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Job Insecurity, Union Support and Intentions to Resign Membership: A Psychological Contract Perspective

ABSTRACT ▪ This article uses psychological contract theory to explore the consequences of job insecurity among union members. We hypothesize that the perception of job insecurity will correlate with a lower level of perceived union support and a higher intention to resign union membership. We also test whether the relationship between job insecurity and membership turnover is mediated by (a lack of) perceived union support. In Belgium, Italy and the Netherlands, an association is found between job insecurity and a reduction in perceived union support, and between job insecurity and the intention to resign membership; this association is also fully mediated by (a lack of) perceived union support. None of these hypotheses are corroborated in Sweden. We discuss implications of these findings for future research and for unions in Europe.

KEYWORDS: European study ▪ intention to resign membership ▪ job insecurity ▪ psychological contract ▪ union membership ▪ union support

Introduction

The last decades have been marked by important organizational changes, with large-scale restructuring, mergers, downsizing and plant closings often accompanied by massive staff dismissals. The number of temporary employees has also shown a significant increase. Thus employees have felt more insecure.

The concept of 'job insecurity' can be defined as the 'subjectively perceived likelihood of involuntary job loss' (Sverke et al., 2002). The same objective situation, such as a decline in company orders, may be interpreted in different ways, provoking feelings of insecurity for some

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workers, even if their job continuity is ('objectively speaking') not at stake. Others, on the contrary, may feel particularly secure about their jobs, even though they may be dismissed soon afterwards. What typifies this subjective conceptualization of job insecurity is that it concerns *insecurity* about the *future*: for the employees concerned, there is uncertainty about retaining their jobs or eventually facing a lay-off (De Witte, 1999). Employees who feel uncertain cannot always adequately prepare themselves for the future. Many definitions also refer to the *involuntary* nature of job insecurity (Sverke and Hellgren, 2002). Research on job insecurity does not focus on employees who deliberately choose, for example, a temporary contract, because it suits their present situation. Insecure employees rather experience a discrepancy between the preferred and the perceived level of security offered by their employer. A feeling of *powerlessness* is also emphasized in many definitions (Greenhalgh and Rosenblatt, 1984). Job insecurity mostly implies feelings of helplessness in preserving the desired continuity of employment.

During the past decades, extensive research has been reported on the effects of job insecurity. It decreases the health and well-being of individual employees and also influences various organizational attitudes and behaviours, thus also affecting the organization (De Witte, 2005a). The perception of job insecurity is frequently linked to reduced organizational commitment (Ashford et al., 1989).

Research on the effects of job insecurity has focused almost exclusively on consequences for the individual employee and the company. Much less attention is paid to the effects of job insecurity on *trade unions* and on *union participation*. These effects are the focus of this article. Using data from four European countries, we examine the association of job insecurity with perceived union support and, conversely, the intention to resign membership. We concentrate on *union members*, since the intention to resign membership can only be analyzed among the latter. First, we focus on union membership, and discuss the motives for becoming (and remaining) a union member. Next, our theoretical perspective (psychological contract theory) and hypotheses are outlined.

(Motives for) Union Membership

Union participation is not a one-dimensional phenomenon. Klandermans (1997) identified two dimensions: intensity and duration. Participation may require minimal or considerable effort (intensity), whereas it may also be one-off or of indefinite duration. In principle, union membership is durable (for an indefinite time), and requires only limited effort from the individual. Such passive participation contrasts with activities of greater intensity, such as participating in strikes or taking up a position as an active union member.

In this article, we concentrate on union *membership*. The choice for this 'basic form' of union participation is obvious. Unions depend on their members for their continuity, whereas membership numbers also constitute their power base (Barling et al., 1992). Having a large number of members strengthens a union's bargaining position, because more employees can be mobilized for collective action (Klandermans, 1997). This suggests that, for the individual member, union membership also represents the 'necessary' (but insufficient) first step to a more active form of union participation, which demands more energy and dedication (e.g. participation in industrial action). For the labour movement, it is thus crucial to find out whether there is an association between job insecurity and union membership, since a change (rise or fall) in the number of members as a consequence of job insecurity has important implications for the future of the union movement.

