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Workplace power in Singapore: a paradox? Evidence from a 1998 national survey

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Abbreviations

BERI	Business Environment Risk Intelligence
NTUC	National Trades Union Congress
SIRP	Social Indicators Research Project
US	United States

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Singapore workers are reputed to be highly disciplined, diligent, skilful, productive, and cooperative. In a tight labour market, though, they are inclined towards job-hopping, arguably a form of organisational disloyalty. Almost a quarter of all workers in Singapore are members of unions affiliated to the National Trades Union Congress (NTUC), the sole confederation of labour unions in Singapore. The NTUC operates in close partnership with the state and adopts a productionist orientation.

This paper is based on data from the Social Indicators Research Project (SIRP) survey completed in 1998 in the midst of the Asian economic crisis. It focuses on four crucial indicators—job dimensions, union orientations, job satisfaction and turnover propensity—to get a sense of how Singapore workers fare in terms of morale, quality of work life, and workplace power. This approach sees labour not as a mere factor of production, passively subject to market forces and managerial decisions which are oriented towards profits, but as a social actor with the potential and capacity to influence conditions that affect work life.

While executive-level employees enjoy greater job autonomy than rank-and-file workers, their higher dependence on senior management for extrinsic rewards and career prospects and more limited access to union representation have rendered them less powerful than rank-and-file workers vis-à-vis their employing organisations. Furthermore, while Singapore unions are productionist in orientation and non-adversarial towards capital and management, they can serve as a deterrent against possible oppressive company

policies or victimisation by managers. This is a benefit accessible to rank-and-file workers, but less so to their executive-level counterparts.

In 1997, a team at the Department of Sociology, National University of Singapore, began what is now known as the Social Indicators Research Project (SIRP). The SIRP survey interviewed a national sample of 1,054 cases, including both households and individual respondents. In addition to a wide spectrum of dimensions of Singapore society, this project, which was completed in 1998, aimed to capture the essence of work life in Singapore. Given its objective and breadth of concerns, the project's approach with respect to each of the topics covered in the survey was to utilise several key indicators to piece together an adequate snapshot of work life in Singapore. The 'indicators' approach has some inherent limitations, such as an inability to provide details on the contexts and dynamics of power distribution and relations at the workplace.

The four key indicators in the questionnaire are

- job dimensions
- union orientations
- job satisfaction
- job turnover.

These indicators were chosen as they can collectively provide a sense of the extent of job autonomy, skill discretion and union strength, and the consequences of these factors for job satisfaction and turnover. The Job Dimensions Index comprises five items, which can in turn be separated into a two-item skill discretion index and a three-item job autonomy index. The Job Satisfaction

Index consists of six items, while Union Orientation is measured by one question on the importance of union membership and an open-ended question soliciting the respondents' reasons for joining or not joining a union (see Appendix). The first two indices were adapted from Price and Mueller (1986) and Eichar (1989), while the third indicator was adapted from Kohn (1975).

While Price and Mueller (1986) are concerned with organisational effectiveness as reflected in, for example, job satisfaction, absenteeism and turnover, Kohn has occupied himself primarily with the effect of work on personality, in particular occupational self-direction and psychological functioning (Mortimer 1993). Apart from these sociologists, there have been many others, primarily business school professors and management consultants, involved in researching the antecedents of job satisfaction over the last four decades (Kalleberg 1977; MacDonald and MacIntyre 1997).

Since there is already a large body of literature on job satisfaction and work attitudes, this paper will concern itself less with testing hypotheses relating job contents to job satisfaction and personality than with deriving a profile of Singapore workers not usually captured in business consultancy reports, such as BERI's (Business Environment Risk Intelligence) Quality of

Workforce Index. An important rationale for the latter approach is to provide a counterbalance to the business literature which tends to view workers narrowly in terms of their contribution to production and profits, rather than as active social agents who have the potential to act on the conditions that affect their work life; and work conditions in terms of organisational effectiveness and survival, rather than as a key factor affecting the human condition. From this perspective, the questions to ask are the following: how much power do workers have in their work life? How do they respond to the conditions affecting their work life? For the purpose of this paper, I consider job autonomy as having sufficient leeway to make decisions on the job and reward dependence—the extent to which the employee's career advancement and job security is dependent on superiors—as subsets of workplace power.

