

REF Impact Case Study Template

Expected format 2021

Institution: Birkbeck, University of London
Unit of Assessment: Business and Management Studies
Title of case study: Mobilizing the power of trade unions
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2000-2018
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2014 to date
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N
1. Summary of the impact <p>Kelly's mobilization theory offers an account of the conditions under which individual employees collectivise in response to problems at work (a sense of grievance, shared with fellow workers; a target to whom blame can be attached; and a belief that there are forms of collective action that will make a difference). The theory was taken up rapidly by trade union activists and has been widely used in trade union education programmes since 2004. In the period since 2014, major unions with a combined membership of over six million workers have drawn on Kelly's work to educate union organisers and to inform the development of major campaigns.</p>
2. Underpinning research <p>The decline in British trade union membership began in 1980 and has continued inexorably ever since. In 1979 trade union membership peaked at 13.2 million, over half the employed workforce, but by 2000 it had fallen below 8 million and by 2016 had slumped further to 6.5 million. These trends encouraged the Trades Union Congress and individual trade unions to launch membership organizing campaigns aimed at persuading workers of the virtues of trade unionism. The campaigns were backed by training programmes designed to equip people with organizing skills so they could identify appropriate workplaces for union recognition campaigns. This is where mobilization theory came to play a key role.</p> <p>Mobilization theory was first promulgated in Kelly's 1998 book <i>Rethinking Industrial Relations</i> but was developed and tested across the 2000s through a series of case studies and surveys [1, 4, 5] and was the subject of a special journal issue in 2018 [7]. The theory stipulates a set of conditions necessary for workers to join unions: first, there must be a sense of grievance, a breach of social norms or values, often linked to emotions such as anger; job dissatisfaction alone is not sufficient. Second, grievances must be widely shared by many employees. Third, there must be appropriate attribution of blame to an agent who can provide the focus for worker demands and for collective action. Fourth, there must be one or more forms of collective action available to workers and in which they are willing to engage. Finally, these various beliefs need to be combined into a narrative or story, a 'collective action frame'. These cognitive conditions must typically be supplemented by a set of structural factors: a collective organization such as a trade union that can provide the resources necessary for collective action; a leadership willing and able to mobilize members for action; a balance of power favourable to such action; a set of channels through which demands can be placed (an 'opportunity structure') such as a bargaining committee; and minimal costs i.e. a low probability of state or employer repression in response to collective action.</p> <p>A series of case studies in the early 2000s – in a university, a call centre and a large warehouse – demonstrated the salience of the beliefs described by mobilization theory but also documented their fragility in the face of employer counter-mobilization [1]. A comparative study of two university organizing campaigns showed that significant differences in levels of grievance and patterns of attribution among workers generated radically different outcomes, in line with mobilization theory [4]. The theory has also been applied to macro-level data on worker attitudes and trade union membership, showing that muted levels of discontent and</p>

REF Impact Case Study Template

Expected format 2021

reasonably positive attitudes towards management both helped explain the difficulties faced by union organizing drives [2, 3]. A survey of union activists in 2008-09 showed that union organizing (rooted in mobilization theory) appeared to offer greater gains in union membership than a strategy of partnership with employers [5] and a study of the PCS union showed that mobilization through strike action was a highly effective way of encouraging non-members to join the union [6].

3. References to the research

1. John Kelly and Vidu Badigannavar (2004), 'Union organizing', in J. Kelly and P. Willman (eds) *Union Organization and Activity*, London: Routledge, pp.32-50.
2. John Kelly (2005a), 'Social movement theory and union revitalization in Britain', in S. Fernie and D. Metcalf (eds) *Trade Unions: Resurgence or Demise?*, London: Routledge, pp.62-82.
3. John Kelly (2005b), 'Labour movements and worker mobilization', in S. Ackroyd, R. Batt, P. Thompson & P. Tolbert (eds) *The Oxford Handbook of Work and Organisation*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 283-304.
4. John Kelly and Vidu Badigannavar (2005), 'Why are some union organizing campaigns more successful than others?', *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 43(3): 515-535.
5. John Kelly and Vidu Badigannavar (2011), 'Partnership and organizing: an empirical assessment of two contrasting approaches to union revitalization in the UK', *Economic and Industrial Democracy*, 32(1): 5-27.
6. John Kelly, Andy Hodder, Nick McCarthy and Mark Williams (2017), 'Does strike action increase trade union membership growth?' *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 55(1): 165-86.
7. John Kelly (2018), 'Rethinking Industrial Relations Revisited', *Economic and Industrial Democracy*, Special issue, 39(4): 701-709.

