

# **The Effect of Collectivism on Union Attitudes and Beliefs**

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*Researchers have attempted to understand the unionization process by examining the variables surrounding an individual's decision to vote for a union. Despite the linkage of an individual's attitude towards unions and the individual's propensity to vote for a union, there has been little research which attempts to understand which personality constructs might be predictive of general attitudes towards unions. Using causal modeling techniques, we investigated the effect of collectivism on general union attitudes and union instrumentality beliefs with a sample of workers from the Southeastern United States. It was found that a more collectivist orientation is positively associated with beliefs about, and feelings towards, unions. Ancillary analyses revealed that African Americans held greater union favorability attitudes and greater positive beliefs about union instrumentality relative to Caucasians, though a more collectivist nature among African Americans did not explain these findings. It was also revealed that females had a more positive general attitude towards unions and were marginally more positive regarding the effects of unions on specific issues as compared to males.*

*Keywords: collectivism, union, personality, labor*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Why do workers join unions? Examining the environmental conditions and psychological processes that lead to an individual's decision to vote for or against a union is both important and timely. Since 1983, union membership has undergone a precipitous and steady decline. Bureau of Labor Statistics data reports that, "The 2022 unionization rate (10.1 percent) is the lowest on record. In 1983, the first year where comparable union data are available, the union membership rate was 20.1 percent." (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023). Potentially indicative of a labor movement revitalization, however, recent high-profile union organizing efforts at corporations such as Starbucks and Amazon have gained increasing media attention. Headlines suggesting that "employees everywhere are organizing" (Elias & Lucas, 2022) have become more common. Additionally, Americans' labor union approval is at its highest point since 1965, with a 68 percent approval rate according to Gallup (Brenan, 2021). Given the evolving economy, we

believe that it is both timely and important to continue research on the psychological processes that are likely behind an individual's decision to vote for the unionization of the workplace.

Research in this stream began some time ago. Those with an economic or industrial relations background investigated the macro level determinants of union growth and decline (e.g., Dickens, Wholey, & Robinson, 1987; Seeber & Cooke, 1983; Maranto & Fiorito, 1987) while behavioral sciences researchers investigated the psychological processes behind the individual's decision to vote for the unionization of the workplace (e.g., Farber & Saks, 1980; Premack & Hunter, 1988). During the eighties, interest in the topic peaked with multiple literature reviews published on the subject (e.g., Block & Premack, 1983; Fiorito, Gallagher, & Greer, 1986; Premack & Hunter, 1988). Premack and Hunter, in their 1988 meta-analysis of the literature, said that further research should be done on the role of individual characteristics as predictors of the individual decision to unionize, and, in 1992, Barling, Fullagar, and Kelloway wrote that "Extensive research now needs to be undertaken to ascertain the causes of specific and general attitudes to unions to broaden our conceptual understanding, and to provide labor organizations with some guidance regarding the focus of any programs aimed at improving the image of labor." (pp 193-194). Several decades later, others noted that the process of unionization remained virtually ignored by behavioral researchers (Houghton, 2000; Zickar, 2004). Contemporary scholars would likely characterize the current state of the literature with much the same sentiment, with Fiorito and Padavic (2022) noting that understanding workers' motivations for union support is both needed and crucial, still. In response, the current research examines whether individuals' collectivist orientation might affect their attitudes towards unions.

### **Theoretical Framework and Hypotheses**

Various predictors for union voting behavior have been investigated, including demographic predictors, personality factors, beliefs about work, and macro-level predictors, (see Barling, et al., 1992 for a summary). The basic model of voting behavior from a psychological perspective is that both work factors (e.g., job satisfaction, job dissatisfaction, perceptions of pay equity) and nonwork factors (e.g., family influences, Marxist work beliefs) combine and contribute to the decision to organize (Brett, 1980; Davy & Shipper, 1988; Deshpande & Fiorito, 1989; Montgomery, 1989; Younblood, et al., 1984; Zalesny, 1985). While these various factors have been investigated, and while the relationships among those factors are arguably complex, there is consensus across the literature that general union attitudes and perceptions of union instrumentality are two of the three variables that consistently predict voting behavior, with the third being job dissatisfaction (Barling, et al., 1992). The current study investigates whether the personality construct of individualism/collectivism might be predictive of an individual's general attitudes toward unions and their beliefs about union instrumentality.

