

REACHING UNION FAMILIES:  
COLLECTIVE IDENTITY, UNION ADVANTAGES  
AND THE AMERICAN ETHOS

---

A Thesis  
presented to  
the Faculty of the Graduate School  
at the University of Missouri-Columbia

---

In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts

---

by  
SARA ROBISON-PETROWSKY

Dr. Joan Hermsen, Thesis Supervisor

AUGUST 2007

The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School, have examined the thesis entitled

REACHING UNION FAMILIES:  
COLLECTIVE IDENTITY, UNION ADVANTAGES AND THE AMERICAN ETHOS

Presented by Sara Robison-Petrowsky

a candidate for the degree of master of arts,

and hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

---

Professor Joan Hermsen

---

Professor Jacquelyn Litt

---

Professor Martha Markward

---

Professor Paul Rainsberger

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project has been an amazing experience to me. I would like to dedicate the completion of this project to my family. I am grateful for their support. My dad is my muse in this project. For his intensity in life, his beliefs and commitment to labor became my basis for this project. He has been more influential than he may ever know. Our many conversations about politics and labor have greatly informed my opinions. My mother has always been one of the most supportive people in my life. She has encouraged me to push myself to the limits, to break through barriers and through it all remember who I am. Last but not least, my husband has been supportive through my experience of thesis writing and graduate school. It is his support and encouragement that has kept me sane over the years.

Through this project and graduate education, I have grown immensely in my scholarship. I would like to thank my advisor, Joan Hermsen, for the development of my critical thought and her dedication to my project and my scholarship. She has helped me bridge the borders of my academic life with my working class roots. She has been an amazing mentor and exemplar of the scholar and person that I hope to become. I also need to thank Jackie Litt without whom I would have never had the courage to pursue qualitative research. It was her encouragement that helped me believe that I was capable of this type of research. Paul Rainsberger has been very crucial to this project. In his knowledge of labor unions in this state has been very insightful during this project. His dedication to labor is inspirational for me. I would also like to thank Martha Markward who agreed to be part of this project at the last minute. I appreciated her recollections of being a fellow union and working class child.

Finally, I would like to thank the union families that allowed me to come into their lives and give them a different sort of voice. I enjoyed the experience of getting to know these people and how unions figure into their lives. The conversations with these families helped me understand my dedication to labor and solidified my belief in the importance of families to the future of unions.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	ii
ABSTRACT.....	vi
Chapter	
1. INTRODUCTION.....	1
2. METHODS .....	7
Participants	
Interviews	
Interview Guide	
Data Management	
Data Analysis	
Establishing Trust	
A Note on this Union	
3. FINDINGS .....	16
Theme 1: Benefits of Unions	
Theme 2: Power and Solidarity	
Theme 3: The American Ethos	
4. DISCUSSION .....	35
Summary	
Transmission of Collectivism	
Union Families	
The Future of Unions	
Constraints on Collectivism	

Border Work

Future Research

BIBLIOGRAPHY .....41

REACHING UNION FAMILIES:  
COLLECTIVE IDENTITY, UNION ADVANTAGES AND THE AMERICAN ETHOS

Sara Robison-Petrowsky

Dr. Joan Hermsen, Thesis Supervisor

ABSTRACT

The present study examines the beliefs of union family members. Through analysis of qualitative interviews with union members and their wives and adult children, I investigate three main themes: 1) the benefits of unions, 2) the relations between corporations and unions, and 3) subscription to the American ethos. Generally speaking, I found that all participants focused on lifestyle and consumption advantages to union membership. Many also noted the fringe benefits associated with union coverage such as health insurance and job security. Moreover, many of the participants cite the ongoing struggle for power between unions and corporations. In addition, while most of the participants profess a strong belief in individualism and the ability of individuals to make it on their own in American society, there is also a tendency to articulate a moderate sense of collective identity and the importance of structural constraints on economic opportunity.

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Labor unions are a significant component of the American economic landscape. Nationally, 1 in 8 or 12 percent of workers belongs to a union (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2007a). As recently as April 2007, approximately 12,000 workers participated in major work stoppages that resulted in over 101,000 days idle (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2007b).<sup>1</sup> Through significant struggle with employers over the last 80 years, unions have secured for both union and nonunion workers numerous workplace protections, including the 40 hour work week, overtime pay, and safe working conditions. And for union members, collective bargaining through unions has contributed to higher wages, sick leave and vacation days, and access to pension plans (for a review of research see Cornfield, 1991). Many of these benefits have spread to nonunion workers as well. Finally, unions offer a political voice for workers not only in the workplace, but also in politics (Freeman and Medoff, 1984).

Although only 12 percent of employed workers in the U.S. are members of unions, the majority of the U.S. public supports unions. According to a Pew Research Center survey from December 2006, 58 percent of respondents were favorable of labor unions and 68 percent agreed that labor unions are necessary to protect the working people (Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, 2007). These figures are higher than 20 years ago when only 45 percent of the public responded favorably to unions in a Cambridge Reports study from 1985 (Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, 2007). Yet, the current level of support is substantially lower than the 79 percent approval reported in a 1939 Gallup study (Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, 2007).

---

<sup>1</sup> Major work stoppage refers to those stoppages that involved 1,000 or more workers.

Although labor unions constitute an important part of the economic and political landscape, and have moderate support among the American public, they are, according to Cornfield and Clawson (1999), understudied by sociologists. Following Cornfield (1991) and Cornfield and Clawson (1999), the research that has been done can be broadly categorized into three areas: 1) the development of the U.S. labor movement; 2) the social, economic, and political impact of unionism; and 3) the decline and revitalization of the U.S. labor movement. Curiously missing from these discussions of unions is any mention of research on union families, with the exception of noting there is too little research on *intergenerational* social mobility due to unionism (Cornfield, 1991: 40).

This lack of research on union families is interesting, especially considering that the study of work and family as overlapping and mutually influencing institutions is pervasive in the sociological literature (e.g., Jacobs and Gerson, 2004; Williams, 2001). Union families are unique in that *collective bargaining* shapes the resources (income, pensions, fringe benefits) families can access. Thus both the political relationship between employers and workers, and the consequences of organized action, should be highlighted in the belief systems of union families, including union members, their spouses, and their children.

The present study examines the beliefs of union family members. Given the absence of in depth studies on union families (I could locate none done in the last 30+ years) this study is exploratory in design.<sup>2</sup> Through analysis of qualitative interviews with union members and their wives and adult children, I investigate three main themes: 1) the

---

<sup>2</sup> There are several studies of working class families, including for example *The Hidden Injuries of Class* (Sennett and Cobb, 1972), *Worlds of Pain* (Rubin, 1976), *Families on the Fault Line* (Rubin, 1994), and *Working Hard and Making Do* (Nelson and Smith, 1999). In this project, I am specifically interested in union families, which may self-identify as working or middle class.

benefits of unions, 2) the relations between corporations and unions, and 3) subscription to the American ethos. Generally speaking, I found that all participants focused on lifestyle and consumption advantages to union membership (e.g. vacations, paying for college). Many also noted the fringe benefits associated with union coverage such as health insurance and job security. Moreover, many of the participants cite the ongoing struggle for power between unions and corporations. In addition, while most of the participants profess a strong belief in individualism and the ability of individuals to make it on their own in American society, there is also a tendency to articulate a moderate sense of collective identity and the importance of structural constraints on economic opportunity.