Research into the motives of individuals for becoming a union member often uses the classification developed by Van De Vall (1970), who distinguishes between ideological motives (e.g. 'To make the union as strong as possible'), social motives (pressure from colleagues or family members) and instrumental motives (financial, legal and administrative support or protection in case of difficulties). European research shows the *instrumental* motive to be the most important motivation for union membership (Waddington and Hoffman, 2000). In Flanders (Belgium), 69 percent of union members joined 'because being a member is good protection in the event of problems at work' (De Witte, 1996: 281). The predominance of the instrumental or 'protection motive' suggests that the union is considered by many members as an 'insurance' against possible problems in the individual or collective sphere (Visser, 1995).

The need for protection which is central to the instrumental motivation of membership of course includes more than just protection against possible dismissal or job insecurity. The latter, however, constitutes an important component of the protection motive. In research in Flanders, 32 percent of union members explicitly referred to job security as a reason for becoming a member (De Witte, 1996). Principal components analysis also shows this motive to be part of the 'instrumental motives' dimension. Quite similar findings emerge from research in other countries, also showing that members highly prioritize job insecurity as a reason why union protection is necessary (Dworkin et al., 1988; Guest and Dewe, 1988). Visser (1995) concludes that the threat of unemployment has motivated many employees to take the precaution of becoming or remaining a union member. Conversely, former members often refer to a lack of protection, or to the fact that they no longer need this protection, as a motive for resigning their membership (Klandermans, 1997).

A Psychological Contract Perspective on Union Membership

The 'protection motive' offers a point of departure for developing hypotheses concerning the association of job insecurity with union attitudes and the intention to resign membership. This orientation towards the union suggests an analogy between the employee–union and employee–management relations. Both relationships seem to be based on a business-like transaction: the employees contribute a cost (membership fee or participative effort), against which the union or the company provides a benefit (employment protection or income). Both relations may thus be typified in terms of a rational cost–benefit analysis. The similarity in the relations pertaining to the company and to union membership suggests that some of the effects of job insecurity on attitudes to the company may also hold true for attitudes and behaviour regarding the union.

In this article, we argue that the effects of job insecurity among union members can be viewed from the perspective of the *psychological contract* (Rousseau, 1995): the mutual expectations between employees and their employer. The psychological contract is implicit, informal and subjective, unlike the formal employment contract. The concept refers to an exchange between two parties; as a consequence, this 'contract' is mutual and dynamic. Within the psychological contract, the idea of *balance* is central: the employee needs to feel that what is offered by the organization balances what the individual brings to the relationship, and a perceived imbalance results in the perception of a violation of the contract. Such a violation has negative effects (Robinson, 1996): in the short term, a strong negative emotional response is evoked, directed towards the party responsible for the violation. As a consequence, various organizational attitudes (such as trust in the employer) become more negative. These could result in negative behaviours in a later phase, such as an intention to leave the organization, and actually doing so.

We can apply the concept of the psychological contract to the relationship between the union member and union. Union members also engage in an exchange relationship in which both parties develop (implicit) mutual expectations. In this article, we only focus on union members and their expectations. We argue that the expectation to be protected from job insecurity forms one of the core elements in the psychological contract between union members and their union, consistent with the finding that members emphasize job security as one of the key benefits of union membership (Dworkin et al., 1988). Our argument is not that members expect their unions to safeguard them totally from becoming unemployed, but rather that unions will ensure the highest level of security possible in the circumstances. We expect that job insecurity disturbs the balance of the cost–benefit relation of members with

their union, and will be perceived as a violation of the psychological contract with the union. Membership is seen to offer *insufficient* protection against insecurity, whereas the very reason they became union members stemmed from the wish to be 'protected' against insecurity.

