Job insecurity, union support and the intention to resign membership

A psychological contract perspective tested among union members in four European countries

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Abstract
This paper explores the consequences of job insecurity among union members. Starting from the dominance of the instrumental motive for union membership, and using psychological contract theory, 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. The hypotheses are tested in four European countries: Belgium, Italy, the Netherlands and Sweden. In three countries, an association is found between job insecurity and a reduction in perceived union support, and between job insecurity and the intention to resign membership. The association between job insecurity and membership turnover intentions is also fully mediated by (a lack of) perceived union support in these three countries. None of the hypotheses are corroborated in Sweden. The results of this study suggest that union members in all countries involved but Sweden experience job insecurity as a violation of the psychological contract with their union. Consequences of these findings for future research and for unions in Europe are discussed.

Key words: job insecurity, union support, union membership, intention to resign membership, European study
Introduction

The last decades have been marked by important organizational changes. Large-scale restructuring, mergers, downsizing and plant closings were often accompanied by massive staff dismissals (Kozlowski, Chao, Smith & Hedlung, 1993). The number of temporary employees also showed a significant increase (De Cuyper, Isaksson & De Witte, 2005). These developments probably affected the perception of job insecurity among employees (OECD, 1997).

The psychological concept ‘job insecurity’ refers to concerns about the continued existence of jobs in the future (Hartley, Jacobson, Klandermans & Van Vuuren, 1991) and can be defined as the ‘subjectively perceived likelihood of involuntary job loss’ (Sverke, Hellgren and Näswall, 2002). Job insecurity is a subjective perception. The same objective situation (e.g. a decline in company orders) may be interpreted in various ways by different workers. It may provoke feelings of insecurity for some, whereas their job continuity is (‘objectively speaking’) not at stake. Others, on the contrary, may feel particularly secure about their jobs, even though they will be dismissed soon afterwards. Subsequently, 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. Employees who feel uncertain cannot always adequately prepare themselves for the future, since it is unclear to them whether actions should be undertaken or not. Many definitions also refer to the involuntary nature of job insecurity (e.g. Sverke & Hellgren, 2002). Research on job insecurity does not focus on employees who deliberately choose an uncertain job status (e.g. prefer to work with 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 (e.g. Greenhalgh & Rosenblatt, 1984). Job insecurity mostly implies feelings of helplessness to preserve the desired job continuity.

During the past decades, extensive research has been reported on the effects of job insecurity (see e.g.: Sverke, Hellgren, Näswall, Chirumbolo, De Witte & Goslinga, 2004). Research shows that job insecurity decreases the health and well-being of individual employees (for overviews, see e.g.: De Witte, 1999 & 2005a; Sverke & Hellgren, 2002). Longitudinal research confirms the causal impact of job insecurity on these indicators. Job insecurity also influences various organizational attitudes and behaviours, thus also affecting the organization. The perception of job insecurity is frequently linked to reduced organizational attitudes and increased turnover intentions (e.g.: Ashford, Lee & Bobko, 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 labour unions and on union participation’. These effects are the focus of this article. On the basis of data from four European countries, we will examine the association of job insecurity with a specific union attitude (union support) and the intention to resign membership. In doing so, we will concentrate on union members, since the intention to resign membership can only be analyzed among the latter.

Job insecurity among union members

First, we motivate our 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 differentiated participation
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 relation between employees and their union, and the employment relation. In both cases, the relation seems to be based on a business-like transaction: the employees contribute a cost (e.g. a membership fee or efforts), against which the union or the company balances profit (e.g. protection or an income). Both relations may thus be typified in terms of a rational cost/benefit analysis (cf. rational choice theories; see e.g.: Klandermans, 1997). The similarity in the relations pertaining to the company and to union membership suggests that some of the effects of job insecurity on the company may also hold true.
for the attitudes and behaviours regarding the union.

In this article, we will argue that the effects of job insecurity among union members can be viewed from the perspective of the ‘psychological contract’ (Rousseau, 1995). The psychological contract encompasses the mutual expectations between employees and their employer (for a discussion: De Cuyper, De Witte & Isaksson, 2005). The psychological contract is implicit, informal and subjective, and its content has not been written down like the content of the formal employment contract. The psychological contract refers to an exchange between two parties (e.g. employees and employer). 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 into the relation. A perceived imbalance results in the perception of a violation of the psychological contract. This mainly happens when the employee feels that the expectations on the employer are not fulfilled. Such a violation has negative effects (e.g. 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 increase of the intention to leave the organization, and actual turnover behaviour.

