
Predicting Union Attitudes in Student Part-Time Workers

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Abstract

We examined the predictors of general union attitudes in a sample of 84 high school and 42 first year university students (*M* age = 17 years) who were employed part-time. In addition to two aspects of family socialization towards unions (parents' perceived union attitudes and parents' perceived union activities), we also assessed students' job quality and satisfaction with both co-workers and supervisors as predictors of their own general union attitudes. Only respondents' perception of their parents' general union attitudes was significantly associated with their own general union attitudes. Neither job quality, nor supervisory or co-worker satisfaction were associated with respondents' union attitudes.

Résumé

Nous avons examiné les prédicteurs d'attitude générale envers les syndicats chez un échantillon de 84 élèves du secondaire et de 42 étudiants de première année universitaire (*M* âge = 17 ans) travaillant à temps partiel. En plus de deux aspects de socialisation familiale envers les syndicats (la perception de l'attitude des parents envers les syndicats et de leurs activités syndicales), nous avons évalué, en tant que prédicteurs de l'attitude des élèves et des étudiants, la qualité du travail de leurs collègues et de leurs superviseurs. Seule la perception qu'avaient les répondants de l'attitude générale de leurs parents envers les syndicats était associée de manière significative à leur propre attitude. Ni la qualité de leur travail, ni le degré de satisfaction de leurs collègues ou de leurs superviseurs n'étaient associés aux attitudes des répondants envers les syndicats.

As private-sector trade union membership numbers decline in many industrialized countries, there is increasing interest in identifying the factors that shape the union attitudes and membership decisions of young adult

workers. Research has shown that, in addition to simple opportunity (union coverage of the workplace), individual propensity towards joining the union, and workplace norms concerning unions, are important factors associated with union membership patterns of young adult workers (Cregan & Johnston, 1990; Hartley, 1992; Spilsbury, Hoskins, Ashton & Maguire, 1987). At the same time, ratification votes are typically decided by a relatively small margin, emphasizing the importance of individual voting decisions (Barling, Fullagar & Kelloway, 1992; Hepburn, Loughlin, & Barling, in press). A critical component of the propensity to join labour unions in adults is the individual's general attitude towards labour unions. These attitudes act as a "gatekeeper" in influencing the direction of the voting decision even after individual union instrumentality has been considered (Brett, 1980). The present study focusses on the correlates of general union attitudes in student part-time workers.

The propensity to vote for a union, or to join a union, is the outcome of several prior influences. In adult workers, these factors include cultural and/or peer attitudes, family socialization, and prior work experiences. Recent research has investigated family socialization as a source of union attitudes in pre-employed students. Based on social learning theory (Bandura, 1977), Barling, Kelloway and Bremermann (1991) proposed that family socialization would influence the development of union attitudes. Some support for this hypothesis has emerged: Pre-employed high school and university students' perception of their parents' union attitudes was the single largest predictor of their own general union attitudes (Barling et al, 1991; Kelloway & Watts, 1994). This phenomenon was replicated when parents' own union attitudes (instead of students' perceptions of their parents' union attitudes) were assessed (Kelloway & Watts, 1994), eliminating the possibility that mono-method bias was responsible for the relationship.

Before young adults confront their first union membership decision, it is likely that they will have had some part-time working experience. Part-time work experiences that take place as a teenager or young adult may contribute to individual attitudes towards unions. Also, workplace conditions influence the union attitudes of adult workers (Barling et al., 1992). The present study assesses whether a similar relationship might be found between work experiences and union attitudes in students who work part-time.