How much power do Singapore workers have?

Combining the three items relating to job autonomy gives a distribution which suggests that Singapore workers are located in the medium or high range of our Job Autonomy Index (Table 1). Indeed, one-third of the respondents are located on the high end of the index.

Table 1 Distribution of job autonomy scores

Job autonomy score	Frequency	Per cent
Low	61	9
Medium	421	59
High	230	32
Total	712	100

In regard to the findings on the component items of the index (see Appendix for details on the items), our data indicate that close to 70 per cent of those in the Singapore workforce said that they are given a lot of freedom to do their job. This figure corresponds to the 60 per cent who reported that, in their job, they are 'allowed to make a lot of decisions on their own'.

The proportion however declines to 36 per cent for those who disagreed with the statement 'I always have to check with my superior before I do something in my job'. A plausible explanation for this finding, which seems to contradict the earlier high proportions, is that Singapore workers have a *kiasu* (fear of losing out to others or making mistakes) mentality, an attitude manifested in obsessive and, therefore, unnecessary behaviour aimed at reducing the chances of making mistakes or of being evaluated lower than fellow workers. Another plausible explanation is that, because the superior holds the key to extrinsic rewards (for example, promotion, pay raise, and job security), workers may be inclined to check with him or her to ensure that their performance receives attention and hopefully a positive evaluation. This practice would be rendered or perceived unnecessary if job rewards were more

intrinsic in nature, as in the case of voluntary work, rather than extrinsic, as in most paid work.

It could be argued that, all other things equal, as long as workers are dependent on the evaluation of superiors for promotions, salary increments or job security, the extent of job autonomy is necessarily circumscribed. If this is indeed the case, then it may be hypothesised that employees with tertiary education (or executive-level employees), as compared to rank-and-file workers, are more likely to indicate that they always have to check with their superiors when carrying out job functions and assignments. While our SIRP data do not support this hypothesis, Table 2 reveals an interesting pattern worthy of attention in the light of the hypothesis: 33 per cent of university graduates, as compared to 42 per cent of polytechnic graduates and 37 per cent of workers with primary education, indicate that they do not always have to check with superior officers.

An alternative explanation for the above pattern is that workers with primary level education (or rank-and-file workers) are likely to be performing standardised tasks which do not require them to check with their superiors. Furthermore, it may be argued that, in the case of executive-level

Table 2 'Always have to check with my superior' by education level (per cent)

Response	Education level			
	Primary	Secondary	Polytechnic	University
Agree	47	45	33	34
Neutral	15	18	24	31
Disagree	37	36	42	33
Total	100	100	100	100

Note: Column totals do not add to 100 due to rounding to the nearest number. The bivariate relationship is statistically significant, $p=0.025$.

employees, checking with superiors usually comes in the form of consultation, rather than receiving direction from superiors. If this is the case, it cannot be simply inferred that executive-level employees have less job autonomy than their rank-and-file counterparts. The reason being that while 'consultation' suggests collegial and democratic superior-subordinate relations, 'direction' spells the opposite, involving a hierarchical and authoritarian character.

Before dismissing the possibility of the paradox of executive-level employees possessing less autonomy and power than rank-and-file workers, we should consider another explanation. It may be argued that while job autonomy is indicative of workplace power, jobs characterised by a high degree of autonomy, and thereby unstandardised tasks and outputs, allow superiors appraising employees in such jobs far more discretion and subjectivity than if they were appraising low autonomy jobs characterised by standardised tasks and outputs. This renders holders of high autonomy jobs highly dependent on the goodwill of their superiors to give them a positive evaluation—a dependence which makes them more vulnerable than their rank-and-file counterparts.

By and large, the findings reported in this section are as expected. Workers with higher educational attainment and in executive-level positions are more likely to report experiencing greater job autonomy. However, while we expect workers in low-level, highly routine jobs to be relatively powerless, the reverse may be true. There is some indication that workers at the lower end of the occupational ladder have somewhat more leeway to disobey orders,

take excessive casual medical leave, or indulge in other forms of absenteeism, without serious consequences for job security and career prospects. Such actions or responses to organisational control have been well documented in the sociological literature dealing with the everyday resistance of workers who perceive themselves to have 'very little to lose, and very little to gain' from cooperating fully with management (Watson 1995:298-310).