### **Description of the Constructs**

In 1989, Deshpande and Fiorito differentiated between specific and general union attitudes. Conceptually, general union attitudes represent an individual's beliefs and views about organized labor, or "Big Labor Image" (Kochan, 1979), and specific attitudes represent beliefs about whether a union might be of particular benefit to the individual, such as whether a union can increase pay.

Individualism-collectivism is the degree to which a person believes that individuals should be self-sufficient and more loyal to themselves than to the interests of their group or organization. When people value the welfare of the group more than the individual they can be categorized as "collectivists" and, conversely, "individualists" are those who tend to promote their own welfare over that of the group (Kirkman & Shapiro, 1997).

Individuals choose union representation by voting in federally administered elections in which each worker, by secret ballot, chooses whether or not to be represented collectively by a union. Each individual must make up their mind as to whether they wish to be represented in the workplace by a union of workers. In other words, workers who choose a union must give up their right to individual action in favor of collective representation (legally, if represented by a union, employees cannot act as individuals when dealing with issues of wages and working conditions). By definition, a union is a collective; it is a group of people acting together rather than as individuals, and the labor contract provides a means whereby the

collective speaks for or represents the individual in dealing with workplace issues (Freeman & Medoff, 1984). It would seem logical then, that an individual's orientation regarding individualism/collectivism might be predictive of their general and specific attitudes regarding unions.

In 1997, Kirkman and Shapiro proposed a similar linkage when they noted that the literature supports a link between personal values and job attitudes and behaviors. Seeing this linkage, they proposed that persons who were from more individualistic cultures would be more resistant to self-managed work teams than those who were from more collectivist cultures. Their rationale was that since "team cohesiveness and interdependence require its members to focus on the welfare of the group rather than on the welfare of the individual" (p. 740) it would then be likely that people in collectivist cultures would be more willing to engage in self-managed work teams than those from individualistic cultures. Following from this logic, we propose that since unions are, by nature, an association of individuals organized into a collective, a person who is more collectivist would be favorably predisposed toward unions, generally and would see unions as being a viable means of gaining the outcomes they value (union instrumentality).

*Hypothesis 1: Collectivism will be positively associated with general union attitudes.*

*Hypothesis 2: Collectivism will be positively associated with union instrumentality beliefs.*

## **METHOD**

### **Sample**

Participants were employees of multiple organizations with operations in the Southeastern United States. Data was collected at one point in time from participants. Cross-sectional data collection elevates common method bias concerns. To mitigate these concerns, scale length was varied between constructs, positive and negative item wording was employed and scale anchors were varied (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003). We conducted exploratory factor analyses on a pilot sample of 150 responses and confirmatory analyses on a validation sample of 464 responses. The average age of participants was approximately 40 years; 51% were male; approximately 60% had earned a college diploma; 72% were Caucasian; and 21% were African American. Approximately 43% of respondents held professional jobs and 15% held managerial jobs, with the remainder falling primarily into technical, clerical, and production or maintenance categories.

### **Measures**

#### *General Union Attitude*

We assessed general attitude towards unions through 5 items measured on a seven-point Likert scale taken from McShane's (1986) General Union Attitude scale. McShane's scale represents a refinement and validation of several items which were previously used to measure general union attitude (i.e., Youngblood, DeNisi, Molleston, & Mobley, 1984) and consisted of 8 items. Given concerns that some of the items might not be particularly relevant in modern times, we conducted an initial exploratory factor analysis with the pilot sample, using principal components factor analysis with a varimax rotation, and examined the factor loadings. Table 1 shows the items and factor loadings. We removed three items that had primary loadings on a second factor and conducted a second principal components factor analysis on the validation sample. The resulting factor loadings are also in Table 1. The five remaining items all loaded on a single factor and all factor loadings were above .71. Negatively-worded items were reverse scored so that higher values indicated more favorable attitudes. The five-item scale had a coefficient alpha estimate of reliability of .84.

