Preemployment Predictors of Union Attitudes: The Role of Family Socialization and Work Beliefs

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A process model of the preemployment predictors of union attitudes was developed and tested. Fifty-nine high school and 143 university students completed questionnaires on family socialization, work beliefs, union attitudes, and willingness to join a union. Linear structural equation modeling showed that union attitudes predicted willingness to join a union and were predicted by humanist and Marxist work beliefs and by subjects' perceptions of their parents' union attitudes. Subjects' perceptions of their parents' union attitudes were predicted by perceptions of parents' involvement in union activities. The results extend findings that union attitudes are of critical importance to unionization in a sample of individuals not yet employed. In addition, several predictors of union attitudes prior to entry into the workplace were identified.

Labor unions are an integral part of the social and occupational fabric. Why individuals choose to be members of unions, or vote to certify unions, has been the focus of considerable inquiry (e.g., Brett, 1980; Decottis & LeLouarn, 1981; Deshpande & Fioritto, 1989; Getman, Goldberg, & Herman, 1976; Montgomery, 1989; Premack & Hunter, 1988; Schriesheim, 1978; Youngblood, DeNisi, Molleston, & Mobley, 1984). One variable that has attracted much interest as a predictor of union voting intentions (e.g., Brett, 1980) and other union-related behaviors (e.g., Kelloway, Barling, & Fullagar, 1991) is general attitudes toward labor unions. Research shows consistently that union attitudes predict pro-union voting intentions and behavior.

Moreover, and of considerable relevance to the present study, union attitudes are stable. In their study of 33 union representation elections, Getman et al. (1976) were able to correctly predict 79% of the union vote on the basis of union attitudes alone. More important, Getman et al. (1976) found that, even in the light of intense and sometimes illegal campaigning by both union and management, employees' voting decisions were consistently predicted by their union attitudes prior to the start of the campaign. The stability of union attitudes parallels research on general (Krosnick & Alwin, 1989) and work-related (e.g., Staw & Ross, 1985) attitudes. Indeed, attitudes are most amenable to change during adolescence and early adulthood; susceptibility declines rapidly thereafter, remaining low throughout the remainder of the life cycle. This is consistent with data supporting Krosnick and Alwin's (1989) "impressionable years hypothesis."

The need to understand the role of union attitudes in the unionization process is apparent. However, there is little theoretical or empirical knowledge available concerning the predictors of union attitudes. In the current study, individuals' attitudes toward unions were examined before they entered full-time employment. If union attitudes are indeed stable, and undergo most change during adolescence and early adulthood, an understanding of their development at that stage becomes even more important.

Early Family Socialization and Union Attitudes

A considerable amount of conceptual and empirical attention has been directed toward the question of how parents influence their children (see Bandura, 1973). The vast majority of this attention has been directed toward child and personality development and the emergence of psychopathological behavior (e.g., phobic and aggressive behavior; Bandura, 1973). More recently, this line of research has been extended to the issue of whether and how parents' employment affects their children (Barling, 1990; Mauksch & Weinberg, 1989; Schmitt, 1990). There are now empirical data available to support the notion that family socialization plays a significant role in the formation of children and adolescents' occupational aspirations and expectations (Barling, 1990; Gottfredson, 1981). For example, children (especially sons) tend to follow in the occupational footsteps of their fathers (Mortimer, Lorence, & Kumka, 1986). When sons do not pursue the same careers as their fathers, they choose careers in similar fields. In addition, children of occupationally successful fathers (especially sons) are more likely to be successful themselves (Cox & Cooper, 1989), especially if they are in the same occupation as their fathers (Reinhardt, 1970).

It is not just the objective status of the parents' occupation that affects children; they are also influenced by perceptions of their parents' employment. Adolescents are more likely to choose the same careers as their parents if they perceive their parents' work experience to be positive (Breakwell, Fife-Schaw,
High school students tend to assign the same importance to job rewards as they perceived their fathers did (McCall & Lawler, 1976). Parents' occupational aspirations for their children define the acceptable range of occupations for their children. Moreover, the occupational aspirations thus established remain stable through adolescence and determine subsequent career choice (Gottfredson, 1981). The findings of this line of research are consistent with social learning theory postulates of the influence of one's family of origin. As Bandura (1977, p. 39) stated, “Much social learning occurs on the basis of casual or directed observation of behavior as it is performed by others in everyday situations.”

