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Ginni Chawla, Tripti Singh, Rupali Singh, Sonal Agarwal,

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Worker participation in union activities: a conceptual review

Ginni Chawla

*Department of Human Resource, College of Management and Economic Studies,
University of Petroleum and Energy Studies, Dehradun, India*

Tripti Singh

*School of Management Studies, Motilal Nehru National Institute of Technology,
Allahabad, India*

Rupali Singh

Faculty of Business Administration, NRIBA, GLS University, Ahmedabad, India, and

Sonal Agarwal

*School of Management Studies, Motilal Nehru National Institute of Technology,
Allahabad, India*

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Abstract

Purpose – Viewed in the context of liberalization, privatization and globalization, the socio-economic and legal environment facing the unions have changed, throwing them into clutches of adversity and destitution. The purpose of this paper is to identify the reasons (i.e. antecedents) behind workers' participation in union activities (such as strikes, rallies, demonstrations) in today's scenario, and to understand how these participation tactics influence workers' performance (i.e. worker behavior effectiveness) at work.

Design/methodology/approach – A range of published sources is drawn on, including quantitative, survey based and qualitative, case-study and other evidence for building the conceptual review.

Findings – The investigation clearly indicates that contemporary challenges facing unions in the present scenario prompt industrial actions. Only specific and genuine grievances and justifiable demands motivate workers to form a strong emotional attachment to their unions and engage in union participation activities such as strike activity (Darlington, 2006; Bean and Stoney, 1986).

Originality/value – Contrary to the traditional view, which sights unions as detrimental to worker productivity, turnover, and attendance at work (via restrictive work rules, featherbedding and disruptive strikes or other adversarial tactics), the investigation, through extensive review of literature proposes that unions positively influence worker behavior at work. The model, however, requires empirical testing to validate the proposed relationships.

Keywords Qualitative, Trade unions, Conceptual model, Antecedents of union participation, Union participation, Worker behaviour effectiveness

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

“The trade union movement around the world remains in the throes of a prolonged and deep decline, whether measured by membership and density, bargaining power in relation to employers or political influence over the ubiquitous neoliberal narrative that underpins the policies of many governments” (Kelly, 2015a, p. 526). Several reasons can be attributed to the decline in union membership base, including: influence of politics; managerial endeavors to reduce labor costs at the workplace; unfavorable socio-economic and legal climate facing union organizers; and emerging managerial unionism.

Despite continual efforts, the union decline has not been arrested or reversed by the many strategic initiatives such as organizing campaigns (Hodder and Edwards, 2015) or coalition building, undertaken in recent years; yet, there is an apparent resurgence of

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interest in the subject (Akkerman *et al.*, 2013; Green and Auer, 2013) owing to an upsurge in the cases of prolonged strikes[1] (such as general strikes, wildcat strikes, national public-service stoppages) across both developed and developing nations such as India, Europe, Vietnam, and China.

Even though the social, economic and industrial environment in which unions operate has changed beyond recognition, yet, in some respects the “concerns and aspirations of the labor movement remain remarkably similar” (Nowak, 2015, p. 684). An extensive review of the recent NEWS[2] reported items in this regard reveals that unions fall back on time-tested issues relating to wages, salaries, job security and employment in the context of financial constraints till date. In addition, workers resort to strikes to seek protection from employers against unrightful suspensions and dismissals (Godard, 2011 as cited in Akkerman *et al.*, 2013), pay cuts, and intolerance by management toward any deviation in production plans (Sen, 2011; Rose *et al.*, 2011; Joseph, 2010). Instances have been reported where employers have evaded laws (Sinha, 2001) by employing workers without a record of employment, or not engaging workers for the required number of days as stipulated by the law (Johri, 1990). In response, workers have resorted to violence and strikes against management over perceived injustices (Sen, 2011; Joseph, 2010; Hill, 2009). Johnson and Jarley (2004) in their empirical study also provided support for the idea that union participation is influenced by perceived injustices associated with managerial actions.

While strike tactics cannot be separated from the character of the unions that employ them, certain pre-conditions must be met for a strike to be successful and effective. Some relevant questions would be: are members involved in the life and activities of the union?; does the union have functioning committees or mechanisms for member involvement in a democratic process?; does the union leadership have support of its members?; do members identify with the ideology of the union or have positive attitude toward the union? When members actively participate, unions tend to become democratic and more responsive to the needs of its members – they gain more strength, become intensively organized and members in turn are thus able to better bargain with the management (Gani, 1992). In the words of International Labour Office (2009), “It is through participation that women and men can achieve decent and productive work conditions of freedom, equity, security and, human dignity” (as cited in Briskin, 2014, p. 210). Thus, our starting point in the paper is the perspective that member participation in all its facets is the key part of the equation in enhancing both union democracy and union representativeness.

The study mainly builds on the following premises: first, taking part in strikes, rallies, demonstrations and union meetings (union participation) is an indicator of a union’s democracy (Gall and Fiorito, 2012; Anderson, 1978; Strauss, 1977). In other words, union’s strength, vigor and ability to survive are derived to a large extent from members’ willingness to become involved in union affairs. Second, workers participate in union activities only if they perceive that union participation will help them achieve important individual, expressive (emotional and representative) and instrumental goals (Chacko, 1985; Anderson, 1978; Strauss, 1977; Blau, 1964). This means that certain antecedent conditions exhort participation. Third, union participation as a mechanism of collective voice has a direct effect on the way workers behave (their productivity, absenteeism, turnover) in an organization (Peetz, 2012; Freeman and Medoff, 1984), i.e. participation in union activities has a bearing on workers’ effectiveness at the workplace.

