

Paper ILERA-Europe Conference, Amsterdam, 20-22 June 2013, Session CS 1.10: Trade union activism and influence

**The psychosocial risk factors of union activism at the workplace:  
investigating the industrial relations determinants**

**Role theory and practice of industrial  
relations:  
antecedents of union activists' burnout**

---

*Presenting author: Guy Van Gyes*

*Additional author(s): Pieter Liagre & Stan De Spiegelaere*

*Organisation/affiliations & address details of presenting author: KULeuven-HIVA, Parkstraat 47 box 5300, B-3000 Leuven, Belgium, [guy.vangyes@kuleuven.be](mailto:guy.vangyes@kuleuven.be)*

*Organisation/affiliations & address details of additional author(s): idem*

Comments welcome: [guy.vangyes@kuleuven.be](mailto:guy.vangyes@kuleuven.be)

First draft, no written or electronic reproduction without permission



## Abstract

Union representatives at workplace level play a key intermediating role in a performing collective industrial relations system. Recent calls within the 'union renewal' literature have been made to re-examine this strand of literature. In relation to this central function of activism the paper illustrates that it is not only important to look how one becomes an active union member at the workplace, but also how one remains an active union member.

The first part of the proposed paper adopts for this purpose the job demands-resources (JD-R) model to the role of union representatives at the workplace. We established based on previous analysis a strong positive relation between role stressors like inter-role conflict and quantitative role overload on the one hand, and feelings of burnout on the other hand. Role ambiguity plays an indirect role. Secondly, it is especially supported by the rank and file, which has a negative relation with burnout. Based on these findings we focus in the second part of the paper (only) on the antecedents of the role demands/stressors of a union representative function. Based on general role theory of work, we develop hypotheses on possible antecedents related to the industrial relations practice and context the union activists/representatives experience.

Key in this regard seems to be what we could call a context or environment of 'high-involvement' industrial relations; A high, dense role of interest representation at the workplace and activism with a lot of influence and recognition by the employer and a strong cohesion and support within the union rank-and-file leads on the one hand to lower levels of role conflict and ambiguity, but on the other hand the risk of role overload increases. Radical union beliefs and formal mandates decrease in this situation role ambiguity. Union activists that have a stronger personal-instrumental incentive to take up the role have a higher probability of a different pattern of role stress. They experience more role conflicts and role ambiguity, but overload their union role less. In general the included antecedents were less helpful to explain possible role overload.

The analysis is based on the results of a representative sample of 600 union representatives in industry from the biggest Belgian trade union.

## Introduction

Union representatives and broader activists at the workplace play a key intermediating role in a performing collective industrial relations system. They are an important link between the 'logic of membership' and the 'logic of influence' of a trade union (Schmitter & Streeck, 1999; Prott, 2004). Strong union representatives at the workplace are considered as an important explanatory factor for the success or failure of national union movements. The loss of power and presence at the company level is considered as an important factor for negative union membership trends (Hancké, 1993; Ebbinghaus, Göbel & Koos, 2011). In other words: a well functioning union team at the workplace that is committed to keep doing this shopfloor activism is defined as an important asset for union revitalization (Fiorito, Gall & Martinez, 2011).

This union activism at the workplace is today confronted with a range of challenges (Danford, Richardson & Upchurch, 2003). Pressure increases on union representatives and activists at the workplace (Pilemalm, Hallberg & Timpka, 2001). These increased pressures are situated within a practice of industrial relations that is by definition characterised by conflict and change (Bluen & Barling, 1988). In the present study we consider these presumed changes and their relation with union militancy by applying an organizational psychological perspective. Recent calls within the union renewal literature have been made to re-examine this strand of literature (Gall & Fiorito, 2011). The focus has in this regard been on the union participation literature. Antecedents of union activism at the micro-level are investigated.

We look at a specific type of organizational psychology, namely about psychological well-being, work engagement and burnout. We believe that it is within the union activism and renewal debate just as important to look not only to questions on 'why and how people get actively involved in the union at the workplace', but also on what factors determine a continuous engagement or the negative opposite 'burnout' as union representatives at the workplace. In this paper we focus on the antecedents of this union reps' 'burnout'.

## Burnout and its consequences

Burnout mainly refers to emotional exhaustion (mental fatigue) and cynicism (a distant attitude towards one's role) in the psychology of work.

The concept of burnout has been introduced in the psychosocial literature in the middle of the 1970s by Freudenberger (1974) and Maslach (1976). Freudenberger and Maslach "invented" the concept independently after having studied the same kind of reactions among volunteers who worked with social problems among underprivileged citizens. While burnout started as a non-theoretical "grass-root" concept it soon became a metaphor for a number of important psychosocial problems among persons who do "people work" and later among working people in general. This growing interest co-incided with a growing debate about the concept itself. According to the classic definition of Maslach and Jackson (1986, p. 1) "burnout is a syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation, and reduced personal accomplishment that can occur among individuals who do 'people work' of some kind". However, in recent times the key change in the definition of burnout has been the limiting to the exhaustion factor. Cynicism and reduced personal efficacy are seen as effects and/or coping strategies of the 'flat battery' syndrome of burnout. Schaufeli and Greenglass define for example burnout as "a state of physical, emotional and mental exhaustion that results from long-term involvement in work situations that are emotionally demanding" (Schaufeli & Greenglass, 2001, p. 501). The Copenhagen Burnout Inventory speaks about work-related burnout as "The degree of physical and psychological fatigue and exhaustion that is perceived by the person as related to his/her work".