Workers in routine, highly standardised jobs are more likely to suffer unemployment (Ministry of Manpower 1999:16). Can one then argue that, in an economic downturn, such as the 1997-98 economic crisis, they have 'more to lose' in regard to job security than their executive-level counterparts? A recent news report (*Straits Times*, 4 April 1999) revealed that of the 29,000 workers retrenched in 1998 as a result of the economic crisis, 20 per cent were executives, including about 7 per cent over 40 years old. These figures suggest that executives are not in any way underrepresented amongst those threatened by job insecurity. Moreover, for executive-level employees, the cost of losing a job may be higher than that for those on the lower segment of the occupational ladder—salaries are higher and they may find it harder to get a job with pay and working conditions equivalent to their previous job.

Our analysis thus far suggests that, conceptually, how much power a worker has on the job can be understood in terms of five dimensions: job autonomy, reward dependence, character of performance evaluation, vulnerability to job insecurity and cost of job insecurity. The simple typology below (Table 3) illustrates how

employees may be distributed among these five dimensions. A plus (+) indicates a high score on workplace power, while a minus (—) indicates a low score on workplace power. It can be hypothesised on the basis of our typology that rank-and-file workers may, in terms of the five crucial dimensions considered here, paradoxically possess more workplace power than executive-level employees.

Union orientation: how do workers respond to the conditions affecting their work life?

The previous section focused on the connection between job-related dimensions and workplace power. This section deals with workplace power via union membership, examining the relevance of union membership from the perspective of workers who are eligible for union membership and therefore have the option to join or not to join a union.

Of the 231 respondents in the SIRP survey who were eligible for union membership, 43 per cent rated unions as 'very important' or 'important'¹. Given that union membership has been declining in the developed countries (Lipset 1998:123), such a relatively high percentage suggests that Singaporean unionism has maintained its relevance.

Is union membership density and size crucial? What about the reasons motivating workers to join unions? Does it make sense to speak of right and wrong reasons for joining unions? The response to these questions depends on ideological position. Taking the extreme view that revolutionary class consciousness is what union leaderships hope for, then having members who care more about access to fringe benefits and recreational facilities is unlikely to be a cause for celebration. Whatever the mission of unionism may be, it could be argued that there is, from the perspective of organisational survival, a need to boost membership, if not for the active support of members, then at least the financial support from membership dues.

In the Singapore case, it may be heartening to the union leadership that 54 per cent of the 133 respondents in the SIRP sample who are union members said that they join unions for job security (28 per cent) and welfare benefits, such as bursary or scholarship awards for members' children (26 per cent).² Another 20 per cent revealed that they join unions to take advantage of such consumer benefits as discount privileges and recreational facilities accessible to union members. What is significant here is that half the union members, including 70 per cent of workers

Table 3 Dimensions of workplace power by job level

Dimension	Job level	
	Executive	Rank-and-file
Job autonomy	+	—
Reward dependence	—	+
Character of performance evaluation	—	+
Vulnerability to job insecurity	—	—
Cost of job insecurity	—	+

with primary-level education (Table 4), in the sample see unionism as protecting economic interests, an indication that unions have not lost their relevance in Singapore, despite the fact that unionism in Singapore has often been characterised in the literature as an example of labour subordination (Deyo 1989). Indeed, in an earlier study, Chew (1991:192) found that 80 per cent of the union members in his sample believed that 'most employers would exploit their employees if there were no unions', and 94 per cent of the same sub-sample supported the statement that 'unions are needed to take note of and act on legitimate complaints and grievances of workers'.

There is an apparent contradiction in that Singapore unionism is capital-friendly, yet it is seen as able to protect workers from victimisation and poor working conditions. Tan (1997 [1993]:398) argued that while workers are expected to be disciplined and productive, employers are expected to share the fruits of worker productivity, ensure fair treatment of workers, and provide a safe working environment. The presence of

unions and shop stewards at the workplace helps to ensure that employers meet these expectations or at least serve as a deterrent against potential employer lapses.

In relative terms, workers on the lower segment of the occupational ladder may, in fact, have more power than executive-level counterparts in so far as they have access to the collective power of unions, while executive-level employees have to depend on their own individual market power. There are a handful of executive unions in Singapore, but these do not enjoy the same degree of power as rank-and-file unions to the extent that executive-level employees are likely to perceive advancement as dependent on individual performance and professional expertise, rather than the collective power of worker organisations. This is reflected in SIRP data relating 'importance of unions' to educational attainment (Table 5). The proportion indicating that unions are important declines rather sharply from 80 per cent for those with no formal education to 10 per cent for those with university education.

