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To be or not to be unionized? A social dilemma perspective on worker decisions to support union organizing

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ABSTRACT

A worker's decision whether or not to support union organizing remains a critical and timely issue for American workers. We draw on the union organizing, organizational psychology, and social dilemma literatures to offer new insight into a worker's decision whether or not to support union organizing efforts. In particular, we highlight three specific conditions – social uncertainty, environmental uncertainty, and exposure – that make the decision whether or not to support union organizing a social dilemma, and describe how these should be expected to vary by union organizing stage. We also examine the effects of key contingencies: management opposition that exacerbates, and strategic union efforts that counteract, the effects of social dilemmas. Finally, we discuss the theoretical and practical implications of viewing union organizing from a social dilemma perspective.

According to the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), close to 1700 union representation elections were held in the United States between 2014 and 2015 (NLRB: Conduct Elections, 2014; NLRB: Election Report for Cases Closed, 2013). In addition, as many as 1500 more certification efforts occur each year via card check procedures (Eaton & Kriesky, 2009). Because the union organizing process provides the foundation for union representation it is important to understand workers' decisions whether to accept or reject union organizing efforts. We apply a social dilemma perspective (Dawes, 1980) to help clarify and explain these decisions. In applying a social dilemma perspective to workers' decisions whether or not to support union organizing, we specifically consider how each of three component pieces of social dilemmas – exposure, environmental uncertainty, and social uncertainty – relates to worker support of union organizing drives. In doing so, we offer a theoretical framework that organizes and extends the existing literatures on union organizing and social dilemma decision making.

Though a social dilemma perspective has a rich history of applicability to the U.S. industrial relations system, such applications have occurred almost exclusively in connection to *post*-certification labor-management activities, such as collective bargaining negotiations (Kochan & Lipsky, 2003; Walton & McKersie, 1965) and contract administration (Ashenfelter, Bloom, & Dahl, 2013; Ashenfelter & Dahl, 2012). Very rarely, and only in a limited fashion, has a social dilemma perspective been applied to the pre-certification union organizing process (Posner, Spier, & Vermeule, 2010; Rogers, 2010). Within the industrial relations sphere, Freeman and Kleiner (1988) raise concerns about dilemmas similar to those we present in this paper but do not feature these dilemma concerns in their theory, model, or analysis regarding union organizing. Thus, the social dilemma perspective, while

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common in explaining individual behaviors at post-certification stages of union activity, is underutilized as a mechanism to explain choices workers face during pre-certification union organizing drives.

Social dilemmas capture "the conflict between self-interest and collective interest" in which a non-cooperative course of action is tempting for each individual, but if all pursue a non-cooperative course of action, the collective benefit is not realized (Van Lange, Joireman, Parks, & Van Dijk, 2013: 126; see also Kahan, 1974). The social dilemma perspective deals with a *dynamic* form of cost/benefit analysis in which the costs and benefits an individual contemplates for an action are highly dependent on the cost/benefit calculations and subsequent actions of others (Dawes, 1980; McCarter, Rockmann, & Northcraft, 2010; Van Lange et al., 2013).

Goal-expectation theory of cooperation in social dilemmas represents a dominant theory of social dilemma decision-making (Pruitt & Kimmel, 1977; also see Rutte & Wilke, 1992, Van Lange et al., 2013, and Yamagishi, 1986). According to goal-expectation theory cooperation is dependent on two inter-related conditions. First, an individual has to have the goal or motivation to cooperate. Examples of such goals and motives include cooperative or/and prosocial orientations (Van Lange & Kuhlman, 1994; Van Lange & Liebrand, 1991). Research shows that when individuals are high on these orientations, willingness to cooperate is increased (De Dreu & Van Lange, 1995; Van Lange, Agnew, Harinck, & Steemers, 1997). A second condition of goal-expectation theory is that an individual has to expect that others will also cooperate. Research has shown that such expectations are enhanced by factors such as group trust or perceptions of reciprocity within the group (De Cremer & Van Vugt, 1999). These two conditions are inter-related such that when individuals expect others to cooperate, their own motivation to cooperate will be increased (Pruitt & Kimmel, 1977). Applying these conditions to the decision to support union organizing, one would predict that individuals should cooperate to support a union organizing campaign to the extent that they (a) are personally motivated to support the organizing effort (perhaps because they are pro-union or expect the union to benefit them), and (b) expect others to also be favorably inclined to support the union organizing campaign.