Union families face the tension of two distinct ideologies, the union ideology of collectivism and U.S. dominant ideology of individualism. Collectivism for unions is based on a “common good” philosophy. Union members join forces in order to have the power of collective voice, the voice of many (Fantasia and Voss, 2004). On the other hand, individualism in American society is based on the idea that every citizen, through individual hard work and determination can find success in this country (Schwarz and Volgy, 1992). Indeed as Bellah (1985) states, “individualism lies at the very core of American culture” (p. 142). Union families are unique in that family economic well-being is tied closely to the belief in collectivism and the subsequent successful implementation of collectivist action. These same families, though, exist within a larger culture the places emphasis on individual merit and achievement. This project explores how this tension plays out in the beliefs held by members of union families.

I argue that parental values matter in shaping the political attitudes of their children. More precisely, I suggest that kids raised in union households should articulate a strong sense of collectivism due to the unique nature of their parents working in a firm that engages in collective bargaining to obtain resources. This will be seen through an expressed awareness of the intangible benefits of unions such as giving voice to workers, greater job security, and the basic knowledge that other workers will stand with you in your grievances with the firm. In addition, union kids, much like their parents, will express an awareness that there are constraints on equal opportunities and that collective action can help to give disadvantaged groups access to opportunities and rewards they may otherwise be denied.

Parents matter in the political socialization of their children, although how and to what extent is variable (Jennings, Stokes, and Bower, 2001). A classic article by M. Kent Jennings and Richard G. Niemi (1968) discusses the transmission of political values from parent to child. Their findings indicate that one's political party affiliation was the most likely of the tested political variables to be transmitted from parent to child. Also, political values that are abstract (e.g. Social justice is fundamental for a stable society) are less likely to be transmitted to children whereas political values that are concrete (e.g., all Americans have a right to vote) are more likely to be transmitted. The relationship between the parent and the child is also crucial. Children are more likely to value a parent as a role model if the parenting is not authoritarian or overly lenient and there is a sturdy system of support. The relationships that are solidly in this middle ground are more likely to foster the transmission of political ideals from parent to child (Jennings and Niemi, 1968). Yet another important consideration is the level of

politicization of the family. Families with higher levels of political activity and involvement are likely to influence their children, both directly and indirectly (Jennings and Niemi, 1987). And in a reexamination of political values transmission, Jennings, et al. (2001) found the presence of politically homogenous parents raised the dependability of transmission.

Communication patterns are deemed important by many scholars in the transmission of political ideas in the family (Chaffee, McLeod and Wackman 1973; Jennings 1983; Tims 1986; Valentino and Sears 1998). When a parent provides “constant and consistent cues”, she/he influences the transmission rate for political (or religious) traits. A parent’s high political commitment demonstrates to the family the importance of politics as well as supports political learning (Jennings et al., 2001:13). Additionally, the “stability” over time of the parent on a political issue, value, party or candidate influences the transmission of those ideals. If a parent is not stable on any particularities of politics, transmission will be weak while those parents with stable and unchanging support of certain ideologies will likely transmit those characteristics to their children (Jennings et al., 2001:16). According to Jennings, et al.(2001): “High levels of parental political engagement and family political discussions encourage parent-child consonance in orientation toward basic political objects such as the political parties and presidential candidates, or in attitudes on issues of heightened significance to the political controversies of the times, its effects are not felt on more peripheral matters” (17). Especially relevant to this project, research shows that the parental transmission of values surrounding big business versus organized labor has strengthened in recent decades as compared to the 1960’s (Jennings, Stoker and Bower, 2001). In summary, over 3

decades of research shows that parents do matter in the transmission of political values to their children (Jennings, Stoker, and Bower, 2001).

What does this all mean for union kids? Because union kids are raised in households where parents participate in a political process (union membership) through their jobs everyday, and whereby the well-being of families is dependent upon the collective strategies of the union to secure benefits and wages, I would expect union kids to possess a strong sense of collectivism. The degree of support for collectivism may vary by the level of engagement the parent shows in the union (e.g. taking on a leadership role, participating in union functions) and how prominent the union identity is for the parent. But nonetheless, I would expect that kids raised in these homes do hold at least a moderate level of support for the value of collectivism.

There are important reasons to be concerned about the transmission of collectivism as a core value. For instance, unions secure substantial tangible benefits for families, including health care and pensions. If unions continue to decline, in part due to the decline in collectivism as a political value, then more families may find themselves in precarious situations in terms of employment benefits. Also, union parents may also promote a sense of collectivism in their children that extends beyond the immediate tangible rewards families receive. Children raised in union households, although not necessarily in union jobs as adults, may be more likely to support broad-based initiatives such as universal health care, increases in the minimum wage, corporate pay reforms, and universal child care. Union kids may be an obvious source of support for these types of actions.

## CHAPTER TWO: METHODS

The study reported here relied on qualitative interviews with union families. In this section I outline the sample studied, the interview process, data management and analysis, and the issue of rapport.

Participants: The participants of this study were required to be union members, a spouse of a union member or an adult child of a union member. In order recruit participants for this study, I went to a union meeting in August 2006. Prior to the start of the meeting, I introduced my project and asked for volunteers. I left information sheets with my contact information at the meeting. Also, the union secretary for this plant sent out an e-mail to the membership on the plant listserv with the information sheet. I interviewed a few families in the first few weeks following the presentation of the project at the August union meeting. I interviewed the union member that I had made the initial contact with and one of his children. The next family was recruited through a social network. I had several respond based on my brief presentation at the meeting and also several that responded from the information posted on the listserv.

I was contacted by e-mail or telephone by 19 different families. I interviewed nine of these families however only eight families' interviews, comprised of 25 total interview subjects, were used in the data analysis of this project. Only one of the respondents that contacted me did not have children. There were a few families that only had children under 18.

The biggest problem that I encountered in recruiting subjects was scheduling conflicts. Some of the workers work rotating schedules where they have different hours

every week. Others worked second shift which interfered with my school schedule. Other conflicts arose as well. Some of the families with children over 18 still had other younger children in the home that were involved in many activities. Several of the families had adult children that lived out of the area, at times even out of state. This caused an additional issue with scheduling. A few of them decided not to participate because it would be too hard to coordinate all of the schedules involved. For one of the families I had scheduled two different attempts at an interview. Both of these attempts were marred by illness. Still yet, there were a few that did not wish to attempt a face to face interview and wished only to fill out a survey.

All of the respondents for this project were self-identified as White/Caucasian, some identifying specific European roots. All of the parents interviewed were in their mid-to-late 40's to early-to-mid 50's. The adult children ranged in age from 18 to 30. With a few exceptions, all of the respondents self-identified as Christians. Six of the respondents lived outside of the Mid-Missouri region. Of this group, three adult children live out of state. Two other adult child respondents lived in Missouri but outside of the Mid-Missouri region. Additionally, one of the parents also lived in Missouri but outside of the central area.

The Johnson family was the first family that I worked with. The father has been a union member for 24 years and has held various leadership roles within the union. His daughter was also interviewed. She is 19 and a college sophomore.

Another family interviewed for this project was the Berry's. The Berry family is made up of a father, mother and two adult children. The father is a 24 year member of the union and has held leadership roles in the union. The mother is an administrative assistant

in the local school district. The daughter is 22 and graduated college in May and the son is a recent high school graduate that has entered the work force in a union job.

From the Wright family, I interviewed the father and one of the sons. The father has been a union member for 32 years and has held various leadership positions within the union. His son is 25 and currently attending college.

The Malone family consists of a father, mother and two daughters. For this project, I interviewed the parents and one of the daughters. The father has been a union for 8 years. The mother is employed as a licensed practical nurse. Their daughter is a recent college graduate that had started a new job just prior to the interview.