Based on the above postulations, this paper revisits the seminal works of researchers in the field of union participation in an attempt to reveal/understand the underlying patterns of relationships among the three constructs – union participation, antecedent conditions leading to such participation and worker behavior effectiveness (WBE). More precisely, this paper seeks to fully explicate the dynamic nature of union participation and specifically understand what motivations underlie participation in union activities in the present scenario.

The investigation further attempts to map what behavioral outcomes are associated with such participation. In present study, though the authors have taken into consideration the same antecedents/predictors as earlier models did, however, the proposed model differs in that WBE has been taken as the outcome variable and union participation as an intervening variable.

Conceptual development and review

The purpose of this section is to lay the foundation for the theoretical development of the conceptual model by attempting to explicitly answer the “why” component of undertaking research on the chosen topic, and identifying and synthesizing important variables of the study. The study specifically meets the intents by intensively reviewing the available literature, keeping in mind the objectives of this study.

Briefly, union participation can be understood as the behavioral involvement of union members in the operations of their local labor organization (Tannenbaum and Kahn, 1958). In the words of Glick *et al.* (1977, p. 150), union participation reflects on “the membership, and members’ needs to influence decisions in the union.” According to Metochi (2002), union participation refers to the involvement of members in combined action, in those union-related activities (McShane, 1986a), which are closely related to the effective working of a union (Sverke and Kuruvilla, 1995). Huszco (1983) regarded union participation as a concept comprising of various types of behaviors considered vital to the working of a representative democracy. Such behaviors are considered to be a function of the motivation to participate and an opportunity to do so. While motivation is represented by members’ willingness or readiness to participate and is determined by individuals’ personal needs as well as their attitudes toward the union, the opportunity to participate is affected by numerous factors like individuals’ background characteristics and life experiences (including the union and job contents) (McShane, 1986a).

Given the personal character of members’ readiness to participate in union activities and dissimilarities in their desires and wants, the nature of participation in union activities may take several forms. Traditionally, the construct was conceptualized and operationalized as a composite of union behaviors such as attending union meetings or holding the union office (Fullagar and Barling, 1989; Chacko, 1985; Anderson, 1979; Glick *et al.*, 1977; Spinrad, 1960); however, in the words of Tannenbaum and Kahn (1958), “although attendance at meetings has been found to discriminate active members from inactive ones better than any other single item, and holding of union office is by definition a sign of greater union activity, however, no single item truly captures the range of behavior involved in union participation” (p. 68).

More recent researches have therefore begun to emphasize on the other forms of participation that are considered just as crucial like attending union meetings or holding the union office. These include organizing informal discussions in union offices, participating in the programs of national trade union centers, reading union-related literature – newspapers, pamphlets, etc. for sustaining the trade union movement. As a result, to capture the essence of union participation phenomenon in its entirety, the present study broadly groups participation activities in two widely acceptable categories – formal and informal participation.

Formal participation activities are usually infrequent and scheduled by nature and are regulated or controlled to some extent by the structure or constitution of the union (Miller and Young, 1955; Steele, 1951). Such activities include displaying specific behaviors like filing a grievance, involvement in union elections, voting in union elections, attending union meetings and serving on union committees (Fullagar, Gallagher, Gordon, and Clark, 1995; Spinrad, 1960; Kahn and Tannenbaum, 1957). Since formal participation activities do not occur frequently and measurable opportunities for such participation behaviors become restricted (Fullagar, McLean Parks, Clark, and Gallagher, 1995; Mellor, 1995), therefore, informal activities are also taken into account.

Tetrick (1995) defined informal activities as extra-role behaviors, that is, involvement beyond what is required. Such activities are typically more frequent, informal and unstructured by nature (Fullagar *et al.*, 2004) and include the following behaviors: helping other members in filing grievances, talking about the union with friends or family (Fullagar, Gallagher, Gordon and Clark, 1995), talking to the supervisors or other union members about the union or work issues (Huszczko, 1983; Blyton *et al.*, 1981; Miller and Young, 1955) and reading union-related publications (Anderson, 1979; Hagburg, 1966; Strauss and Sayles, 1952).

According to Fullagar, McLean Parks, Clark and Gallagher (1995), both types of participation are discretionary and constructive to the organization, and members cannot be either punished or contracted for their non-engagement.

The model and propositions

At the outset, membership participation in a local labor organization was explained by Marxist theorists (Marx and Engles, 1977; Seidman *et al.*, 1958) in terms of members' frustration with the existing order and their urge to overthrow the oppressive order. Later, the theories on membership participation centered around the job and workers' "stake in the job" advocating that members' dissatisfaction with their job, specifically its economic factors, job contents and status was influential in procuring votes in favor of the union (Mason and Bain, 1993; Fiorito and Gallagher, 1986; Bain and Price, 1983; Odewahn and Petty, 1980; Berger *et al.*, 1983).

Another psychological approach, central to the many economic explanations (Deery and Cieri, 1991; Hirsch, 1980; Cooke, 1983), elucidated on membership participation orientations utilizing the expectancy theory, also known as rational choice theory. This utility maximization approach hypothesized that workers continuously engaged in calculating the benefits realized – both wage and non-wage considerations (Farber and Saks, 1980) before joining and participating in union activities. Workers tend to estimate whether benefits outweigh the costs incurred in obtaining and retaining the union membership, so that they may achieve "standards of successful living" (Gani, 1992, p. 244).

Yet another part of theorizing on membership participation concentrated on the attitudinal approach (Deshpande and Fiorito, 1989) which predicted that the decision to become (or not) a union member could be found in an individual's beliefs about the perceived desirability of unions in general.

