An Event History Analysis of Union Joining and Leaving

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This article examines parallel models of union joining and leaving using individual-level longitudinal panel data collected over a 5-year period. The authors utilized objective measures of joining and leaving collected from union and organizational records and took into account time by using event history analysis. The results indicated that union joining was negatively related to procedural justice and higher performance appraisals and positively related to partner socialization and extrinsic union instrumentality. Conversely, members were most likely to leave the union when they perceived lower procedural justice, where there was no union representative present in the workplace, and where they had individualistic orientations. The authors discuss the implications of these findings for theory and practice for trade unions.

Keywords: Union joining, union leaving, event history analysis

The decision to join trade unions has been extensively investigated in the literature (Barling, Fullagar, & Kelloway, 1992). Initial studies in the field tended to adopt either a macro level time series or an aggregated cross-sectional approach (Rain & Price, 1983; Carruth & Disney, 1985). The problem with these studies, however, was that they did not explain individual variations in union membership. More recently, there has been a shift to social psychological approaches to understanding the individual decision to join a union (van Rij & Daalders, 1997; Visser, 2002).

These approaches to union joining have focused on three main theoretical perspectives to explain the phenomenon: frustration-aggression, social context and identity, and rational choice (Guest & Dewe, 1988; Klandermans, 1986). They have situated the decision to join the union in terms of responses to job-related dissatisfaction (frustration-aggression), socialization experiences (social context and identity), or individual cost-benefit assessments (rational choice). The evidence has been mixed regarding the relative importance of these theories, although most studies have found support for the rational choice perspective (Charlwood, 2002; Guest & Dewe, 1988; Visser, 2002).

In contrast to union joining, there have been very few studies that have examined the issue of union quits or exits (Sverke, Kuruvilla, & Sjöberg, 1994; van Rij & Daalders, 1997; Visser, 2002). The research that has been conducted in this area has sought to explain union-leaving behavior in one of two ways: leaving as the antithesis of joining, or leaving as a result of a lack of identification with or commitment to the union. Most studies have modeled leaving as the antithesis of joining. Here members are seen to leave the union because they are satisfied with their job and their working environment and do not require the services of the union (Barling et al., 1992).

There are a number of limitations to the existing literature. First, it is predominately cross-sectional. As a consequence, the research is unable to take into consideration the timing of the decision to join or leave the union. Second, most studies use union membership as a proxy for joining. This is problematic, as the reasons for joining a union (e.g., job insecurity) may not be captured accurately at the time when data are subsequently and simultaneously collected on union membership status and job attitudes (van Rij & Daalders, 1997). Finally, the leaving literature tends to use subjective measures for quitting (i.e., intention to leave; Snape & Redman, 2004).

The research in this article tests parallel models of union joining and union leaving using individual-level longitudinal panel data. It incorporates objective measures of joining and leaving behavior using archival records. The models are estimated using event history analysis.

Union Joining

Theory and hypotheses. There are three main theoretical perspectives that dominate the union-joining literature at the level of the individual: frustration-aggression, social context and identity, and rational choice. In addition, explanations drawing upon the effect of the business cycle have been used in macro level studies. These will be discussed in turn.