In the Carter family, both parents are union members. They work at the same plant but are represented by two separate unions. Mr. Carter has been a union member for 20 years while Mrs. Carter has been a member for 22 years. They were both interviewed for this project. Their son, a college freshman in the fall of 2006, was also interviewed.

Additionally, I interviewed the Clark family. The father has been a union member for 24 years. The mother is an administrative assistant at a local construction firm. The three adult children have all completed college and are all now in various places in their graduate career. Their ages range from 24-30.

From the Peterson family, I interviewed a father and son. The son works in the plant where my information sheet was posted and where I received most of my participants. His father works for the same company but is represented by another union. The son has been in the union for 5 years while the father has been in the union for 30 years.

For the Friedrich family, I interviewed both parents and their two daughters. The father has been in the union for 24 years. The mother is a teacher in a nearby school

district. Both daughters are college graduates and continuing their education in graduate school.

Interviews: Data for this project was collected through face-to-face interviews. Most of the interviews were conducted in the homes of the respondents. There were three interviews that were conducted in parks. Additionally, there were also seven interviews conducted through other means. Because I was unable to find families that had all children and parents in the Central Missouri region, I had to conduct telephone and e-mail interviews with respondents that were out of the area. I felt that in all circumstances the respondent was comfortable with the arrangement that we made. During and throughout the course of the interviews, only the interviewees and I were present.

The adult children were all interviewed alone while most of their parents were interviewed in pairs. When this issue first came up, I decided that the respondents could make the decision on whether they could be interviewed together. However, I was concerned about a couple of different issues. I feared initially that the husbands would talk over their wives and not allow for their full participation. I also was worried that either party, but particularly the women would not express their opinions fully. I was also concerned that I was not including the wives in some of the questions, especially those about union membership as the fathers/husbands were primarily the union members. Only one of the wives was also a union member. Additionally, I was not sure how to handle the dynamics of interviewing two people at once. My first dual interview was the family with children under 18. I used this interview as a pilot interview to understand how to approach the other dual interviews. I decided that I would discontinue the interview if any issues arose. All of the husband/wife interviews went very smoothly. I

was also very excited to have most of the wives participate because I went into this project with the assumption that few of the wives would participate.

The private interviews ensured confidentiality of the respondent. The interviews generally lasted around an hour; however there were also cases in which the interview lasted two full hours, although, most of the lengthy interviews were with a husband and wife. All of the interviews were voice recorded.

Field notes are of great importance to qualitative work. In this study, I recorded notes from a completed interview immediately following the session. This exercise occurred in private and not during the course of the interview. In a few instances, I voice recorded my field notes while driving home from an interview. I reviewed these notes during the analysis. I find that the notes are very handy for recalling a respondent's mood and moments in the interview that I found exciting or frustrating.

Interview Guide: My primary area of interest in this project was to uncover similarities and differences in generational attitudes toward labor unions, collective action, and getting ahead in America. The interview guide was constructed to determine if the children and parents think about these issues in a similar manner. Additionally, I wished to determine how the union lifestyle influences political beliefs and participation.

My interview guide consisted of five distinct areas of inquiry. The first questions covered demographic information. The respondents were asked to self-identify their age, race, ethnicity, sex or gender, religious affiliation, education level and marital status. The second portion of the interview was over union membership. There were questions about length of membership, union action and history as well as traditions and benefits that unions offer. Additionally, all respondents were asked if they would voluntarily join a

union in their jobs. The third section of the interview guide was designed to see if the respondent held ideals that lean toward collective behavior. The questions revolved around worker rights, social good and politics. The next portion of the interview asked questions about the respondent's thoughts on individualism. This segment queried the respondent's feelings about elements of the American Dream, education and success in the American work place. The final section of the interview seeks answers about the family unit and its participation in union life.

Data management: I observed the confidentiality of the interviewee by the use of pseudonyms that I recorded separately for interview materials in an evolving log of participants. In order to protect the integrity of these materials, the field notes were transcribed and stored electronically in multiple places (e.g., CDR, USB drive, hard drive). These materials were stored and organized using the participant's pseudonym, date of interview and a family surname pseudonym. The materials were stored as paper copies and organized in the same fashion as the electronic versions.

The interviews were transcribed from the voice recording. The transcripts were stored and organized in the same manner as the above-mentioned field notes with both hard and electronic copies. The interviews were transcribed in their entirety, using the language of the respondent.

Data Analysis: I coded the data from my interviews with a system of thematic coding. I started with discussing which themes I recalled from the initial interviews. My first thoughts were on dividing the families into groups based on their participation in and dedication to union life. However, I began to notice that members in families that I had decided were not engaged were using the same language to talk about unions as those

families that I described as dedicated. It was at this point that some themes began to emerge. Additionally, I kept a manual of all codes as I progressed through the coding process. As with the field notes, the code manual will be electronically stored through various measures.

In order to demonstrate the themes and important findings of my research, I used selective coding as well as verbatim quotes. Selective coding is a process that occurs towards the end of the research project. By this point, I will have established themes in the data that merit reporting. Through selective coding, I chose cases that help support my main themes (Neuman, 2000). In addition, verbatim quotes helped to reveal the themes and important points to the audience.

Additionally, I feel that using experiential analysis improves my interpretation of this project. My upbringing in a union family and a member of the working class gives me a perspective that is considerably different from a researcher of a different class that would be conducting “top down” research. I understand the language and situations of union families. I recall strikes, layoffs and contract negotiations. Because of my life circumstance, I feel that I am able to understand my informants in a way that other researchers could not.

Establishing trust: One challenge that I faced in my interviews was establishing legitimacy and trust with the union members. For the first couple of interviews, I had met the participants through a network of pro-union people and from my presentation at the above mentioned union meeting. I also marched with this union in the Labor Day parade in hopes of showing my dedication, gaining trust and legitimacy as well as participants for this study. I also brought my dad, who introduced me to the importance of labor

unions, to this event. I felt that this also helped my legitimacy because he could talk shop with those members that I had already met and help others understand how I became involved in labor. Establishing rapport with these participants was not an issue; these folks already knew my dedication to labor unions.

However, I later began talking to people that I had not met through this network and therefore had to prove myself. Much has been written about the challenges of interviewing elites with their unique position in power hierarchies and their resistance to participating in research (see Odendahl and Shaw, 2002 for example), with the implication often being that the “powerless” have less to lose by participating in interviews. For that reason I did not expect the union members I interviewed to question my motives. But they did, and this very fact sheds light on the precarious condition labor faces in this country.

In one such interview, I had been talking with this couple for about 10 minutes when the union member, after answering my question about the union activity he has witnessed, asked me when he got to ask me questions. I was thrown off by this. I asked him what he wanted to know. He proceeded to ask me about what my interest was in labor unions. I took the time to explain to him my family background, my research interests and a few key points (in my opinion) on the future of the labor movement in this country. After my explanation, he says, “I was just curious because young people aren’t interested in labor.” In the phrasing and tone of the question, however, I felt that he wanted to know if I was anti-labor. I also had a member who was in disbelief that someone actually wanted to talk to him about his membership in a labor union. After his interview, we talked about labor issues and the future of the movement. He *thanked* me

for taking the time to study this issue. He was so excited to see interest in unions from a young person (which was the sentiment of many other members too).

To put this in perspective, there was no challenge to my legitimacy from any of the union children. They accepted at face value that I was a researcher completing a requirement for a graduate degree. However, in one case, one family had to convince their daughter that, despite her self-proclaimed lack of knowledge on unionism, she was still helping my understanding of children of union workers.