**TABLE 1**  
**FACTOR ANALYSIS RESULTS FOR GENERAL UNION ATTITUDE**

Items	Exploratory Factor Loadings		Confirmatory Factor Loadings
	1	2	1
1. Unions are a positive force in this country.	.787		.771
2. If I had to choose, I probably would not be a member of a union.		.859	
3. I am glad that labor unions exist.	.865		.822
4. People would be just as well off if there were no unions in this country.	.800		.841
5. Unions are an embarrassment to our society.	.735		.714
6. I am proud of the labor movement in this country.		.577	
7. Most people are better off without labor unions.	.822		.771
8. Employees are considerably better off when they belong to a labor union.		.634	

*Individualism-Collectivism*

We measured collectivism with an instrument developed by Wagner (1995) that assessed five facets of collectivism using twenty questions measured on a seven-point scale. We conducted factor analyses on the pilot and validation samples, respectively, using varimax rotation. The results of both analyses replicated the pattern of factor loadings obtained by Wagner (1995). Table 2 presents the factor loadings, the items, and the coefficient alpha reliability estimates for the validation sample. All factor loadings were above .62. Factor 1 consisted of five items and measured personal independence and self-reliance; factor 2 was comprised of five items which assessed the importance of competitive success; factor 3 included three items and pertained to the value of working alone; factor 4 concerned the subordination of personal needs to group interests and consisted of four items; and factor 5 involved the effects of personal interests on group productivity and was comprised of three items. In coding responses, items were reverse scored as needed so that higher values indicated a more collectivist orientation.

**TABLE 2**  
**FACTOR ANALYSIS RESULTS FOR COLLECTIVISM ITEMS**

Items	Factors				
	1	2	3	4	5
1. Only those who depend on themselves get ahead in life.		.715			
2. To be superior a person must stand alone.		.626			
3. If you want something done right, you've got to do it yourself.		.683			
4. What happens to me is my own doing.		.692			
5. In the long run the only person you can count on is yourself.		.745			
6. Winning is everything.	.692				
7. I feel that winning is important in both work and games.	.649				
8. Success is the most important thing in life.	.666				

9. It annoys me when other people perform better than I do.	.642				
10. Doing your best isn't enough; it is important to win.	.794				
11. I prefer to work with others in a group rather than working alone.					.858
12. Given the choice, I would rather do a job where I can work alone, rather than doing a job where I have to work with others in a group.					.705
13. Working with a group is better than working alone.					.863
14. People should be made aware that if they are going to be part of a group, then they are sometimes going to have to do things they don't want to do.		.786			
15. People who belong to a group should realize that they're not always going to get what they personally want.		.818			
16. People in a group should realize that they sometimes are going to have to make sacrifices for the sake of the group as a whole.		.845			
17. People in a group should be willing to make sacrifices for the sake of the group's well-being.		.708			
18. A group is more productive when its members do what they want to do rather than what the group wants them to do.				.839	
19. A group is most efficient when its members do what they think is best rather than doing what the group wants them to do.				.802	
20. A group is more productive when its members follow their own interests and concerns.				.834	
Coefficient Alpha reliability estimates	.78	.76	.76	.81	.84

### *Specific Union Beliefs*

We used eight items from the Union Image Survey (AFL-CIO Committee on the Evolution of Work, 1985) to measure specific beliefs regarding unions. These items have been used in several studies to measure union instrumentality (Deshpande & Fiorito, 1989). The items asked employees to consider the effect that unionization would have if their current employer was unionized. The response format consisted of a three-point Likert-type format. The initial factor analysis of the pilot sample using a varimax rotation produced a pattern of factor loadings in which all of the items loaded on a single factor; the analysis of the data from the validation sample confirmed these loadings. The items and the loadings from the validation sample are shown in Table 3. All factor loadings were above .68. The coefficient alpha reliability estimate for this scale was .86.

