Greetings,

A few months ago you participated in a study about negotiations between a workers’ union and its parent company, and said that you would be interested in hearing about the results. We appreciate your help with our research, and we are happy to tell you about the findings. The study was administered by Alison Sullivan and Janie Busby under the supervision of Dr. Winnifred Louis. If you would like to ask questions, to comment on what you read, or to find out more, you can contact project staff by phoning (07) 3346 9515, by emailing w.louis@psy.uq.edu.au, or by writing to Dr. Winnifred Louis, School of Psychology, McElwain Building / University of Queensland / St. Lucia, QLD 4072. You can also read about other studies that we’ve done on opinion group norms at http://www.psy.uq.edu.au/~wlouis/.

SUMMARY OF RESULTS: MOTIVATIONS TO COOPERATE WITH HIGH AND LOW POWER UNIONS.

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WHAT WE WERE LOOKING FOR.

The primary goal of this study was to investigate whether belonging to a high power group or a low power group influences people’s willingness to cooperate with their own group or another group in a negotiations scenario. This study’s theoretical context is a model called “referent information influence” (Terry & Hogg, 1996), which says that the norms of groups you belong to (‘ingroups’) are very important in decisions, while the norms of groups that you don’t belong to (‘outgroups’) are generally unimportant in shaping attitudes. A contrasting model called “agentic normative influence” (Louis & Taylor, 2002) says that in conflict contexts, people do pay attention to both groups. Last year we ran a study using negotiations between a multinational corporation (high power) or a small local company (low power), and we found that the agentic normative influence model was supported. People were more likely to cooperate with their own group, especially when they identified strongly with that group, and that this was because they thought cooperative behaviours would benefit the group and themselves. People were more like to cooperate with the other group too however, not only when they did not identify with their own group, but also when they thought that choice would benefit their own group and themselves. High power participants were more likely to cooperate with the other group. This is an interesting finding that we wanted to ‘replicate’ (find again) in a different context.

The present study asked participants to imagine that they were an employee that belonged to a union that was lobbying against a company management team. Participants were informed that their union was strong, with a large membership and successful negotiation history (high power), or weak with a low membership and poor history of successful negotiating (low power). Then everyone was told that the union supported two options (A and B), and rejected two others (C and D). They were also informed that the management supported two options (A and C), and rejected two others (B and D). Then everyone was measured on how they viewed the different options.

SOME DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION ABOUT PARTICIPANTS

From May to August 2006, 112 students in first year undergraduate psychology completed the study for course credit (along with another study on reactions to a hate crime). Participants ranged in age from 17 to 46 (but 79% were 21 or younger). Most were women (76%), born in Australia (91%), and of White/European heritage (86%).
WHAT WE FOUND

1. IDENTIFICATION WITH A UNION. After being told to imagine that they were employees of either a high or low power union, participants were asked whether, in this situation, they would identify with the union, and feel a sense of commitment and solidarity. Overall, people tended to feel a sense of association, with 68% of participants stating that they would be committed, 62% that they identified with the company, and 76% that they would feel a sense of solidarity. These ratings tended to be higher for participants assigned to the high power union.

2. COOPERATION PATTERNS AMONG GROUPS. We then told participants that negotiators for their union had decided to support two of the options put forward (Options A and B) and reject the other two (C and D). They were also told that the negotiators for management endorsed two options (A and C) and rejected two others (B and D).

First we asked the participants how they thought other people would vote. As expected, people thought that union members would support the options supported by the union, and reject those not supported by this group. Similarly, they predicted that members of the management team would vote in line with the preferences of management, selecting and rejecting the options chosen and rejected by their group. Also, most people stated that they thought that the options that their union endorsed would benefit the union and themselves, and that those endorsed by management would probably harm their union and themselves.

Then participants were asked how they would vote in this situation. Most people supported the option both union and management supported (91%) and very few people supported the option both sides rejected (3%). Seventy-one percent of participants stated that they would support the option supported by their union but rejected by management, and only 29% of all participants supported a proposal rejected by their union and endorsed by management.

3. LINKS BETWEEN GROUP IDENTIFICATION, GROUP POWER AND COOPERATION. We were interested to see whether the power of the union in the scenario and participants’ identification with their union would affect their decision to support each of the options.

We found that people’s willingness to cooperate with the negotiators from their union was predicted by how much they identified with their union (their ingroup), but was not directly influenced by the power level of the company. Further analyses revealed that people who identified strongly were more likely to think that the options their negotiators supported would benefit the union, and more likely to think that the options that benefited the union would benefit themselves. Thus overall we found that people’s willingness to vote according to the suggestions of their own union could be predicted by (a) how much participants identified with their company; (b) this identification as mediated by the belief that such a decision would benefit the group; and (c) the effect of identification as mediated by the belief it benefits the self (through benefiting the group).

We then examined why people cooperated with the suggestions of management (the outgroup). Cooperation with the other group’s suggestions was unrelated to identification with their own group, unlike in the first negotiations study, and it was also unrelated to group power. Participants who thought cooperation would benefit their own union voted with the other group, and this was mediated by the belief that benefiting the union would benefit the self.
CONCLUSION

In this study we investigated whether belonging to a high or low power union affected how people cooperated with the endorsements of their own union and management. These results suggested that people are more likely to cooperate with their union when they identify with that group, because high identifiers think this would benefit the group and themselves. People were more likely to go along with the recommendations of the other group when they thought that choice would benefit their own group and themselves, but these perceptions were not systematically related to either power or identification, unlike in the first business negotiations study. Unfortunately we’re not sure exactly what explains the inconsistencies in study results! A third study follows …

THANKS AGAIN…

So that’s a description of what we found in this study. If you have any questions, or would like a copy of the longer write-up when we get that done (in several months) please get in touch. And thank you again for your participation and interest!