Basic Concepts and Definitions

Unions, also known as labor unions or trade unions, are democratic organizations of workers that strive to achieve economic and political gains for their members or for workers in general. At a fundamental level, the concept of a union refers to an organization of workers formed for the purpose of advancing its members' interests in regard to their employment situation or circumstance. It is usually described as a democratic institution based on the fact that they are “political organizations in which decisions are made by voting blocks of members.” (Gray, 128) The organizations can also be viewed as democratic because membership is typically voluntary.

Unions are usually organized around occupational, corporate, industrial, or national lines. In the U.S., the most successful unions were occupational until the 1930s, when industrial unions became more common. Union agreements in the U.S. mainly involve an individual company collectively bargaining a three-year agreement with local subunits of a larger union. Such agreements typically concern wages and benefits, with political action mainly limited to national or state legislative initiatives.

Importance of Topic to Work-Family Studies

Many unions in the U.S. historically promoted the "separate spheres" vision of work and family ("W-F"), with a breadwinner father in the workplace and a housewife in the home. The concept of separate spheres implied that work (i.e., employment) and home (i.e., family) issues were to remain distinct entities that did not overlap. Therefore direct involvement in family issues was largely limited to the passage of child labor laws and prohibitions against female labor in the early 1900s. These "protections" promoted the vision of separate spheres by inhibiting labor market competition and limiting women's and children's role in the economy. In addition, however, by striving for high wages, pensions and health insurance covering entire families for their members, unions helped working men serve as breadwinners, raised the standard of living of entire families, and facilitated many women’s ability to be non-employed.
A minor inconsistency with the model was found in the existence of unions mainly populated by women, such as the International Lady Garment Workers Union (today known as UNITE). These unions were relatively small and almost always headed by men until the last half of the 20th century.

A major inconsistency always existed with regard to working time. Beginning in the latter half of the 19th, and continuing throughout the 20th century, men regularly sought reductions in working time, increased vacation days, and control over total hours and shiftwork. The rationale for these efforts often lay in the desirability of expanded time with the family.

The rooting of union objectives in the separate spheres model became increasingly anachronistic in the latter part of the 20th century. In part, unions received a strong signal that the model was no longer appropriate through declining rates of membership. As of 1956, 35.5 percent of the workforce was unionized, but a relatively steady erosion of membership led to only 13.5 percent of employees being members by 2001 (Jackson & Schuler, 635).

More direct challenges to the separate spheres model were found in changes in the composition of the membership, as women and minorities joined unions in increasing numbers. Women had no employment role in the separate spheres model, and minority women had always been employed at high rates historically, giving minority men little stake in the achievement of separate spheres objectives. We do not address the causes of these changes in the demographics of unions here (see, e.g., Freeman and Medoff, 1984). But the changes are nonetheless clear. Overall, 39 percent of union members are now female, and women comprise a majority of the newly organized workforces and those sectors that have yet to be organized. Unions now cross racial lines; of the 6.5 million female members 1.1 million are African American and 600,000 are Latina. Of the 9.9 million make members 1.3 million are black and 1 million are Latino (Gerstel & Clawson, 277).

As a result of these shifts, and because unions are democratic, unions showed signs of moving away from the separate spheres model decades ago. As early as the late 1960s, unions attempted to amend the Taft Hartley Act in order to make child care a permissible issue for labor-management negotiations. They helped develop the Comprehensive Child Care Act of 1971 and were part of a coalition that pushed through the Pregnancy Discrimination Act (PDA) in 1978. In the 1980s they were active in a coalition to win support for the Act for Better Child Care. (Bravo, 1995: 182). Unions were similarly involved in passage of the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) of 1993. In so doing they established a precedent of advocating for the right of all workers, be they men or women, to take leave from their jobs due to family and medical reasons while still retaining employment security.

The major strengths of U.S. unions, and the most dramatic gains, however, exist in the arena of collective bargaining. In fact the majority of large public sector workplaces that were unionized provided parental
leave with job guarantees prior to passage of the FMLA. By 1991 union contracts which provided four months or more of job guaranteed leave were common. Recently unions have sought to expand this achievement by introducing paid leave, ensuring that the FMLA is enforced through the establishment of grievance procedures, and extending workers’ eligibility to utilize leave time (Bravo, 1995: 182). Some unions have even taken it upon themselves to negotiate language into their contracts to protect members so that they don’t have to worry about job security or job advancement if they do choose to take family leave. Additionally John Budd (2001) found that workers that are covered by a union contract are more likely to take a family or medical leave than their nonunion counterparts (p. 11), and unions have been able to provide FMLA type protections for those who are not even legally covered by the law.