**TABLE 3**  
**FACTOR ANALYSIS RESULTS FOR SPECIFIC BELIEFS ITEMS**

Items*	Factor 1
1. The pay you receive?	.720
2. Your job security?	.707
3. The recognition you receive for the work you do?	.699
4. Your fringe benefits?	.712
5. Your chances for job advancement?	.752
6. Your opportunity to participate in decisions that affect your job?	.715
7. Health and safety dangers?	.686
8. Treatment by your supervisors?	.752

\* Item stem: If your present employer was unionized, do you think \_\_\_\_\_ would get better, get worse, or remain the same (if you are not employed, think as if you were in a job and it changed from being without a union to having one):

*Control Variables*

We controlled for factors that could provide alternative explanations for individuals’ attitudes towards unions. We entered race as Caucasian or African American and omitted other ethnicities from the analysis (there was a small number of respondents who self-identified in other categories). We controlled for gender and for whether the respondent had ever been a member of a union. Social influences have also been shown to affect union attitudes (Gallagher & Strauss, 1991). Socialization experiences are strong predictors of loyalty to and belief in unionism (Gordon, Philpot, Burt, Thompson, & Spiller, 1980), and union members who have friends that are pro-union tend to have stronger commitment to unions (Nicholsen, Ursell, & Blyton, 1980); thus, we asked whether parents or anyone that the respondent knew had been union members, and we also asked whether the respondents thought any of their close friends would be in favor of unions.

**RESULTS**

Subsequent to the previously described factor analytic procedures, we tested the model for the data using the validation sample with structural equation analysis via EQS (Bentler, 1995) software. We estimated the model following the two-stage procedure outlined by James, Mulaik, and Brett (1982) and Anderson and Gerbing (1988). The first stage in the procedure is the development of an adequate measurement model, relating the indicators to their respective factors (or constructs). In the second stage, the structural (or theoretical) model is analyzed via a series of tests of nested models.

**Measurement Model**

Joreskog (1993) makes the case that a hypothesized model may be tentative and undergo modification(s) to better fit the population under study. We modified the original measurement model resulting from the principal components factor analyses by omitting any indicators with standardized structural equation factor loadings less than .300. The five individualism/collectivism factors were allowed to co-vary, as were the Union Instrumentality and General Union Attitude factors.

Table 4 contains the final list of indicators along with their maximum likelihood parameter estimate loadings on the factors. All of the loadings were significant at the .01 level. The model fit is more than adequate as indicated by several measures. As suggested by Bentler (1992), we examined the comparative fit index (CFI), which indicated a good fit (.921). Hu and Bentler (1995) suggest examination of the standardized residuals resulting from fitting the model to the data as another measure of model fit. The average absolute standardized residual (ASR) was .0595 and the largest ASR was .184, indicating good fit.