Table 4 Reasons for joining union by education level (per cent)

Reason for joining union	Education level				
	No formal education	Primary	Secondary	Polytechnic	University
Job security/ protection	20	46	28	21	17
Welfare/ fringe benefits	20	23	31	5	17
Others	60	31	41	74	66
Total	100	100	100	100	100

Note: not statistically significant, $p=0.167$.

Job satisfaction, turnover propensity, and workplace power

To complete our analysis on workplace power, this section will focus on the consequences of job autonomy and skill discretion for job satisfaction and turnover propensity.

First, we consider the level of job satisfaction among the 724 respondents in the SIRP sample who are in the workforce. On the item 'I enjoy my job very much', 72 per cent of these respondents answered in the affirmative, while 20 per cent gave a neutral answer. On the more catch-all item 'Overall, I am very satisfied with my job', a resounding 75 per cent indicated that they are satisfied with their job. Our summary index also suggests that close to one-third of working persons in the sample are highly satisfied, while the other two-thirds indicate a 'medium' level of job satisfaction. Only a rather small proportion, 4 per cent, scored a 'low' on the job satisfaction index.

With regard to turnover propensity, 18 per cent of the 724 respondents in the SIRP sample who are in the workforce indicated that they do 'have intention of leaving their present job in the near future'³. It is difficult to gauge whether this is a high propensity or not. Wagner and Hollenbeck (1995:214), in their general text, reported that a 'full 50

per cent of those (US workers responding to surveys) said it was likely that they would change employers in the next five years'. In a study of hospital workers, Price and Mueller (1986:48) considered the 'eighteen per cent turnover (of the hospitals he studied) during...recession conditions' to be unusually high. However, it should be noted that he was referring to actual turnover, while the data reported here refer to turnover propensity, which is likely to be higher than actual turnover. Nevertheless, turnover propensity provides a measure of morale or at least the extent of mismatch between jobs and job incumbents.

Apart from measuring the extent of job satisfaction and turnover propensity, there is some indication that workers who are allowed skill discretion and job autonomy are likely to score high on our job satisfaction index—41 per cent of those who score high on skill discretion are likely to score high on job satisfaction as well (Table 6). The relationship between the two scores falls into a rather neat pattern. Similarly neat patterns emerge where job satisfaction is cross-tabulated with job autonomy (Table 7)—46 per cent of those who score high on job autonomy also experience high job satisfaction. As expected, those who score high on the three indices—skill discretion, job autonomy, and job satisfaction—are less

Table 5 'Importance of unions' by educational level (per cent)

Importance of unions	No formal education	Primary	Secondary	Polytechnic	University
Important	80	52	46	35	10
Not important	20	48	54	65	90
Total	100	100	100	100	100

Note: statistically significant, $p=0.008$.

likely to entertain thoughts of quitting their job in the near future (Tables 8, 9 and 10). Job satisfaction seems to have a dramatic effect on turnover propensity—71 per cent of those in the low satisfaction category as contrasted with 8 per cent in the high satisfaction category indicated an intention to leave their present job.

The above results are consistent with the literature (Price and Mueller 1986:121; Eichar 1989:68)—workers who possess some degree of workplace power, in the sense of having some control over how they perform their work, are more likely to feel positively about their jobs and less likely to leave their jobs. In themselves, these results are not particularly exciting, but could possibly be used to provide some indication of the relative workplace power of executive-level employees and rank-and-file workers. For

the purpose of this analysis, I have chosen to consider the inference that could be made about workplace power.

Turnover is usually reported as, among other things, a product of low job satisfaction. Low job satisfaction may in turn result from a job expectation gap, arising from the career prospects of a job falling below expectations. SIRP data suggest that workers in low-level jobs are less likely than executive-level employees to indicate that they intend to quit their present jobs in the near future. Does this finding indicate that executive-level employees experience a wider job expectation gap than their rank-and-file counterparts, or could it be that the former possess more job options beyond their current workplace and are therefore more likely to consider the exit option? If this is indeed the case, then it could be

Table 6 Job satisfaction by skill discretion (per cent)

Score	Skill discretion		
	Low	Medium	High
High	16	22	41
Medium	69	75	56
Low	15	4	3
Total	100	100	100

Note: statistically significant, $p=0.00$.