Thus we are able to see that unions fought for W-F issues not only through the use of the bargaining table but also through their efforts at lobbying for legislation. According to Budd these actions comprise some of the primary responsibilities of unions as they are capable of lobbying for legislative change, bargaining for specific benefits, and aiding employees in their efforts to exercise their rights under existing laws (Budd, 2001: 1). This can entail monitoring and enforcing statutory labor policies or explaining to members their options and under what types of situations these options exist in. This can be done through the use of union publications or training sessions.

Increased family diversity implied that no single, coherent vision of work and family integration was available to unions. Indeed, the definition of W-F issues continues to be hotly debated among unionists. For example, Bravo (1995) contends that "one of the most important ways unions help workers have a family and a job is higher pay and greater benefits." (p. 187). At face value, this statement might imply that employers should provide family health insurance as a W-F benefit. That claim might fit breadwinner fathers and single parents as well. It might not fit employed wives in neotraditional families, whose husbands already have health insurance, or the unemployed, or union members in low-wage industries and occupations where employers cannot afford to provide health insurance. This argument implies that unions are likely to be at the forefront of efforts to expand the definition of W-F issues. The traditional corporate vision of work-family seeks to facilitate the coexistence of motherhood and careers for professional women through various leave policies, reduced-hours options, concierge services, and subsidized or on-site childcare. By focusing on all the types of families found among their members, union policies and initiatives are more likely to reflect and respond to family diversity.

**State of the Body of Knowledge**

Unions are often characterized (Gray, 2001: 115) as traditional and slow-moving organizations. Some key features of unions would seem to contradict this statement. First members of local unions determine the structure and policies of the national union by electing their officers through referendum or by delegates who are assembled at national conventions (Gray, 2001: 112). Still, the typical union is built on a seniority
system, with current leaders being comprised mainly of older males who have moved up through the ranks of the union. Even with this electoral system, because women are the minority in most unions, Gray views them as unlikely to be elected to the top leadership positions within national unions where their voices could be heard and utilized to shift the strategies. Sometimes top leaders are "promoted" from local union offices but "men in power positions tend to seek out other men to be second in command, while women are on their own" (Gray, 2001: 120). Because women have been delegated the task of caring for the family they have been seen as the ones to ensure that work and family life are compatible. Most incumbent male leaders rise to these esteemed positions through the traditional and accepted, yet slow-moving path of the loyalist who begin as rank-and-file members and over time are elected to increasingly responsible stations (thus the idea of the seniority system). Further there is little room for upward mobility due to the fact that union membership is decreasing so there are few opportunities for new hires or replacements. Generally there are no term limits in place, nor retirement rules for incumbents thus guaranteeing that the older male leadership will remain in place for long periods of time. Traditional resistance to women's leadership within labor unions is one possible explanation for the slow movement of some unions in dealing with W-F issues.

Recent Work by Unions

Because union activity is democratically determined and typically local in the U.S., there is no uniform or standard approach by unions to W-F issues. Just as employers, families, and workers are diverse, unions are not monolithic entities either. There is variation among unions and not just between union and non-union workplace settings (Gerstel & Clawson, 2002: 278). They assert that it is "counterproductive to use a dichotomous variable about union membership in quantitative analyses of W-F issues" (Gerstel & Clawson, 2002: 296). Furthermore Gerstel and Clawson have found that only a small number of unions have deemed W-F policies central to their contract negotiations and legislative agendas. For example, some unions might place a greater emphasis on health and safety relative to family benefits. The particular emphasis depends upon member expectations of the union. As Gerstel and Clawson state regarding W-F benefits, "if members aren't asking for it, why should unions make it a priority?" (Gerstel & Clawson, 2002: 292)

Nonetheless, union priorities and achievements are somewhat predictable, depending upon the gender of the members, union strength, and the priorities of specific union leaders. The latter is, in turn, linked to the gender of the leaders.

Gender of Members

By the 1990s even as overall union membership continued to decline, there was tremendous growth in
the membership of women. The fastest growing unions have been those associated with "women's work," such as nursing, teaching, hotel and clerical work.

At the center of this growth was the emergence of the Coalition of Labor Union Women (CLUW), an organization with close ties to both women union leaders and unions populated predominantly by women. CLUW was fundamental to the creation of the American Family Bill of Rights (Bravo, 1995), and provides networking opportunities and leadership on women's issues in general and for W-F issues and legislation.