**TABLE 4**  
**STRUCTURAL EQUATION FACTOR LOADINGS**

Variable	Factor Loading <sup>a</sup>
<b>Collectivism</b>	
<u>Independence/Self Reliance</u>	
1. Only those who depend on themselves get ahead in life.	.668
2. To be superior a person must stand alone.	.772
3. If you want something done right, you've got to do it yourself.	.661
5. In the long run the only person you can count on is yourself.	.664
<u>Competitive Success</u>	
6. Winning is everything.	.780
8. Success is the most important thing in life.	.713
10. Doing your best isn't enough; it is important to win.	.707
<u>Working Alone</u>	
11. I prefer to work with others in a group rather than working alone.	.909
13. Working with a group is better than working alone.	.676
<u>Subordination of Personal Interests</u>	
14. People should be made aware that if they are going to be part of a group then they are sometimes going to have to do things they don't want to do.	.602
15. People who belong to a group should realize that they're not always going to get what they personally want.	.731
16. People in a group should realize that they sometimes are going to have to make sacrifices for the sake of the group as a whole.	.893
17. People in a group should be willing to make sacrifices for the sake of the group's well-being.	.681
<u>Group Productivity</u>	
18. A group is more productive when its members do what they want to do rather than what the group wants them to do.	.820
19. A group is more efficient when its members do what they think is best rather than doing what the group wants them to do.	.700
20. A group is more productive when its members follow their own interests and concerns.	.897
<b>General Union Attitude</b>	
21. Unions are a positive force in this country.	.771
22. I am glad that labor unions exist.	.820
23. People would be just as well off if there were no unions in this country.	.736
25. Most people are better off without labor unions.	.655

**TABLE 4**  
**STRUCTURAL EQUATION FACTOR LOADINGS (CONTINUED)**

Variable	Factor Loading <sup>a</sup>
<b>Union Instrumentality</b>	
39. The pay you receive?	.696
40. Your job security?	.661
41. The recognition you receive for the work you do?	.653
42. Your fringe benefits?	.639
43. Your chances for job advancement?	.758
44. Your opportunity to participate in decisions that affect your job?	.795
45. Health and safety dangers?	.614
46. Treatment by you supervisors?	.696
Model $\chi^2$	757.61
<i>df</i>	340
<i>p</i>	<.001
CFI	.921

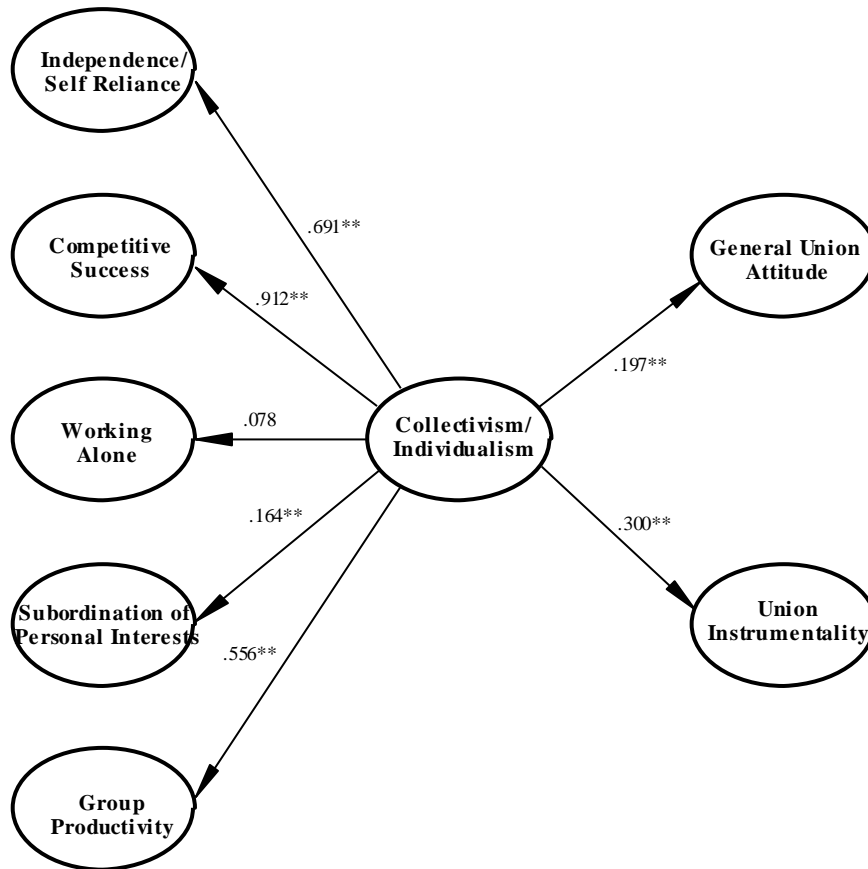
Although the chi-square statistic was significant at the .001 level, for large sample sizes the chi-square statistic is highly sensitive and can be significant for rather trivial differences between the sample covariance matrix and the fitted model (Hayduk, 1987, Hu & Bentler, 1995). As a check, we divided the model chi-square (757.61) value by the degrees of freedom (340), which resulted in a quotient of 2.23. A value less than three is an indicator of adequate fit (Kline, 1998). Also, the sample size of 464 is considered large; thus, we discounted the significant chi-square statistic, particularly in light of other information indicating a good model fit.