Subsequent research in the east and west has either contradicted or partially supported existing theories. For example, the standard union membership theory of individualist cost-benefit considerations has been increasingly challenged (Zacharewicz *et al.*, 2016; Cregan, 2013; Gintis *et al.*, 2003), and focus has now shifted to more recent theories in the domain – the social exchange relationship model of union membership (Shore *et al.*, 1994) and ideological exchange relationships – or covenants – which are non-calculative by nature and based on emotions (Kirton and Healy, 2013; Snape and Redman, 2004; Thompson and Bunderson, 2003; Tetrick, 1995). In their attempts to find answers as to why people get involved in union-related activities, researchers have sought the advice and counsel of people from varied backgrounds, including sociologists, economists and statisticians, whose tools of inquiry range from simple direct response and observation to statistically extracted empirical investigations, yet, it has not been possible to arrive at definite conclusions due to lack/absence of shared inferences.

The above theoretical precedents clearly suggest that a wide range of motives are at work while an employee takes a membership participation decision. This makes the study of participation behavior a complex phenomenon which needs to be deliberated upon further for deriving a concrete set of factors that endorse union participation. In order to delineate the antecedents of union participation for the present study, only those variables that are consistently found to be theoretically and/or statistically related to union participation in previous studies have been considered.

While significant literature is now available to support our propositions relating to what motivates workers to take part in union activities much less efforts have been expended toward theorizing the consequences or outcomes of such participation. Kelly (2015b) in his study convincingly argues that outcomes of collective action, both strikes and non-strike, and their explanations must be assessed because: first, very little is known about such outcomes, and second, these outcomes pose a methodologically and theoretically challenging yet vitally important question for theory building and organizers and advocates of collective action. The present study thus revisits existing literature with the intent to delineate the broad constructs/antecedents that impel union participation and map the consequences of such participation.

In the following section, we have outlined our propositions pertaining to the antecedents of union participation by taking into account individualistic economic exchange (union instrumentality) and collective exchange relationships – social (union support) and ideological (union ideology). We also elaborate upon the role of union commitment and attitudes as possible antecedents of union participation. Thereafter, we delve into the possible consequences of union participation.

Antecedents of union participation

Union commitment. Researchers in the field of union participation have extensively explored the relationship between union commitment and participation; both cross-sectional (see Bolton *et al.*, 2007; Sverke and Kuruvilla, 1995; Kelloway *et al.*, 1992) and longitudinal studies (Fullagar *et al.*, 2004; Fullagar and Barling, 1989; Gallagher and Clark, 1989) have indicated a strong relationship between the two constructs. Findings of a recent study has also clearly established that unilateral commitment to the union is predictive of both union rank and file activities (such as reading a union journal or magazine, and voting in union elections) as well as activist activities (such as attending union meetings, and steering union campaigns or elections) (Redman and Snape, 2016).

Union commitment was traditionally defined as the intensity of an individual's recognition with, and his or her contribution in a particular organization (Porter *et al.*, 1974). However, Gordon *et al.* – in 1980 – gave a more comprehensive definition of the construct. They conceptualized union commitment using four dimensions derived from the factor analysis of their 48 potential commitment items. These dimensions included: union loyalty – sense of pride in belonging to the union and admiration for the benefits arising out of membership; responsibility to the union – members' willingness to fulfill day-to-day tasks of the union; willingness to work – members' readiness to engage in activities above and beyond those that are normally expected; and belief in unionism – general attachment to the concept of unionism.

Since Gordon *et al.*'s conceptualization of the construct has remained the most widely accepted antecedent of union participation across studies (see Gall and Fiorito, 2012; Fiorito *et al.*, 2010; Buttigieg *et al.*, 2008), therefore, union commitment has been considered a predictor of union participation in the present study as well, and it is proposed that union commitment will have a significant positive impact on union participation.

Union instrumentality. Majority of studies on union participation (Redman and Snape, 2005; Tan and Aryee, 2002; Kuruvilla *et al.*, 1993; Fullagar and Barling, 1989; Arya, 1982; Ramaswamy, 1977) have postulated economic and security motives among the most important reasons for unionization.

Gordon *et al.* (1995) described union instrumentality as “the perceived impact of union on traditional (e.g. wages, benefits) and non-traditional work conditions (e.g. job satisfaction) that define the employment relationship” (p. 353). Newton and Shore (1992) defined union instrumentality as a conscious intellectual activity of assessing the costs and benefits associated with union membership. Fullagar and Barling (1989), conceptualized union

instrumentality as the perceived impact of union on valued outcomes, such as pay and employment conditions, that is, it is the amount of possible gains that unions could pull off for their members. Klandermans (1986) defined instrumental motives as those intentions that urge people to participate for the reason that they think they will stand to benefit from it. These include – monetary backing during strikes, safety against unpredictability of employers and additional union facilities.

Both Strauss (1977) and Anderson (1978) in their respective studies have indicated that members' perceptions about the union's performance in obtaining intrinsic and extrinsic benefits influence participation and involvement in union activities. Chacko (1985) also concluded that member participation in union activities was positively related to members' perceptions of the union's priorities and performance in obtaining both intrinsic (wages and benefits) and extrinsic (quality of work-life) benefits. Some more recent studies on participation have also probed the association between the two constructs and reported a positive relationship between them (for instance, see Fiorito *et al.*, 2014; Goeddeke and Kammeyer-Mueller 2010; Blader, 2007; Tetrick *et al.*, 2007; Chan *et al.*, 2006). It is therefore proposed that union instrumentality will have a significant positive impact on union participation.

Union ideology. Researchers concerning themselves with writing about trade unions and labor movements have always cited “ideology” as a crucial factor from which their generalizations about labor organizations have evolved.