We can apply the concept of the psychological contract to the relationship between the union member and his/her union. Also union members engage in an exchange relationship in which both parties develop (implicit) mutual expectations towards one another. 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 issues of the psychological contract of union members towards their union. This aligns with the finding that union members emphasize job security as one of the core issues to be defended by their union (Dworkin et al., 1998), and with the notion of the instrumental motivation of membership and the protection motive, as outlined above. Our argument is not that members expect their unions to totally safeguard them from becoming unemployed, but rather that unions will ensure the highest level of security possible in the situation they are in. 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 their union. After all, the psychological contract between the member and the union is not honoured in the eyes of the union members: membership seems to offer insufficient protection against insecurity, whereas the very reason why people became union members stems from the wish to ‘protect’ them against insecurity.

Violation of the psychological contract: hypotheses

Since a violation of the psychological contract evokes strong 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 & Goslinga, 2003). A reduction of loyalty seems to reduce various attitudes, which in turn result in more negative behaviours later on (Sverke et al., 2004). In this article, we will focus on a specific attitude towards unions, that did not receive much attention in previous research: the extent to which people feel supported by the union membership seems to offer insufficient protection against insecurity, whereas the very reason why people became union members stems from the wish to ‘protect’ them against insecurity.

The concept of ‘perceived union support’ is developed by analogy with research in the context of companies (Shore, Tetrick, Sinclair & Newton, 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 met been met. The experience of insecurity is also at odds with their instrumental motivation of membership. We thus hypothesize that this leads to the perception that one is not supported by the union (hypothesis 1).
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 (hypothesis 2), 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 unsatisfactory union interest representation: the union offered insufficient protection against insecurity.

The inclusion of perceived union support and the intention to resign membership into the same study enables to answer an additional research question. Research shows that attitudes (such as perceived union support) often have an impact on the intention to resign (e.g. Barling et al., 1992). The psychological contract perspective suggests that we 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 analyze whether job insecurity autonomously influences turnover intentions, once perceived union support has been controlled for. The latter also allows testing a final research question. When discussing the reactions to a violation of the psychological contract, we mentioned that the reduction in attitudes seems to precede an increase in turnover intentions (e.g. Sverke et al., 2004). Research on union attitudes also shows that attitudes towards unions predict behaviours, such as turnover (e.g. Barling et al., 1992; Goslinga & 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 decreasing 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 will partly use already existing data (secondary analyses), however, some variables are not operationalized in exactly the same way (see below).

The selection of countries guarantees substantial heterogeneity concerning union contexts. This suggests that the results of the analyses may be meaningful within a European context. As regards union membership density, the almost complete range within Europe is included in our design (cf. Waddington & Hoffmann, 2000): from countries with a rather low union member percentage (The Netherlands; more or less 25 to 30%), countries from the ‘middle level’ (Italy and Belgium; more or less 40 to 50%), to countries with a high degree of unionization (Sweden, around 87%). In addition, there is variation as regards the integration of labour unions into the social security system (Ferner & Hyman, 1998): from countries where this integration is rather poor (e.g. The Netherlands) to countries where labour unions are strongly implied in the management of the social security system and/or have a strong influence in the related decision making process (e.g. Belgium and Sweden). 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. To that aim, an attempt has been made to produce as comparative data as possible, even though this aim has probably not fully been met (see below). 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. The survey was aimed at employees from the private sector, employed in companies with at least 50 employees. In total, 1,487 employees were interviewed. This constituted a response of 20% in relation to those who could be reached by telephone and fitted the criteria to be interviewed. 870 of them were members of a union. They were on average 39 years old and 59% 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 were administered the questionnaire, mainly in small groups and at their workplace (response percentage: 55%). 296 of them were members of a union. The average age was 40.7 and 67% of the respondents were male. In Italy, the sample was equally heterogeneous as far as social class and educational level are concerned, whereas, in this case, respondents from the public sector were also present in the sample (77.5% worked in the private sector; the remainder in the public sector).

In the Netherlands, the data were collected as part of the longitudinal panel held amongst CNV members (the National Christian Trade Union Federation). Even though the CNV is an ideologically distinctive (Christian) union, this confederation has approximately 350,000 members, which makes the CNV the second largest trade union federation in The Netherlands. The CNV comprises both public sector and private sector unions. The telephone survey in the Netherlands thus concerns only union members. The data were collected in 1998 (response percentage: 52%). In total, 896 members participated in the survey. Their average age was 46.2 years old and 75.3% of them were male. In the survey, no questions were asked about their occupational position. The sample is heterogeneous concerning educational level.

The data in Sweden were collected in the course of 2000 by means of a postal survey. The target group was made up of blue collar workers who were members of the Swedish Municipal Workers Union (Kommunal), which is affiliated with the Swedish Trade Union Confederation (LO), Sweden’s largest confederation. In total 1,923 union members returned their completed questionnaires (response percentage: 75%). The average age of the members was 45.2 years, and 78% of them were women. The questionnaire contained no questions on their educational level.