A Note on This Union: This union was organized in 1940. Between the years 1965 and 1975, the union had four strikes as the company attempted to weaken worker rights. There have been no strikes in this union since 1975. The union continued to grow and now represents nearly 2,000 employees in Illinois, Iowa and Missouri. On an important note, this union represents highly paid, highly skilled workers in a sticky industry. This means that these workers are at a little risk of offshoring because their work must be done in the area. In addition, nearly 30 percent of the labor force in this utility industry is unionized, and rates of unionization have been stable for nearly 30 years. Finally, this union is housed in an employment-at-will state.

## CHAPTER THREE: FINDINGS

### *Theme 1: Benefits of Unions*

It is well established that unions offer workers greater access to secure, living wages as well as fringe benefits such as health care and pension plans (Cornfield, 1991). This was confirmed in my conversations with union kids who, in response to my questions about the benefits of unions, typically focused their responses on fringe benefits and good pay.

In nearly every interview with an adult child, medical insurance is cited as a benefit of union membership. One union kid puts it like this, “Health care is tremendous. Back when I was a sophomore (in high school) I had to have surgery (to correct a major health concern) and the insurance covered it. It was about a \$20,000 surgery.” Others talk about the co-pay with prescription medications and being able to visit the dentist regularly. One respondent says, “We don’t have to pay very much for prescriptions.” She continues by talking about how she and her brother always “got to go to the dentist.” Another respondent says, “I could go to the doctor, you know, and it was a \$5 co-pay.”

This attention to medical insurance may reflect their awareness that millions of people in the U.S. are uninsured (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007) and that the cost of health care has increased dramatically in recent years (National Coalition on Health Care, 2007). Medical insurance is also tangible in the sense that these union kids had access to health care when they were younger as needed for everything from routine checkups to major surgery; this differs from pensions which the adult kids won’t realize directly but only indirectly through their parent’s retirement income. Additionally, many of these adult

child participants are entering the work force and may be purchasing their own policies while others are minimally covered by the higher education institutions that they work for as students, and some may be realizing that their tenure on their parents' insurance plans are nearly over.

The wages of a union worker also do not go unnoticed by their children, not so much though for the living wage per se but rather for the access to middle class consumption practices. Many of the children identify their homes and lifestyles as product of a good paying union job. During the course of one interview, the participant asks me to look around at their home (implying that this is what union wages can buy). He also cited various vacations they were able to take and the fact that his dad was able to "provide everything we ever needed." Another says that he was afforded a private education in part because of union wages. Other participants cite going to professional and collegiate sporting events. One such participant says this, "Our big thing is that we go to Mizzou games." Still another talks about his participation on a hockey team.

Union wages matter for the consuming they afford the union kids. Sociologists generally agree that consumption practices may signify class standing (Bourdieu, 1984: 282). As noted with these adult children, their consumption practices are more inline with those of the middle class than the working class. They have been afforded the opportunity to travel, live in middle class neighborhoods and have the economic and cultural resources needed to obtain a college education. The spread middle-class lifestyle has consequences for unions, especially in drawing people into discussions about (much less organizing around) justice, fairness, and equality in the workplace. As Bottero (2005) says, "once everyone has a TV, computer games and holidays in Ibiza, class

inequalities seem less significant” (p. 128). Furthermore as discussed by Fantasia and Voss (2004), in the post-WWII America, the middle class would rise to notoriety as the “true universal class” (p. 57). This has led to mass consumption based on a desire to be included in the American dream and a distinct approval of “competitive individualism” (Fantasia and Voss, 2004: 57), an ideology that emerges again and again in discussions with union kids and parents.

In addition to health care and good wages, some unions kids also made mention of the union providing a safe working environment. One daughter said, “They are necessary when you work in a dangerous job...are necessary for the health and well being of the workers.” Another adult child claims that she can rest assured that her father is safe at work because the union works to keep them safe on the job.

Another topic that comes up in discussion of the benefits of union jobs is job protection or security. This subject is explained in various ways. “...being a member of the union have protected, you know, my parents’ employment...,” says one union kid whose parents are both members of a union. In his own experience as a union worker, one adult child talks about job protection as a mechanism that protects him from being arbitrarily fired. This is put by another child as “being fired on the spot.” It is also mentioned that American labor unions protect American jobs from going overseas. Fair treatment is also discussed by the union kids. As one daughter put it, “(they have) someone to go to if they’re being treated unfairly.”

Job security and job protection are central issues for organized labor. Changes in the economic landscape over the last thirty years of have been challenging for American labor. Factors such as deindustrialization, technological changes, trade imbalances,

immigration, and offshoring all impact the employment security of American workers, and blue-collar and union workers in particular (Danziger and Gottschalk, 1995). The share of employment in manufacturing jobs has declined substantially over time. Indeed, over two million manufacturing jobs were between 1997 and 2002 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007). With the advent of trade agreements such as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA, now known as CAFTA-DR with the addition of the Dominican Republic), U.S. businesses are able to move their manufacturing plants to Mexico and other countries in Central America. Not only will these countries provide a cheap source of labor, these American businesses are able to “import” the manufactured goods without facing a tariff. Relatedly, according to the U.S. Department of Commerce (2007) the trade deficit has increased substantially over the last twenty years (although not as quickly now as even three years ago). This suggests that there is lower demand for U.S. made goods around the globe and hence a lower demand for the output of U.S. workers. Additionally, immigration to this country has increased dramatically since the 1970’s with more than 40 percent of immigrants coming to this country during the 1990s (U.S. Census, 2007). Although for some, immigrants are seen as competition for jobs (even one my interview subjects discussed this without being solicited), many in the U.S. labor movement have identified immigrants as a key force for future organizing (Cornfield and Clawson, 1999). Finally, offshoring threatens employment security by moving U.S. jobs overseas. Whether this is a real threat to U.S. workers is unclear as systemic data is not yet available. And, it is unlikely utilities workers are under threat because, as a report by the National Academy

of Public Administration shows, the utility industry lags well behind most other industries when it comes to off-shoring (Norwood et al, 2006).<sup>3</sup>

In addition to job security, my respondents discussed job protection or the ability to file a grievance with the employer without threat of firing. Fantasia and Voss (2004) argue that the Taft-Hartley Act altered the nature of unionism in the United States from a more radicalized, militant unionism with an ideology of class struggle to a bureaucratic “push-button” unionism where formal grievance procedures replaced strikes and class struggle as a theme was diminished (p. 55). The focus of the kids on these procedural issues like regulations for safe workplaces or filing grievances is consistent with the nature of unions today. The presence of these procedures, though, may contribute to the lower sense of unionism than one might expect among these union kids.

When discussing the benefits of union membership with the parents, many of their responses were similar to those recognized by their children as benefits of union employment. Nearly every member cited their wages, major medical plan, sick leave and vacation. Many also discussed seniority rights and pension plans. Still yet, there is much talk about safe working conditions and job security. One long-time member compares union membership to buying car insurance, “I don’t mind paying the monthly union dues, in case I ever need them (the union).” Another member says, “...I mean eight hour days, overtime, social security, public schools, a list of things that have come about, OSHA, because of unions in America today.” One wife had this to say, “The union has afforded us a lifestyle that, that’s very comfortable...I was able to stay home with the kids because we knew that is what I wanted.” Other wives and members discussed sending their

---

<sup>3</sup> Only recently has the federal government begun to track offshoring of jobs, as of yet, there are no firm numbers on the extent of offshoring.

children to college and helping them out when they can. Additionally, some of the more active members cited “a voice in the work place” and “the benefit to organize.”