Empirical evidence has shown that burnout has important ramifications for the individual worker including anxiety, depression, and lowered self-esteem. Chances on absenteeism and turnover are higher (Maslach et al., 2001).

## The JD-R model as first theoretical device

In a previous paper we investigated the antecedents of ‘burnout’ in the role of union representatives by adopting the ‘balanced’ approach of the job-demands-resources model (JD-R) (Liagre & Van Gyes, 2012; Van Gyes, Liagre & Despiegelaere, 2012)). There is increasing evidence that the model is valid to the area of volunteer work (Cox, Pakenham & Cole, 2010; Huynh, Metzger & Winefield, 2011; Lewig, Xanthopoulou, Bakker, Dollard & Metzger, 2007).

The JD-R model is a well-established theoretical model that provides a comprehensive assessment on how employees’ working conditions may affect their health and well-being at work. The JD-R model assumes that every occupation has its own specific risk factors that lead to job stress. A broad variety of work aspects can be taken into consideration, but according to the JD-R theory, these characteristics can always be aggregated into two broad higher-order categories: job demands and resources. Another aspect of the JD-R model is its buffering assumption. In addition to the main effects of job demands and job resources, the JD-R model proposes that the interaction between job demands and job resources is important for the development of job strain and motivation as well. More specifically, it is proposed that job resources may buffer the impact of job demands on job strain, including burnout (Bakker et al., 2005; Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). It is claimed that several job resources can play the role of buffer for several different job demands in relation to burnout.

In our results we detected in the first place the expected relations between demands/resources and burnout. We especially noticed a strong positive relation between inter-role conflict and quantitative role overload on the one hand, and feelings of burnout on the other hand. Secondly, it is especially support by the rank and file, which has a negative relation with burnout. Overall, the fundamental balance model in the occupational health literature – here applied by the JD-R approach – seems also to have relevance to interpret (and solve) activism problems of union representatives at the workplace. In line with the ‘balanced processes’-idea of the JD-R model, we see in the results that all of the significant role demands explain a larger extent of the variance in burnout than the included role resources. A poorly designed role (inter-role conflict) and chronic work overload (quantitative role overload) exhaust the mental and physical resources of a union representative fulfilling his/her role.

We found finally partial confirmation for the buffering assumption of the JD-R model. This buffering assumption first of all suggests that available role resources buffer/moderate the relation between role demands and burnout. We did find conformation for this assumption, but other interaction effects we found run in a different way. Also it has to be said that all three interaction effects in the regression analysis on burnout are difficult to interpret because of the absence of clear main effects, which is in particular the case for the interaction effect between qualitative role overload and support by the direct union officer.

We established in the study thus a strong positive relation between role stressors like inter-role conflict and quantitative role overload on the one hand, and feelings of burnout on the other hand. Role ambiguity plays an indirect role. Secondly, it is especially support by the rank and file, which has a negative relation with burnout. The application of the JD-R model showed further that resources are an important factor in the functioning of union representatives at the

workplace. These resources are mostly confined to the workplace itself: support from co-workers and a trustful, influence-based relationship with the employer.

## **Link with antecedents of industrial relations**

Based on these findings we focus in this paper (only) on the antecedents of the role demands/stressors of a union representative function that influence significantly the chance of burn-out as such a union activist role at the workplace. The fundamental theorem to which these stressors like role conflict, ambiguity and overload refer is role theory (Biddle, 1986; Kahn et al., 1964). Role theory attempts to explain the interactions between individuals in organizations by focusing on the roles they play. Role behavior is influenced by role expectations for appropriate behavior in that position. Role conflict refers to the extent to which an individual experiences incompatible role pressures. Role ambiguity refers to the lack of necessary information (specificity and predictability) about duties, objectives and responsibilities needed for a particular role or the lack of role clarity. Role overload refers to the perception of having too many role tasks and not enough time to do them. When these forms of role pressures (conflict, ambiguity, overload) are encountered, finite resources like time, attention, physical and psychological are drained away and cause dissatisfaction and exhaustion with the role of union representative.