At any one time, approximately half of all high-school students in North America are employed part-time, and by graduation from high school, approximately 80% will have held part-time jobs (Steinberg & Dornbusch, 1991). Thus, most individuals' first direct exposure to the workplace typically occurs as a student, in part-time or temporary work. Their work is often low-skilled, repetitive, and regarded as undesirable by more permanent workers. The nature of the work to which they are exposed may have important consequences for two reasons. First, if the literature on adults generalizes to students employed on a part-time basis, then such negative work experiences may predispose students employed on a part-time basis towards unions: Research shows that negative work experiences for adults are consistently associated with pro-union attitudes. More specifically, low satisfaction with supervision, and to a lesser extent a job that is of poor intrinsic quality, are consistently associated with pro-union attitudes in adults (Barling et al., 1992). Second, attitudes that develop early in the life-span (prior to the age of 25) tend to be stable over time (Krosnick & Alwin, 1989); and both work attitudes (Staw & Ross, 1985) and union attitudes (Getman, Goldberg & Herman, 1976) are stable over time. Hence, pro-union or anti-union attitudes that develop during the formative years may be somewhat stable. If indeed they are, the implications for understanding the development of union attitudes would be considerable.

Given the separate literatures showing the relationship between family socialization (for pre-employed students) and negative work experiences (for adults) and union attitudes, in this study we will assess the *relative* contribution of both family socialization (i.e., perceptions of parents' union attitudes) and work experiences (i.e., perceived job quality and supervision satisfaction) on teenagers' and young adults' union attitudes. We will also focus on satisfaction with co-workers as a predictor of union attitudes. Co-worker satisfaction is not a strong correlate of unionisation in adults (Barling et al., 1992), perhaps because the union has little control over the selection of co-workers. However, co-worker satisfaction is an integral component of job quality for teenagers' employed on a part-time basis, and is associated with positive employment consequences for teenagers. For

example, peer considerations represent one of the primary reasons teenagers seek part-time employment (Barling, Rogers & Kelloway, 1995). Hence, we will include co-worker satisfaction as a third work-related variable related to student part-time workers' union attitudes.

Lastly, we will also assess whether any links between family socialization or job experiences and union attitudes are moderated by the number of hours worked per week, or exposure to unions. First, because previous research has shown that employment quantity and employment quality interact in predicting personal and organisational functioning for teenagers employed on a part-time basis (Barling et al., 1995), we will assess whether employment quantity, i.e., number of hours worked per week, moderates the relationship between job quality and students' own union attitudes. We expect that greater exposure to a poor quality job will exacerbate any relationship between employment quality and union attitudes. Second, because exposure to unions in the workplace — whether personal or vicarious — provides information on which to base judgements about the union's effectiveness in dealing with workplace issues (Barling et al., 1992), we will assess whether any relationship between work experiences and union attitudes are moderated by the effects of quantity (but not quality) of prior exposure to unions. While the quality of prior exposure to unions may also moderate these relationships, we will only test the extent of exposure to unions in the present study. Exposure to unions may enable students who experience poor quality part-time employment to view unions as a "voice" mechanism, and exposure to unions would therefore function as a moderator of the relationship between the quality of work experiences and students' union attitudes (Freeman & Medoff, 1984; Spencer, 1986). Working with union members or being a member themselves could allow students to form first-hand opinions about the usefulness of unions in alleviating workplace problems.

Thus, we hypothesize that after controlling for age, tenure, and family socialization effects, part-time work experiences will predict students' union attitudes. In addition, this relationship will be moderated by the students' prior exposure to unions, and the number of hours worked per week.

METHOD

Subjects and Procedure

The sample consisted of 126 students (51% female), ranging in age from 15 to 21 years (M age = 17 years, SD = 1.48 years) all of whom were attending high school or first year university, and were employed part-time during the study (mean working hours per week = 15.52, SD = 9.42). The proportion of females to males was

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TABLE 1
Descriptive statistics and intercorrelations of study variables ($N = 126$)

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Range	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Age	17.00	1.48	15-21										
2. Hours/week	15.52	9.42		.01 ¹									
3. Tenure (months)	23.00	20.30		.13	.13								
4. Family union activities ²	0.05	3.05		.04	.05	-.17	.80						
5. Family union attitudes	6.07	1.16	2-12	-.10	-.14	.00	.36**	.82					
6. Co-worker satisfaction	41.54	11.84	0-54	.04	-.10	.11	-.02	.22*	.85				
7. Supervisor satisfaction	41.02	10.10	0-54	.14	.03	-.01	.07	-.03	.27**	.78			
8. Exposure to unions	0.55	0.97	0-3	.20*	-.06	-.02	.24*	-.10	-.15	-.03			
9. Job quality	4.64	0.90	1-7	-.02	-.03	-.10	.00	-.01	.30**	.23**	-.05	.75	
10. Own union attitudes	3.32	0.53	1-5	.08	-.19	-.01	.10	.60**	.20*	-.01	.01	-.03	.87

