

RESEARCH NOTES

Working for the union: the perception of New Zealand trade union officers

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It is generally accepted that the New Zealand public regards the job of a full-time trade union officer to be an inferior occupation. It naturally follows from this that there is an underlying stigma attached to being a union officer. Since much of the evidence in this area is anecdotal, this paper considers an actual measure of the difference between the union officer's and the public's perception of the status of union work. It also reports the specific views of union officers on the social and employment outcomes of the stigma that goes with working for the union. The results show that in judging the status and prestige of this type of work the two parties seem to be missing each other in psychological space.

Introduction

It is commonly held that large sections of the New Zealand population regard working full time for a trade union to be a low status occupation. Almost certainly, there is an appreciable difference between union officers and the general public in the level of esteem and prestige placed on that occupation. It is not surprising, therefore, that for many officers the attendant stigma attached to themselves and to their work leads to "social estrangement" (Dufty, 1979: 180-181). This, so it is argued, generates a sense of "frustration, dissatisfaction, embarrassment, and often loneliness" (Michelson, 1993: 119). Unfortunately, much of the published evidence and discussion in this area is perfunctory and often anecdotal. Although this paper reports current evidence of the social and employment effects of the stigma that goes with working for the union, its major thrust is directed at measuring the extent to which the union officer's and the public's perception of the status of the job of a union officer are different. The measurement procedure adopted is for union officers to rank not only the occupational

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status of their own job but also to record what they perceive would be the public's ranking of the same job. This seemed appropriate and fitting since officers bear the stigma attached to working in what many others class as an inferior occupation. At least, it provides information which can usefully be applied to test the hypothesis that a union officer sees the job as important and is likely to rank it as relatively high status employment and that the public sees the job as less important and is likely to rank it as relatively low status employment.

Research background

The relevant information is taken from a recently completed questionnaire survey of full-time union officers in New Zealand (Howells, 1999). The survey was directed, more specifically, at those officers who were actively involved in what might strictly be termed an industrial relations role, namely, recruiting union members, handling members' day-to-day problems, taking grievance cases, dealing with employers and being actively involved in bargaining at all levels. It excluded those whose responsibilities were largely administrative and concentrated on those considered most influential "in shaping the responses of union members to management initiatives" (Kelly and Heery, 1994: 3). Interest, therefore, was deliberately centred on "front-line" staff - the group that always attracts so much media attention and public disapproval "largely because of its alleged power and influence" (Callus, 1986: 410).

Names and addresses of union officers were taken from the *Trade Union Directory* published by the New Zealand Council of Trade Unions in 1996. Legislative measures since 1987, however, had led to both a high turnover and a permanent reduction in full-time staff as some unions ceased to exist and others disappeared through amalgamation with larger unions (Howells, 1998). The *Directory*, therefore, was useful but less than reliable. Obvious gaps in the information were filled in two ways: regional secretaries based locally were willing to pass on their own lists of union officers; some national secretaries volunteered to prepare additional photocopies of the questionnaire to give to staff who had not been contacted. Despite this assistance from senior officials, it was impossible to confirm with any real confidence the exact number of "front-line" officers in New Zealand. However, a total of 143 responses from 27 unions and a response rate that definitely would have exceeded 60 percent compared more than favourably with similar studies in the United Kingdom and Australia.¹

To test the hypothesis that union officers work in an occupation that they themselves regard as eminently worthwhile but which the public is quite prepared to dismiss as unimportant, the questionnaire listed 42 specific occupations. These were numbered

¹ A questionnaire survey by Heery and Kelly (1989) had 101 responses and a response rate of 37 percent. Another by Kelly and Heery (1994) had 87 responses and a response rate of 51 percent. An Australian study of white-collar unions (Copper, 1983) was based on 200 responses and a response rate of nearly 43 percent.

and arranged from high status (1 = doctor, dentist; 2 = judge, magistrate) to low status (41 = process worker; 42 = driver). The actual list was taken from more comprehensive listings by Elley and Irving (1972 and 1985) which had been devised as a socio-economic index for social surveys in New Zealand. Despite some inconsistencies, it was considered for the purpose of this study to be an acceptable and sufficiently accurate indicator of the status and prestige ranking of various occupations. From this list of numbered occupations, respondents were required to do two things. First, they were asked to indicate at which number they would also place their own position as a union officer. Secondly, they were asked to indicate at which number they would assume the public would also place the position of a union officer. In all, 97 of the total sample of 143 officers answered the question.