### *Theme 2: Power and Solidarity*

The second theme to emerge from the data was about the relationship between corporations and unions, or employers and workers. Some of the children talk about corporate business and the potential threat they pose to organized labor. One says that unions “protect the workers from big corporations abusing them and not giving them the rights they deserve.” Another believes that unions are necessary to “provide a check and balance to big corporations. They will try to get the cheapest labor which isn’t always the best price for us.” For others, corporations are dangerous in the political realm also. This is illustrated by one daughter’s statement, “There are some political parties that are all for big businesses where they are going to make the rich man richer and the poor people poorer, and I don’t think that’s right.” Another daughter shares a similar sentiment as she discusses how big business and tax breaks wrecks havoc on the middle class and working people. She concludes with, “Republicans are trying to do away with labor unions.”

During the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, workers across the globe were attempting to gain political and economic rights. These struggles often resulted in quarrels with employers as well as state authorities (Hechter, 2004: 401). The working class gained political influence in Europe but never reached that potential in the United States and Canada (Hechter, 2004: 402,411). In the United States by the 1850’s, the Republican ideology of free labor considered work in relation to the market and not in terms of politics. This represents the shift from the Revolutionary-era ideal that framed “work as

production by free citizens of useful goods for the benefit of the community (Glenn, 2002: 67).” In the U.S, unlike its European counterparts, the government did not intervene or regulate the practices of businesses (Fantasia and Voss, 2004:37)

In 1935, the National Labor Relations Act was passed. This act fortified the worker’s right to form unions in a government-audited election process. Additionally, a major strike incident in Flint, Michigan led General Motors to allow workers to organize. Soon to follow were other major corporations of the day such as U.S. Steel and Chrysler. This momentum was rocked by U.S. involvement in World War II. Through the cry of a “national emergency,” workers’ militancy and the solidarity of unions were diminished. As a wartime tactic to ensure production of goods, both the AFL and the CIO pledged no-strike policies. This policy was then enforced by the War Labor Board. In 1947, the Taft-Hartley Act was passed. This act was authored by corporate attorneys and passed by a dutiful congress. The Taft-Hartley Act was meant to revoke the worker rights put forth by the National Labor Relations Act a mere 12 years before. The Act made a union’s certification process more difficult, encouraged members to file grievance with management instead of their representatives, outlawed the “closed shop” and allowed states to make their own laws regarding the unionization of workers (Fantasia and Voss, 2004: 42-51).

To say the least, unionization is something that corporations have not taken lightly. They have fought tooth and nail every step of the way. Nonetheless, labor unions in the United States have still managed to secure rights and benefits such as safe working conditions, fair compensation and fringe benefits. From the beginning of the labor movement in this country, politics and the belief in unrestricted capitalism have been

very influential. As stated before, prior to the National Labor Relations Act, the U.S. government never sought the regulation of business practices. During the era of the Great Depression, labor was able to make outstanding gains in regards institutionalizing unions in the American workplace. At this dismal point in our history, Americans were seeking salvation from despair. They found this in the progressive programs of President Roosevelt. Furthermore, business was able to find their audience with later political regimes and successfully decreased the power of American labor unions. Given the politically contentious history of corporations, labor, and the state, it is no wonder the union kids spoke strongly and negatively about corporations.

As with the conversations I had with the adult children, corporations were also discussed in the interviews with the members and their spouses. One member discusses corporations in relation to labor laws, he says, “As soon as labor money and the organization disappears, the corporate America is going to buy those laws back.” Additionally, this member talks about the “Wal-mart way of doing business” which he claims is hiring a majority of your workers as part-time but getting them to work full-time hours. This strategy enables them to avoid providing benefits to their employees. Another talks about compensation practices in corporate America this way, “When you see guys making the amount of money that they make and the amount of bonuses they make, turn around and say, ‘We can’t afford to give you a pay raise this year’ but they give themselves a seven figure bonus. Without that (organized labor), we’d be working for nothing. It would be bad.”

Although the union I studied worked under a no strike clause, there were still opportunities for collective action and these appear to have had significant meaning in the

lives of the union kids. There are several mentions of different solidarity rallies that occur around contract negotiation time. One daughter recalls her dad coming home from running errands with a brand new black shirt. She says that this struck her because her father never bought clothing for himself. She says that she then began to pester him about what was going on. For this particular occasion, the black shirt was part of an organized rally for solidarity. This rally comes up in several of the interviews. There are mentions of other organized behavior such as wearing camouflage pants, wearing neckties over work apparel and clocking in a few minutes late as a group.

The no-strike clause is one way that companies attempt to strong arm attempts by labor unions to gain and retain fair practices for their membership. As Dixon and Martin (2007) claim, “organized labor is only as strong as its capacity to disrupt the production of goods and services (p.36-37).” The strike is one of the best ways that unions are able to demonstrate that they should be taken seriously and have the support of a dedicated membership. The disruption in service or production takes the cause to the company. It demands their attention. Without the right to strike, there is little for the union to threaten to make the company bend to its demands (Dixon and Martin, 2007: 37). In these situations, unions must look to other fronts in order to organize their membership and find solidarity amongst them. The union that I worked with did a number of solidarity rallies in which the membership was to wear a matching article of clothing. In this case, the article of clothing was a black shirt. While this may seem trivial for a union that is afforded the right to strike, this is key component in this union’s struggle for their workers. Just as strikes are central for me in my understanding of my dad’s union life,

these forms of collective action appear to have taken on meaning for these kids. The clothing, for these union kids, is a symbol of collective identity.

There are many different words and phrases used by the adult children to describe unions. One believes that it is “like a fraternity” while another states that it is “everybody for a common goal.” One of the adult children who is now employed as a union laborer says this, “there’s a brotherhood... (We) watch each others’ backs.” Another sees it this way, “They (unions) offer a support system, you know, you don’t feel so alone.” Still yet, others described the union as “power in numbers,” “strength in numbers” and being “bound” together.

Although union kids invoke the language of unions they generally appear unaware of the larger issues confronting unions today. Their discussions of the benefits of unions at times made comparisons with non-unionized work, but not with the status of unions in the more recent or distant past or the challenges facing unions today in maintaining those benefits. For example, the fact that a smaller and smaller share of the American workforce is unionized never came up, with one exception. One respondent had taken a labor class during college and was able to quote a percentage of U.S. workers in unions and also specifically mentioned the decline in raw numbers. This lack awareness for declining union membership and threats to collective bargaining may reflect the industry under study here. As noted earlier, nearly 30 percent of utilities workers are unionized, and rates of unionization have been fairly stable in this industry. An awareness of declining union power, however, was shown by a few children that mentioned losses during contract negotiations. In one such interview, the respondent

says, “They actually lost these apprenticeship programs in the last collective bargaining agreement.”

In my conversations with union members, I find that many of them cite very specific items that illustrate the decline of unionism in the U.S. Many of the members discussed the contract concessions that they have made over the years with their employers. One member says, “In the 25 years, I’ve been with the company, three years ago (last contract), was the first year that we didn’t get no raise.” Another member, when asked about the concessions during contract negotiations, put it like this, “I guess we got into regressive bargaining.” Included in the regressive bargaining in recent negotiations was the loss of an apprenticeship program, a loss mentioned by several workers. On-the-job training has historically been a hallmark of union employment. But under the new system of unionism in the U.S., many apprenticeship programs are being lost in contract negotiations. Union parents interpret these concessions as losses and frequently discussed the power struggle unions and corporations engage in. As one says, “...when you got a good contract and the company lives by it and we have the power to make them live by it. My low points have been in the last...contract, as soon as we signed...they (the company) were already wanting to change things.”