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$

Notes: ¹ Scale Reliabilities (Cronbach's alpha) on the diagonal; ² Subscale scores have been standardized and combined.

greater ($p < .05$) in the high school sample ($n = 84$) than in the university sample ($n = 42$).

Permission to approach the high school students was obtained from the school principal. In addition, parents were notified of the study through a school newsletter. Two hundred and fifty-eight questionnaires were handed out to students who were currently employed on a part-time basis and collected by teachers during class. Students were advised that participation was completely voluntary and that their responses would remain anonymous. Ninety-two questionnaires were returned (a response rate of 36%), eight of which were discarded as unusable. The university students were recruited through the subject pool of introductory psychology students who earn course credits through voluntary participation in research. These students attended sessions at predetermined times, and 44 students filled out the questionnaire (two were discarded as unusable).

Questionnaires

Descriptive statistics, intercorrelations, and Cronbach's alpha are presented in Table 1.

Respondent's *Union Attitudes* were assessed using a 16-item General Union Attitude scale that combines the items from Brett (1980) and McShane (1986). Our practice in combining these two scales is motivated by the need to create a comprehensive pool of items, and has been used successfully in previous research (Barling et al. 1991; Kelloway & Watts, 1994). This combined scale consists of 15 belief statements about unions (e.g., "unions are a positive force in this country", "unions are becoming too

strong") to which the respondent indicated the extent of their agreement or disagreement on a five-point scale ("strongly disagree" to "strongly agree"), and one item in which they are asked to indicate how favourable their overall attitude towards unions was on a five-point scale ("not favourable at all" to "very favourable"). The mean of all item responses represented the final score on this variable.

We assessed attitudes towards unions held by the respondent's parents (*Family Union Attitudes*) with 11 items from the Family Socialization scale (Barling et al., 1991). Respondents are asked to indicate on a five-point Likert scale ("strongly disagree" to "strongly agree") the extent to which each of their parents would agree or disagree with six belief statements (e.g., "unions are too powerful in this country", "unions promote better worker-management relations") about unions. The final score on this variable is the sum of the mean of mothers' attitudes plus the mean of fathers' attitudes.

To assess *Family Union Activities*, respondents were asked to estimate separately each of their parents using two subscales from Barling et al. (1991). The first asked whether the parent had ever belonged to a union, held office in a union, and whether the parent had ever gone on strike as a union member. These six items were coded "0" (no, uncertain) or "1" (yes). The second section required the respondent to indicate the frequency on a five-point scale ("very frequently" to "never") with which each parent (1) attended union meetings, and (2) participated in other union activities. Within each subscale, responses were summed for all items; subscale scores

TABLE 2
Results of regression analysis predicting students' union attitudes

Predictor variables	R ² change	F change	b	p
Covariates				
Age			.199	
Tenure	.025	1.19	-.061	>.05
Family socialization				
Parents' perceived attitudes			.624	
Parents' perceived activities	.383	29.71	-.118	<.01
Job quality				
Coworker satisfaction			.101	
Supervisor satisfaction			-.020	
Job quality	.009	0.48	-.068	>.05

R² = .42

F = 9.09, df 7,89, p <.01

were standardized and added together for a total parental union activity score.

The respondent's degree of *Union Exposure* was indicated by three items indicating whether they had (1) worked with union members, (2) been a union member in the past, and (3) were currently union members. Each item was coded as "0" (no) or "1" (yes). Responses were summed over the three items to assess degree of union exposure.