Violation of the Psychological Contract: Hypotheses

Since a violation of the psychological contract evokes negative emotional responses, we can expect an impact on attitudes as well as behaviours. The attitudes can be expected to precede the behavioural responses, since a violation of the psychological contract first of all affects the loyalty of members towards their union (Sverke and Goslinga, 2003). A reduction of loyalty seems to reduce various attitudes, which in turn results in more negative behaviours later on (Sverke et al., 2004). In this article, we will focus on a specific *attitude* towards unions, which has not received much attention in previous research: the extent to which people feel supported by their union. We then discuss the intention to resign *union membership*.

The concept of '*perceived union support*' is developed by analogy with research in the context of companies (Shore et al., 1994). The central idea is that, as a member, one is heard within the union when one has a question or a problem. Using psychological contract theory, an association between job insecurity and perceived union support seems obvious. For members, the experience of job insecurity implies the violation of their psychological contract with the union, since the expectation that their union will protect them against insecurity has not been met. The experience of insecurity is also at odds with their instrumental motivation. We hypothesize that this leads to the perception that one is not supported by the union (H1).

Our second dependent variable is the *intention* to *resign* union membership. Here again, the similarity with the intention to resign from a job in an organizational context is apparent. It is justifiable to look at intention rather than concrete turnover behaviour, because intention is linked to future action, as suggested by the theory of planned behaviour (Ajzen, 1985). Psychological contract theory leads to the hypothesis that job insecurity is associated with a higher intention of resigning membership (H2), because members perceive their psychological contract to be violated. Union membership does not prove instrumental: people feel threatened by unemployment, even though they wanted to 'insure' or protect themselves against it by becoming a union member. As a consequence, members become disappointed, and could start wondering whether it is still beneficial to continue their membership. The increased intention to resign membership could also reflect dissatisfaction with inadequate union interest representation: the union offered *insufficient* protection against insecurity.

The inclusion of perceived union support and the intention to resign membership in the same study enables us to answer an additional research question. Research shows that attitudes (such as perceived union support) often have an impact on the intention to resign (Barling et al., 1992). The psychological contract perspective suggests that we can expect job insecurity to have an autonomous influence on perceived union support *and* on the intention to resign union membership. To test this assumption, we will analyse whether job insecurity autonomously influences turnover intentions, once perceived union support has been controlled for. The latter also allows testing of a final question. When discussing reactions to a violation of the psychological contract, we mentioned that more negative attitudes seem to precede an increase in turnover intentions. Research also shows that attitudes towards unions predict behaviours, such as turnover (Barling et al., 1992; Goslinga and Klandermans, 2001). These findings thus suggest that the association between job insecurity and turnover intention could be mediated by perceived union support. We will test this assumption, using the recommendations of Baron and Kenny (1986).

Method

Design

This research is part of a broader, European comparative study on the role of unions in mitigating the negative effects of job insecurity (Sverke et al., 2004). Four European countries are involved in this project: Belgium, Italy, the Netherlands and Sweden. In these countries, we tried to collect similar data on this topic. Because we partly use existing data (secondary analysis), however, some variables are not operationalized in exactly the same way (see later).

The selection of countries guarantees substantial heterogeneity of union contexts. This suggests that the results of the analyses may be meaningful within a broad European context. The almost complete range of membership density is included in our design: the Netherlands has relatively low density, 25–30 percent; Italy and Belgium are in the middle range of 40–50 percent; Sweden has the highest European density, roughly 80 percent. In addition, there is variation as regards the integration of labour unions into the social security system (Ferner and Hyman, 1998): this is rather weak in the Netherlands but very strong in the other countries. In this contribution, we are especially interested in the robustness of our hypotheses: the main aim of the comparison between the four countries or 'union contexts' is to examine to what extent results regarding the various hypotheses may be *generalized* across different samples and countries. With that objective, an attempt has been made to produce data

as comparative as possible, even though this aim has probably not fully been met (see later). The purpose of this analysis is not to provide a specific explanation of differences *between* countries, although such differences will also be discussed in the conclusion.