From a perspective of union renewal based on enhanced workplace activism, insights in the antecedents of these pressures related to the role of union representative are in other words important. However, studies investigating the explaining factors of these role pressures, encountered by union representatives at the workplace, are until now almost totally absent from the international literature. We only have Martin & Berthaume dating from 1993, which focused mainly on personal expectations and attitudes to explain role conflict and role ambiguity of union stewards. We seek to address this gap in the literature by articulating the contextual conditions under which these role pressures enact. These role pressures are derived through the experiences individuals have when acting within particular environments (Biddle, 1986). This includes experiences with both supervisors and peers as well as other individuals with whom one interacts (Graen, 1976). In relation to the role of union representative at the workplace the context is of course in the first place the practice of industrial relations (Nicholson, 1976). In the following paragraphs we will build hypothesis on the possible antecedents of union reps' role pressures by linking the general organisational behavior theories on role pressure antecedents with the field/dynamics of industrial relations at the workplace. As already stated, we focus on inter-role conflict, role ambiguity and role overload as dependent constructs.

Although mixed results have been obtained, lower levels of role stressors have been associated with job task variables like greater variety, autonomy and identity. Supportive managerial behaviors like greater recognition, communication, feedback, participation and closeness have been generally associated with again lower levels of role stressors. Finally, factors of organisational structure have been related to role stress. These characteristics include the degree of formalisation and the position of the employee in the organisational hierarchy (Van Sell, Brief, & Schuler 1981; Jackson & Schuler, 1985; Bacharach & Bamberger, 1992; Wetzels et al., 2000; Minnick, 2013).

## **Hypotheses**

Let us relate these general findings on role stressor antecedents to the specific role functioning and industrial relations context of a union representative. After introducing the personal antecedents established by Martin & Berthaume (1993), we will first focus in this hypothesis

building on the task variety, secondly on the element of autonomy and participation, thirdly on the managerial aspects of recognition, communication and closeness and finally on the factors of formalisation and organisational level. We add also in a last step some hypotheses on personal factors like experience and gender.

Martin&Berthiaume (1993) stress the personal role expectations factor as important antecedents of union reps' role stressors. Referring to older, more qualitative studies on the role of union shop stewards, they define the motivations/orientations for taking up the role and the degree of union commitment (Nicholson, 1976; Partridge, 1977; Gullahorn, 1956). People motivated because of a high pro-union attitude and helping others and having higher (affective) union commitment were associated with lower role conflict and higher role ambiguity. People more motivated by personal-instrumental reasons had both higher role ambiguity and higher role conflict. However, the used variables showed especially a high correlation (.52) between the union commitment and the collective-normative motivation ('institutional' in their wordings). These results learn nevertheless that it is important to include the orientations or motivations as possible antecedents of role stressors and make a differentiation in this regard between the collective-normative motivations and the individual instrumental motivations of personnel development. In relation to the commitment aspect, we can refer also to Denis (2012) on the radical union activists of the French SUD. This radicalism brings a clear view or perspective on the role to play (being in management's line of fire, a trouble maker), thus diminishing role conflict and role ambiguity. This radical drive can however also lead to overload.

*Hypothesis 1: Union representatives scoring high on collective-normative motivations and pro-union attitude experience a lower degree of role conflict and role ambiguity, but are confronted with a higher degree of role overload.*

*Hypothesis 2: Union representatives scoring high on personal-instrumental motivations have a higher chance to experience role conflict and role ambiguity, but a lower degree of role overload.*

Participation in decision-making is considered as an important factor that reduces role ambiguity (Morris et al. 1979; Minnick, 2013).. It lower this role ambiguity by increasing the feedback employees receive regarding their performance, improving the employee's understanding of organisational processes and developing problem-solving and technical skills to cope with ambiguities. We hypothesize thus that union representations that have a strong influence in decision-making of the workplace and of the union, will be less hampered by role ambiguity. More influence means however also more representational work to do. So we hypothesize also that this higher influence in decisions relates to more overload.

*Hypothesis 3: More influence as employee representation at the workplace results in less role ambiguity and more role overload.*

The relational aspect is an important factor of role stressors. Recognition, cooperation, mutual support reduce the probability of overload and conflict, because it facilitates the possibilities to find solutions for too much work or conflictual roles. It reduces also the chance of role ambiguity because the feedback of others enhances role clarity (Jackson & Schuler, 1985). Closeness, cooperation and recognition from management and other union reps in the group at the workplace seem to be key in this perspective.

*Hypothesis 4: Recognition by the employer and a cooperative relationship with this management leads to less role conflict, ambiguity and overload.*

*Hypothesis 5: High mutual support and cohesion in the group of union activists has the same effect: less role conflict, ambiguity and overload.*

Studies have shown that higher levels of structure and formalisation are positively related to role conflict and negatively to role ambiguity (Rizzo, House, & Lirtzman, 1970; Bacharach, Bamberger & Mitchell, 1990). Workplace industrial relations are determined by a range of rules on information and consultation rights. The role of union representative can include a range of formal tasks, certainly in a European context of institutionalised workplace industrial relations. One can occupy different mandates in formal bodies at the workplace and obtain also different positions within the union structure. These institutionalised rules define and document the roles and activities of employees (reps) clearly and thereby reduce role ambiguity, they do so at the expense of role conflicts. We hypothesize as a consequence that union activists more involved in the formal information and consultation bodies at the workplace are less confronted with role ambiguity, but more with role conflict.