An ideology can be defined as “a connected set of beliefs, attitudes and values held by an identifiable social group which refer to a specific aspect of social reality, which comprise normative, empirical and prescriptive elements and which may be at a general or particular level” (Geare, 1994, p. 125). Hyman and Brough (1975) described ideology as “a frame of reference, a world-picture or Weltanschauung, a set of normative and empirical assumptions which are social-structurally generated” (as cited in Hodder and Edwards, 2015, p. 845). In the words of Fosh (1993), union ideology reflects the solidarity orientation of members toward the unions, i.e. the members see unions as having social and political goals.

Simms (2012) argued that union renewal efforts need to be examined in terms of building solidarities between different groups of workers (whether different workplaces, different social groups, etc.), that is as a part of class project; and in the concluding remarks of her study, she highlighted solidarities between the workers “because they are workers” (p. 113). While Golden and Ruttenberg (1942) reported that there existed convincing societal, mental and emotional reasons that led to solidarity amongst union members, in Klanderman's (1984) view, members participated in union activities when they were convinced that the goal was important, their own participation would make a difference, others would participate, and together they would be successful.

According to Ramaswamy (1977), the ideology of the union plays a vital role in endorsing union participation and merely bread and butter unionism (instrumental motives) cannot be expected to sustain participation of the workforce for long. Newton and Shore (1992), corroborating the work of Ramaswamy, also contended that unions should essentially lay emphasis on both ideological and instrumental issues to achieve the kind of active hold up needed to sustain themselves. Therefore, for ensuring continual union participation, regular ideological indoctrination emerges as a constant responsibility of the union. Prominent support for the union ideology hypothesis comes from the works of eminent researchers in the field, such as Kirton and Healy (2013), Heyes (2012), Sinclair and Tetrick (1995), Fullagar and Barling (1989), Klandermans (1989), and Guest and Dewe (1988). From the discussion above, it may be concluded that union ideology plays a significant role in predicting participation behavior of the workforce and that its purpose cannot be undermined. Thus, it is proposed that union ideology will have a significant positive impact on union participation.

General pro-union attitudes. General pro-union attitudes figure notably in the literature as significant predictor of union participation. Sufficient empirical support has been provided for the hypothesis that attitudes not just play an important role in predicting whether workers join unions, but also show a strong association with union participation (see e.g. Fiorito *et al.*, 2014; Chan *et al.*, 2006; Lahuis and Mellor, 2001; Bamberger *et al.*, 1999; Huszczo, 1983; Gordon *et al.*, 1980; Anderson, 1979; Glick *et al.*, 1977; Perline and Lorenz, 1970; Spinrad, 1960; Strauss and Sayles, 1952). In the words of McShane (1986b), the general pro-union attitude toward unions explains the perceived desirability of unions in general, and “encompasses an individual’s broad beliefs about the virtues of unionism” (Deery *et al.*, 2014, p. 215).

Deshpande and Fiorito (1989) essentially intellectualized the construct and highlighted that general union attitude variables tapped the overall perceptions about unions in general. They used statements such as, if union membership fee is worth what the members get in return, does union work to get legislations that help all workers, or union leadership is supportive of its members, to gauge the general perception of members toward their unions. Drawing from Deshpande and Fiorito’s conceptualization of the construct, this study proposes that general pro-union attitudes will have a significant positive impact on union participation.

Union support. Drawing from Eisenberger *et al.*’s (1986) concept of perceived organizational support, Shore *et al.* (1994) explained union support perceptions as “members’ global beliefs concerning the extent to which union values their contributions and cares about their well-being,” i.e. perceived union support is a manifestation of the extent to which members observe the union as being committed to them (p. 971).

A social exchange framework underlies the notion of union support, that is, perceived social exchange between members and their union involves feelings of obligation and reciprocation. It is based on a give and take relationship wherein an individual by “supplying rewarding services” to another, obligates the receiving party to furnish benefits to the former in return (Blau, 1964, p. 89). For instance, when members perceive that the union cares about their well-being and values them, it could be expected that members, in turn, would show greater support and allegiance to the union. Since substantial theoretical and statistical linkages between union support and participation have been reported in previous studies (see Cregan, 2013; Gibney *et al.*, 2012; Tetrick *et al.*, 2007; Snape and Redman, 2007; Shore *et al.*, 2006; Fullagar *et al.*, 2004; Metochi, 2002; Fuller and Hester, 2001), therefore, this study also endorses that union support perceptions will have a significant positive impact on union participation.

The preceding discussion helps in clearly identifying the antecedents of union participation which are summarized in Figure 1.

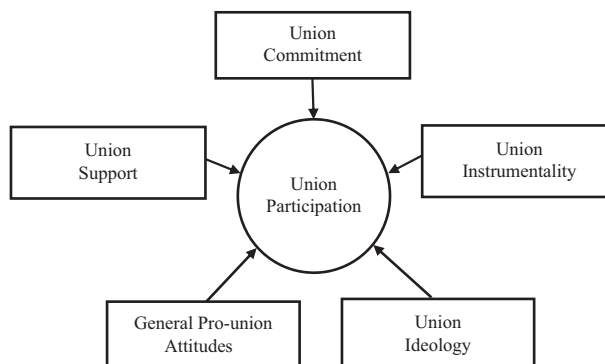


Figure 1.
Antecedents of union participation

Consequences of union participation

In recent years, many investigators have tried to determine whether favorable or unfavorable union participation effects prevail. In one of the oft-cited classic study of Freeman and Medoff (1984) it has been established that trade unions constitute a desirable voice/response mechanism through which worker preferences and demands (individual, expressive and instrumental motives) can be easily broadcast and made subject to proper management consideration. Consequently, instead of responding to dissatisfaction by exiting, employees manifest their grievances via partaking in strikes and demonstrations and seek to have their dissatisfaction addressed. This way, unions help improve worker morale and cooperation, and provide workers an alternative to quitting (Addison and Belfield, 2004). This stable workforce, in turn, exhibits greater productivity and efficiency at work which may subsequently lead to substantial cost savings for the organization (Freeman and Medoff, 1984). Other distinguished researchers such as Brown and Medoff (1978), Clark (1980) and Allen (1984) have also supported the Freeman and Medoff union-voice hypothesis.