#### **Structural Model**

The fit of the structural model was acceptable. The CFI was .913; the average absolute standardized residual was .0410; the largest standardized residual was -.151; and the chi-square/degrees of freedom was 1.92 (1094.98/570). Figure 1 presents the structural model, along with maximum likelihood parameter estimates for the hypothesized linkages.



**FIGURE 1  
STRUCTURAL MODEL RESULTS <sup>1</sup>**



*N* = 464

Standardized parameter estimates are shown.

\*\* *p* < .01

<sup>1</sup> For clarity, only the parameter estimates for the constructs are shown. Factor loadings for the indicators and parameter estimates for the control variables are shown in Tables 4 and 5, respectively.

We hypothesized that collectivism, as measured by the five collectivism factors, would be positively related to general union attitudes and to union instrumentality. The results in Figure 1 indicate that collectivism is measured by four of the five collectivism factors (*p* < .01); the non-significant path was the “working alone” factor. Regarding the hypothesized relationships, we found statistically significant parameter estimates (*p* < .01) for the paths between the collectivism construct and both general union attitude and union instrumentality, respectively. Thus, we found support for both hypotheses.

Table 5 shows the findings regarding the control variables; these ancillary analysis findings were generally in agreement with expectations. African Americans had a more favorable attitude towards unions than did Caucasians (*p* < .01) and had more positive beliefs about union instrumentality (*p* < .05). Blacks tend to have more pro-union attitudes than whites (Hills, 1985) and this pro-union attitude may stem from the fact that African Americans have gained more historically from collective action (Kaufman, 1989) and therefore tend to be more collectivist in nature. The implication is that the collectivist nature of African Americans makes them more pro-union than Caucasians. Our results showed, however, that race was still a significant predictor of union attitudes when a measure of collectivist orientation was included in the model. We also conducted a *t*-test which indicated no significant difference in collectivist orientation

between Caucasians and African Americans. Our results suggest that a more collectivist nature does not provide an explanation of the pro-union attitudes of African Americans.

**TABLE 5**  
**PARAMETER ESTIMATES FOR THE CONTROL VARIABLES**

Items	General Union Attitude	Union Instrumentality
Union Member	.170**	.101*
Know Anyone in Union	.037	.063 <sup>a</sup>
Parent Union Member	.070 <sup>a</sup>	.009
Friend Union Member	.314**	.303**
Gender	.131**	.086*
Race	.197**	.101*

<sup>a</sup>  $p < .10$

\*  $p < .05$

\*\*  $p < .01$

Regarding union membership, people who are or have been union members had a more positive general attitude about unions ( $p < .01$ ) and were more positive regarding the effects of unions on specific issues ( $p < .05$ ). Females had more positive general attitudes towards unions ( $p < .01$ ) than males and were marginally more positive regarding the effects of unions on specific issues ( $p < .05$ ).

The expectation that social influences could affect participants' attitudes towards unions was mostly supported. Those who had a close friend that they believed would favor unions ( $p < .01$ ) had a more positive attitude and those with a parent who belonged to a union ( $p < .10$ ) were marginally more positive in general about unions. Simply knowing anyone who was a union member had no significant effect on attitudes, so we might conclude that only people with a close relationship, such as family or good friends, influence attitudes about unions. Regarding union efficacy, the perception that close friends would favor unions had a positive effect on specific beliefs about union effects ( $p < .01$ ) and knowing someone who was in a union led to marginally more positive beliefs about unions ( $p < .10$ ).