Whether attitudes toward unions or the willingness to join a union is influenced in any way by parental union membership status has been of interest for some time (Bakke, 1945; Whyte, 1944/1945). More recently, there has been some investigation of whether characteristics present in one's family of origin have any influence on one's own union attitudes or union voting behavior (Laliberte, 1986; Youngblood et al., 1984). These two studies failed to show a link between parental union membership status and children's union attitudes or voting intentions. We suggest that the reason for this is that the wrong question was asked. Specifically, Laliberte and Youngblood et al. assumed that pro-union attitudes and voting behavior would be higher in people whose fathers or mothers or both were union members. However, union membership status may not determine union attitudes. An individual may be a member of a union and still express anti-union attitudes; conversely, non-unionized individuals may express pro-union attitudes but not have the opportunity to opt for representation. Indeed, Gallagher and Jeong (1989) showed that, although parental membership status was not associated with members’ attitudes toward organized labor, parents’ general attitudes toward unions were. Similarly, Husczo (1983) found that parental membership status was not associated with participation in union activities. In contrast, parental orientation toward unions has correlated significantly, albeit moderately, with such participation (Nicholson, Ursell, & Lubbock, 1981). Thus, the salient family influence may not be parents' membership status but rather their attitudes toward organized labor. Accordingly, in the present study, we hypothesized that children's perceptions of their parents' union attitudes would predict children's attitudes toward unions directly. Indirect support for this hypothesis emerges from Fullagar, McCoy, and Schull's (in press) study. They showed that referent others (i.e., family members and other “important people” whose opinions were valued by the subjects) exerted a direct influence on union attitudes. However, Fullagar et al. (in press) did not separate out the effects of these two sources.

One question that emerges from this hypothesis is what sources of information children use in determining their parents' union attitudes. Perhaps the most direct source of information is the parents' stated attitudes. However, because children may neither ask about, nor be told such information directly, we examined whether children infer their parents' union attitudes from observation of their parents' participation in union activities. We predicted that children’s perceptions of their parents’ participation in the union would predict their perception of their parents' union attitudes. Because previous studies have shown that membership in a union is an inadequate predictor of union attitudes (Laliberte, 1986; Youngblood et al., 1984), our operationalization of perceived participation included formal acts engaged in by parents on behalf of the union (e.g., frequency of attending meetings, holding office).

We also investigated whether gender moderated the links between mothers' and fathers' attitudes toward unions and children's attitudes. Social learning theory predicts, and research shows, that mothers and fathers affect their sons and daughters differently (e.g., Bandura, 1977). This is also true for the effects of parents' occupational characteristics on their children. For example, Mortimer et al. (1986) showed that sons but not daughters tended to choose the same or similar occupations as their fathers. A same-sex effect was hypothesized in the present study, on the basis of findings showing gender differences in behavioral participation in unions (Gordon, Philpot, Burt, Thompson, & Spiller, 1980). Hence, echoing Piotkowski and Stark's (1987, p. 3) observation about the relationship between the occupational worlds of parents and their children, we proposed that, as children observe their mothers' and fathers' participation in union-related activities, or as children listen to their parents talk about unions, children develop perceptions of their parents' attitudes toward organized labor. In turn, these perceptions influence children's own attitudes toward organized labor.

Beliefs About Work and Attitudes Toward Unions

Aside from the effects of family socialization, individuals hold personal and work-related beliefs that may predict union attitudes and the willingness to join or vote for a union. Buchholz (1978) proposed that these beliefs gain their predictive value because they clarify and simplify the world people live in and place limits on people's behavior. Two work-related beliefs that may influence attitudes toward labor unions are the Marxist and humanistic belief systems.