Samples

The *Belgian* data were collected in 1998 via a telephone survey in the three parts of the country (Brussels, Flanders and Wallonia). The survey was aimed at employees from the private sector, in companies with at least 50 employees. In total, 1487 employees were interviewed: a response rate of 20 percent from those who could be reached by telephone *and* fitted the criteria to be interviewed; 870 of these were members of a union. They were on average 39 years old, and 59 percent of them were male. The sample was heterogeneous with regard to social class and educational level, and members from all unions were represented.

In *Italy*, data were collected in 2000. A random sample of 476 workers responded to the questionnaire, mainly in small groups and at their workplace (response rate: 55 percent); 296 were members of a union. The average age was 41, and 67 percent were male. The sample was also heterogeneous as far as social class and educational level are concerned. In this case, respondents from the public sector were also included in the sample, but 77.5 percent worked in the private sector.

In the *Netherlands*, the data were collected as part of the longitudinal panel held amongst members of CNV. This is an ideologically distinctive (Christian) union, with approximately 350,000 members – only about 30 percent of the size of the largest Dutch federation, the FNV. The telephone survey in the Netherlands thus covered only union members. The data were collected in 1998, with 896 participants (response rate: 52 percent). Their average age was 46 and 75 percent were male. The sample is heterogeneous in terms of educational level. No questions were asked about occupational position, but the CNV covers both public and private sectors.

The data in *Sweden* were collected in the course of 2000 by means of a postal survey. The target group was blue-collar workers who were members of the Swedish Municipal Workers Union (*Kommunal*), affiliated to the main union confederation (LO). In total, 1923 members returned completed questionnaires, a response rate of 75 percent. The average age was 45, and 78 percent were women. The questionnaire contained no questions on educational level.

Measures

All surveys contained questions on a number of *background characteristics* such as gender and age. As indicated above, some of these were not present

in every dataset. Several items were used to operationalize the dependent variables. All items were scored on a five-point scale ('1' = 'disagree' and '5' = 'agree'). Principal components analysis was performed per country to determine whether the various items referred to the expected dimension (for detailed information, see Sverke et al., 2001). Subsequently, scales were computed for each concept.

In Italy, the Netherlands and Sweden, *job insecurity* was measured with five items, three of which were derived from Ashford et al. (1989) and two from De Witte (2000). These items refer to two dimensions of job insecurity: cognitive ('*I am sure that I can keep my job*', reverse scored), and affective ('*I am worried about keeping my job*'). A higher score on the scale indicates more job insecurity. The scales are reliable: Cronbach alpha varies between .79 and .91. In Belgium, job insecurity was measured with only one item. Respondents had to answer: '*How large, in your opinion, is the probability that you will become unemployed in the near future?*' on a five-point scale ('1' = 'extremely small or impossible' and '5' = 'very high'). In previous research in Belgium, principal components analysis shows that this (cognitive) item is part of the broader dimension of job insecurity, as measured with five items in the remaining countries (De Witte, 2000).

In Belgium, Italy and the Netherlands, *perceived union support* was measured with five items, derived from the scale of Shore et al. (1994). Examples are: '*I can always turn to my union with questions and problems*' and '*My union appreciates my opinion*'. A high score on the scale expresses the perception of support from the union. The reliability of the scales was limited in Italy ($\alpha = .59$) and rather moderate in Belgium ($\alpha = .68$) and the Netherlands ($\alpha = .71$). In Sweden, only three items were available to measure this concept, which did, however, prove to be reliable ($\alpha = .79$).

In each country, the *intention to resign membership* ('membership turnover intention') was measured with one item, scored on a five-point scale. In Italy and the Netherlands, respondents evaluated the item '*I sometimes consider giving up my membership*'. In Sweden, respondents evaluated '*I considered leaving my union during the past six months*'. In Belgium, the item was formulated slightly differently: '*I would leave my union if I had a good alternative*'. Principal components analysis on other datasets in Sweden and the Netherlands shows that these diverse items are all manifestations of the same concept: the intention to give up membership (Sverke et al., 2001).