Measures

All surveys contained questions on a number of background characteristics such as gender and age. As mentioned above, some background characteristics were not present in every dataset (e.g. educational level and social class). In general, several items were used to operationalize the dependent variables. All items were scored on a 5-point scale (“1” = “disagree” en “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 (e.g. “I am sure that I can keep my job”), reverse scored, and affective (e.g. “I’m 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 evaluate the item: “How large, in your opinion, is the probability that you will become unemployed in the near future?” on a 5-point scale (“1” = ‘extremely small or impossible’ and ‘5’ = ‘very high’). Here, a high score also shows higher job insecurity. 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 5-point scale. In Italy and the Netherlands, respondents evaluated the item “I sometimes consider quitting my membership”. In Sweden, respondents evaluated “I considered quitting my union during the past six months”. In Belgium, the item was formulated slightly differently: “I would quit my union if I had a good alternative”. Principal components analysis on other datasets in Sweden and Holland shows that these diverse items are all manifestations of the same concept: the intention to give up membership (see e.g. Sverke et al., 2001: 49).

Analysis

The hypotheses will be 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 1 688 in Sweden). 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 will test all conditions.

Results

Job insecurity and perceived union support

According to hypothesis 1, 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.

Table 1 about here

The results in Table 1 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. Hypothesis 1 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 R² below Table 1).

**Job insecurity and the intention to resign membership**

Hypothesis 2 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 2 about here

Hypothesis 2 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 hypothesis 2 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 R² 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 analysis’ explanatory power is slightly more substantial, as can be read from the R²-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 are 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) 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 are 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 in this country.
Summary and discussion

This study explored the consequences of job insecurity among union members. Little research has been performed on the effects of job insecurity for unions and for union participation. In this article, a psychological contract perspective was adopted to analyze this topic (Rousseau, 1995). The application of this perspective in the field of union research is one of the innovative features of this study. 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 (e.g. Visser, 1995; Waddington & Hoffman, 2000). 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 (cf. Robinson, 1996). 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, insecure union members showed a stronger membership turnover intention when they felt insecure about their job. The results finally also suggested mediation of the relationship between job insecurity and the intention to resign membership in these three countries: in Belgium, Italy and The Netherlands, 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 because of job insecurity. In Sweden, none of the hypotheses were 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 as well: in some countries scales could be used, whereas in some other countries only one item versions of the relevant concepts were available for our analysis. 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 a larger amount of sampled countries. The methodological limitations of this study, however, can to a certain extend 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 analyze the impact of job insecurity on union members.

One of the striking findings of this study relates to the position of Sweden. None of our hypotheses were corroborated in this country. This could be due to methodological and/or institutional reasons. Of all samples involved, the sample of Sweden was the most homogeneous, since only blue collar workers from a specific union (Kommunal) were sampled. This homogeneity perhaps limited a valid test of our hypotheses.

The rejection of our hypotheses in Sweden could however also relate to the characteristics of this country. Of all countries involved, Sweden shows the highest union density (Waddington & Hoffmann, 2000), which not only means that a great majority of employees join a union, but also that few union members resign union membership. 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 Italy, The Netherlands and Belgium. Traxler (1998) typifies the IR systems in these three latter countries as extension-based bargaining regimes: while union density rates are low to average, the bargaining coverage rates in these countries are much higher due to state intervention in the bargaining process, especially through extension of collective agreements to non-unionized workers in the sector or company. 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 state intervention is absent. Kjellberg (1992) qualifies 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 responsible (Visser, 1996). In contrast to countries with extension-based bargaining regimes, Traxler labels the Swedish IR system as 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 holding 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 drastically 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 voluntary unemployment insurance. Unemployment in Sweden is provided by ‘benefit societies’ which are financed from union membership contributions, employers’ fees and public subsidies. Membership of these societies is voluntary, but is usually included as part of union membership (Visser, 1996). Arguably, this system has helped trade unions to sustain membership growth, but also impacts the intention of union members to resign. As far as decentralized industrial relations are concerned, Sweden is a typical case of workplace codetermination without works councils. Swedish codetermination arrangements are exclusively union-based: only union members are eligible to vote for and be elected as work force representatives. The 1976 Act on Codetermination 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 & Streeck, 1994). So, also from this perspective, becoming and remaining a union member has tangible advantages.

Together, these institutional features of the Swedish IR system (dependence on high membership levels to maintain self-regulating capacity of social partners, union involvement in the administration of voluntary unemployment insurance and union-based codetermination arrangements) may have a certain impact on intentions of union members to resign. This mix of institutional features is absent in the IR systems of Italy, The Netherlands and Belgium. This finding from cross-national comparison implies that our hypotheses may only apply to countries with extension-based bargaining regimes (Traxler, 1998). Moreover, Sweden distinguishes itself from the other three countries from a social and economic policy perspective. Traditionally Sweden is well-known for its commitment to full employment and the promotion of active labour market policies. As
a result, on a number of labour market indicators Sweden’s record is better than that of other market economies: high participation rates (especially among women), low unemployment rates, less than 10% 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, i.e. benefits (Visser, 1996). Possibly, job insecurity has a different meaning to Swedish employees in comparison to Italian, Dutch and Belgian employees. The presence of lower levels of job insecurity together with lower intentions to resign membership (as a consequence of specific institutional features of the Swedish IR system) might explain the different results in the corroboration of our hypotheses in this country.