The Marxist work belief asserts that workers should have a greater span of control over the workplace as a means of avoiding exploitation and alienation (Buchholz, 1978). Because the Marxist belief reflects the raison d'être of labor unions, we proposed that individuals who manifest this belief would exhibit pro-union attitudes. The humanistic work belief presumes that individual growth is more important than productivity, and that the workplace should be redesigned to be meaningful and to allow for the fulfillment of higher order needs (Buchholz, 1978). Although the humanistic belief does not presuppose that collective action is a necessary means to this end, the vision of workers' fulfillment is certainly compatible with the ultimate goals of the labor movement. There are data to support both these suggestions. First, Buchholz (1978) found that union officials and rank-and-file members manifested stronger Marxist and humanistic beliefs than non-unionized individuals and that union officials manifested stronger Marxist and humanistic beliefs than rank-and-file members. Second, Barling, Laliberte, Fullagar, and Kelloway (1991) showed that Marxist work beliefs predicted union attitudes in non-unionized individuals.

For the present research, one important assumption was that work beliefs exist independent of current work experiences. Adolescents and young adults may hold beliefs about job-re-
lated exploitation and alienation, just as they may hold beliefs about the personal fulfilment one should derive from one's work, even though their employment experiences are limited.

In this study, we proposed and empirically tested a model hypothesizing that family socialization and work beliefs influence individuals' general attitudes toward unions. In turn, these attitudes were hypothesized to predict an individual's willingness to join a union. To test this model, we deliberately chose to focus on a sample of subjects who were not yet employed on the assumption that their work beliefs and memories of work-related events in their family of origin would be less discolored by the quality of their current work experiences. (The overidentified model representing these hypotheses is presented in Figure 1.)

Method

Subjects

Questionnaires were administered to 143 undergraduate university students and 59 high school students in Ontario, Canada (mean age = 18.79 years, SD = 1.55). There were proportionately more female than male undergraduate students (91 vs. 52) but more male than female high school students (34 vs. 25). The total sample comprised 86 men and 116 women. (However, listwise deletion of data resulted in a final sample of 168.) Because of the hypothesis that gender moderates the relationship between family socialization on the one hand, and union attitudes and willingness to join a union on the other, it is important to note that men and women did not differ significantly in terms of any of the variables (namely, perceptions of mothers' and fathers' perceived participation and union attitudes, children's union attitudes, and expressed willingness to join a union; p > .05).

Although no self-report demographic data are available on their parents, the subjects reported that 64 (31.7%) of the mothers and 63 (31.2%) of the fathers had ever been members of a union and that 115 of the fathers (56.9%) and 118 of the mothers (58.4%) had never been members of a union. In the rest of the cases (20 mothers and 23 fathers), subjects were unsure of their parents' membership status. Of the 183 subjects who recorded whether they themselves would join a union or not, 74 (40.4%) said they would.

Questionnaires

A family socialization scale was developed especially for the present study, as there are no psychometrically acceptable scales assessing union attitudes in the family of origin. In the five-item subscale assessing perceptions of parents' participation, subjects provided separate ratings of their mothers' and fathers' involvement in union-related activities. In three of the five items, subjects responded on a 3-point scale (yes, uncertain, and no, scored 2, 1, and 0, respectively) to questions about whether their father or mother belonged to a union, held office in a union, or ever went out on strike for a union. The remaining two items were rated on a 5-point scale and asked how often the mother or father attended union meetings and the extent to which he or she was involved in other activities to strengthen a union. The subscales for both mothers' and fathers' perceived participation were internally consistent (α = .70 and .77, respectively). In the union attitude subscale, subjects indicated on a 5-point scale their perceptions of their mothers' and fathers' agreement or disagreement with six statements adapted from Brett (1980; e.g., "unions help improve working conditions," "unions are too powerful in this country."). Subscales for mothers' and fathers' perceived union attitudes were internally consistent (α = .82 and .84, respectively).

Children's work beliefs were assessed with Buchholz's (1978) Marxist Work Belief and Humanistic Work Belief subscales. The 11-item Marxist Work Belief subscale includes such items as "The work of the laboring class is exploited by the rich for their own benefit." The Humanistic Work Belief subscale contains 10 items, for example, "Work can be organized to allow for human fulfilment" and "Work can be a means of self-expression." Both the Marxist and Humanistic Work Belief subscales were internally consistent in this study (α = .76 and .87, respectively).

McShane (1986) found that Getman et al's (1976) and McShane's (1986) measures of general union attitudes were the most psychometrically acceptable measures of attitudes toward labor unions. In this study, both these questionnaires were combined to create a more comprehensive 16-item measure of union attitudes. Items included "Unions are a positive force in our country" (positively keyed) and "Most people are better off without unions" (negatively keyed; α = .93).