While the union-voice mechanism was primarily used to explain lower attrition rates among union members (Miller and Mulvey, 1991; Spencer, 1986), quitting is not the only form of exit behavior open to employees dissatisfied with their jobs (Hodson, 1997). A number of studies have also drawn on exit voice to explain employee absence – a form of temporary escape from the dissatisfying job and/or a withdrawal from an uncongenial work situation (Luchak and Gellatly, 1996). While Deery *et al.* (2014), Deery *et al.* (1999) and Hammer *et al.* (1981) in their respective studies reported that perceptions of union effectiveness were associated with improved worker attendance at the workplace, Allen (1984) and Leigh (1981) identified a positive relationship between union status and absenteeism. This positive association has generally been ascribed to greater sick-leave benefits negotiated through collective bargaining agreements, lower penalties for absenteeism occasioned by less harsh disciplinary procedures, and employee perceptions of better protection from arbitrary employer behavior in the presence of a union (Allen, 1984; Barling *et al.*, 1992, as cited in Deery *et al.*, 2014). While these contrasting results point to the possible monopoly face of unions (Freeman and Medoff, 1984), however, the positive union-voice interpretation cannot be altogether refuted. As Allen (1984) notes, higher absence in union sectors may reflect factors other than workplace conditions, including inadequate incentives for attendance. This clearly suggests that greater precision is required in identifying the outcomes of collective participation of members in union activities (Addison and Belfield, 2004).

Along similar lines, a recent study by Peetz (2012) draws from the collective-voice hypothesis to explain favorable work behaviors such as enhanced output, job satisfaction and a decrease in the level of conflicts at work. Peetz envisages that unions can have a positive effect on productivity as well as the overall satisfaction of employees on the job. According to him, when employees express their voice through unions, it subsequently results in lowering the covert conflict, encouraging symbolic and behavioral adaptability at the workplace. In his opinion, at unionized workplaces, employees stay and seek to resolve the problems they identify, hence cutting down turnover costs for the employer and causing overall satisfaction with the job for employees. Another researcher, keeping acquiescence with previous researchers explains that conditional upon the favorable workplace and institutional circumstances, both direct and indirect participation by employees – preferably in combination – on an average leads to lower labor turnover, lower absenteeism, higher morale and employee satisfaction (Grimsrud and Kvinge, 2006).

On the basis of the discussion above, it may be concluded that union participation acts as a medium for placating workers and achieving “positive work behaviors” such as enhanced productivity and reduced absenteeism, turnover and workplace conflict.

These positive work behaviors are collectively labeled “WBE” by researchers in the present study and it is proposed that union participation will have a significant positive impact on WBE. Since existing research in this domain has considered the effect of union participation on productivity, absenteeism, turnover and workplace conflict in isolation, therefore, the authors of this study have attempted to group the currently scattered outcomes of union participation under the common heading of WBE. The nomenclature “behavior effectiveness” is taken/captured from the work of Robbins *et al.* (2013), who, in their organizational behavior model, identified employee productivity, absenteeism, and turnover as the resultants of change in individual-level (e.g. attitudes, motivation, emotions), group-level (e.g. communication, conflict) and organization system-level (e.g. organization change and culture) variables, and related each of the identified components of the dependent variable with individual effectiveness at the workplace.

Antecedents of union participation and WBE

Since our proposed model consists of three variables – independent (antecedents of union participation), dependent (WBE) and the intervening (union participation) – the researchers plan to use mediating regression analysis (using Baron and Kenney’s (1986) four-step model) to test the proposed relationships in the subsequent study. However, in order to test for mediation using Baron and Kenney’s (1986) four-step model, the following theoretical relationships among constructs must be explicitly established: (a) independent variable must be the predictor of mediating variable – relationship already established in the previous section on antecedents of union participation; (b) independent variable must be the predictor of dependent variable; and (c) mediating variable must be the predictor of dependent variable – relationship already established in the previous section on consequences of union participation.

While the theoretical relationships for (a) and (c) above have been clearly explained by researchers in the previous sections, yet the association of union commitment, instrumentality, ideology, attitudes and support with worker-related behavioral outcomes such as productivity, absenteeism, turnover, and conflict needs to be established. In this section, we present our propositions related to the connections between antecedents of union participation and WBE.

Union commitment acts as a binding force that may help immunize an organization against turnover and absenteeism by providing a stable and dedicated workforce whose contributions coalesce into productive group actions. Larson and Fukami (1984) examined the relationship of union commitment with behavioral outcomes and reported that union commitment had a positive interaction effect with productivity and led to a decline in worker turnover and absenteeism. Based on their findings, it is proposed for this study that union commitment will have a significant positive impact on WBE.

Instrumental motivations underlying participation in union activities are believed to be based on calculative, utilitarian and self-oriented interests of employees (Wiener, 1982). Different studies have revealed that intrinsic and extrinsic rewards reinforce productivity, and intent to leave (Choo and Perry, 2009; Gomez-Mejia and Balkin, 1984; Weiner, 1980). Thus, based on the findings of previous researchers, it is proposed that union instrumentality will have a significant positive impact on WBE.