Though these predictions stemming from goal-expectation theory provide useful insights, we argue that they may be limited in at least three ways with respect to their application to a union organizing context. First, considerations of the "goal side" of the goal-expectation equation largely focus on the personal orientations and motives that drive cooperation in support of collective action. While these personal orientations and motives may certainly be relevant in a union organizing context, other factors may be even more important. For example, particularly when employers are strongly anti-union, individuals may not be motivated to cooperate because the investment of significant personal resources is required, thus increasing the perceived risk associated with union support. This perception of risk is amplified when individuals fear organizational opposition or when they are uncertain about the eventual outcomes of collective action. Accordingly, even if individuals are motivated to support a union, they may fail to cooperate because of perceptions of personal risk. Applying goal-expectation theory to the decision whether or not to support union organizing fails to capture this element of individual motivation.

A second way that goal-expectation theory may be limited with respect to a union organizing context is in its temporal focus. Existing research drawing on goal-expectation theory has been largely conducted using lab experiments where cooperation decisions are made without consideration of whether those decision will be beneficial to the individual over the long term. Thus, existing research on goal-expectation theory fails to incorporate temporal considerations – that is, individual assessments of whether or not they will benefit even if cooperation to support the union does occur (McCarter, Mahoney, & Northcraft, 2011; McCarter et al., 2010; Van Lange et al., 2013). This type of temporal consideration is particularly relevant to a union organizing context given strong evidence that 40% of certified unions fail to reach first contract. This means that, even if individuals are motivated to support the union organizing campaign (perhaps because they are pro-union or believe a union can benefit them), they may fail to do so because they have substantial uncertainty about whether the personal benefit will be realized even if the union is certified (Messick, Allison, & Samuelson, 1988; Suleiman & Rapoport, 1988).

A third limitation of goal-expectation theory applied to union organizing campaigns relates to the "expectation side" of the equation (i.e., whether others can be expected to also cooperate). Expectation considerations have largely been linked to either psychological dynamics of the group (e.g., those that promote trust and reciprocity) or to structural dynamics (e.g., the existence of rewards and/or punishments associated with cooperation or the failure to cooperate [Wit & Wilke, 1998; also see Van Lange et al., 2013 for a recent review]). While those are undoubtedly important factors associated with expectations that others will cooperate, expectation factors of specific importance to the union organizing context – such as the role of bargaining union characteristics – have received comparatively little attention. Thus, it is worth considering how such factors affect individuals' expectations that others will also cooperate to support the union.

With the intent of explaining workers' decisions whether or not to support union certification and filling these gaps in goal-expectation theory literature (i.e., a lack of focus on risk perceptions as motivators, temporal considerations, and characteristics particularly relevant to bargaining units) we present a union-organizing-as-social-dilemma framework. Foundational to our framework are three inter-related components of social dilemmas that address risk perceptions, temporal considerations, and bargaining unit characteristics influencing individual assessments that others will be likely to also cooperate. The three components are: exposure, social uncertainty, and environmental uncertainty (McCarter et al., 2010, 2011; Messick et al., 1988; Suleiman & Rapoport, 1988). *Exposure* refers to whether or not individuals risk investing significant personal resources in uncertain outcomes of collective action. *Environmental uncertainty* emerges when factors outside the control of the collective might intervene to prevent even successful cooperation from translating into future personal benefit realization (Messick et al., 1988; Suleiman & Rapoport, 1988). *Social uncertainty* refers to the possibility that other members of the collective (in this case, the bargaining unit) will not cooperate – i.e., invest their personal resources to support the union (Roch & Samuelson, 1997; Suleiman & Rapoport, 1988). Of the three components, social uncertainty is the most closely aligned with existing expectation

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