Finally, we assessed individuals' willingness to join a labor union. As in other studies on union voting (e.g., Barling, Laliberte, et al., 1991; Beutell & Biggs, 1984; Deshpane & Fioritto, 1989) and decertification elections (Bigoness & Tosi, 1984), we used a one-item scale to assess willingness to unionize: "Would you willingly join a union?" (yes, uncertain, and no, coded 2, 1, and 0, respectively).

Figure 1. Overidentified model linking family socialization, work beliefs, union attitudes, and unionization.
Results

Descriptive statistics and intercorrelations of all scales are presented in Table 1. To assess whether gender moderated the relationship between mothers’ and fathers’ attitudes and their children’s attitudes, we computed two regression analyses in which children’s attitudes were regressed separately on their mothers’ (or fathers’) attitudes and gender. Neither of the two interaction effects (between mothers’ or fathers’ union attitudes and subjects’ gender) were significant, nor were the main effects for gender ($p > .05$).

We assessed the fit of the proposed model by using maximum likelihood estimation as implemented in LISREL VI (Jöreskog & Sörbom, 1984). All subsequent analyses were based on the covariance matrix. Because of the lack of a moderator effect attributable to gender and because of the significant correlations between students’ perceptions of their mothers’ and fathers’ attitudes toward unions ($r = .70$) and mothers’ and fathers’ participation ($r = .45$), the proposed model (see Figure 1) was modified in two ways. First, perceptions of mothers’ and fathers’ attitudes toward unions were hypothesized to represent a single latent variable—parents’ attitudes toward unions. Second, perceptions of mothers’ and fathers’ participation in union activities were hypothesized to be manifest indicators of a single latent variable—parents’ participation in union activities.

The remaining variables in the model were treated as single indicators of latent variables. In treating these variables as single indicators of latent variables, we sacrificed an important advantage of latent variable models, that is, the estimation of disattenuated correlations for multiple indicator latent variables. As it was of little benefit to attempt the prediction of error variance, we fixed both the common and the unique factor loadings for these variables and estimated only the variance for these variables. Specifically, we fixed the common factor loadings for single indicator latent variables as the product of the square root of the reliability and the standard deviation of the observed variable. Unique variance was fixed as the product of the variance of the observed variable and $(1 - R_{xx})$. An alternative approach would be to operationalize all variables in the model as multiple indicator latent variables. Although this is more statistically elegant, it would require a much larger sample to derive stable estimates of parameters.

An initial test of the model suggested a reasonable, but not outstanding, fit to the data: $x^2(18, N = 163) = 66.23, p < .001$; goodness-of-fit index (GFI) = .91; adjusted goodness-of-fit index (AGFI) = .82; root-mean-square residual (rmsr) = .02. Two additional model modifications were made to improve the fit of the model. First, the residual factors for fathers’ participation in the union and perceptions of fathers’ attitudes toward unions were allowed to covary. Second, we estimated a correlation between the two endogenous variables, parents’ attitudes toward unions and Marxist work beliefs. The resulting model demonstrated an acceptable fit to the data: $x^2(16, 163) = 24.54, ns$; GFI = .97; AGFI = .92; rmsr = .02.

The standardized solution for the model is presented in Figure 2. Students’ attitudes toward unions were predicted by their perceptions of their parents’ union attitudes ($\beta = .75, Z = 8.94, p < .01$). Students’ union attitudes were also predicted by Marxist ($\beta = .16, Z = 2.13, p < .01$) and humanistic ($\beta = .16, Z = 2.88, p < .01$) work beliefs. Students’ willingness to join a union was predicted by their own union attitudes ($\beta = .40, Z = 5.26, p < .01$). Finally, as hypothesized, perceptions of parents’ participation in union activities predicted perceptions of parents’ attitudes toward unions ($\beta = .49, Z = 4.20, p < .01$) and Marxist work beliefs ($\beta = .37, Z = 3.41, p < .01$).

