial action. In the utility model, it is the perceived ability of a union to deliver benefits greater than the costs of belonging that is critical (Guest and Dewe, 1998; Guest and Conway, 2004). This model is interesting in two ways. It describes workers who are far from dissatisfied or threatened but who join a union on the rational calculus that it will enlarge their relative gains in the workplace. However, it also connects to the dissatisfaction-threat model: research often finds that dissatisfied workers are more likely to join a union when they perceive that the union will be instrumental in resolving their problems (e.g. Kochan, 1979; Premack and Hunter, 1988). The third model sees union membership as stemming from an ideological position or a collective sense of identity among workers. But, again, there is a connection with the dissatisfaction-threat model because pro-union ideologies or collective identities are most likely to develop when groups of workers share a history of disadvantage or injustice (e.g. Kelly, 1998; Blackwood et al. 2003; Peetz and Frost, 2007).

The present study is motivated by a threat-dissatisfaction model of unionism. With regards to individual experiences of work intensification, the threat that union membership might be expected to mitigate is the intensification of work itself, as well as factors posited to cause intensification such as organisational restructuring, downsizing, as well as the use of pay-for-performance and other performance-oriented HRM techniques (Gallie, 2005; Green, 2004; Handel and Levine, 2004; White, Hill, McGovern, Mills and Smeaton, 2003).

If intensified work – through increased hours, role overload, and/or perceived increased pressure from managers to work harder or longer – threatens employee interests or leads to dissatisfaction, then the threat-dissatisfaction model suggests that employees experiencing intensification would be more likely to be union members than not. On the other hand, if unions are instrumental in reducing work intensification pressures for their members, then non-union employees could be predicted to experience higher levels of intensification than

union members. As with the argument about the relationship between union membership and job satisfaction (Guest and Conway, 2004), we need to consider both possibilities. Therefore, because union membership may be associated with either higher or lower levels of work intensification, we formulated the following non-directional hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: Employee experiences of work intensification will differ between union members and non-members.

Beyond work intensification, the threat-dissatisfaction model of union belonging can also be applied to three other measures of employee well-being used in the present study – job satisfaction, stress, and work-life balance. In the case of job satisfaction, the connection with union membership is well established and with union members tending to be less satisfied with their jobs than non-union members. That said, an influential paper analysing the *British Workplace Employee Relations Survey 1998* concluded that while union membership was not random, unobserved individual characteristics lead employees to both join unions and report dissatisfaction with their jobs (Bryson, Cappellari and Lucifora, 2004). In other words, suggesting that the oft observed relationship between job dissatisfaction and union membership was spurious.

Consistent with the need to study employee well-being in a more comprehensive way (Wood, 2008), the present paper explores whether these individual motivations might include other aspects of the experience of work and, in particular, perceptions of job-induced stress and work-life imbalance. There is a clear relationship between work intensification and such variables (e.g. Eby, Casper, Lockwood, Bordeaux and Brinley, 2005; Green, 2002; Landsbergis, Cahill and Schnall 1999; Sparks, Cooper, Fried and Shirom, 1997; White et al. 2003; Macky and Boxall, 2008), suggesting that intensification typically creates greater levels of stress and work-life imbalance. Such effects logically threaten employee interests.

The threat-dissatisfaction model, then, implies that employees experiencing poorer well-being outcomes from their jobs would be more likely to be union members. However, as argued in respect of hypothesis 1, we must allow for the reverse: if collective action via union membership serves to mitigate factors in the work environment that impact on employee well-being, then it is also feasible that union members would report better levels of well-being at work than non-members. Once again, a non-directional hypothesis was therefore formulated:

Hypothesis 2: Employee psychological well-being, in terms of job satisfaction, job-induced stress, and work-life imbalance, will differ between union members and non-members.

Data and variables

The study utilises data collected from a random CATI survey (response rate = 34.2%) of 1004 New Zealand employees aged 18 or over and who had worked for at least 6 months for an employer with 10 or more employees. Conducted in late 2005, the telephone interviews took, on average, thirty minutes to complete.

The analyses are based on the 645 respondents who reported having a union at their place of work that they could join. Of these, 350 people (54.3%) were members of that union at the time of the survey (thus creating a dichotomous dependent variable coded 0 non-member, 1 member). These respondents were mainly permanent (92.2%) rather than temporary employees, nearly two thirds were female (62.9%), with a mean age of 44.44 years (SD = 11.33), and they had a median tenure with their current employer of 5 years (range = 6 months to 40 years). Most respondents (80.6%) met the New Zealand Department of Statistics' definition of a full-time employee (30 hours or more a week). The median typical weekly take-home pay was NZ$625 (range = $65 – $2000).