The power struggle with the company is not the only point of contention within the union. Those members who strongly identify with the union, who feel solidarity with their fellow members, find it hard to understand why others do not wish to be that involved with issues that affect them. Several members cited what they call the “90/10” rule. This means that 10 percent of the membership is active, “does the (union) work”, so to speak for the other 90 percent of the membership. One member cites “fast-paced

lifestyles” of people today as a reason why there is not staunch support from the entire membership. While not specifically mentioned, I believe that politics may also come into play in limiting participation. During the course of one interview, a member tells me, “I don’t mix my union affiliation with my political affiliation.” Furthermore, one member’s wife tells me that she believes that unions “get their nose into too many things, especially politics.” Her spouse reflects this sentiment by stating, “My union really doesn’t influence the way that I vote.” This couple even talks about how people refer to them as single-issue voters. There were many issues that were discussed as more influential to political participation than labor union issues, namely abortion and national defense.

As with the union kids, the union members themselves also invoked the language of solidarity in their discussions with me. However, the difference was that the members did so with greater emotion and commitment in their voices to the idea. One describes it like this, “you have some pretty close ties with...your other workers. You know, ‘we’re all in this together’ type of thing...they stick together on issues, you know what I mean.” This member goes on to talk about his “union brothers” and the camaraderie they have at work. Many members also talk about their commitment to labor unions. One member, who is heavily involved with labor and union-related activities talks about his commitment like this, “I do these things because I feel that I owe the union for what the union has given me and my family. I feel like that is an obligation I have as a union member.” Another expresses his dedication this way, “...if the union says we are going to strike, even if that means losing my job, then that’s what I will do.” Others talk about their desire to continue their leadership roles within the union and the labor movement. One member says this, “I would find something in a labor movement to continue the

cause. I mean, I , I'm absolutely committed to it.” Another member talks about wanting to continue moving up in the leadership of the union.

Solidarity rallies are a common part of labor unions. This is a common union activity prior to and during the contract negotiations with the company. Many interviews included a discussion about the black t-shirt solidarity rally. The membership came to work in black shirts and stood together in the parking lot before work. One member talks about the power of this demonstration as the company employees (non-union) had to walk between the black-clad members to enter the plant. Another mentions a solidarity event in which the membership met in the parking lot and came into work a few minutes after their scheduled start time. The members came in at once which made the clocking in process slower than normal and was used to show the company management that these workers were a force to be reckoned with. The workers were docked for their tardiness. One member recounts this event as “a badge of honor.”

### *Theme 3: The American Ethos*

The American ethos, as discussed by Schwarz and Volgy (1992), is the “deeply engrained” belief that “in a free society, people showing individual responsibility and diligence will get ahead” (3). It is said that the American ethos came about as a result of the diversity of early Americans. Without a shared history, language, culture or heritage Americans looked for other ways to solidify their mutual nationality. Therefore, the national birthright became “a shared philosophy founded upon a belief in the promise, possibility and progress of the individual (Schwarz and Volgy, 1992: 7).” The American ethos was popularized during the late nineteenth century by Horatio Alger. In his fictional

writing of rags-to-riches tales directed toward juvenile audiences, the main character achieves great success in a triumph over adversity. In one such tale, the main character is told, “I hope, my lad, you will prosper and rise in the world. You know in this free country poverty early in life is not bar to a man’s advancement...Remember that your future position depends mainly on yourself and that it will be as high or low as you chose to make it.”

In my interview questionnaire, I ask the following question, “Do you believe that a person, any person, can pull themselves up by their bootstrap?” I wanted to find out how strongly my participants believed in this American ideal of the “rags to riches” success stories. This question was asked to measure the respondent’s belief in the so-called “American Dream,” which an integral part of the American ethos.

The response of the adult children was overwhelming positive. Most of them believed that one could pull herself up by her bootstrap. This demonstrates the pervasiveness of this American ideology. In my conversation with one adult child, he says that people need to “buck up and do their thing just like everyone else.” Another respondent says, “...I think that people need to go out there and get jobs and they shouldn’t be relying on the government and us, the people that work to support them.” Another says that if you “put your mind to it...and (have) determination” then anything is possible. To illustrate his point, he claims that, “anyone can become President of the United States.” This statement expresses the sentiment of the American ethos that anyone and everyone is included; that “all can belong no matter what their background or station” (Schwarz and Volgy, 1992: 7).

A few of the child respondents make qualifying statements in their answers. Their initial response was almost always “yes” anyone can get ahead in America followed by an explanation of support. This explanation of support was usually followed by a qualifier claiming that perhaps some people were not able to pull themselves up. For instance, one respondent said, yes, but qualified by saying “but unions can help.” In one of the more surprising responses to the bootstrap question, the respondent says, “I also understand that there are instances where, for whatever reason, you can’t, but I am not sure how much I believe in that.” She continues by adding, “...pick yourself up and then ask for help.” These respondents believe in the abundance of opportunity and few if any obstacles to prevent taking advantage of opportunities.

I found that the disbelief in the idea of the bootstrap was fairly rare. In one family, all three of the adult child respondents answered no to this question. However, their ‘no response’ has varying degrees. One claims that, “I think there are people in this world that no matter how hard they tried could not better themselves without help, whether it’s due to their socioeconomic situation or personal character” while another claims, “Most people can keep their born station. Exceptionally talented or untalented people can rise or fall in the socioeconomic spectrum...The farther down you start; the harder it is to get to the ‘top’”. Then, there is this unexpected response of, “Heck no. It can happen, but the idea that anyone can become great from effort alone is silly. At the very least, there usually has to be luck too. The American meritocracy is a myth!”

In analyzing this data, I was struck at the degrees in which people clutch to this idea that hard work and determination can get you anything. I also found it very interesting that those who qualified or outright answered “no” still used language that

was very focused on the individual. The use of words such as luck, talent, personal character were used in the negative answers illustrate the tendency to still lean toward individualized notions of success and failure. When we accept the American ethos, there is an inference “personal inadequacies” prevent people from achieving success (Schwarz and Volgy, 1992: 8).

Another interesting point in this conversation based on the idea of the bootstrap is that when the respondents are asked about whether or not they believe a person is solely responsible for their lot in life, they are more willing to allow room for circumstance. For example, the respondent who had told me that “anyone could be president” had this to say, “It depends, I think...cause you have people that work hard to get where they’re at and to me it also seems that there are people who...it’s been given to them.” This sentiment demonstrates to me that he does understand inequality to some extent, even if he only recognizes those located above him in the social hierarchy.

Additionally, many of the respondents, even the staunchest supporters of the bootstrap ideology, decided circumstance had something to do with it. One respondent puts it like this, “No, there are always circumstances that you can’t overcome...you can apply this across the board.” Another says, “If you are born to rich parents, then you are rich, if you are born to poor parents, then you are poor...but at the same time, if you were born with nothing, it’s hard, you know, to rise above that.”

There are responses to this question that follow perfectly to the previous question. One respondent claims, “You gotta have the will to do something, like you gotta believe in yourself...that you can do it.” In his answer to this question, he gives an anecdotal story about the father of one of his friends. Apparently, this man has a rags-to-riches

story that is utterly convincing for him. Two other respondents could not decide where they fell on this question, but still ended up with answers that suggested that they were not sold on the idea of circumstance. One of them says, "...if they don't try ...and always give up then you're not going to get anywhere."