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 versus relational (Rousseau, 1990). Can one distinguish the same kinds of psychological contracts with the union? Next to this, especially the issue of violation of the psychological contract was relevant for our analysis of the impact of job insecurity among union members. This issue has only been analyzed in a limited way in this study. Several research questions remain unanswered. If the psychological contract of union members encompasses a larger amount of expectations, then one could wonder whether these are ordered according to some hierarchy: do members expect specific expectations to be fulfilled more urgently than others? And how important is the issue of preserving job insecurity compared to other expectations? What exactly do members expect regarding the issue of security? Do they expect unions to offer total security, or ‘sufficient’ security? Do they also expand their expectations to issues such as fair treatment once the organization is faced with a restructuring or downsizing? And what are the behavioural consequences of a perceived violation on the longer term? Do they really leave their union, or do feelings of insecurity ‘only’ affect their union attitudes (e.g. dissatisfaction). Does job insecurity also affect other aspects of union participation, such as participation in strikes and industrial action? In a study on the consequences of job insecurity, Goslinga (2005) found that perceived union support was associated with participation in various union activities. This suggests that job insecurity could also affect union participation, by its effect on perceived union support. These and related questions could be further explored in future research.

This study adds on previous research, and expands our knowledge on the impact of job insecurity on union attitudes and behaviours in several ways. First of all, the issue of job insecurity did not receive much research attention in the past. Its link with union attitudes and behavioural intentions remained fairly underdeveloped. This study is also the first to explicitly analyze the impact of job insecurity on perceived union support. The application of psychological contract theory on union membership is also innovative. This study is however not only relevant from a theoretical point of view. Its results are also relevant from a practical point of view. The conclusions of this study substantiate that job insecurity is not only problematic for the individual employee or his/her company, but also for labour unions. After all, in three countries (Belgium, Italy and The Netherlands) job insecurity seems to be associated with a less favourable attitude towards unions (e.g. the perception to receive too little support) and with the intention to resign union membership. This underpins the idea that job insecurity may have a negative impact on unions’ membership file. 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 (e.g. De Witte, 2005c; Sverke et al., 2004). The negative consequences of job insecurity could be alleviated by extending the package of services offered to members. In a study of this issue, 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. This package of new services will not only reduce 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 among members. These new tasks will however also increase the workload of union activists and officials.

Some refining is in order, however. This study only looked at 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. The reactions of non-members to job insecurity were not discussed in this study. The outlined consequences for the unions are thus one-sided and incomplete. Future research will have to concentrate on analyzing the consequences of job insecurity for members as well as non-members, before more definite conclusions can be drawn.
References


Table 1. Job insecurity and background characteristics as predictors of perceived union support. Results of a regression analysis in four European countries.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictors</th>
<th>Belgium</th>
<th>Italy</th>
<th>The Netherlands</th>
<th>Sweden</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>-.16**</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.05*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>.13**</td>
<td>.13*</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>.10***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job Insecurity</td>
<td>-.15**</td>
<td>-.19**</td>
<td>-.14***</td>
<td>-.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F-Value</td>
<td>6.25***</td>
<td>7.80***</td>
<td>5.26**</td>
<td>7.35***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>df</td>
<td>(3, 472)</td>
<td>(3, 249)</td>
<td>(3, 691)</td>
<td>(3, 1727)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R</td>
<td>.19</td>
<td>.29</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R²</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

Table 2. Job insecurity, perceived union support and background characteristics as predictors of the intention to resign membership. Results of a regression analysis in four European countries.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictors</th>
<th>Belgium</th>
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<th>The Netherlands</th>
<th>Sweden</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>-.07</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job insecurity</td>
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<td>.06</td>
<td>.15*</td>
<td>.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Union support</td>
<td>/</td>
<td>-.34***</td>
<td>/</td>
<td>-.26***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F-value</td>
<td>2.75*</td>
<td>16.96***</td>
<td>3.25*</td>
<td>12.79***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>df</td>
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<td>(4, 467)</td>
<td>(3, 362)</td>
<td>(3, 692)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>.36</td>
<td>.19</td>
<td>.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R²</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* .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.

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2 The strong reduction of the sample in Belgium is due to the lack of information concerning the age of one third of the Belgium respondents. The impact of this reduction is probably limited, since an analysis with pair wise deletion of missing values (instead of list wise) reveals highly
similar results.