Lastly, we used two different scales to assess work experiences. *Job Quality* was measured using 14 items from Hackman and Oldham's (1980) Job Diagnostic Survey which assess the degree to which a job offers skill variety, task identity, task significance, autonomy, feedback from the job, feedback from others, and dealing with others. Responses were made on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from "Very False" to "Very True". Responses were summed over the 14 items, then the mean taken for the final score. *Satisfaction with co-workers* and *Satisfaction with supervisor* were both measured using 18-item sub-scales from Smith, Kendall and Hulin's Job Descriptive Index (1969). Respondents indicate whether they agree with each of the 18 adjectives or descriptive phrases in each category. Responses were coded "0" (no or uncertain), and "3" (yes) in compliance with prior use and the scale authors' recommendations (Smith, Budzeika, Edwards, Johnson, & Bearse, 1986). Responses were then summed over the 18 items for a total score on each scale. Higher scores on these scales indicate greater satisfaction.

RESULTS

We first assessed whether family socialization and work experiences exerted main effects on union attitudes. To do so, a hierarchical multiple regression was computed. We entered subjects' age and organisational tenure as covariates in the first stage to control for their effects. Older students will have had the opportunity for more exposure to work conditions and to unions at work. Student who have had more experiences with paid work may have different expectations about the workplace and their role in it. Likewise, longer tenure with any employer may affect the attitudes of a student towards the employer and other workplace parties such as unions. At the very least, self selection may be a factor as employees who enjoy their work experiences (or who become union members themselves) would be less likely to seek work elsewhere. Next, perception of parents' union attitudes was entered along with parents' union activities in a block that represents family socialization towards unions. Finally, the three indicators of work experiences (job quality, supervision and co-worker satisfaction) were entered as a block to assess their contribution to variance over and above that contributed by family socialization. We chose to enter family socialization variables before work experience variables for two reasons: (a) Prior research suggests that family attitudes are an important influence on union attitudes of high-school students (Barling et al, 1991; Kelloway & Watts, 1994), and (b) family socialization effects will most likely take place prior to (and even in the absence of) workplace experience.

As can be seen from Table 2, the demographic variables (age and tenure) are not related to union attitudes. After controlling for the effects of age and tenure, family socialization towards unions (family union attitudes and family union activities) accounts for a significant amount of variance in students' own union attitudes ($\chi^2_{\text{cha}} = .38, p < .01$). Within this block it is parents' union attitudes that account for the majority of variance ($b = .62, p < .01$). Students whose parents have more positive attitudes towards unions were more likely to have positive attitudes towards unions. None of the three workplace variables (work quality, supervisor satisfaction and co-worker satisfaction) accounts for a significant amount of variance in union attitudes.¹ (We conducted similar analyses for the components of the Job Characteristics Scale to test the possibility that the null results for our job quality index are spurious. However, none of the effects for the independent subscales were significant.)

1 Supplementary analyses in which the family socialization variables were entered after the work experiences yielded the same results.

We then computed separate regression analyses to assess any moderator effects. Using the procedure recommended by Cohen and Cohen (1983), the component scales of each proposed interaction were first standardized then entered into a regression equation. Next the interaction term was entered to assess the amount of unique variance it accounts for when both component variables have been controlled. Hours worked per week and exposure to unions at work were tested as moderators of the effects of family union attitudes and job quality on students' union attitudes (a total of four interactions tested). Neither employment quantity, expressed as the number of hours worked per week, nor exposure to unions, moderated the effects of family socialization or work experiences on students' own union attitudes.

DISCUSSION

To date, the nature, predictors and outcomes of adults' union attitudes have typically been studied without a parallel interest in students' union attitudes. While this study did not directly compare adult full-time and adolescent part-time employees, the present results do suggest that the factors related to union attitudes differ somewhat for these two groups. In students aged 15 to 21 years old who are employed part-time, family socialization, particularly family attitudes, contributed the greatest amount of variance to general union attitudes in the present study. Neither job quality nor supervision satisfaction were significantly associated with teenagers' union attitudes, although both are consistently found to relate to adults' union attitudes (Barling et al., 1992). This does not mean that the quality of part-time work is unimportant for students, only that it is of questionable relevance to students' developing union attitudes.