4. Details of the impact

Mobilization theory is a fundamental element of training courses for trade union activists both within the movement as a whole (Trades Union Congress, TUC) and within specific unions: the Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS), University and College Union (UCU), the Transport and Salaried Staffs' Association (TSSA) and the National Union of Teachers (NUT), since 2017 the National Education Union (NEU). Unions covered by the TUC number about 5.6 million members. PCS has around 185,000 members, UCU around 120,000 members and TSSA around 22,300 members. The NUT had around 370,000 members and the NEU, the result of a merger with another teachers' union, has around 450,000.

In 2004 the deputy general secretary of the TUC, invited Kelly to design and run a 10-day training course for national union officials called 'Leading Change'. This invitation was made on the basis of Kelly's work on mobilization theory: Nowak wanted a programme that would be rooted in contemporary social scientific and management thinking and would cover mobilization, strategic analysis and SWOT analysis, amongst other issues. The annual programme ran from 2004 until 2018 (with only one break), growing and adapting in light of Kelly's ongoing research. As well as co-directing the programme, Kelly also taught mobilization theory in its opening session each year (developing the content of these sessions in light of his ongoing research) and both taught and chaired other sessions throughout the programme. Over this period 218 senior union officials from 34 of the TUC's 49 unions (representing 98% of TUC membership) passed through the programme: 15 subsequently became General Secretaries of their respective unions, one became an MP, and one served as General Secretary of the Labour Party from 2018 to 2020.

In 1998 the TUC launched an Organising Academy to train activists in union organizing drives, to encourage workers to join unions and encourage employers to negotiate with them. The TUC National Organiser knew Kelly's work on mobilization theory and ensured that it comprised a significant element in the course syllabus. The main academic survey of union organizers on the TUC programme collected data from 133 of the 240 people trained between 1998 and 2008 and found that on average each of them was recruiting into unions

REF Impact Case Study Template

Expected format 2021

approximately 1,000 people per annum [G, p.154], figures which can be extrapolated forward into the impact period to suggest that new recruits between 2014 and 2020 would conservatively number in the hundreds of thousands. Comments from a graduate of the organising academy who was in Feb 2020 appointed to the post of Acting General Secretary of the Wales Trade Union Congress testify to its influence on the trade union landscape: “Many of the people I went through the academy with are still in the movement and it really changed the dynamics of how unions worked. It made such a difference, especially the make-up of unions which were full of men doing the big important negotiations.” [H] Kelly’s work with the TUC has continued throughout the impact period; he has been invited to speak to academy students on several occasions, sharing his evolving perspective in the light of continued research, and publication [7] is cited as reading material in training materials from the Organising Academy [D].

In relation to the Public and Commercial Services Union, Kelly was contacted by former PhD student and union official [redacted] who had tested elements of mobilization theory in his doctoral thesis, carried out under Kelly’s supervision and completed 2010. In 2005 [redacted] had been appointed to a senior post in PCS and in 2007, in light of publications 1-4, he asked Kelly to join him in helping write an organizing syllabus for training PCS union activists that would draw on mobilization theory. Throughout the impact period the programme has run on multiple occasions, covering almost four hundred PCS local union activists. It has helped develop the ability of local union leaders to identify grievances that are widely and deeply felt and to use them as the basis for membership mobilization. In many cases these campaigns have involved strike action and Kelly’s research [6] showed there was a strong and significant positive association between the level of strike activity and union recruitment.