*Hypothesis 6: Cumulating formal mandates in the information and consultation bodies of the workplace and not just being a union activist leads to less role ambiguity, but more role conflict.*

Position in the organisation determines how one is confronted with role conflict and ambiguity (Bacharach & Bamberger, 1992). As union representative one is confined to two different organisational positions: on the one hand the position in the regular job and on the other hand the position in the union hierarchy. We hypothesize on the one hand that persons occupying a lower level regular job, have more difficulties to combine the role of union representative with this regular job. On the other hand we prospect that persons obtaining higher ranking position in the union structure are more confronted with difficulties of role ambiguity and clarity.

*Hypothesis 7: union representatives having as regular job a blue-collar position are more confronted with role conflict.*

*Hypothesis 8: union activists involved in higher-ranking position within the union structure experience a higher degree of role ambiguity.*

Experience, job tenure, training are all considered to be important elements in reducing the probability of role ambiguity (Wright & Milesen, 2008; Jackson & Schuler, 1985). These resources bring information, skills and confidence that diminishes feelings of role ambiguity. Links of these factors with role conflict and overload as stressors seem less clear.

*Hypothesis 9: Seniority as union representative reduces role ambiguity.*

A final element we would like to bring into the discussion is the gender dimension (Bryant-Anderson & Roby, 2012; Kirton & Healy, 2013). Women are still underrepresented in union leadership roles and research have shown that they adopt also another style with more emphasis on care and help (Kaminski & Yakura, 2008). It leads them to deal more often with problems that fall outside the normal boundaries of the representative work. The risk is also still that sexism adds an extra layer of emotional labor to the job of union representative. Bryant-Anderson & Roby (2012) report in their study that women stewards had to fight harder to promote their agenda and affect change. Balancing life is also still to be considered more difficult for women (Kirton & Healy, 2013). Based on these findings we hypothesize that women are as union representatives more confronted with role conflicts and ambiguity.

*Hypothesis 10: Female union representatives experience more role conflict and ambiguity.*

The following table summarizes the developed hypotheses on industrial relations practices as antecedents of role stressors experienced by workplace union activists.

**Table 1:** Developed hypotheses

Effect on ...	Role conflict	Role ambiguity	Role overload
Pro-union beliefs/strong normative motivation	-	-	+
Personel-instrumental motivation	+	+	-
Participation in decision-making		-	+
Recognition by/cooperation with management	-	-	-
Support&cohesion rank-and-file	-	-	-
Cumulation of formal mandates	+	-	
Blue-collar regular job	+		
Board member in union		+	
Seniority as union activist		-	
Female	+	+	

## Method

### Survey: data, procedure and participants

The data in the present study originate from a Belgian quantitative survey of a representative sample of 610 union representatives in industry. All of them are members of the biggest Belgian trade union organization (ACV-CSC). About half of respondents have an effective mandate in one of the official Belgian consultative bodies at company level<sup>1</sup>, the others are deputy members of one of these consultative bodies or have no specific mandate. The sample was drawn random from the union file and the response was relatively high (34 per cent). The sample was checked and where necessary weighted for age, gender, language (region) and sector.

### Measures

The presence of role stressors are determined in terms of the union militants' perceptions (i.e. the inquiry yielded subjective assessments of the experience of each stressor, resource or reaction). The respondents mostly were exposed to a number of statements, and asked to indicate how well these fitted their situation.

For all interval variables we constructed an eleven-point scale (10 = maximum stressor, resource or reaction) and the validity of each scale was checked (Cronbach's alpha coefficients, see Table 1). Factor analysis confirmed that all items of each scale load on one factor. The unidimensionality of each scale was so confirmed.

#### *Role stressors*

Three kinds of role stressors were measured: <sup>(1)</sup> inter-role conflict, defined as incompatibility between contrasting roles that a single person plays; <sup>(2)</sup> role ambiguity, comprised of uncertainty about what actions to take to fulfill the expectations of the role; and <sup>(3)</sup> role overload, viewed as the extent to which time and resources prove inadequate to meet expectations of commitments and obligations to fulfill a role (Örtqvist & Wincent, 2006).

The measure of the first demand focused on the multiple roles witch union militants must play: as union representative, as employee and as a family member). These roles may conflict, and in this situation one can speak of an inter-role conflict. **Inter-role conflict** (i.e. incompatibility

<sup>1</sup> Which are: Works Council, Committee for Prevention and Protection at Work and Union Delegation (shop steward).



between contrasting roles), was assessed using two items: 'the extent union activity is combinable with usual work' and 'the extent union activity is combinable with a personal life'.

Role ambiguity was measured using three items and role overload using five items. Union militants responded to these items on five-point Likert scales with anchor points ranging from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree'. Each measure was determined by summing the responses to the items. Higher scores for these two measures corresponded to higher levels of role ambiguity and role overload.