Geare *et al.* (2009) highlighted that ideology of union played a vital role in endorsing union participation. Since there always exists an “inevitable potential for conflict between management and workers” due to differences in ideology (Geare *et al.*, 2009, p. 1147), this conflict may lead to increased stress and anxiety levels among individuals, leading to a decline in their productivity, and an increase in turnover rates for an organization (Bauer and Erdogan, 2009). However, people connecting with one another on similar ideological

grounds may help reduce stress, anxiety and conflict levels, and consequently lead to higher productivity, and reduced absenteeism and turnover. Thus, it is proposed that union ideology will have a significant positive impact on WBE.

A previous study revealed that worker attitudes (in the context of unions) are potential contributors to the indices of organizational and behavioral effectiveness, namely worker performance, tardiness, absenteeism and turnover levels (Hammer, 1978). Therefore, it may be construed that workers' attitudes toward union can reinforce WBE. Hence, it is proposed that general pro-union attitudes will have a significant positive impact on WBE.

Given the importance that members attach to the exchange principle, union support perceptions are also likely to determine members' intent to leave the organization, absenteeism and productivity levels and intensity of latent conflict at the workplace. As the unions support their members, obligations occur on the part of workers to take part in union activities (Blau, 1964). Mutually favorable outcomes thus received via social exchange determine members' intent to leave the organization or absent themselves from work. Hence, it has been proposed in the present study that union support perceptions will have a significant positive impact on WBE.

Since ample conceptual associations exist between the broad constructs identified for this study, therefore, it may be deduced that the proposed causal paths stand successfully established theoretically. The subsequent section presents the theoretical and practical implications, strengths, and possible limitations of the proposed conceptual model. Directions for future research are also outlined.

Discussion and conclusions

Theoretical implications

The review provides valuable insights into the area of study. Review of extant international and national literature on union participation suggests that union commitment, instrumentality, support perceptions, members' attitude toward union and union ideology are elemental to spurring participation in union activities. Moreover, the underlying pattern of relationships reveal that participation in strikes, rallies and demonstrations is not necessarily detrimental to the health of an organization. Rather, in the wake of major transitions taking place in work practices across organizations, unions can act as buffers against immoral employment practices and emerge as a means to achieving important outcomes (individual, expressive and instrumental goals) for their members. Consequently, such an involvement in union-related activities (meetings, strikes, rallies and demonstrations) helps members to build their perceptions of democracy in the organization, which in turn has positive implications on their behavior effectiveness (e.g. productivity, absenteeism, turnover), and hence organization's performance (in terms of enhanced profits, goodwill).

In general, the relationship patterns indicate the positive influence of union participation and its antecedents on workers' productivity, absenteeism, turnover, and workplace conflict.

A comprehensive review of available secondary literature has helped in laying the theoretical foundation of the study and devising concrete definitions of union participation, its antecedents, and WBE. Table I presents a summary of the definitions along with their respective literary sources.

Since the extensive review of literature provides logical, systematic and coherent explanations for selection of identified variables, the relationships can hence be presented in the form of a conceptual model. Three main components that constitute the research model for the present investigation are shown in Figure 2; the model includes the set of identified independent (antecedents of union participation) and dependent (WBE) variables, and a mediating variable (union participation).

Variable	Definition	Sources
Union commitment	It is defined as a measure of the extent to which an individual accepts or identifies with the goals and values of his/her union, such that he/she: (a) feels a sense of pride in belonging to the union; (b) willingly does routine tasks of union; and (c) readily engages in activities above and beyond those that are normally expected from a union member	Bolton <i>et al.</i> (2007), Fullagar <i>et al.</i> (2004), Sverke and Kuruvilla (1995), Kelloway <i>et al.</i> (1992), Fullagar and Barling (1989), Gallagher and Clark (1989), Gordon <i>et al.</i> (1980)
Union instrumentality	It is defined as a conscious psychological activity of assessing the amount of possible gains – both intrinsic and extrinsic benefits that unions can realize for its members	Gamage and Hewagama (2012), Gordon <i>et al.</i> (1995), Newton and Shore (1992), Chacko (1985), Fullagar and Barling (1989), Gani (1988), Arya (1982), DeCotiis and LeLouarn (1981), Anderson (1978), Glick <i>et al.</i> (1977), Ramaswamy (1977), Strauss (1977), Pandey and Vikram (1969)
Union ideology	It is defined as a connected set of beliefs and values held by an identifiable social group, which gives its members a sense of solidarity, as well as helps them cope with employer exploitation	Sinclair and Tetrick (1995), Fullagar and Barling (1989), Klandermans (1989), Guest and Dewe (1988), Klanderman's (1984), Kochan (1979)
General pro-union attitudes	It is defined as enduring propensities of an individual's feelings and thoughts toward participation or non-participation in union-related activities	Chan <i>et al.</i> (2006), Deshpande and Fiorito (1989), Huszczo (1983), Gordon <i>et al.</i> (1980), Glick <i>et al.</i> (1977), Perline and Lorenz (1970), Spinrad (1960), Strauss and Sayles (1952)
Union support	It is defined as members' global beliefs concerning the extent to which the union values their contributions and cares about their well-being	Gibney <i>et al.</i> (2012), Tetrick <i>et al.</i> (2007), Fullagar <i>et al.</i> (2004), Fuller and Hester (2001), Sinclair and Tetrick (1995), Shore <i>et al.</i> (1994), Barling <i>et al.</i> (1992), Fullagar and Barling (1991)
Worker behavior effectiveness	It is defined as the extent to which the conduct of workers and actions undertaken by them are viable in achieving favorable outcomes for the organization	Robbins <i>et al.</i> (2013), Myers (1970)
Union participation	It is defined as the behavioral involvement of active union members in combined action for achieving representative democracy and ensuring effective working of their local labor organization	Fullagar <i>et al.</i> (2004), Tan and Aryee (2002), Fullagar, McLean Parks, Clark and Gallagher (1995), Fullagar, Gallagher, Gordon and Clark (1995), Huszczo (1983), Blyton <i>et al.</i> (1981), Anderson (1979), Hagburg (1966), Miller and Young (1955), Strauss and Sayles (1952)