Discussion

Because work-related variables have not fully accounted for individuals’ attitudes toward unions in previous studies, there has been some speculation that some of the determinants of union attitudes lie outside of the organizational context (Barling, Fullagar, & Kelloway, in press; Barling, Laliberte, et al., 1991; Montgomery, 1989; Youngblood et al., 1984). The primary purpose of the present study was to provide some insight into the antecedents of the unionization process among a sample of students who were not yet employed and whose work beliefs and recollections of family socialization were presumably less contaminated by their own current work experiences and dissatisfaction. A process model predicting union attitudes was developed, based on non-job-related variables, namely, family socialization and work-related beliefs.

Two aspects of family socialization were investigated: the perception subjects had of their parents’ attitudes toward

<table>
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<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
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<td>2. Mothers’ participation</td>
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<td>4. Mothers’ attitude</td>
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<td>-.03</td>
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<td>5. Fathers’ attitude</td>
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<td>3.91</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.34*</td>
<td>.27*</td>
<td>.27*</td>
<td>.50*</td>
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<td>6. Marxist work beliefs</td>
<td>35.90</td>
<td>5.50</td>
<td>-.02</td>
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<td>.23*</td>
<td>.40*</td>
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<td>7. Humanistic work beliefs</td>
<td>42.10</td>
<td>4.31</td>
<td>-.06</td>
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<td>.10*</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>.10</td>
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<td>8. Own attitudes toward unions</td>
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<td>-.06</td>
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<td>9. Intention to join</td>
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<td>.94</td>
<td>-.16*</td>
<td>.19*</td>
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Note: $N = 163$.

* $p < .01$. 

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics and Intercorrelations of Study Variables
unions, and the degree to which subjects perceived their parents to participate in union activities. As predicted, adolescents' and young adults' perceptions of their parents' attitudes toward unions significantly predicted their own union attitudes. One question deriving from the self-report nature of the current study is how accurately children perceive their parents' union attitudes. No information is provided in this study that would allow us to answer this question. However, Whitbeck and Gecas (1988) found that the strongest predictor of value congruence between parent and child is the child's subjective perceptions of the parent's values. Thus, the major issue in understanding the predictors of union attitudes may not be whether children's perceptions of their parents' union participation are accurate or not, but rather their subjective impressions thereof. This has important ramifications for researching the effects of family socialization on union attitudes: Despite frequent calls to avoid self-reports of data, these measures are appropriate in such research.

A second issue regarding the role of family socialization as a predictor of union attitudes concerns the link between perceived union participation and union attitudes of parents. The present results suggest that adolescents and young adults inferred their parents' union attitudes, at least in part, from their perceptions of their parents' participation in union-related activities. Yet parents' perceived participation in union activities exerted no direct effect on children's own union attitudes. This is consistent with social learning theory (e.g., Bandura, 1977), which postulates that children do not simply engage in behaviors they observe their parents performing (in this instance, participation in the union). Instead, children abstract information from these observations, which they may later use in inferring their parents' attitudes and intentions.

Contrary to our predictions, no support emerged for the hypothesis that family socialization effects on children's union attitudes would be dependent on a match between parent and child gender. Perhaps gender is more likely to exert a moderating effect on observational learning when the behavior in question is clearly sex-typed. For example, sons are more likely to learn aggression from their fathers than are daughters (e.g., Bandura, 1973). In contrast, there are no similar cultural stereotypes suggesting that it would be less socially appropriate for women to unionize. Any gender differences in union participation are more a function of additional family responsibilities placed on women (Barling, Fullagar, Kelloway, & McElvie, 1991; Cornfield, Filho, & Chun, 1990). Indeed, women's union participation is not socially censured, and women enjoy a history of active participation in the labor movement (Briskin & Yanz, 1983; Morton & Copp, 1980). Another explanation for the fact that no gender effects emerged derives from Gottfredson's (1981) suggestion that the occupational preferences of university or high social class students may be less sex-typed than the occupational preferences of the population at large.