Items of the **role ambiguity** measure required union militants to assess the extent to which they were uncertain about the responsibilities of their union role and expectations entertained by others. Three items were used: 'I'm not always sure what the members expect from me'; 'I know exactly what my role as union representative means' and 'I'm unclear as to what my union and militants expect from me'.

Items of the quantitative **role overload** measure focused on the workload/time ratio. That is, an union militant experiences quantitative overload when he or she feels that there is much to be done but little time to do it in.

### *Antecedents*

The variable **pro-union beliefs** was measured with seven items about the core union ideology. Examples are: 'employees still have to struggle for an equal position in society' and 'in our society employers are enriching on the backs of the workers'. Besides a strong normative commitment (cf. pro-union attitude) and a social exchange factor, two factors were discerned in the survey as personal-instrumental motives for doing the job of union representatives. A first factor stresses the **individual-developmental motives**: one learns and gets informed about the business of the company. A second motivational factor involves the **personal job position**: the position leads people to take up the union role which brings them more security and status in the job.

The **influence on management decisions** was assessed with a seven-item scale for measuring the extent to which the union militants may affect such decisions. The following topics are dealt with: purchasing power, safety and health, working hours, work organization, education and training, the impact of reorganization and restructuring and the overall business strategy.

**Recognition or support from the employer** was measured using 3 items related to the frequency of positive appreciation by the employer and the opposite threats of dismissal or mobbing. A **cooperative relationship** between management and union was measured with 3 items: union and management have a lot of raws; the atmosphere between management and union is open; there is a lot of dialogue between management and union. **Recognition and mutual support by the rank and file** was measured using a five-item scale: three items refer to the group of union activists; two are related to all workers. Examples of the first type are, 'as militants we form a close group' and 'the cooperation in the militant core is good'. An example of the second type is, 'workers are strongly involved with the union'.

The **cumulation of formal mandates** is calculated on a scale of 0 to 4, counting the amount of mandates a union representative occupies within the workplace. Mandates are on the possible information and consultation bodies according to Belgian legislation (works council, health and safety committee, union delegation, European works council).. A division was further made between union reps having a **lower-level (blue-collar) and higher-level regular job (white-collar)**. A comparable dummy-variable was constructed to operationalize the involvement as

**board member in the local or national union. Seniority** as union militant (years) and **gender** (female=1) were the final variables included in the analysis.

## Results

### Descriptive Statistics

Table 2 shows the correlations between all measurements

**Table 2:** Bivariate correlations between the variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
1 interrole inter-role conflict	100,00														
2 ambiguity role ambiguity	0.11555	100,00													
3 overload role overload	0,13 *	0,26 **	100,00												
4 pers_inst personal development motivation	-0,19 **	-0,14 *	0,02	100,00											
5 pers_posi job position motivation	-0,14 *	0,10	0,08	0,22 **	100,00										
6 pro_union pro-union attitudes	0,01	-0,14 *	0,10	0,08	-0,02	100,00									
7 influence influence at the workplace, on management decisions	-0,04	-0,29 **	0,09	0,14 *	0,15 *	0,02	100,00								
8 recognition recognition/support by the employer	-0,18 **	-0,08	-0,12	0,04	0,00	-0,18 **	0,12 *	100,00							
9 cooperation cooperative relationship with the employer	-0,15 *	-0,14 *	0,04	0,12 *	0,14 *	-0,16 **	0,33 **	0,31 **	100,00						
10 support support and cohesion - rank and file	-0,21 **	-0,42 **	-0,10	0,22 **	0,13 *	0,05	0,36 **	0,14 *	0,30 **	100,00					
11 seniority seniority as union	-0,01	-0,22 **	0,11	-0,03	0,06	0,06	0,15 *	0,06	0,06	0,05	100,00				

---

	representative															
12	form_mand	0,05	-0,24	0,06	0,00	-0,07	0,06	0,20	0,04	0,04	0,06	0,29	100,00			
	formal mandates - scale 0-4		**					**				**				
13	blue_collar	-0,08	-0,04	0,06	0,18	0,07	0,18	0,03	-0,03	0,05	0,06	0,06	-0,13	100,00		
	blue-collar position (dum.)				**		**						*			
14	high_rank	0,00	-0,24	0,05	0,04	-0,08	0,12	0,18	-0,02	0,01	0,06	0,17	0,30	0,00	100,00	
	higher-ranking position within the union structure (dum.)		**				*	**				**	**			
15	female	-0,04	0,08	0,04	0,05	-0,05	0,03	-0,10	-0,04	-0,07	-0,06	-0,10	0,00	-0,07	0,02	100,00
	female gender (dum.)															

---

\* p<0.01; \*\* p<0.001; \*\*\* p<0.0001

Table 1 shows that the dependent role stressors variables measure sufficiently other dimensions of the concept. The link between role ambiguity and role overload is higher. It is furthermore interesting to note that the antecedents ‘influence in decision-making’, ‘cooperative relationship with employer’ and ‘recognition by this employer’ are linked to each other., just like the fact that strong pro-union beliefs correlate negatively with a higher climate of recognition and cooperation with the employer.