Table I. Summary of the identified antecedents of union participation – definition and supporting literature sources

Source: Concluded from review of literature

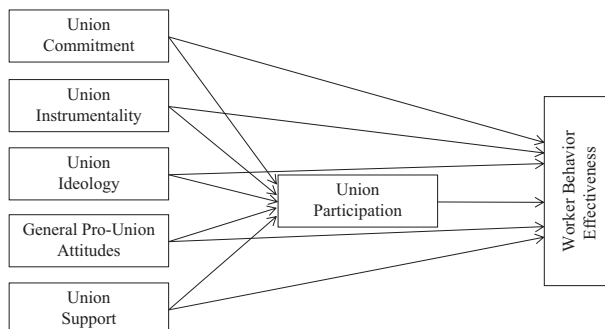


Figure 2. Proposed research model depicting linkages between independent, dependent and mediating variable(s)

Practical implications

The study has practical implications for both union leaders as well as employers. While the extensive review can aid union leaders in finding ways of expanding the union membership base and improving union participation levels, managers interested in enhancing employee performance can also benefit from a deeper understanding of behavior-related outcomes (productivity, absenteeism, turnover and conflict) associated with participation in union activities. The study most importantly suggests that anti-management sentiments alone do not generate membership participation, instead, the contemporary challenges facing unions in the present scenario (such as stagnant wages and endemic low pay; unfair rewards, treatment and decision making; spiraling inequality and insecurity at work; and a huge imbalance in the employment relationship) prompt industrial actions.

It is also essential for union leaders to understand here that economic motives alone are not sufficient to evoke union participation in the present scenario. An exclusive focus on economic issues may lead the management to disregard other issues of importance to workers, and lead unions and union organizers to focus their appeals in favor of unionization to an overly limited set of issues. Since now-a-days, "people's fundamental concerns in their organizational lives extend well beyond the economic issues" (Blader, 2007, p. 124) to include attainment/fulfillment of individual and expressive (emotional and representative) goals and desires, therefore, such psychological assessments cannot be overlooked. That is to say that over and above instrumental motives, a broad range of intervening variables like union commitment, ideology, general pro-union attitudes and union support perceptions also go a long way in evoking a fair degree of union participation. These motives, along with appropriate leadership guidance, can help establish a bond that may knit the members with the union and prompt members to actively participate in union-related activities. When members actively participate, unions tend to become democratic and more responsive to the needs of their members; they gain more strength, become intensively organized, and members are thus able to bargain better with the management.

From the management perspective, the implications are that if a manager is to "respond appropriately to workplace issues and to rectify problems of injustice or mistreatment, he/she may need information that would not otherwise come to their attention through non-union channels" (Deery *et al.*, 2014, p. 223). Union participation can essentially help bridge this "representation-gap" that has emerged as a result of declining union membership in most countries and can bring problems to the attention of those in the workplace who make decisions. Hence, the most essential take-away for managers from this study is that workers' decision to join and participate in unions should not be necessarily evidenced as detrimental for the organization. In contrast, participation in union activities must be viewed positively by the employers. Only if a person is willing to stay with the organization does he/she seek to resolve the issues/problems through the mechanism of collective voice.

Strengths, limitations and future research directions

A key strength of our study is the theorizing of the consequences of union participation. Despite longstanding research on the existence and importance of union participation as a medium of collectively venting out workers' dissatisfaction toward the perceived injustices of the employers, literature has rather neglected examining the outcomes of such participation. Particularly, literature on labor relations seems to lack comprehensive theoretical models that include explications of how individuals' attitudes and perceptions about unions may work together to explain the behavior of members at the workplace. In this study, the researchers have developed a series of testable propositions for exploring factors that may contribute to members' participation in union activities, and that may explain how individuals' attitudes and perceptions about unions work together to explain

the behavior of members at the workplace. However, the propositions should be read in the light of certain limitations of the study, which are outlined as under.

The proposed causal paths of this study are consistent with the broader theoretical traditions from which they emerge. For instance, extensive research has causally linked: commitment, instrumentality, support perceptions, general pro-union attitudes and union ideology to union participation (see Bolton *et al.*, 2007; Gamage and Hewagama, 2012; Sinclair and Tetrick, 1995; Chan *et al.*, 2006; Gibney *et al.*, 2012, respectively); and union participation to behavior effectiveness (see Choo and Perry, 2009; Geare *et al.*, 2009; Freeman and Medoff, 1984; Gomez-Mejia and Balkin, 1984; Larson and Fukami, 1984). While the present study and an extensive array of similar studies provide a strong theoretical basis for the proposed pattern of effects presented here, the possibility of reverse causality between the variables in the theoretical model cannot be excluded. This leaves open the possibility that union participation actually shapes perceptions of union commitment, instrumentality or ideology. Indeed, a reciprocal relationship between union commitment and union participation is compatible with existing theories on union participation (see e.g. Parks *et al.*, 1995; Organ 1990). Nevertheless, the revealed pattern of commitment predicting participation is consistent with the conclusions offered by cross-sectional (Kelloway and Barling, 1993) and longitudinal studies (Fullagar and Barling, 1989; Fullagar *et al.*, 2004) in the domain. The longitudinal studies have conclusively established that union commitment is predictive of union participation both eight months and ten years later, and that the relationship is unidirectional, in that participation does not predict commitment. Therefore, while only informed findings have been used for the development of our theoretical framework, future work is needed to examine whether the proposed causal paths apply to unionization contexts.