The respondents' perception of their parents' general union attitudes and their parents' union activities were found to be associated with the respondents' union attitudes in this study, accounting for 38% of the total variance in union attitudes. The major contributor to this variance is family union attitudes. This is consistent with previous findings in which parents' attitudes towards unions were associated with the union attitudes of pre-employed students (e.g., Barling et al., 1991; Kelloway & Watts, 1994). Although job characteristics were expected to be associated with general union attitudes, this relationship was not obtained in this study even for respondents who had been exposed to unions in the workplace.

Why are job quality and supervision satisfaction salient in the prediction of adult workers' union attitudes but not for student workers? One possibility is that students have lower expectations concerning the quality of their employment. It is also possible that their work-

life is less meaningful to their general well-being than is the quality of employment for adult full-time workers. Alternatively, the meaning of work may be different for this age group as social factors play an important part. In addition, the temporary nature of these jobs may ameliorate some negative effects of poor job quality: Most students of this age do not expect to continue in their present work after graduation. For this reason, different aspects of work quality may be salient for student workers, and this might question our strategy of combining work quality, as measured by the Job Characteristics Scale (Hackman & Oldham, 1980), into a unidimensional scale. However, as noted above, similar results were obtained when the different components (e.g., autonomy, task significance) were analysed. Clearly, further research concerning the meaning and consequences of work for students employed on a part-time basis is critical. Presently, explicit research attention to adult part-time and contingent workers is growing in response to the increasing proportions of part-timers in the work force (Barling & Gallagher, 1996). Future research should also focus on the needs, expectations and attitudes of this group of workers as well as the differences that might exist between adult part-time and younger (student) part-time workers.

Contrary to our hypotheses, neither exposure to unions nor employment quantity served as moderators. We speculate that exposure to unions is an insufficient condition for the development of union attitudes in student part-time workers. In addition to social factors and exposure *per se*, the quality of the exposure may be critical. Also, it has been shown in past research that students form union attitudes based (in part) on parental attitudes without benefit of direct work and/or union experience (Barling et al. 1991). If, as indicated by the present results, work experience has little or no additional influence on these attitudes for student part-time workers, then neither the amount of work nor union exposure is likely to moderate this relationship.

The use of self-report scales in the present study may raise some concern, particularly in the case of respondents' reports of their parent's attitudes and activities. However, Kelloway and Watts (1994) found that students' perceptions of their parents' union attitudes and union activities were significantly associated with parental self-reports of their own attitudes and activities. This suggests that students' perceptions are sufficiently accurate for use in the present study. Likewise, the fact that perceptions of parents' union attitudes predicted students' own union attitudes, while perceptions of parents' involvement in union activities did not do so, mitigates to some extent the possibility that the results are simply a function of mono-method bias or respon-

dent guessing.

Another question raised by the present results is the extent to which family socialization (both perceived parental union attitudes and union participation) contributes to union attitudes and voting intention *and/or* union participation in adult workers. One possibility is that family socialization assumes less predictive importance as personal experience with work experiences increases, and future research might investigate this issue.

Finally, further research which explores the meaning and impact of part-time work for teenagers is necessary to increase our understanding of the work factors which can be identified as beneficial or harmful in the development of union and work attitudes at this important stage of development. Among those factors that may need to be further investigated are contextual factors such as the type of work (and industry) in which the student is involved, or the influence of the employers' stance on unions. It is unlikely that all factors can be assessed in any one study and it is only through a body of research that we can reach an understanding of these complex interactions. For instance, in the present study it is possible that the type of industries in which the part-time jobs were held would contribute to the low rate of exposure to unions and the failure of exposure to unions to exert an influence on union attitudes. Lastly, future research should use longitudinal data wherever possible; the use of cross-sectional data in the present study precludes any causal inferences, and limits our understanding of the influence of family socialization on the *development* of union attitudes.

In conclusion, we chose to focus in this study on the relative relationship between family socialization and work experiences on the one hand, and general union attitudes of student part-time workers on the other. Our results extend previous findings in showing the salience of family socialization for the development of union attitudes in young people relative to work experiences.

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