The bi-variate correlations between the role stressors variables and hypothesized antecedents show already also some clear relationships as hypothesized. The relationship with blue-collar job position and gender seem less relevant, but the other antecedents show one or more significant correlations with one of the 3 role stressors. The relationships runs however not always in the expected direction (see variables of personnel development and job position motivation). Links with role overload are limited, but they are strong with role ambiguity.

Let us now see how these relationships develop in a multiple regression analysis. We use a linear regression technique. Variables have been standardised. The principle of Occam's Razor states that among several plausible explanations for a phenomenon, the simplest is best. Applied to regression analysis, this implies that the smallest model is best. Unnecessary predictors will add noise to the estimation of other quantities that we are interested in. Collinearity is increased by having too many variables trying to do the same job. Our exercise is furthermore heavily exploratory due to the limited previous studies on the matter. We conducted as a consequence the multiple regression analysis by adopting a criterion-based selection method (adjusted R-square).

**Table 3:** Multiple regression results

	Role conflict			Role ambiguity			Role overload		
	$\beta$ -estimate	p<t		$\beta$ -estimate	p<t		$\beta$ -estimate	p<t	
<b>Intercept</b>	0	0.3500		0	0.1379		0	0.8435	
<b>Pro-union beliefs</b>				-0.07335	0.0596	(*)	0.11623	0.0120	*
<b>Personal development as motivation</b>	-0.11681	0.0127	*	-0.07285	0.0712	(*)			
<b>Job position as motivation</b>	-0.09753	0.0328	*	0.17721	<.0001	***	0.08420	0.0649	(*)
<b>Influence at the workplace on management decisions</b>	0.08418	0.0862	(*)	-0.11225	0.0090	**	0.12675	0.0125	*
<b>Recognition/support by the employer</b>	-0.15261	0.0010	**				-0.10632	0.0261	*
<b>Cooperative relationship with the employer</b>							0.09495	0.0634	(*)
<b>Support and cohesion - rank and file</b>	-0.16852	0.0006	***	-0.35961	<.0001	***	-0.15879	0.0014	**
<b>Formal mandates - scale 0-4</b>				-0.10170	0.0154	*			
<b>Blue-collar regular job (dum.)</b>	-0.05042	0.2599							
<b>Higher-ranking position within the union structure (dum.)</b>				-0.11965	0.0039	**			
<b>Seniority as union representative</b>				-0.15812	0.0001	***	0.07560	0.0974	(*)
<b>Gender (female=1)</b>	-0.06640	0.1349							
<b>R-square - Pr &gt; F</b>	0.11	<.0001	***	0.32	<.0001	***	0.07	<.0001	***

(\*) p<0.10; \* p<0.05; \*\* p<0.01; \*\*\* p<0.001

The multiple regression confirms that the hypotheses-building based on industrial relations practices is stronger in predicting possible antecedents of role ambiguity and less in explaining role overload. The power is certainly different for these two analysis (R-square of 0.32 and 0.07).

In the hypothesis-building we could establish more links between the industrial relations practices and role ambiguity and to a lower extent with role overload. The regression results confirm this pattern.

In relation to the prospected antecedents of role conflict, the hypotheses are only partly confirmed. No relationship is established with radicalism (strong union beliefs). The link with personal-instrumental orientations is only significant with personal job position as motivation. The relationship runs however in the opposite direction: the more important personal job position is a motivator, the less role conflict is experienced. Recognition/support by the employer and/or the activists group at the workplace are the strongest predictors of less role conflict in our model. The relationship runs as predicted. The relationship with blue-collar job and gender seem to run prudently in the expected direction, but they are not significant in the model. More formal mandates do not lead to the expected higher chance of role conflicts. No links were hypothesized with seniority and board-membership in the unions. More influence in decision-making has a very slight impact on more role conflict. It was not hypothesized, but looks a feasible relationship. Getting more involved in the workplace decision-making, makes the fulfillment of other roles (executing the regular job) intrinsically more difficult.

The hypotheses related to the antecedents of role ambiguity or lack of role clarity are largely confirmed. Strong union beliefs, influence in decision-making, recognition/support by rank and file, more formal mandates and seniority as union activist lead to less role ambiguity. Job position as motivation and board-membership in the union result in a higher degree of role ambiguity as experienced by the union activists at the workplace. Hypothesized links with gender and recognition by the employer are not confirmed in the results of the analysis. Less seniority, lower support and cohesion in the group of union rank and file at the workplace and a too high orientation to the own job position as motivation are the strongest predictors of high role ambiguity experienced by the union activists.

Although to some degree predicted by the hypothesis-building, the regression model for explaining role overload by the included dimensions of industrial relations context is less performant. Radical unionists, strongly involved in decision-making at the workplace, are more prone to role overload. Although the significance is not always strong, being for a longer time involved in strong social exchange and recognition by management and rank-and-file doesn't lead to less role overload as hypothesized, but to a higher probability of role overload according to our data and analysis.