When I reviewed the parents' answers to the bootstrap question and the follow-up, I was surprised to find that most of them answered in some variation of "yes." This positive answer was in almost all cases followed by a statement in regard to assistance. The union members themselves were more likely than their spouses to give some sort of qualifying statement. For example, one respondent said, "...I think that people can...uh, that doesn't mean that they shouldn't be helped" while his spouse recounted that she watched her father pull himself up by the bootstrap. Another member says, "Yes, but I think you can get somebody down hard that it's going to take a big effort. They might not be able to do it by their selves, it's going to take some help." His spouse says that it is possible if, "they are determined enough." There is at least one member that cannot make a judgment on this question, one way or another. He says, "I don't know about any circumstance. I won't go as far as to say that." He does continue with by saying that he hopes that everyone who is able "can get a job and try to support themselves." Even still with the consideration of circumstance and assistance, the sentiment here is still intertwined with the American ethos ideal that able-bodied persons, through hard work and determination, are able to secure success for themselves (Schwarz and Volgy, 1992: 7,8).

In this group, there were also a few parents who did not believe in the ideal of pulling oneself up by the bootstrap. In one instance, a respondent tells me that he does not

believe that statement to be true, but he does say that “it depends on the individual.” The two others that expressed disbelief were a married couple. This couple has a very different history than many of the other parents. The union member worked in a non-union chemical plant for nearly 15 years before he landed a union job. They had experienced a considerable lift in their socioeconomic status after he began working in a union plant. Thus, their opinion was that it is impossible to pull oneself up without some sort of help, whether it come from family, friends or the government. To this bootstrap question, he says, “Those people saying that they pulled themselves up alone, well, I don’t know if I believe that. They must be forgetting someone...help that they got along the way.”

In the follow up question to the bootstrap conversation, I asked the parents, as I asked their children, how they felt about a person’s responsibility for their position in life. The family that expressed disbelief in the bootstrap again said that receiving help was a major factor in someone’s position. Generally speaking, this question was answered by the parents in a very similar manner that the adult children answered. It seemed that they were more willing to allow for circumstance. For example, one respondents claims, “Not necessarily...You know, you can be going along good and ...something our of your control will happen, you know, and there’s nothing you can do about it.” Another member puts it this way, “...there’s a lot of things that people can’t help...some people just have bad luck or situations occur where, you know, of no fault of their own, they struggle.” Even though this sentiment is allowing for difficult situations, the respondent still seems to contemplate the individual nature in this question. There were also cases where people focused in on personal accountability. Several respondents’ answers

included statements such as “you are responsible for yourself” and “you are responsible for the decisions that you make” which demonstrate the individual nature of the American ethos that dominates this country’s ideology.

The American ethos has led us down a path of individualism that not only affects that way that we view our fellow Americans; it also distorts our view of social class (Vanneman and Cannon, 1987). If we believe that an individual is solely responsible for themselves and everyone has the ability to pull themselves up by their bootstrap, then one might believe that saliency of class for Americans is nearly disappeared. This poses a serious threat to American labor unions in a number of ways. First, labor unions are dependent upon the solidarity of their membership for continued growth and maintenance of the labor movement. Members must be able to identify a shared ground. Once, class provided that commonality. Additionally, unions today, provide so much for their membership, that the plight of the workers seems to be forgotten by some. Many union families are now living as middle class and have the ability to send their children to college. This “increasing affluence of the working class” gives a false sense of economic equality (Bottero, 2005: 128). As Bottero puts it, “Because society has become individualized and fragmented, the prospects for material inequality giving rise to class community, solidarity, consciousness and action have receded.” Social class has much less influence on the way the Americans participate in society, both socially and politically which potentially may have an adverse effect on how labor unions operate in the future in the United States.

## CHAPTER FOUR: DISCUSSION

Summary: This project explores the tension between individualism and collectivism as expressed by union parents and their adult children. I set out to show that the value of collectivism could have been transmitted to the union kids directly through conversations with parents and indirectly through being raised in a family where the economic benefits obtained through union collective action contributed to a distinctly middle class lifestyle. However, union families do not exist in a vacuum; the collectivism they promote collides with the individualism of the dominant culture. This tension became obvious in the interviews.

The literature on the parental transmission of political values argues that parents play a significant role in the values adopted by their children. Union parents generally articulated a strong sense of collectivism as shown in their responses referencing collective voice, solidarity and limited opportunity structures. However, a muted version of collectivism has been transmitted to the union kids. In discussing union benefits, they focus primarily on the tangible benefits such as high wages and health insurance and much less so on collective voice, representation, and solidarity. Further, while many expressed concern about the power of “big business” over labor in the U.S., only a few of the union kids noted that they are pursuing careers that will likely align them more closely with “big business” than with organized labor in the future. And, these union kids articulated a strong belief in the American ethos of hard work, equal opportunity, and individual effort as precursors to success in America. Structural constraints and limited opportunities were infrequently commented upon.

In some of the families, union members did not talk about union collectivism in their homes. In these instances, the children were not able to discuss the benefits of unions, collective identity. Notably, these are the only children that did not mention their family's health care plan. These adult children did not display the anti-corporate bias of their more union socialized peers. However, they did highlight their parents' views on religion and related social issues. This is consistent with the findings of Jennings, et al. (2001) who argue that the absence of political discussion in the home is in itself is a form of political socialization. It is a socialization that renders some subjects unimportant in one's life (e.g. collectivism, unionism).

Transmission of Collectivism: Those children that come into adulthood with a strong sense of their parent's political values are more likely to hold consistent values into adulthood and later life than their peers (Jennings, Stoker and Bowers, 2001). For most of these union kids, this may mean that they are likely to support other forms of collective action in efforts to support a common good. This may be reflected in everything from voting in support of universal healthcare to participating in boycotts of products produced in sweatshops. In addition, these adult children are likely to transmit collectivism as a core value to their children. Research suggests that the transmission of political values surrounding big business versus labor is intensifying and this trend has been increasing over the last three decades (Jennings, Stoker and Bowers, 2001). While these adult union children have a muted sense of collectivism, they are still more likely to promote this value to their own children than are their peers for whom collectivism is irrelevant. This transmission of political values does not occur in a vacuum, hence the

prospects of transmitting this value will always be to some extent contingent on the expression of individualism in American culture.

Union Families: In this project I purposely set out to research a group of families underrepresented in sociological research- union families. What have I learned about these union families? In many ways these families are like other middle class families in their communities. The parents participate in civic activities, worry about their children's futures, and engage in the middle class parenting practice of concerted cultivation of childhood (Lareau, 2003). Their children were involved in extracurricular school activities, pursued college after high school, and engaged in music, fashion and activities of their local subculture. But in a significant way many may differ from non-union middle class families. In most of these families, unions were a part of family conversations. In these conversations, kids were exposed to issues such as worker rights, fair working conditions and corporate power. These were not abstract ideas in these families, rather they were ideas and issues linked to concrete experiences that these families faced through collective bargaining. The labor versus big business tension in this country was experienced at the family level.

The Future of Unions: The future of the labor movement and labor unions in the U.S. relies on its ability to find new membership and retain continued support from current union workers and retirees. Union jobs have provided their workers the opportunity to send their children to college making it unlikely that union work will have generational support. Children of union workers may support unionized labor but it is risky to rely on their participation in labor unions as the future of the movement. These

children have an upward mobility, at least educationally speaking if not economically as well. Labor unions will have to look elsewhere for membership.