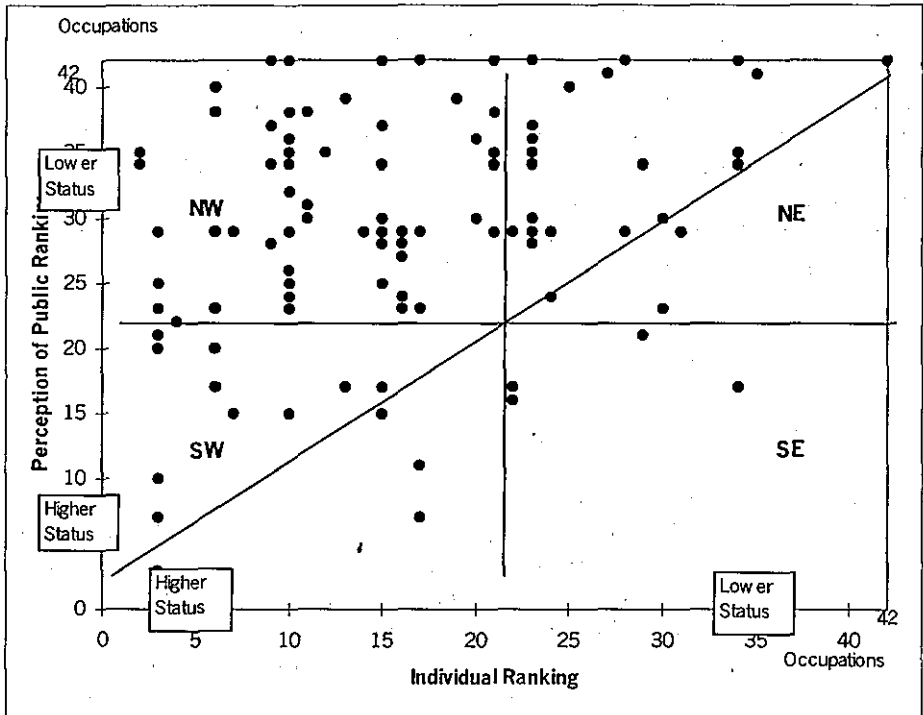
Results and commentary

The occupational ranking of union work

The information presented in Figure 1 is derived from combining the exact point at which union officers would place a full-time union position (from the horizontal axis) with the exact point at which they assume the public would place a full-time union position (from the vertical axis). Each dot, therefore, represents both the individual's own ranking and that individual's perception of the public's ranking of the occupational status of union employment. To put this information into some perspective, those occupations on the horizontal and vertical axes numbered from 1 to 21 are taken to represent higher status occupations and from 22 to 42 to represent lower status occupations.

The results are quite revealing. For example, over 81 percent of union officers (the 79 in the NW and NE quadrants) are convinced that the public would rank union employment as a lower status occupation. More than this, nine out of the 79 think the public would actually wish to rank union employment as the equivalent of the very lowest of the listed occupations. Furthermore, the clear perception of about 50 percent of this group of 79 is that the public would certainly place union employment in the lowest quartile of occupations in terms of status and esteem. Although there are 18 union officers (those in the SW and SE quadrants) who believe that the public does regard a union position as higher status employment, the majority view is that the public would still only be prepared to rank a union post as the equivalent of those listed occupations numbered from 15 to 21. This, of course, is a favourable and positive assessment, but it hardly constitutes a resounding and emphatic public endorsement of those union staff working in full-time positions. Indeed, from Figure 1, the strong and overriding perception of union officers is reflected in the fact that, on the basis of status and respect, over 41 percent of the sample of 97 officers are convinced that the public would place union employment in the lowest quartile of occupations. Only 4.1 percent are similarly convinced that the public would place union employment in the highest quartile of occupations.

Figure 1: Occupational status: individual ranking versus perception of public ranking



In sharp contrast to what can be characterised as the public view, over 71 percent of union officers (the 69 in the NW and SW quadrants) identify their own employment position as a higher status occupation. Some, however, go further than this: nearly 16 percent rank their jobs as equivalent in status to those in the top four of listed occupations; a little over 50 percent rank their jobs as the equivalent of those in the top ten of listed occupations. In case these two examples of the extreme importance that some attach to union work are judged to be typical of all union officers, additional information from Figure 1 needs to be examined. First, just over 39 percent of those who do regard union work as a higher status occupation are definitely not prepared to rank their jobs any higher than those listed occupations numbered from 15 to 21. Secondly, and significantly, nearly 29 percent of union officers (the 28 in the NE and SE quadrants) are willing to accept their work as a lower status occupation. Thirdly, there are six officers who rank union employment in the bottom ten of listed occupations and one of these ranks it bottom. Indeed, the wide cross-section of viewpoints captured in the Figure suggests that respondents are sincere and candid in their answers. Their

responses seem to be carefully considered and not narrowly partisan.² Confidence in the reported data does add credence to the obvious conclusion that the ranking of the occupational status of union employment by union officers diverges considerably from their perception of public ranking. Given the extensive experience of New Zealand union officers - measured by years as an ordinary member and by voluntary and full-time positions previously held (Howells, 1999: Tables 15, 16, 17 and 18) - one might reasonably assume that their perception of the public's ranking of union employment fairly accurately reflects what would be the public's actual ranking.