## DISCUSSION

The results of this study support the expectation that collectivism is positively associated with attitudes towards and beliefs about unions. People who are more collectivist in nature tend to have more favorable general attitudes about unions and they tend to have more positive beliefs concerning the effects of unions regarding job related issues such as pay and benefits. Significantly, while the literature on unions has implicitly recognized the nature of a union as being a collective (Freeman & Medoff, 1984), this paper represents the first empirical investigation of whether a person's collectivist orientation may predict their attitude toward unions and the perceived benefit of joining a union.

As with all research, there are potential limitations and weaknesses in the current study. Generalizability of the study findings might not apply outside of American contexts, as the sample was composed of only Americans. Future research could sample individuals from other nations, especially among cultures that are more collectivist and less individualistic, culturally. The cross-sectional nature of the study might be characterized as a weakness, in part due to common method bias concerns. Future research could collect data with a temporal lag in an effort to protect against common method bias. Even with the limitations arising from a cross-sectional dataset, the study examines traits as predictors of attitudes and intentions and our findings do provide a basis for future causal inferences, as has been suggested in recent union research (Fiorito & Padavic, 2022). The study does not demonstrate causality, as we did not examine whether individuals indeed vote in favor of unionizing or choose to actually join unions when presented with the opportunity. Future research could survey individuals faced with the decision to unionize, in a natural experiment that collects both individual differences data and enacted (reported) union voting behavior.

Finally, other individual differences factors which likely relate to union attitudes and beliefs could be examined, such as personal beliefs about groups. Collectivism is general, relating to interdependence and reliance on others whereas beliefs about groups is specific, symbolizing beliefs about collectives in terms of their value, importance and effectiveness (Karau & Elsaid, 2009).

Recent research has focused on union ‘organizing approaches’ or strategies (Refslund & Sippola, 2022). Based on findings in the current research, one recommendation for unions is that they should recognize that individuals differ significantly in their initial perceptions of unions and that these perceptions may have roots elsewhere in an individual’s psyche. Consequently, if they are to be successful, union organizers should be trained to see that the persuading of an individual regarding the efficacy of a union may need to include other issues rather than just the “bread and butter” issues or workers’ pragmatism focus for which American unions are famous. Bronfenbrenner (1997) showed that union tactics in National Labor Relations Board certification elections are important in determining the outcome of elections. It was also found that slow, underground, person-to-person campaigns, house calls, and small group meetings (a “rank-and-file intensive strategy”) led to higher win rates for unions (Bronfenbrenner, 1997). Our results are consistent with Bronfenbrenner (1997) in that a rank-and-file intensive strategy allows for “personalized” persuasion of individuals in the context of a union election and for a greater degree of understanding regarding the particular individual’s attitudes towards and feelings about unions. Given that “individualists” are less prone toward unions in general and believe less in union instrumentality, union organizers might try modifying their organizing approaches to appeal to them.

## CONCLUSION

Unions are a collective, a group of individuals banding together to achieve goals collectively. They represent a means whereby employees can communicate their true feelings with management (Freeman & Medoff, 1984). It is surprising, then, that the psychological construct of individualism/collectivism has not previously been tested as a correlate of union attitudes and union instrumentality. It was found in the current research that a more collectivist orientation was positively associated with beliefs about, and feelings towards, unions. Ancillary analyses revealed that African Americans held greater union favorability attitudes and greater positive beliefs about union instrumentality relative to Caucasians, though a more collectivist nature among African Americans did not explain these findings. It was revealed that females had a more positive general attitude towards unions and were marginally more positive regarding the effects of unions on specific issues as compared to males. Future research on the psychology of unions is needed to determine what other constructs might affect a person’s propensity to choose unionization; if collectivism is predictive of an individual’s predilection regarding unions, then it appears that other psychological constructs may also help us to answer the question, “Why do workers join unions?”

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