## **Conclusion**

Activism of union representatives at the workplace is an important element of an 'organizing approach' to union renewal (Peetz, Webb & Jones, 2002). Union revitalization has to recognize however that the psychological dimensions of 'being active' at the workplace, is important. Activism and renewal can be hampered by feelings of mental exhaustion. How the work/role of a union representative is organized and supported can make a difference in this mental 'state' of union activism at the workplace.

In the present paper we investigated antecedents of role stressors that have been determined in previous work as important factors of union activists' burnout (Nandram & Klandermans, 1993; Francis & Kelloway, 2005; Van Gyes, Liagre & Despiegelaere, 2012). Based on general role theory of work, we developed hypotheses on possible antecedents of these role stressors related to industrial relations practices and context the union activists/representatives experience.

Key in this regard seems to be what we could call a context or environment of 'high-involvement' industrial relations; A high, dense role of interest representation at the workplace and activism with a lot of influence and recognition by the employer and a strong cohesion and support within the union rank-and-file leads on the one hand to lower levels of role conflict and ambiguity, but on the other hand the risk of role overload increases. Radical union beliefs and formal mandates decrease in this situation role ambiguity. The investigated group all scored high on a strong normative commitment to take up the role of union representative: striving for more justice in a collective way and helping out other at the workplace. Union activists that combined this motivation with also a stronger personal incentive of securing and developing the own job position in the workplace have a higher probability of a different pattern of role stress. They experience more role conflicts and role ambiguity, but overload their union role less. In general the included antecedents were less helpful to explain possible role overload.

Although the present study provides interesting findings on the relationship between the industrial relations practices and role stressors of union activists at the workplace, some warnings are warranted. The most obvious limitation of this study is further that we used a cross-sectional design. This means that we can't draw firm conclusions regarding the causal ordering among studied variables. Furthermore, as all data were gathered through self-reports, common method variance might contaminate the results.

The present study focused on a specific sample of union representatives, namely in the Belgian industry. The established relation could be specific for this group of union representatives. The setting of union activism is in this country and particular in these sectors one of an organized system of collective industrial relations, whereby a union representation at the workplace is institutionalized with an elaborated statutory system of information and consultation rights (Van Gyes, Vandenbrande, Lehndorf & Kohl, 2007; Van Gyes, Segers & Hendrickx, 2009). This particular setting may have influenced the results. Future studies could explore the generalisability of our results to other institutional settings of industrial relations and countries.

## References

- . Morris , J. H. , Steers , R. M. , & Koch , J. L. ( 1979 ). Influence of organization structure on role conflict and ambiguity for three occupational groupings . *Academy of Management Journal* , 22 , 58 – 71 .
- Bacharach , S. B. , Bamberger , P. , & Mitchell , S. ( 1990 ). Work design, role conflict, and role ambiguity: The case of elementary and secondary schools . *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* , 12 , 415 – 432 .
- Bacharach, S. & Bamberger, P. (1992). Causal models of role stressor antecedents and consequences: the importance of occupational differences. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 41, 13-34.
- Bakker A. B. & Demerouti E. (2007). The Job Demands-Resources model: State of the art. *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, 22, 309-328.
- Bakker, A. B., Demerouti, E. & Euwema, M. C. (2005). Job resources buffer the impact of job demands on burnout. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, 10, 170-180.
- Biddle, B.J. (1986). Recent Developments in Role Theory. *Annual Review of Sociology* 12: 67–92.
- Bryant-Anderson, R. & P.A. Roby (in press), The Experience of Leadership: Women and Men Shop Stewards in Ten Trade Unions. *Labor Studies Journal*, online version August 1, 2012.
- Cox S., Pakenham, K.J. & Cole S. (2010). A test of the job demands-resources model with HIV/AIDS volunteers, *Journal of HIV/AIDS and Social Services*, 9, 332-355.