Analysis

The hypotheses are tested by means of (OLS) regression analysis. Respondents with no scores for one or more variables were excluded

from the analysis ('list-wise deletion'). This reduced the size of the samples ($N = 463$ in Belgium, 248 in Italy, 691 in the Netherlands and 1688 in Sweden). The large reduction in the Belgian sample is due to the lack of information concerning the age of one third of the respondents. The impact of this reduction is probably limited, since an analysis with pair-wise deletion of missing values (instead of list-wise) reveals very similar results When testing hypotheses, the available background characteristics (gender and age) were controlled for. We limit the 'control variables' to those present in all four datasets, in order to increase the comparability of the results. According to Baron and Kenny (1986), the following conditions must be met in order to demonstrate mediation: job insecurity and perceived union support must both predict turnover intentions, job insecurity must predict perceived union support, and the association between job insecurity and turnover intentions must decrease or disappear once perceived union support is added to the analysis. We test all conditions.

Results

Job Insecurity and Perceived Union Support

According to H1, job insecurity is associated with a reduction in (perceived) union support. Table 1 contains the results of a regression analysis, with perceived union support as criterion variable, and age, gender and job insecurity as predictors.

The results show that in Belgium, Italy and the Netherlands, the associations between job insecurity and perceived union support are significant, when age and gender are kept under control. No significant job insecurity contribution is observed in Sweden, however. H1 is thus confirmed in three countries, but rejected in Sweden. Note that the coefficients of job insecurity are rather modest (ranging between −.14 and −.19). Table 1 equally shows that older people in Italy experience reduced union support, whereas they feel slightly more supported in Sweden. In three out of four countries, women score higher regarding perceived union support. The three predictors together only explain a limited part of the variance in perceived union support (see R^2 in Table 1).

Job Insecurity and the Intention to Resign Membership

H2 states that union members' experience of job insecurity is associated with a higher intention to resign union membership. Table 2 contains the results of a regression analysis to predict membership turnover intention on the basis of age, gender and job insecurity (see step 2 regarding all countries).

TABLE 1. Job Insecurity and Background Characteristics as Predictors of Perceived Union Support

	Standardized regression coefficients (Bêta)			
Predictors	Belgium	Italy	The Netherlands	Sweden
Age	.03	−.16**	.05	.05*
Gender	.13**	.13*	−.01	.10***
Job insecurity	−.15**	−.19**	−.14***	−.02
F-value	6.25***	7.80***	5.26**	7.35***
d.f.	(3, 472)	(3, 249)	(3, 691)	(3, 1727)
R	.19	.29	.15	.11
R^2	.04	.09	.02	.01

* $.05 > p > .01$; ** $.01 > p > .001$; ***$p < .001$.

H2 is confirmed in three countries: Belgium, Italy and the Netherlands. As hypothesized, increased job insecurity is associated with a higher intention to resign membership in these countries. Note that these associations are again not very high, however (ranging between .10 and .15). In Sweden H2 is rejected. One additional association with background characteristics is observed: in Sweden women have a slightly lower turnover intention. Also this time the explanatory power of the analysis is limited, judging by the low R^2 value at the bottom of Table 2.

To determine whether job insecurity has an autonomous effect on the intention to resign membership, a third series of regression analyses was performed. This time, perceived union support was introduced along with the background characteristics (age and gender) and job insecurity to predict membership turnover intention. Step 3 in Table 2 contains the results of this analysis for each country.

After controlling for perceived union support (and background characteristics), none of the coefficients of job insecurity are significant. The significant coefficients of job insecurity in Belgium, Italy and the Netherlands drop to an insignificant level, whereas the non-significant coefficient in Sweden is unaltered after including perceived union support in the analysis. This time, the explanatory power of the analysis is slightly more substantial, as can be read from the R^2 values at the bottom of Table 2. This increase is due to the inclusion of perceptions of union support in the analysis.