Table 7 Job satisfaction by job autonomy (per cent)

Score	Job autonomy		
	Low	Medium	High
High	16	25	46
Medium	69	72	50
Low	15	4	3
Total	100	100	100

Note: statistically significant, $p=0.00$.

Table 8 Turnover propensity by skill discretion (per cent)

Intention to quit	Skill discretion		
	Low	Medium	High
Yes	29	18	16
No	71	82	84
Total	100	100	100

Note: statistically significant, $p=0.04$.

Table 9 Turnover propensity by job autonomy (per cent)

Intention to quit	Job Autonomy		
	Low	Medium	High
Yes	33	18	16
No	67	82	84
Total	100	100	100

Note: statistically significant, $p=0.014$.

argued that, in so far as executive-level employees are in a better position to exercise the exit option, they possess greater workplace power than their rank-and-file counterparts. Unfortunately, we do not have the data to test this hypothesis.

Conclusion

This paper is based on a dataset intended to provide some crucial indicators that can capture and explain some of the key dimensions of work life in Singapore. The dataset contains some inherent limitations. However, it points us to an interesting hypothesis—that rank-and-file workers might paradoxically possess more workplace power than their executive-level counterparts.

The data do not provide conclusive evidence to support this hypothesis, but serve as a starting point to argue that rank-and-file workers may possess more

workplace power than their executive-level counterparts to the extent that they are less dependent on superior officers for job rewards and that superior officers have less leeway to exercise subjectivity in appraising job performance. Moreover, rank-and-file workers have access to the collective power of unions, while executive-level employees have to depend primarily on individual market power, job performance, and professional expertise. It is plausible to argue, however, that executive-level employees may be in a better position to exercise the exit option, understood as a form of workplace power, though job options elsewhere may not always be more attractive than those currently held.

The analysis in this paper suggests that the distribution of power among different segments of the occupational ladder is not unidimensional (dependent on job contents alone), but that along other dimensions,

Table 10 Turnover propensity by job satisfaction (per cent)

Intention to quit	Job satisfaction		
	Low	Medium	High
Yes	71	20	8
No	29	80	92
Total	100	100	100

Note: statistically significant, $p=0.00$.

including union membership, a paradoxical situation of rank-and-file workers having more workplace power than executive-level employees may arise. If this hypothesis has any merit, it warrants further research into such variables as reward dependence, cost and vulnerability of job insecurity, power via union membership and availability of exit options.

Notes

¹ The total sample consists of 1,054 cases, of whom 724 are in paid work, including 231 persons eligible for union membership. 57 per cent of those eligible for union membership, that is 133 respondents, are union members. Admittedly, there are inherent limitations in making inferences from these small sub-samples; hence, the results reported in this paper should be seen as indicative, rather than definitive, of the state of union membership in Singapore.

² In an earlier study (Chew 1991:190) found that 85 per cent of the union members in his survey agreed with the statement that 'the NTUC and other unions improve the wages, working conditions, and job security of workers', and 62 per cent claimed that they had benefited from being union members. These findings are in agreement with those of the SIRP which are reported here.

³ The survey questionnaire does not contain any questions soliciting the respondents' reasons for having an 'intention to leave present job

in the near future'. However, our survey sought to explain job satisfaction and turnover propensity in terms of the key indicators of job dimensions and demographic variables (for example, education level) included in the questionnaire.

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5. I am probably not very well suited for the kind of work associated with my job.

6. I am very satisfied with the promotional prospects in my job.

Turnover propensity

Do you have any intentions of leaving your present job in the near future (that is, within the next 12 months)?

Appendix

Job autonomy index

1. I am given a lot of freedom to do my job.
2. In my job, I am allowed to make a lot of decisions on my own.
3. I always have to check with my superior before I do something in my job.

Skill discretion index

1. In my job, one has to keep learning new things.
2. My job requires a high level of skill.

Job satisfaction index

1. I enjoy my job very much.
2. If I had the chance to choose again, I would probably get into some other type of work.
3. I am seldom bored with my job.
4. Overall, I am very satisfied with my job.