**Strength of the Individual Union**

Firestein (2000) found that the majority of unions that have pushed for and won W-F benefits in the past two decades have gone to the bargaining table from positions of power either because they had recently won an organizational drive or because they already represented the bulk of workers within their industry. Similarly Bailyn, Drago, & Kochan have noted that the securing of W-F gains is more likely in settings where unions represent a significant proportion of the workers within and industry, company, or region and where there is already an adequate base of basic benefits (Bailyn, Drago, & Kochan, 2001:28).

**Active Leaders**

Gerstel and Clawson (2002) argue that leaders with a proactive stance on W-F issues enhance the likelihood of achieving W-F benefits, even in a strong union with many women members. Gray (2001) finds that women who become union leaders tend to exhibit such a proactive stance. Due to the assignment of women to stereotyped positions within unions such as recording secretaries and their continued exclusion from core union functions such as collective bargaining, women have moved only slowly into positions of union leadership. Family responsibilities can also help to explain the slow pace of movement into leadership positions. Further, women who do become leaders often sacrifice family commitments in favor of long hours of work for their unions. This dynamic helps to explain why the non-family issues of sexual harassment and equal pay have been high priorities for women union leaders. Nonetheless, Gray (2001) finds that many women who have achieved leadership positions tend to promote W-F policies, regardless of their own family status.

Despite many arguments to the contrary, Gerstel and Clawson found that only a small number of unions have deemed W-F policies central to their contract negotiations and legislative agendas. They claim that union perspectives have rarely been included in discussions of W-F matters due to the fact that they have not yet had a major impact on these issues (297).

Nevertheless it would seem from the evidence that unions have managed to incorporate the primary areas of family life into their recent efforts. For instance in terms of the availability of alternative work schedules (flextime) we find that unions with large female memberships (again unions' responses will
depend on the composition and priorities of their members) have often negotiated flextime clauses built around compressed work schedules. Other examples of efforts to ease workers' time constraints are through the institution of job-sharing provisions, benefits for part time employees, limits to mandatory overtime, and option to return to work part time after the birth or adoption of a child. Unions have similarly addressed the need for better child care arrangements by negotiating site child care, through the offering of subsidies or child care funds, and by making resource and referral services available. Further many have worked extensively to ensure that workers receive adequate parental and family leaves. For example some have negotiated policies in which their members are allowed to use their sick time in order to care for sick family members. Both paid and unpaid leave have been obtained including paid personal days. In addition to the benefit of returning to work part time after a leave some have secured an expanded time of leave after birth for their members. In fact Gerstel and Clawson describe unions in regards to family leaves as vehicles that "serve as key mechanisms through which state policy is developed, disseminated, and ensured" (2002: 288).

Four cases listed below concern unions that have successfully negotiated W-F benefits (see references for specifics). The first and last cases cover mainly union members who are women, each union was in a position of relative strength when W-F benefits were negotiated, and all of them include women as union leaders.

1. **Health and Human Services Employees Union 1199 NYC** (Firestein, 2000) In this case a majority of the union's members wanted better child care services in their communities. Responding to the priorities of their members, the union in 1989 secured funding for the establishment of a child care fund in which employers would contribute a certain percentage of their gross payroll. The fund included such amenities as vouchers for child care, summer camp subsidies, child care resource and referral, a child care center, and a cultural arts program.

2. **Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees International Union Local 2** (Firestein, 2000) In this case the union was composed of a very diverse membership but all shared a common goal of obtaining support for their responsibilities of child and elder care. Thus a Child and Elder Care fund was created in 1994 and was managed by a joint labor and management committee. Employers were required to contribute to this fund which provided direct cash subsidies to its workers.

3. **United Autoworkers International Union and Ford** (Bailyn, Drago & Kochan, 2001) In 1982 after negotiations between UAW and the "Big Three" a fund was formed which would cover a variety of programs that were related to W-F issues. Highlights of the benefits awarded members included an expanded FMLA, Employee Assistance Programs, child development centers, and child and elder care resource and referral programs.
4. Harvard University and Harvard University Clerical and Technical Workers Union (Bailyn, Drago, & Kochan, 2001) In a survey of their members, 83% of whom are female, this union found that child care was the main concern. Specifically there was a need for funding in order to ease the financial burden of the provision of quality child care and a request for the allowance of more flexible work schedules. After the use of union pressure and member demonstrations, in 1989 a child care fund was established that provided cash grants to members based on their need in order to pay for child care providers. In the ensuing decade other rights were secured by the union including 8 weeks of paid maternity leave and the right to use sick time in order to care for sick family members.