Additionally, a logical step for unions would be to organize “sticky” industries. These are industries that do not run the risk of being offshored to developing nations (Dixon and Martin, 2007: 37). In jobs where companies are able to outsource or offshore work, the power of the union is severely diminished. Many U.S. companies are escaping unionization by moving to other nations where labor and environmental laws are extremely lax in comparison to those in the U.S. Another potential outlet for unionization would be in industries that have a high rate of immigrant employment. These workers are potentially at-risk regarding their immigration and work status in this country as well as an inability to fully grasp the language in which they are negotiating their employment. The risk of deportation and being turned over to government authorities may be too great for these workers to consider speaking out about the conditions in which they work.

I also believe that the labor movement and more specifically unions would benefit greatly by making strides to include the families of their membership in their activities. This would allow a member to be active in union activities without significantly interfering in his/her family time. Additionally, it would help foster a stronger group identity and solidarity that is currently there. Potentially, these activities could serve as educational opportunities for the member’s family. The union would be able to demonstrate why it is in place and what it does for the worker as well as the larger society. This education and inclusion has the potential of reaching more people than organizing a workforce alone. I feel that it is through this inclusion that the labor movement can sustain itself.

Constraints on Collectivism: Collectivism as a political value receives short-shrift in American cultural life. Schools, as demonstrated by many authors (Kohn 1977; Jennings and Niemi 1968; Xiao 2000), are also an influential factor of value and political transmission. Students learn the American ethos that through hard work, dedication and determination, all children, even the most underprivileged, has endless life possibilities. Additionally, the media offers endless romanticized visions of individualism instilling hope in the American Dream. Numerous movies celebrate the triumph of an ordinary person over adversity (e.g. *The Pursuit of Happyness*). Furthermore, the news media is equally at fault. Many a news story carries a theme of heightened individualism and personal responsibility. Not to mention, the positive stories on the labor movement and unionism in the U.S. are few and far between. Individualism matters greatly in these institutions making it difficult to foster the growth of collectivism.

Border Work: When I began thinking about this project, I had imagined that many of the adult children of union workers would have experienced “border work.” I expected to discover stories of boundary negotiation as described by Julie Bettie in *Women without Class* (2003). Border work can be defined as negotiating the boundaries of distinct positions. In this case, the border work would occur on real and assumed class boundaries. It is in this situation, that those who are working class performing middle class feel inferior, unwelcome, unwanted, misunderstood and fear being seen as an imposter. These people must negotiate the boundaries of their old and new identities. My thoughts were that this idea would resonate strongly with union families because union jobs often afford a family a middle class lifestyle and the ability send their children to college but these families still must negotiate being members of the blue-collar working

class. I assumed that during pursuits of college education, these adult children may have encountered a situation that warranted border work. I also assumed that the conversation and questioning during my interviews would have triggered this sort of recognition of this work. However, in my analysis of the data, there are no signs that any of these union kids are performing border work. These children are all decidedly middle class and therefore this concept does not apply. This is not to say that at some point in their futures they will not experience border work.

Future Research: First and foremost, the inclusion of families in research regarding labor movements and labor unions needs to be addressed. It is crucial that this aspect be included as the union member is not the only one affected by the outcomes of collective bargaining. Another interesting direction for future research is one using a comparison group of non-union families. In this project, I expected to have a comparison between generations, however that proved not to be the case. Additionally, it would be interesting to investigate union families in a female dominated industry such as garment manufacturing. A more racially and ethnically diverse area of the U.S. may also find different results. The industry that these men work in is not threatened by outsourcing in the same manner as other industries which alter the way that they are able to collective bargain. On the other hand, this industry provides a product that is crucial to life in the U.S. making government intervention into union-company affairs a real possibility. It would be interesting to see differences among traditionally unionized industries and trade/craft unions as well.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bellah, R. 1985. *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and commitment in American life*. Berkeley: University of California Press
- Bettie, J. 2003. *Women without class: Girls, race and identity*. Los Angeles, California: University of California Press.
- Bottero, W. 2005. *Stratification: Social division and inequality: United Kingdom*: Routledge
- Bourdieu, P. 1984. *Distinction: A social critique of the judgment of taste*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press. .
- Bureau of Labor Statistics. 2007a. Union Members in 2006. Released January 25, 2007.
- Bureau of Labor Statistics. 2007b. Work stoppages involving 1000 or more workers, April 2007. Downloaded from <http://www.bls.gov/cba/ws042007.htm> on July 9, 2007.
- Cornfield, D. & Clawson, M. 1999. "What has happened to the US labor movement? union decline and renewal." *Annual Review of Sociology*, 25, 95-119.
- Cornfield, D. 1991. "The U.S. Labor Movement: Its development and Impact of Social Inequalities and Politics." *Annual Review of Sociology*, 17, 27-49
- Danziger, S. & Gottschalk, P. 1995. *American unequal*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Dixon, M. & Martin, P. 2007. "Can the labor movement succeed without the strike?" *Contexts: Understanding People in their Social Worlds*, 6(2), 36-40
- Fanastasia, R. & Voss, K. 2004. *Hard work: Remaking the American labor movement*. Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Freeman, R. & Medoff, J. 1984. *What do unions do? USA*: Basic Books.
- Glenn, E.N. 2002. *Unequal freedom: How race and gender shaped American citizenship and labor*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.
- Hechter, M. 2004. "From class to culture." *American Journal of Sociology*, 110(2), 400-445
- Jacobs, J. & Gerson, K. 2004. *The time divide: Work, family, and gender inequality*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Jennings, M. K. & Niemi, R.. 1968. "The transmission of political values from parent to child." *The American Political Science Review*, 62(1), 169-184.

Jennings, M.K., Stoker, L. & Bowers, J. 2001. "Politics across generations: Family transmission reexamined." Working paper 2001-15 at *Institute of Governmental Studies*. University of California, Berkeley.

Kohn, M. 1959. "Social Class and Parental Values." *American Journal of Sociology*, 64 (4) 337-351

Lareau, A. 2003. *Unequal Childhoods: Class, race and family life*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

National Coalition on Health Care. 2007. Facts on the Cost of Health Care. Accessed online at <http://www.nchc.org/facts/cost.shtml> on July 12, 2007.

Nelson, M. & Smith, J. 1999. *Working hard and making do: Survival in small town America*. Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Neuman, W.L. 2000. *Social research methods: Qualitative and quantitative approaches*. Needham Heights, MA: Allyn and Bacon.

Odendahl, T. & Shaw, A. 2002. "Interviewing Elites." Pp. 299-316 in *Handbook of Interview Research*, Jaber F. Gubrium and James A. Holstein, eds. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Norwood, J. L., Carson, C., Deese, M., Johnson, N., Reeder, F. & Rolph, J. 2006. *Offshoring: How big is it?* National Academy of Public Administration.

Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut. 2007. [http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/data\\_access/ipoll/ipoll.html](http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/data_access/ipoll/ipoll.html)

Rubin, L. 1976. *Worlds of pain: Life in the working-class family*. New York: Harper Collins.

-----1994. *Families on the fault line*. New York: Harper Collins.

Schwarz, J. & Volgy, T. 1992. *The forgotten Americans*. New York: W.W. Norton and Company.

Sennett, R. & Cobb, J. 1972. *The hidden injuries of class*. New York: W.W. Norton and Company

U.S. Census 2007. Health Insurance. Accessed online at <http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/hlthins.html> on July 11, 2007.

U.S. Department of Commerce. 2007. Foreign Trade Statistics. Released May 2007.

Williams, J. 2001. *Unbending gender: Why family and work conflict and what to do about It*. Oxford University Press.

Vanneman, R. & Cannon, L. 1987. *The American perception of class*. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Temple University Press.

Xiao, H. 2000. *Class, gender and parental values in the 1990's*. *Gender and Society*,. 14(6), 785-803