Work Intensification was measured by three variables. Firstly, ***hours worked*** over a defined period of time is a common approach to the measurement of work intensification (e.g., Gallie, 2005; White et al. 2003). For this study, the mean usual hours worked per week was 39.39 (SD = 13.13) with a range from 4 to 95 hours. While the range is large, the mean, median and mode measures of central tendency are all nearly identical and the frequency distribution approximates the normal.

The second intensification measure was ***work role overload,*** in the sense of feeling that there is too much work to do in the time available (Beehr, Walsh and Taber 1976). This was measured using a six-item scale (Arynee, Srinivas and Tan, 2005) with responses obtained on a 7-point response scale anchored from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (7) (coefficient alpha = .84). Higher scores are interpreted as indicating higher perceived work intensification through work overload. Example items are: '*It often seems like I have too much work for one person to do*' and '*There is too much work to do everything well*'.

Work may also be intensified through the perceived demands and expectations management places on employee time in ways that might interfere with non-work activities. A modified four-item measure of ***time demands*** originally developed by Thompson, Beauvais and Lyness, (1999) was used. The items were: '*To get ahead in the organisation, employees are expected to work more than their contracted hours each week*', '*Employees are often expected to work overtime or take work home at night and/or weekends*', '*Employees are regularly expected to put their jobs before their families or personal lives*' and '*To be viewed favorably by senior managers, employees in my organisation must put their jobs ahead of their family or personal lives*'. Responses were obtained on a 7-point response scale anchored from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (7), with higher scores interpreted as indicating higher perceived work intensification through managerial demands on personal time (coefficient alpha = .85).

Job Satisfaction was measured using Warr, Cook and Wall's (1979) original 15-item instrument, together with an additional item measuring satisfaction with the degree of involvement in decisions. Responses were obtained on a 7-point scale bounded from *very dissatisfied* (1) to *very satisfied* (7) (coefficient alpha = .90)(see Table 4 for items). A measure of overall job satisfaction was obtained by taking an average of the responses to the 16 items. ***Job-induced stress*** was measured using House and Rizzo's (1972) seven-item instrument with responses obtained on a 6-point scale scored so that higher scores represent greater felt stress (coefficient alpha = .85). Finally, ***work-life imbalance*** was measured using an instrument Frone and Yardley (1996) developed to measure work-family conflict. Because the wording of the six items includes negative work spillover to non-familial aspects of personal life and friendship, higher scores are interpreted in this study as suggesting greater negative spillover from work to non-work life and therefore greater work-life imbalance. The

response scale was *never*, *seldom*, *sometimes*, *often*, *very often*, bounded from 1 to 5 (coefficient alpha = .90).

Control Variables: Preliminary analyses indicated that respondent gender (χ^2 (1) = 3.06, *p* = .080), temporary or permanent employment status (χ^2 (1) = 3.29, *p* = .070), and firm size in terms of number of employees (*t* (631) = -1.25, *p* = .213) were independent of union membership status. However, age (*t* (637) = -3.53, *p* = .000), log weekly pay (*t* (622) = -3.07, *p* = .002) and log years' tenure (*t* (642) = -5.46, *p* = .000) were found to differ by union membership. Older workers, those with longer tenure and those earning higher incomes were more likely to be union members. These last three variables were therefore included as potential control variables in the analyses that follow.

Employees' behavioural and affective commitment to their organisation were also explored as potential control variables on the principle that those experiencing poorer well-being at work and/or higher levels of intensified work can seek to resolve the situation by either exiting or psychologically disengaging from their organisations, rather than by attempting to use collective voice. Both dimensions of commitment were measured using the Organisational Commitment Questionnaire (Mowday, Porter and Steers, 1982). However, neither intentions to stay (*t* (642) = 0.79, *p* = 0.43) nor affective commitment (*t* (640) = 0.29, *p* = .768) were found to be associated with union membership.

Principal-axis factor analysis with varimax rotation (available on request) revealed that the work involvement and employee well-being variables were all factorially independent. Nor was a single dominant factor was identified, suggesting common method variance is unlikely to be a significant problem in this study.

Analytical strategy and results

Table 1 reports the correlations between the variables of interest in this study. With regard to union belonging, employees with longer weekly working hours, higher perceived role overload and greater managerial demands on their time were slightly more likely to be union members than not, as were those with higher reported levels of job-induced stress and work-life imbalance.

As indicated above, there is potential for union membership to be both a dependent variable, in the sense that well-being at work may influence whether or not someone joins a union, or an independent variable in that membership may, through collective action, influence employee well-being outcomes. A cross-sectional research design such as the present one cannot specify causal direction or whether the nature of the relationship is reciprocal. Furthermore, as Table 1 shows, the work intensification and well-being variables also covary with each other to varying degrees, although not to a level suggesting multi-collinearity. For these reasons, MANCOVA was used to test the hypotheses, with union membership entered as a factor variable, and the well-being variables entered as dependent variables. The control variables of age, log pay, and log tenure were entered as covariates. Bonferroni corrections were applied to all significance levels to reduce the potential for Type I errors arising from multiple statistical tests.