In relation to the University and Colleges Union, Kelly was approached early in 2017 by the former Head of National Negotiations in Higher Education with UCU, now working as a consultant on activist training, to offer advice on the new training programme for union organisers that he was putting together. This has become known as Transforming UCU. Between 2017 and 2020 Kelly acted as ‘the key academic adviser’ on this programme [A], jointly designing the syllabus and contributing to the management and teaching of the course. The first cohort began early in 2018 and since then, [redacted numbers] have attended. Figures from UCU demonstrate that the universities and colleges where organisers have completed the training course have a higher rate of union growth, with a difference greater than one percentage point in HE institutions and over five percentage points within FE [A]. Feedback from participants shows tangible impacts at the ground level, both in terms of union numbers and activity and on the thinking of the participants themselves. [redacted comments]

Kelly’s work has also informed training design in unions with whom he has no direct relationship. Writing on ‘the radical reform of trade union education provided by the National Union of Teachers (NUT)’, two members of the NUT national executive describe the reform of the NUT’s training programme ‘based on John Kelly’s application of mobilization theory to industrial relations’ [C]. Pilot sessions demonstrated that the training had immediate, practical results: reps reported that they had succeeded in cancelling unnecessary lesson observations, disputed the directed working time calendar, and achieved a 50 percent boost in members taking strike action as a result of their activist work. ‘All of these early successes were attributed directly to the knowledge, skills and confidence gained on the courses.’ The training sessions were widely introduced in late 2014 and ran until 2017, when the NUT merged with the NASUWT (another teaching union) to create the National Education Union (NEU), which continued to deliver training based on Kelly’s work [D, I]. The NEU estimates that [redacted figure] reps have gone through this training since 2015 [B]. Comments from recent participants confirm Little and McDowell’s evaluation of the immediate impact of the course: [redacted comments].

Kelly’s work was also utilised by the NUT in its Stand Up for Education campaign (2014-15). A 2014 article co-authored by the now general secretary of the NEU discusses the opportunities presented by the campaign and refers repeatedly and explicitly to Kelly’s work as inspiration [F]. The campaign ran through a period of strikes by teaching staff, as well as the run-up to the

REF Impact Case Study Template

Expected format 2021

2015 election. In a 2015 article [E], academics Howard Stevenson and Justine Mercer speak positively about the campaign's impact: 'Its "stand up for education" campaign achieved widespread recognition... Meanwhile, the union's membership has been growing, and key local indicators, such as the percentage of schools with a school-based union representative, are also on the increase.'

Kelly's influence across all of these diverse unions matters because unionized workplaces provide better terms and conditions, on average, than their non-union counterparts. The aggregated figures from the unions with which Kelly and his work have been associated tell us that between 2014 and 2020, millions of employees at thousands of workplaces received higher pay, longer holidays and better fringe benefits such as sick pay. Moreover, the achievement of collective bargaining over terms and conditions of employment means that these newly unionized workers now have more say in workplace decisions than would otherwise have been the case.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

- A. Testimonial from [redacted], University and College Union (UCU)
- B. Testimonial from [redacted], National Education Union
- C. Gawain Little and Lindsey McDowell (2017), 'Responding to social-movement trade unionism within education', in Mike Seal (ed.), *Trade Union Education: Transforming the World*. Oxford: Workable Books, pp.185-201.
- D. Workbook: TUC Organising Academy, Diploma in Organising, Module 2 Research
- E. Howard Stevenson and Justine Mercer (2015), 'Education Reform in England and the Emergence of Social Movement Unionism: The National Union of Teachers in England', pp.169-188 in *Teacher Unions in Public Education: Politics, History and Future*, ed. Nina Bascia (New York: Palgrave MacMillan)
- F. Kevin Courtney and Gawain Little (2014), 'Standing Up for Education: building a national campaign', *Forum* 56(2): 299-318.
- G. Simms, M. et al (2013) *Union Voices*, ILR Press
- H. David Nicholson (2020), 'A woman in a hurry: Meet Wales TUC's new leader', *Morning Star* <https://morningstaronline.co.uk/article/f/woman-hurry>
- I. NEU Reps Foundation Tutor Notes, 2019