These results allow us to analyze whether the association between job insecurity and turnover intentions is mediated by perceptions of union support. In order to examine this issue, we first of all need to know whether turnover intentions can be predicted on the basis of perceived union support. The results of a separate analysis (not reported in Table 2)

TABLE 2. Job Insecurity, Perceived Union Support and Background Characteristics as Predictors of the Intention to Resign Membership

	Standardized regression coefficients (Bêta)							
	Belgium		Italy		The Netherlands		Sweden	
Predictors	Step 2	Step 3	Step 2	Step 3	Step 2	Step 3	Step 2	Step 3
Age	−.07	−.06	.11	.06	−.00	.01	−.01	.02
Gender	−.02	.02	−.01	.03	.02	.01	−.08**	−.04
Job insecurity	.11**	.06	.15*	.08	.10*	.06	.03	.02
Union support	/	−.34***	/	−.38***	/	−.26***	/	−.45***
F-value	2.75*	16.96***	3.25*	12.79***	2.24*	14.17***	4.73**	112.18***
d.f.	(3, 468)	(4, 467)	(3, 262)	(3, 246)	(3, 692)	(4, 690)	(3, 1720)	(4, 1719)
R	.13	.36	.19	.41	.10	.28	.09	.45
R^2	.02	.13	.04	.17	.01	.08	.01	.21

*$.05 > p > .01$; **$.01 > p > .001$; ***$p < .001$. In step 1 only the background characteristics are introduced in the analysis. This step is not mentioned in Table 2. In step 2, job insecurity was added to the background characteristics of step 1. In step 3, perceived union support was added to all variables of step 2.

indeed show this to be the case in all countries. After controlling for age and gender, perceived union support is significantly negatively related to turnover intentions in Belgium ($\beta = -.35$, $p < .001$), Italy ($\beta = -.39$, $p < .001$), The Netherlands ($\beta = -.25$, $p < .001$) and Sweden ($\beta = -.45$, $p < .001$). The results of step 3 in Table 2 show that the impact of job insecurity on turnover intentions is fully mediated by perceived union support in Belgium, Italy and the Netherlands, since the significant-coefficient of job insecurity in step 2 drops to an insignificant level after the inclusion of union support in these three countries. In Sweden, no mediation takes place, since the first condition for mediation was not met: job insecurity was not associated with turnover intentions.

Summary and Discussion

This study has explored the consequences of job insecurity among union members. Little previous research has been performed on the implications of insecurity for unions and for union participation. One of the innovative features of this study was the adoption of a psychological contract perspective. The dominant instrumental (or 'insurance') motive for becoming a union member offered a point of departure: research in Europe shows that employees mainly join unions to protect themselves, and protection against job insecurity and dismissal is one of the components of this motivation. Members thus enter into a type of business transaction with their union: in exchange for their financial contribution, the union must provide protection and a sufficient level of security. This relationship was understood in terms of a psychological contract between members and their union, in which the idea of balance is central: the member needs to feel that what he or she brings into the relation is balanced by what is being offered by the union. We expect that the perception of job insecurity will be experienced by members as a violation of the psychological contract with their union. As a consequence, we hypothesized that the perception of job insecurity would correlate with a lower level of perceived union support, and a higher intention to resign union membership. Our hypotheses were tested by means of a secondary analysis of data from four European countries: Belgium, Italy, the Netherlands and Sweden. The results support our hypotheses in three out of four countries.

In three countries, affirmation was found for the hypothesis that job insecurity is associated with a reduction of *perceived union support*, even though the standardized regression coefficients were rather limited in magnitude. The expected association between job insecurity and the *intention to resign membership* was also found in the same three countries: in Belgium, Italy and the Netherlands, union members showed a stronger membership turnover intention when they felt insecure about their job.

Finally, the results also suggested mediation of the relationship between job insecurity and the intention to resign membership: in these three countries, the association between job insecurity and turnover intentions was fully mediated by perceived union support. This means that union members in these countries were more inclined to resign their membership once they experienced job insecurity, because they felt less supported by their union. In Sweden, none of the hypotheses was corroborated.