Table 1: Correlations

Variables	Union belonging	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1 Usual hours worked	.08*								
2 Overload	.12**	.24**							
3 Time demands	.09*	.23**	.48**						
4 Job satisfaction	-.03	.00	-.31**	-.36**					
5 Job Stress	.19**	.26**	.53**	.50**	-.41**				
6 Work-life	.11**	.32**	.55**	.55**	-.35**	.67**			
7 Age	.13**	.01	-.00	-.02	.06	-.03	-.03		
8 Log tenure	.22**	.07	.02	.07	.04	.11**	.05	.41**	
9 Log pay	.12**	.68**	.21**	.16**	.09*	.23**	.24**	.07	.19**

Notes: Union Belonging coded 0 (not a member), 1 (member). N = 616 after listwise deletion of missing values. * = $p < .05$ ** = $p < .01$ (2-tailed)

Initial multivariate tests did not find any significant effects for employee age (*trace* (6, 606) = 1.14, p = .339) or log tenure (*trace* (6, 606) = 1.84, p = .089) and these variables were therefore dropped as controls from subsequent analyses. For the final model, the *Box's M* test of the equality of the covariance matrix was not statistically significant (p = .832), and nor were the Levene's tests of the equality of the error variances, indicating that these assumptions underpinning the use of MANCOVA were met (Hair, Anderson, Tatham and Black, 1998).

In the final model, the multivariate test for union belonging was significant (*trace* (6, 612) = 3.23, p = .004), thereby justifying further analysis. Table 2 reports the tests of between-subjects effects and the marginal means for the intensification and well-being variables. While the magnitude of the difference between the means is not large, all are in the direction of suggesting that union members work longer hours, experience more work role overload, and have greater demands placed on their non-work time by management. They also tend towards having poorer job satisfaction, higher job-induced stress and work-life imbalance. The differences between the means for work overload, time demands, job induced stress and work-life imbalance are statistically significant. However, the differences between union and non-union members in respect of hours worked and job satisfaction are not statistically significant.

Table 2: Union belonging marginal means and univariate tests of between-subjects effects

Variables	Marginal Means		F	p
	Non-member	*Union Member*	(df 1, 617)	
Typical Weekly Hours	39.19	39.26	0.01	.925
Overload	3.44	3.72	6.07	.014
Time Demands	3.19	3.46	3.89	.049
Job Satisfaction	5.19	5.09	1.49	.222
Job Induced Stress	2.61	2.97	18.07	.000
Work-life Imbalance	2.43	2.61	5.19	.023

Of the observed differences, stress appears to be the clearest differentiator between union and non-union members. To further explore this finding, Table 3 reports findings for two regression analyses examining the predictors of job-related stress for union and non-union members separately. In both models, over 50% of the variance in job stress is explained. For both groups, negative spillover from work to non-work life is the clearest predictor of stress, followed by dissatisfaction with one's job.

The within-group analyses then show varying patterns in the predictors of stress, with union members with higher stress also tending to report more role overload, to have longer tenure, and to be permanent rather than temporary employees. For non-union employees, higher stress levels were associated with higher levels of managerial demands on their time, as well as being better paid, female and younger.

Table 3: Standardised Regression Coefficients for Job-Induced Stress

Predictors	*Non-member* (N = 274)		*Union Member* (N = 330)	
	B	t	B	T
Constant		-0.11		2.01 *
Age	-.09	-2.05*	-.06	-1.29
Gender (0 M 1 F)	.20	4.37***	.00	0.09
Permanent / temporary (1,0)	.01	0.22	.09	2.21*
Log years tenure	.04	0.87	.09	2.05*
Log weekly pay	.23	3.23**	.02	0.46
Log N employees	.02	0.35	.00	0.09
Usual weekly hours	-.07	-1.05	.04	0.71
Role overload	.07	1.23	.20	4.12***
Time demands	.17	3.27**	.07	0.16
Job satisfaction	-.19	-4.16***	-.20	-4.47***
Work-life imbalance	.46	8.26***	.44	8.26***
Adjusted R^2	.538		.528	
Model *F*	29.86***		34.40***	

$* = p < .05$ $** = p < .01$ $*** = p < .001$

To explore whether an aggregate measure of job satisfaction may in fact be masking facet-level dimensions of dissatisfaction that relate to union belonging, a further secondary analysis was performed using logistic regression to analyse whether any aspect of job satisfaction or dissatisfaction predicted the binary union membership variable (Table 4).