Implications for Practice and Research

Men in the U.S. are increasingly viewing their family role as involving more than financial responsibilities, a shift that may lead unions to place a higher priority on W-F issues. In addition, Gerstel and Clawson (2002) argue that casting W-F as a union issue could lend momentum to the union movement by appealing to women and young workers, serving as both an organizing tool and a mechanism for strengthening existing unions.

Suggestions for Making Work and Family a Priority:

1. Unions should continue to respond to their members. The changing demographics of union membership and of union leadership in conjunction with democratic processes are sufficient to ensure that W-F issues will continue to rise on the agendas of many unions. W-F issues that cut across diverse types of families, and across lines of gender, might warrant the closest attention, including control over working time in general, shiftwork, leave, vacation, as well as pay and benefits issues that can be but often are not cast as W-F issues.

2. Unions may want to focus on coalitions with advocacy, non-profit, governmental and corporate groups to obtain W-F benefits (Firestein, 2000). Such a coalition was involved in the 1199 case mentioned above, where it generated a dramatic expansion of childcare resources beyond what the union alone could have negotiated, and connected organizations that jointly exerted an impact on New York state. A similar coalition closely involving unions was responsible for passage of paid parental and family leave legislation in California in 2002. The Labor Project for Working Families (laborproject.berkeley.edu), 9to5 (www.9to5.org) and CLUW (www.cluw.org), each promote this approach.
References


Budd, John W., & Brey, Angela M. (2001). *Unions and family leave: Early experience under the Family and Medical Leave Act*. Minneapolis, MN: Industrial Relations Center, University of Minnesota.


Other Recommended Readings on this Topic:


Locations in the Matrix of Information Domains of the Work-Family Area of Studies

The Editorial Board of the Teaching Resources section of the Sloan Work and Family Research Network has prepared a Matrix as a way to locate important work-family topics in the broad area of work-family studies. ([More about the Matrix ...]).

Note: The domain areas most closely related to the entry’s topic are presented in full color. Other domains, represented in gray, are provided for context.

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About the Matrix

Sloan Work and Family Research Network
Resources for Teaching: Mapping the Work-Family Area of Studies

Introduction

It was appropriate that the members of the Founding Editorial Board of the Resources for Teaching began their work in 2000, for their project represented one of the turning points in the area of work and family studies. This group accepted the challenge of developing resources that could support the efforts of teaching faculty from different disciplines and professional schools to better integrate the work-family body of knowledge into their curricula. The Virtual Think Tank began its work with a vision, a spirit of determination, and sense of civic responsibility to the community of work-family scholars.

A fundamental challenge emerged early in the process. It became clear that before we could design resources that would support the teaching of those topics, we would first need to inventory topics and issues relevant to the work-family area of studies (and begin to distinguish the work-family aspect of these topics from "non work-family" aspects).

The members of the Virtual Think Tank were well aware that surveying the area of work and family studies would be a daunting undertaking. However, we really had no other choice. And so, we began to grapple with the mapping process.

Purpose

1. To develop a preliminary map of the body of knowledge relevant to the work-family area of study that reflects current, "across-the-disciplines" understanding of work-family phenomena.

2. To create a flexible framework (or map) that clarifies the conceptual relationships among the different information domains that comprise the work-family knowledge base.

It is important to understand that this mapping exercise was undertaken as a way to identify and organize the wide range of work-family topics. This project was not intended as a meta-analysis for
determining the empirical relationships between specific variables. Therefore, our map of the workfamily area of study does not include any symbols that might suggest the relationships between specific factors or clusters of factors.

**Process**

The Virtual Think Tank used a 3-step process to create the map of the work-family area of studies.

1. **Key Informants:** The members of the Virtual Think Tank included academics from several different disciplines and professions who have taught and written about work-family studies for years. During the first stage of the mapping process, the Virtual Think Tank functioned as a panel of key informants.

   Initially, the Panel engaged in a few brainstorming sessions to identify work-family topics that could be addressed in academic courses. The inductive brainstorming sessions initially resulted in the identification of nearly 50 topics.

   Once the preliminary list of topics had been generated, members of the Virtual Think Tank pursued a deductive approach to the identification of work-family issues. Over the course of several conversations, the Virtual Think Tank created a conceptual map that focused on information domains (see Table 1 below).

   The last stage of the mapping process undertaken by the Virtual Think Tank consisted of comparing and adjusting the results of the inductive and deductive processes. The preliminary, reconciled list was used as the first index for the Online Work and Family Encyclopedia.

2. **Literature review:** Members of the project team conducted literature searches to identify writings in which authors attempted to map the work-family area of study or specific domains of this area. The highlights of the literature review will be posted on February 1, 2002 when the First Edition of the Work-Family Encyclopedia will be published.