The social and employment stigma of union work

There is no doubt that much of the stigma surrounding union officers and their work stems directly from the strong negative perception held by the community about union employment. Union officers occupy positions that so many people (including some of their own colleagues) brand as inferior and which, in the public mind, carry little or no status or esteem. To gauge the reaction of individuals in jobs which others treat with opprobrium, the questionnaire survey required union officers to list (in an open-ended question) the serious reservations they may have held about union employment before accepting an appointment. These are summarised in Table 1 and show that 16.4 percent of the 189 responses do touch on the stigma of working for the union. Although these are expressed mainly in terms of specific social and employment concerns, one general theme is regularly reported:

- "being tarred with the union brush - the stigma of being a unionist is negative"
- "the general perception held by many that unions and union officials were an unnecessary evil"
- "some sections of society felt the job held a stigma (like being a police officer)"
- "the unknowing wrongly judge TU officers"
- "the image of trade unionists"
- "the legacy of being perceived as irrelevant by the public"
- "Most people's perception of unions is as troublemakers. They don't see the other activities of unions".

There is a real concern that the stigma of union employment creates a discreet web of social barriers that leads to an element of social isolation. Even more hurtful for some is the evidence that barriers are set up inside the workplace which can upset relationships with former colleagues. Although not reported in Table 1, both sets of concerns affect male officers more than their female counterparts and are more strongly felt by those in manual unions than in non-manual or white-collar unions:

² Instances where an individual's ranking and that same individual's perception of the public's ranking are identical might suggest a careless, slipshod and disingenuous approach to the question. These rankings, perhaps, should be treated with some suspicion. Fortunately, in Figure 1, identical ranking occurs only six times in nearly 100 cases and some of these could be genuine.

- "socially inconvenient - antagonistic response to unions produced many defensive dinner conversations"
- "not at all socially popular"
- "social stigma"
- "being isolated from friends and traditional work associates"
- "anti-union bias by my workmates"
- "union officers are not trusted in a large number of unions".

Table 1: Reasons for not wanting to become a union officer

Reason	Total responses	
	No.	%
Nature of the job:	105	55.6
Environment of conflict, hostility, criticism	6	3.2
Workload, stress, unrealistic expectations	27	14.3
Lower pay and lack of resources	19	10.1
Stigma of union job and future employment	19	10.1
Doubt about continuity and long-term prospects	15	7.9
Significant career change; different from other job	19	10.1
Personal and family factors:	72	38.1
Travel and away from family for long periods	25	13.2
Doubts about one's ability to do the job	26	13.8
Possible relocation and impact on the family	9	4.8
Loss of privacy and freedom	2	1.1
Reservations about unions, and union leaders	10	5.3
Social concerns:	12	6.3
Community attitude to union work	7	3.7
Loss of workmates and social contacts	5	2.6
Total responses	189	100.0

Note: Since the questionnaire allowed individuals to list more than one reason, the total of responses exceeds the total of respondents.

A major reservation - and an issue on which union officers are particularly forthright - is that the stigma associated with union work seriously reduces career opportunities elsewhere and makes occupational mobility more difficult. In short, there are genuine and grave misgivings that a full-time union position undermines and hinders future employment prospects:

- "long service in a union does not enhance your CV to other types of employers"
- "I was a little concerned that I would be labelled as unemployable elsewhere. Who knows?"
- "career end, difficult to get another job"
- "the knowledge that working for a trade union could limit my future options"

"social stigma - possible career implications"

"the stigma also affected job opportunities other than within the union movement".

Although not mentioned by union officers, it is possible that employment prospects may actually be improved for those prepared to join the "opposition" and accept matching management positions in the private or public sector. The unfortunate dilemma, of course, is that "hopping the fence" or "jumping the fence" creates additional social barriers between them and their former workshop and union colleagues.

Conclusion

The accumulation of evidence from Figure 1 does support the hypothesis that a union officer sees a union job as important and worthwhile and is likely to rank it as relatively high status employment and that the public sees the job as less important and is likely to rank it as relatively low status employment. Again, as might be expected, the difference between union officers and the general public in the esteem and prestige they attach to working for the union does give rise to a form of stigma which encourages social and employment estrangement. The implications of this are disturbing. For example, achievement in the job is hardly ever recognised by the community at large and the degree of public apathy surrounding the onerous work of union officers develops a sense of futility and worthlessness. As their own responses indicate, these are issues strongly felt by union staff in New Zealand. Table 1 confirms this. Reported reservations about the broad implications of occupational stigma emerge as a greater obstacle to the smooth recruitment of union officers than the more obvious and standard issues of workload, uncompetitive pay scales and family pressures. All the signs point unequivocally to union officers and the public missing one another in psychological space.

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