The samples used to test our hypotheses were convenience samples rather than samples representative of the total population of union members in each country. Even though all samples were selected at random, the target groups differed across samples. As a result, the composition of the samples varied between the countries compared (e.g. there were differences in the gender ratio, and some samples were limited to members of a specific union, or a specific occupational group). The methods of data collection differed too (telephone versus postal surveys), as well as the response rates. Finally, measures differed between studies: in some countries scales could be used, whereas in some other countries only one-item versions of the relevant concepts were available. Sometimes, even the formulation of a specific variable differed across countries. All these differences obviously limit the comparability of our datasets and results, and call for a replication of our findings in future research, using identical samples and measures, and perhaps also more countries.

The methodological limitations of this study, however, can to a certain extent also be regarded as an asset. It is striking after all, that our hypotheses were all confirmed in three out of four countries, even though the composition of the samples and the selection of measurements differed between these countries. This heterogeneity in samples and measures could be regarded as a more severe test of our theoretical assumptions. The fact that similar results were found after testing our hypotheses in varied conditions could perhaps indicate that our findings can be generalized. Some caution is needed, however, before one can draw definite conclusions. Future research will have to indicate whether our findings can be truly generalized. Given the lack of international comparative research on this issue, we suggest that the reported study already constitutes a modest step forward, in order to analyse the impact of job insecurity on union members.

One of the striking findings of this study relates to the position of Sweden, where none of our hypotheses was corroborated. This could be for methodological and/or institutional reasons. Of all samples involved, the Swedish was the most homogeneous, since only blue-collar workers from a single union were sampled. This homogeneity perhaps limited a valid test of our hypotheses.

The rejection of our hypotheses in Sweden could however also relate to distinctive national characteristics. The exceptionally high union density

in Sweden not only means that the great majority of employees join a union, but also that few union members consider resigning. The impact of job insecurity on the intention to resign union membership is perhaps more limited in a country which is in many respects an institutional outlier, especially in comparison to the others in our study. Traxler (1998) typifies industrial relations in these three latter countries as extension-based bargaining regimes: while union density is low to average, bargaining coverage is much higher because of legal extension of collective agreements to non-unionized workers. So union membership is not a requirement to benefit from collectively bargained employment advantages and resigning union membership has little to no consequences on employment conditions. In Sweden, this kind and level of legal regulation is absent. Kjellberg (1992) describes the Swedish model of industrial relations as centralized 'self-regulation': powerful, well-organized and centrally coordinated interest organizations operate within a three-tier system of collective bargaining with no mandatory incomes policies or state intervention in collective bargaining as long as the labour market parties behave responsibly (Visser, 1996). Hence Traxler labels the Swedish system an organization-based regime. However, this self-regulating capacity of labour market parties and the maintenance of a relative balance of power between labour and capital require a strong union movement capable of attracting and retaining a majority of the work force as members. Under these conditions, resigning as union member becomes a less attractive option, because in the end it would weaken the bargaining capacity of the union movement. The high level of unionization in Sweden has been attributed to the combination of centralized and decentralized organizational structures (Kjellberg, 1992) and union involvement in the administration of unemployment insurance. Unemployment in Sweden is provided by 'benefit societies' which are financed from union membership contributions, employers' fees and public subsidies. Choice of scheme is voluntary, but is usually included as part of union membership (Visser, 1996). Arguably, this system has helped trade unions sustain membership growth, but also affects the intention to resign. At the decentralized level, Sweden is a case of workplace codetermination without works councils: arrangements are exclusively union-based, with only union members eligible to vote for and be elected workforce representatives. The 1976 Act on Co-determination at Work gives these internal union bodies the possibility to negotiate a wide range of participation rights, creating a unique amalgamation of collective bargaining and second-channel 'industrial democracy' (Rogers and Streeck, 1994). So from this perspective, becoming and remaining a union member also has tangible advantages.