Another possible shortcoming of the study is that the evidence base is rather mixed on the outcomes of union participation as a medium of collective voice. For example, Deery *et al.* (2014) concluded that union participation has a favorable impact on worker behavior and organizational effectiveness, whereas Cregan (2013) and Berg *et al.* (2014) in their respective studies posited that participation can have a neutral or negative effect on behavior effectiveness. However, such varied deductive inferences do not imply that union-voice interpretation is without validity. As Barnes *et al.* (2013) correctly pointed out: “union forms of employee representation may allow employees to express dissatisfaction with the workplace free from the fear of employer relation, and workers may have the ability to express voice over a wide range of issues, particularly when they lack any legislative definition of powers” (p. 568). As unions are able to provide more breadth through the voice mechanism, their presence could as well improve job satisfaction and allegiance to the organization (Cox *et al.*, 2006). By including all variables mentioned in the literature hitherto, and testing underlying relationships using sophisticated statistical tools, it will be possible to more accurately predict and understand the outcomes of union participation. Therefore, an empirical study for establishing linkages between the constructs is warranted.

The limitations notwithstanding, the insights generated are of potentially great practical importance for academics as well as practitioners as results clearly indicate that union participation is not simply an abstract concept or an indicator of passive attitudes. Rather, it is a basic concept that can translate into positive work behaviors.

Notes

1. For instance, refer to the works of Wang (2016), Anner and Liu (2016), Lyddon (2015), Kelly (2015b), Elfstrom and Kuruvilla (2014), and Mathew and Jones (2012); for detailed information on recent strike statistics and strike tactics employed by unions in Vietnam, Western Europe, China, India, etc.

2. The literature collected from NEWS reports has been further validated through research papers, published reports and circulars available on company websites. Relevant journal references are cited in the text above.

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About the authors

Dr Ginni Chawla is a Faculty of Human Resources (HR) at the LM Thapar School of Management, Thapar University, Patiala, India. Prior to joining Thapar University, she worked as an Assistant Professor at the Department of HR, College of Management and Economic Studies, University of Petroleum and Energy Studies, Dehradun. She has also worked in corporate sector with Yes Bank Ltd, Mumbai, as Branch Service Partner. Dr Chawla received the PhD Degree in the field of Industrial Relations from Motilal Nehru National Institute of Technology Allahabad, India, where she was a Full-time Stipendiary Research Scholar at the School of Management Studies. Dr Chawla received National Scholarship from the University Grants Commission, New Delhi, India, in the domain of Labour

Welfare/Personnel Management/Industrial Relations/Labour & Social Welfare/Human Resource Management, in the year 2010. Her areas of interest include industrial relations, talent management, innovative HR practices and management graduate employability. She has published papers in reputed scholarly journals, and has won awards and accolades for paper presentations made at the international conferences in connection with her doctoral work. Dr Chawla is also an active member of two professional bodies, namely, the Indian Society for Training and Development (New Delhi, India), and the International Association of Innovation Professionals (Texas, USA), and she serves as a Reviewer for the prestigious journal publishers like Wiley, Elsevier, Emerald, IGI Global and Allied Publishers, as well as for the papers submitted to reputed Conferences such as EURAM. Ginni Chawla is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: ginnichawla@gmail.com

Dr Tripti Singh is an Assistant Professor at the School of Management Studies, Motilal Nehru National Institute of Technology, India, with around 17 years of experience. Her area of specialisation is Strategic Human Resource Management, Competency Mapping and Competitiveness of Micro Small And Medium Enterprises. She has guided several PhD Thesis, under her as well as completed government sponsored projects from University Grants Commission and Indian Council of Social Sciences in the area of Quality of Work Life and Competency Mapping. She has published around 45 papers in Scopus and SSCI Indexed Journals and several in proceedings of reputed International Conferences. She has also won Best paper awards for three of her papers on quality of work life, talent management and on trade unions. Her PhD students have won appreciation and best doctoral thesis awards for their work on Talent Management.

Dr Rupali Singh received a PhD Degree from Motilal Nehru National Institute of Technology and working as Assistant Professor at NR Institute of Business Administration, Faculty of Business Administration, GLS University, Ahmedabad, Gujarat. Dr Singh received "IM Nanavati Research Award" from GLS University, "Sant Swami Das Award" from DEI Deemed University, Agra and "Shrestha Shikshak Puraskar" from Sharda Group of Institutions, Agra. Dr Singh is a Reviewer for journals of repute in Emerald, IGI Global, and Inderscience. Dr Singh has in her credit, 14 published research papers, 5 working research papers, and research papers presentations in institutes of repute including NUS Singapore, IIM Ahmedabad, IIM Bangalore, IIM Indore, Gurukul Kangri University Haridwar, Symbiosis Institute of Operations Management, Symbiosis Centre for Management Studies Noida, and Institute of Management Technology Ghaziabad.

Dr Sonal Agarwal received a PhD Degree from the School of Management Studies, Motilal Nehru National Institute of Technology Allahabad, India. She has academic experience with Birla Institute of Technology, Mesra, Ranchi. She is working as resource person with Securities and Exchange Board of India. Her areas of interest include: Organizational Innovation, Finance and Human Resource Management. She has to her credit ten publications in international refereed journals and books in the areas of innovation, innovative work practices and employability. She also has eight research paper presentations at prestigious institutes and universities including National University of Singapore and IIM Lucknow. She also has corporate experience with Iffco Tokio General Insurance Co Ltd prior to joining academics.

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