Of the 16 facet-level dimensions of job satisfaction measured in this study, only two were found to be useful for predicting whether someone was a member of a union at their place of work: being dissatisfied with the amount of recognition received for good work and being satisfied with one's opportunities for promotion. However, while the overall model for job satisfaction is significant, the level of reduction in the -2log likelihood between the initial and final regression step, together with the small value of the Nagelkerke R^2, does not suggest that the model explains much of the variance in union membership. Furthermore, knowing an employee's level of satisfaction on these two facets would only improve the odds of correctly classifying someone as a union member by just under 4%.

Table 4: Union membership logistic regression results for job satisfaction – final model

Variable	B	Wald	p	Exp(B)
Constant	-0.10	0.04	.846	0.90
The physical work conditions you have to work in	-0.04	0.03	.578	0.97
The freedom you have to choose your own methods of working	-0.02	0.05	.832	0.99
Your fellow workers.	0.00	0.00	.950	1.00
The amount of recognition you get for good work	-0.20	7.63	.006	0.82
Your immediate manager or supervisor	0.04	0.49	.483	1.05
The amount of responsibility you are given	0.08	1.13	.289	1.08
How much you are paid	0.03	0.34	.560	1.03
The involvement you have in decisions that affect you	-0.10	1.95	.163	0.91
Your opportunity to use your skills, abilities and knowledge	0.12	2.09	.148	1.12
Relations between management and other employees in your firm.	0.02	0.09	.756	1.02
Your chances of promotion	0.12	4.31	.038	1.13
The way your firm is managed	0.01	0.03	.858	1.01
The attention paid to suggestions you make	-0.10	1.72	.190	0.91
Your hours of work	-0.07	1.43	.231	0.93
The amount of variety in your job	0.07	0.97	.326	1.07
Your current level of job security	0.05	0.85	.356	1.05

Initial -2log likelihood = 887.90   Final -2log likelihood = 860.73
Initial CCR = 54.3%   Final CCR = 58.2%
Nagelkerke R^2 = .055   Model Goodness of fit χ^2 (16) = 27.17; p = .04

Discussion and conclusions

This paper throws light on the relationship between employee well-being outcomes of the experience of work and union belonging. In certain conditions, work intensification remains an important managerial 'low-road' for increasing labour productivity and thence organisational performance (e.g. Cooke, 2001). Such a process often has adverse implications for employee well-being and the quality of working life. Our results provide partial support for Hypothesis 1 in that workers experiencing higher levels of work overload, in the sense of having too much work to do in the time available, and who feel managers

make high demands on their personal time, are more likely to be union members. These findings seem consistent with union joining as a threat response to managerial actions that increase demands on workers without necessarily increasing either resources or rewards.

These findings also support a key methodological point for studies of work intensification that use hours worked as the primary indicator (e.g., Macky and Boxall, 2008). In our study, the actual hours worked by an individual do not differentiate union members from non-members whereas perceptions of work overload and managerial demands on time do. Future research needs to be careful to distinguish situations where workers work longer hours in order to meet personal income goals, or because they are highly absorbed in work that interests them, from those situations in which work pressures are imposed on, and are distressing for, the worker. The latter situation can derive from direct supervisory pressure or from the gradual development of an organisational culture in which managers and peers (for example, in teams) create excessive workload norms.

The study also found partial support for Hypothesis 2. The findings on job satisfaction reveal no significant differences in overall satisfaction between union members and non-members, while the findings at the facet level are not strong. Instead, in our study the key differentiators between unionists and non-unionists lie in the areas of stress and perceptions of work-life imbalance. Both higher levels of stress arising from work, and perceptions of a negative balance between work and non-work life, were related to union belonging.

The stress measure used in this study is symptom-based, pointing to both psychological and physiological adverse health outcomes that, for union members, are also associated with being dissatisfied with one's job, work-life imbalance, and perceptions of being overloaded at work. That this pattern of stressors differs from that for non-union members is an interesting result and needs further research.

Pertinent to these findings is the 'demand–control' model of stress, which predicts that jobs with higher demands, combined with low employee control, will be those that create the most strain (Karasek, 1979; Mackie, Holahan, and Gottlieb, 2001; Gallie, 2005; Wood, 2008). To the extent that stress is indicative of a loss of autonomy on the job, union joining behaviour may represent a strategy by which some employees seek to gain greater control over their work pressure and thereby a reduction in job stress.

To conclude, our study shows the value for research on union membership of measuring employee well-being in a more comprehensive way than has typically been done in the past. Our findings show that job satisfaction is not a useful predictor of union membership in New Zealand, while issues to do with work intensification, stress and work-life imbalance are. Union members' discontent in this country is associated with higher levels of stress, role overload, and demands on their personal time, consistent with a demand-control model of job strain. That said, while our research implies that union membership is at least associated with poorer employee well-being at work, we need to understand how effective those same employees perceive their unions to be in responding to these issues. Research of this nature, examining the dynamic interplay among the motives of dissatisfaction/threat, utility, and ideology/identity, is an important agenda for the future.

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