Like family socialization, Marxist and humanistic work beliefs also exerted a direct effect on union attitudes. Because these work beliefs are not job dependent (people hold beliefs about work regardless of their employment status), they provide more information on the non-job-related predictors of unionization. Indeed, these work beliefs may be an interesting avenue for future research, particularly to identify some of the antecedents of these and other work beliefs. The results of the present study suggest that it may be useful to assess whether parents' work beliefs and experiences influence those of their children. In particular, our finding of a significant residual correlation between perceptions of parents union attitudes and individual Marxist work beliefs suggests that variables not included in our model affect both these criteria.
Because the path coefficients obtained are standardized, direct comparison of the magnitude of the individual effects within the model are appropriate. These results point to the importance of family socialization and suggest that perceptions of parental attitudes toward unions was the most important predictor of children's own attitudes toward unions; the magnitude of the coefficient of parental attitudes (β = .75) is approximately five times larger than the coefficients for either Marxist (β = .16) or humanistic (β = .16) work beliefs. Moreover, Marxist and humanistic work beliefs exert similar effects on children's attitudes toward unions. Some implications for future research can be gleaned from this pattern of results. First, a continuing focus on the effects of family socialization is justified. In addition to a strong direct effect between parents' and children's attitudes, perceptions of parents' participation in union activities predicted both Marxist (β = .37) work beliefs and perceptions of parents' attitudes toward unions (β = .49). In any such research, the extent to which children identify with their parents may moderate any parental influences on their behavior (MacEwen, 1991). Second, we considered the role of both humanistic and Marxist work beliefs, both of which exerted approximately the same modest effect on children's own attitudes. It might be more worthwhile for future researchers to investigate other work-related beliefs that predict union attitudes and unionization. One work belief that predicts union loyalty is the Protestant work ethic (Fullagar & Barling, 1989). Given the correlation between union loyalty and union attitudes (Kelloway et al., 1991), future researchers might fruitfully focus on the Protestant work ethic. Psychological conservatism, reflecting the fear of change, also predicts union attitudes directly and union voting intentions indirectly (Barling, Laliberte, et al., 1991).

The model developed and tested in the current research accounts for a substantial amount (73%) of the variance in union attitudes. This extends previous research, which has identified union attitudes as an important predictor of unionization (e.g., Brett, 1990). More recent research on union members has also accentuated the role of union attitudes. In refining Fullagar and Barling's (1989) model of union commitment, Kelloway et al. (1991) showed that union attitudes predict union instrumentality perceptions, participation in the union, and union commitment. Clearly, future research must continue to examine the role of union attitudes. Our decision to focus on a sample of high school and university students prior to their entry into the work force was motivated by previous research suggesting the stability of general attitudes (Krosnick & Alwin, 1989) and work-related attitudes (McCall & Lawler, 1976; Staw & Ross, 1985; Taylor & Thompson, 1976). Because union attitudes are stable and are important predictors of union vote behavior, a knowledge of how they develop has implications for an understanding of the unionization process.

Several directions for future research can be identified. First, parents' self-reports of union participation and union attitudes should be compared with children's perceptions to confirm Whitbeck and Gecas's (1988) findings that children's perceptions of parental attitudes are of most importance in predicting value congruence between parent and child. In terms of their socializing influence, the importance of parents' actual attitudes could be addressed. A secondary question in this regard would be whether children accurately evaluate their parents' union attitudes.

Second, further attention needs to be directed toward the construct and measurement of willingness to join a union. Premack and Hunter (1988) demonstrated that measures of intent to unionize are strongly correlated with subsequent behavior. However, these conclusions are based on samples of employed individuals for whom unionization was a realistic and imminent decision. In this current study, our focus is on individuals not yet employed suggests that willingness to join a union is not a measure of unionization intent per se. Thus, our measure of willingness to join a union may reflect support for unionization, which is a more distal cause of union voting than unionization intent. Further research could be directed toward expanding and validating this definition and measure. Longitudinal data would be useful in confirming that willingness to join a union predicts subsequent behavior.

Third, future researchers could examine the relative effects of family socialization among employed individuals, directly contrasting the effects of family socialization and employment experiences. Finally, because empirical support for a particular path model does not necessarily exclude the plausibility of alternative models, refinements to the current model, as well as competing models, should be investigated.

In conclusion, the present study has demonstrated the validity of a process model of the predictors of union attitudes in a sample of adolescents and young adults who were not yet employed. The results reported here support a view of the unionization process that begins long before a vote for or against a union is imminent and that is influenced by nonjob factors (Barling et al., in press). Specifically, although previous findings were replicated in that union attitudes predicted the willingness to join a union, family socialization factors and work beliefs were identified as salient predictors of union attitudes, and union attitudes were shown to mediate the influence of family socialization factors and work beliefs on the willingness to join a union.

References