3. **Peer review:** On October 1, 2001, the Preliminary Mapping of the work-family area of study was posted on the website of the Sloan Work and Family Research Network. The members of the Virtual Think Tank invite work-family leaders to submit suggestions and comments about the Mapping and the List of Work-Family Topics. The Virtual Think Tank will consider the suggestions and, as indicated, will make adjustments in both of these products. Please send your comments to Marcie Pitt-Catsouphes at pittcats@bc.edu
Assumptions

Prior to identifying the different information domains relevant to the work-family area of study, members of the Virtual Think Tank adopted two premises:

1. **Our use of the word “family” refers to both traditional and nontraditional families. Therefore, we consider the term “work-family” to be relevant to individuals who might reside by themselves.** Many work-family leaders have noted the problematic dimensions of the term “work-family” (see Barnett, 1999). In particular, concern has been expressed that the word “family” continues to connote the married couple family with dependent children, despite the widespread recognition that family structures and relationships continue to be very diverse and often change over time. As a group, we understand the word “family” to refer to relationships characterized by deep caring and commitment that exist over time. We do not limit family relationships to those established by marriage, birth, blood, or shared residency.

2. **It is important to examine and measure work-family issues and experiences at many different levels**, including: individual, dyadic (e.g., couple relationships, parent-child relationships, caregiver-caretaker relationships), family and other small groups, organizational, community, and societal. Much of the work-family discourse glosses over the fact that the work-family experiences of one person or stakeholder group may, in fact, be different from (and potentially in conflict with) those of another.

Outcomes

We will publish a Working Paper, "Mapping the Work-Family Area of Study," on the Sloan Work and Family Research Network in 2002. In this publication, we will acknowledge the comments and suggestions for improvement sent to us.

Limitations

It is important to understand that the members of the Virtual Think Tank viewed their efforts to map the work-family area of study as a "work in progress." We anticipate that we will periodically review and revise the map as this area of study evolves.

The members of the panel are also cognizant that other scholars may have different conceptualizations of the work-family area of study. We welcome your comments and look forward to public dialogue about this important topic.
Listing of the Information Domains Included in the Map

The members of the Virtual Think Tank wanted to focus their map of work-family issues around the experiences of five principal stakeholder groups:

1. individuals,
2. families,
3. workplaces,
4. communities, and
5. society-at-large.

Each of these stakeholder groups is represented by a row in the Table 1, Information Domain Matrix (below).

**Work-Family Experiences:** The discussions of the members of the Virtual Think Tank began with an identification of some of the salient needs & priorities/problems & concerns of the five principal stakeholder groups. These domains are represented by the cells in Column B of the Information Domain Matrix.

- Individuals' work-family needs & priorities
- Individuals' work-family problems & concerns
- Families' work-family need & priorities
- Families' work-family problems & concerns
- Needs & priorities of workplaces related to work-family issues
- Workplace problems & concerns related to work-family issues
- Needs & priorities of communities related to work-family issues
- Communities' problems & concerns related to work-family issues
- Needs and priorities of society related to work-family issues
- Societal problems & concerns related to work-family issues

**Antecedents:** Next, the Virtual Think Tank identified the primary roots causes and factors that might have either precipitated or affected the work-family experiences of the principal stakeholder groups. These domains are highlighted in Column A of the Information Domain Matrix.

- Individual Antecedents
- Family Antecedents
• Workplace Antecedents
• Community Antecedents
• Societal Antecedents

Covariates: The third set of information domains include factors that moderate the relationships between the antecedents and the work-family experiences of different stakeholder groups (see Column C in Table 1).

• Individual Covariates
• Family Covariates
• Workplace Covariates
• Community Covariates
• Societal Covariates

Decisions and Responses: The responses of the stakeholder groups to different work-family experiences are highlighted in Column D.

• Individual Decision and Responses
• Family Decisions and Responses
• Workplace Decisions and Responses
• Community Decisions and Responses
• Public Sector Decisions and Responses

Outcomes & Impacts: The fifth set of information domains refer to the outcomes and impacts of different work-family issues and experiences on the principal stakeholder groups (see Column E).

• Outcomes & Impacts on Individuals
• Outcomes & Impacts on Families
• Outcomes & Impacts on Workplaces
• Outcomes & Impacts on Communities
• Outcomes & Impacts on Society

Theoretical Foundations: The Virtual Think Tank established a sixth information domain to designate the multi-disciplinary theoretical underpinnings to the work-family area of study (noted as Information Domain F).
Table 1: Matrix of Information Domains (9/30/01)

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Domain F: Theoretical Underpinnings to All Domains