Together, these institutional features of the Swedish system may have an important impact on the readiness of union members to resign. This

mix of institutional features is absent in the other cases. This finding from cross-national comparison implies that our hypotheses may only apply to countries with less encompassing unions and extension-based bargaining regimes (Traxler, 1998). Moreover, Sweden is distinct from the other three countries from a social and economic policy perspective, with its traditional commitment to full employment and the promotion of active labour market policies. As a result, on a number of labour market indicators its record is better than that of other market economies: high participation rates (especially among women), low unemployment rates, less than 10 percent of the jobless being unemployed for a year or longer and a relatively small percentage of the total labour market budget spent on 'passive' measures (Visser, 1996). Possibly, job insecurity has a different meaning to Swedes in comparison to Italian, Dutch and Belgian employees.

Our results thus suggest that job insecurity can be accompanied by a reduction in perceived union support and with the intention to resign membership. Both conclusions correspond with the idea that union members experience job insecurity as a violation of the psychological contract with their union, resulting in negative consequences for the union. This suggests that the introduction of psychological contract theory in this study could constitute a fertile basis for further development of theory and hypotheses in this domain. Members seem to view the relationship with their union from a cost–benefit perspective, in which they expect enough returns in exchange for their membership fee. This opens new avenues for future research. First of all, it seems interesting to explore the content of what members expect from their union, and the way these expectations are balanced by their promises towards the union. Research suggests that one can identify at least two kinds of psychological contracts between employers and employees: transactional and relational (Rousseau, 1990). Can one distinguish the same kinds of psychological contracts with the union? Next, the issue of violation of the psychological contract was especially relevant for our analysis of the impact of job insecurity among union members. This issue has only been analysed in a limited way in this study and several research questions remain unanswered. If the psychological contract of union members encompasses a larger range of expectations, then one could wonder whether these are ordered according to some hierarchy: do members require specific expectations to be fulfilled more urgently than others? And how important is the issue of preventing job insecurity compared to other expectations? What exactly do members expect in this respect: *total* or *sufficient* security? Do they also extend their expectations to issues such as fair treatment once the employing organization is faced with restructuring or downsizing? And what are the behavioural consequences of a perceived violation in the longer term? Do they really leave

their union, or do feelings of insecurity 'only' affect their union attitudes? Does job insecurity also affect other aspects of union participation – which Goslinga (2005), in a study of the consequences of job insecurity, found was associated with perceived union support – such as involvement in strikes and industrial action? These and related questions should be explored in future research.

This study adds to previous research, and expands our knowledge of the impact of job insecurity on union attitudes and behaviours in several ways. First of all, the issue of job insecurity and its link with union attitudes and behavioural intentions has not received much research attention in the past. The application of psychological contract theory to union membership is also innovative. This study is however not only relevant from a theoretical point of view: the conclusions substantiate that job insecurity is not only problematic for the individual employee or the company, but also for trade unions. In three countries it seems to be associated with a less favourable attitude towards unions and with an intention to resign from membership. As indicated above, this might threaten the power basis and strength of unions. The consequence of all this is that unions need to pay specific attention to the issue of job insecurity and its consequences (De Witte, 2005b; Sverke et al., 2004). The negative consequences of job insecurity could be alleviated by extending the package of services offered to members, and Goslinga (2005) concluded that they can do so by offering information about job opportunities, the local labour market, and by providing career guidance and advice. Such a package of services not only reduces the harmful effects of insecurity for the well-being of individual members, but could also help in reducing negative union attitudes and subsequent turnover intentions. Such tasks will however also increase the workload of union activists and officials.

Some refinement is in order, however. This study only examined the attitudes and intentions of union members. Job insecurity can, however, also influence non-members. The latter can, for example, be prompted to become a member because of job insecurity, which may compensate for the exodus of union members. Since reactions of non-members to job insecurity were not considered in this study, our comments on the consequences for the unions are thus one-sided and incomplete. Future research will have to analyse the impact of job insecurity on non-members as well as members, before more definite conclusions can be drawn.

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