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COMMENTARY

Tales from an attempt to study perceived union support: Challenges and opportunities for the future

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Introduction

Lefkowitz et al. (2026) presented a comprehensive overview of the historical relationship between industrial-organizational (I-O) psychology and organized labor. We are grateful for these authors' intentional work to redirect our communal attention to a group that in many ways embodies what I-O psychology researchers and practitioners (or IOPs, hereafter) have sought to do throughout our existence: "transforming work that builds effective organizations *and* [emphasis added] promotes worker well-being" (SIOP, n.d.). One area in particular that is ripe for a fruitful collaboration between IOPs and organized labor is the subfield of occupational health psychology (OHP; Vesper et al., 2025). Intuitively, this partnership with unions to study worker health sounds easy, but as we learned, working with unions by no means frees researchers from the broader challenges of applied collaborations. In this commentary, we answer Lefkowitz and colleagues' prompts to share about obstacles in working with unions (#3), as well as the opportunities to connect with historically understudied groups (#9). We also offer three key takeaways from our experience for IOPs who may be considering conducting future research with a unionized sample.

A reflection on data collection with unions

The first author's family has a long lineage of union workers in the traditionally industrial American Midwest, from factory workers to carpenters and Teamster truck drivers. This connection ultimately inspired an undergraduate research thesis. Discovering what Lefkowitz and colleagues clearly articulated in the relative scarcity of collaborative research between IOPs and labor unions, we sought to partner directly with a local chapter (i.e., "local") of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) for the thesis. In short, we found that perceived union support had a significant relationship with burnout and engagement, above and beyond traditionally studied forms of support from coworkers and supervisors (Wiley, 2023). While the results of that study are being prepared for presentation elsewhere, the focus here is on the process.

Our initial contact and meetings were met with enthusiasm from the president of the IBEW local. We developed the survey contents together to ensure that we also addressed the relevant interests of the union. As a token of appreciation, the president of the local included us in a union tradition by gifting us IBEW challenge coins. It was a simple gesture that demonstrated their desire for partnership and collaboration.

The process of subsequent data collection, however, proved to be a much more prolonged and challenging venture than originally anticipated. The sample of workers from the IBEW local willing to take the survey was much smaller than hoped for, so we decided to broaden the pool to other IBEW locals, as well as other union locals under the umbrella of the building trades

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(e.g., steelworkers, construction workers, roofers, masons, etc.). The first author sent emails to at least 130 different locals and directly called dozens of others. The vast majority of emails were never answered, as may be expected with cold emailing from an unknown email address. For those that did respond, there was initial hesitation and a need to establish trust due to the proliferation of phishing email scams and, in the authors' estimation, a historical lack of interest from researchers.

Although the locals that did respond largely expressed a desire to help, further complications developed due to the composition of the membership. One representative of an Operative Plasterers' & Cement Masons' International Association (OPCMIA) local noted that around 75% of their members were Hispanic and primarily spoke Spanish. This was a hurdle for our team, given our lack of time and ability to provide high quality translations. Two OPCMIA representatives also informed us that the survey was likely too long for their members to realistically complete, and thus, it would be difficult for the survey to gain much traction among the rank-and-file membership (one said, "If it was a 3-to-5-minute survey, maybe."). Despite these concerns, in the end, the union representatives with whom we collaborated were supportive of the project and appreciative of a summary of the results. Representatives from OPCMIA and the United Union of Roofers, Waterproofers and Allied Workers locals also expressed a willingness to collaborate in the future. Although interest among the rank-and-file members varied widely, there seemed to be real interest from these leaders in a mutually beneficial partnership that could yield applicable data for our science and their day-to-day practice.

Key takeaways

Reflecting upon this process, there are several key takeaways for IOPs who may be curious about how they can try to involve unions in their own work. First, *engaging with unions could be a simple extension of mainstream I-O work*. In general, many of the union-related constructs developed by IOPs in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s relate to important and familiar constructs in the broader field, including commitment (i.e., union commitment; Gordon et al., 1980), instrumentality (i.e., union instrumentality; DeCotiis & LeLouarn, 1981), loyalty (i.e., union loyalty; Fullager & Barling, 1989), and support (i.e., perceived union support; Shore et al., 1994). Many of these constructs were directly adapted from other previously established and validated constructs but applied to a novel type of organization.

Second, *unions also make it possible for researchers to gain access to groups of workers that can otherwise be difficult to study*. This includes the more traditional building trades and so-called "blue-collar" workers of our sample, as well as a significant sector of the service industry in the US who are represented by the Service Employees International Union and the United Food and Commercial Workers for example. Involving such workers can improve the representativeness of our samples and answer the potent question proffered a decade ago by Bergman and Jean (2016): Where have all the "workers" gone in I-O research? Their critique that our science overemphasizes managerial and professional workers remains relevant. Unions may serve as one connecting point to gain access to those "workers" who have otherwise been difficult to study.

Third, *just because partnering with a union or unions may make it technically possible, the realities of recruitment may paint a different picture*. Access is not the same as participation. Even though unions also care about work-related issues facing their members, it does not seem to make participant recruitment any easier than recruiting in applied organizational settings. This important challenge is not novel for I-O researchers, but familiar recruitment-related issues may be amplified due to unique characteristics of this particular population. For instance, unlike workers who may work in an office setting with near-constant access to technology, including the screens necessary for online survey completion, blue-collar workers in a manufacturing setting or workers in a bustling grocery store often do not have the same ease of access. From our experience,

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what seems to be the most effective strategy is to distribute very short surveys with adequate financial compensation, which might need to be more generous than prevailing best practices due to union wage premium expectations (in the US, union workers typically earn 10–20% more than non-union workers; Feiveson, 2023). When possible, it may be most effective to utilize shortened scales or even validated single-item measures to address concerns around survey length. In general, it might be worthwhile to prioritize successfully distributing one short, paid survey with only a select few constructs of interest. Then, based on the success (or lack thereof), the membership may be receptive to additional surveys in the future (i.e., foot-in-the-door technique).

Conclusion

There does not necessarily need to be a zero-sum game, wherein IOPs must take a radical prolabor stance and jeopardize relations with clients, or, on the other hand, continue purely as "servants of power" (Baritz, 1960). We should recognize that we do in fact hold several critical values in common with organized labor, namely, creating work that is safe, meaningful, and engaging for workers while also creating value for organizations. Beyond seeking to collaborate with unions for survey research, IOPs, particularly those with expertise in OHP, have the opportunity to partner with unions to help their members better understand physical and psychosocial risk factors at work. IOPs can also use their influence within organizations to act as a mediator between the traditionally antagonistic forces of management and labor by articulating a case for workers *and* an appealing business case to their organizations.

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