- Danford A., Richardson M. & Upchurch M. (2003). *New unions, new workplaces. A study of union resilience in the restructured workplace*. Routledge, London.
- Denis, J.-M. (2012). The case of SUD-Rail: the limits of ‘radical political unionism’. *European Journal of Industrial Relations*, 18, 267-272.
- Ebbinghaus B., Göbel C. & Koos S. (2011). Social capital, ‘Ghent’ and workplace contexts matter: comparing union membership in Europe. *European Journal of Industrial Relations*, 17, 107-124.
- Fiorito J., Gall G. & Martinez A.D. (2010). Activism and willingness to help in union organizing: who are the activists? *Journal of Labor Research*, 31, 263-284.
- Francis L. & Kelloway E.K. (2005). *Industrial Relations*. In: Barling, J., Kelloway, E.K. & Frone, M. R. (eds.), *Handbook of Work Stress*, Sage, Thousand Oaks, 325-352.
- Gall G. & Fiorito J. (2011). Union commitment and activism in Britain and the United States: searching for synthesis and synergy for renewal. *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 50, 189-213.
- Graen, G. B. (1976). Role-making processes within complex organizations. In M. D. Dunnette (Ed.), *Handbook of industrial and organizational psychology* (pp. 1202–1245). Chicago: Rand McNally
- Gullahorn, J.T. (1956). Measuring role conflict. *American Journal of Sociology*, 61(4), 299-303?
- Halbesleben J. & Buckley M.R. (2004). Burnout in organizational life. *Journal of management*, 30, 859-879.
- Hancké B. (1993). Trade union density in Europe 1960-1990: rediscovering the locals. *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 31, 593-614.
- Huynh J.-Y., Metzger J.C. & Winefield A.H. (2011). Engaged or connected? A perspective of the motivational pathway of the Job Demands-Resources model in volunteers working for nonprofit organizations. *Voluntas*, (in press).
- Jackson, S. E. and Schuler, R. S. (1985). A Meta-analysis and Conceptual Critique of Research on Role Ambiguity and Role Conflict in Work Settings. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 36, 16 - 78.
- Kahn R.L., Wolfe D. M. & Quinn R. P. (1964). *Organizational stress: studies in role conflict and ambiguity*. Wiley, New York.
- Kirton, G. & Healy, G. (in press). Commitment and collective identity of long-term union participation: the case of women union leaders in the UK and USA. *Work, Employment & Society*, online version, January 11, 2013.
- Lewig K.A., Xanthopoulou D., Bakker A. B., Dollard M. F. & Metzger J. C. (2007). Burnout and connectedness among Australian volunteers: a test of the Job Demands-Resources model. *Journal of vocational behavior*, 71, 429-445.
- Liagre P. & Van Gyes G. (2012). Importance of resources: investigating union activism at the workplace with the Job Demands-Resources model, *International CRIMT Conference*, Montreal (Canada), October 25-27.
- Martin, J.E. & Berthiaume, R.D. (1993). Stress and the union steward’s role. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 14, 433-446.
- Minnick, W. (2013). Understanding the antecedents of role stressors in the safety professional. *Journal of Workplace Behavioral Health*, 28, 134-157.
- Nandram, S. & Klandermans, B. (1993). Stress experienced by active members of trade unions. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 14, 415-431.
- Nicholson, T. (1976) ‘The role of the shop steward: an empirical case study’ *Industrial Relations Journal*. 7(1) pp 15-25.
- Partridge, B. (1977) The activities of shop stewards. *Industrial Relations Journal*. 8(4) pp 28-42.



- Peetz, D., Webb, C. & Jones, M. (2002). Activism among workplace union delegates. *International Journal of Employment Studies*, 10, 83-107.
- Pilemalm, S., Hallberg, N. & Timpka, T. (2001). How do shop stewards perceive their situation and tasks? Preconditions for support of union work. *Economic and Industrial Democracy*, 22, 569-598.
- Prott, J. (2004). Vertrauensleute. Ehrenamtliche gewerkschaftsfunktionäre zwischen beruf und sozialer rolle. Westfälisches Dampfboot, Münster.
- Rizzo, J. R., House, R. J., & Lirtzman, S. I. (1970). Role conflict and ambiguity in complex organizations. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 15, 150 – 163.
- Schmitter, P. & Streeck, W. (1999 [1982]). *The Organization of Business Interests: Studying the Associative Action of Business in Advanced Industrial Societies*. Discussion Paper 99/1. Max Planck Institute for the Study of Societies, Cologne, Germany. Available at: [www.mpi-fg-koeln.mpg.de](http://www.mpi-fg-koeln.mpg.de).
- Shirom, A. & Mayer, A. (1993). Stress and strain among union lay officials and rank and file members. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 14, 401-413.
- Van Gyes G., Liagre P. & De Spiegelaere S. (2012). Engagement and burnout of union representatives. Investigating activism at the workplace with the Job Demands-Resources Model, ILERA World Congress 2012, Philadelphia (USA), July 2-5.
- Van Gyes G., Segers J. & Hendrickx E. (2009). In het gelijke, onze verschillen ... Het Belgische collectieve systeem van arbeidsverhoudingen gespiegeld aan Nederland. *Tijdschrift voor HRM*, 12, 67-96.
- Van Gyes G., Vandenbrande T., Lehndorf S. & Kohl H. (2007). *Industrial relations in EU Member States 2000-2004*. European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, Dublin.
- Van Sell, M., Brief, A. P., & Schuler, R. S. (1981). Role Conflict and Role Ambiguity: Integration of the Literature and Directions for Future Research. *Human Relations*, 34, 43 - 71.
- Wetzels, M., Ruyters, K., & Bloemer, J. (2000). Antecedents and consequences of role stress of retail sales persons. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, 7, 65 – 75.
- Wright, B.E. & Milesen, J.L. (2008). Nonprofit board ambiguity: investigating its prevalence, antecedents and consequences. *The American Review of Public Administration*, 38(3), 322-338.
- Xanthopoulou D., Bakker A. B., Demerouti E. & Schaufeli W. B. (2007). The role of personal resources in the Job Demands-Resources model. *International Journal of Stress Management*, 14, 121-141.