A model of social loafing in real work groups

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Abstract:

Social loafing is the decline in member effort that often occurs in groups. A paper discusses factors that may contribute to social loafing, and proposes a model integrating these factors. The model attempts to move social loafing research from the laboratory to the workplace. Recommendations are offered for reducing social loafing in work groups. Using field theory (Lewin, 1951) to view those factors that promote social loafing as driving forces can inform designers and managers of groups as to how to circumvent loafing.

Full Text:

INTRODUCTION

Organizations are increasingly calling upon project teams, ad hoc task forces, quality circles, ongoing crews, and other groups to perform work (Finholt & Sproull, 1990; Galbraith & Kazanjian, 1988; Hackman, 1987, 1990; Huber, 1984; Lawler, 1986; Tjosvold, 1986). Indeed, the group is the appropriate work unit when it is desirable to bring multiple perspectives to bear on a task. Groups can produce both more and higher-caliber solutions (especially to complex problems) than independently working individuals (see, for example, Shaw, 1981; Wanous & Youtz, 1986).

As groups have become more prevalent as performance units in organizations, there has been a parallel interest in enhancing productivity by eliminating from these groups those "dysfunctional behaviors that interfere with the attainment of desirable interpersonal and task outcomes" (Greenbaum, Kaplan, & Damiano, 1991 127). Several models of group effectiveness (see, e.g., Gladstein, 1984; Greenbaum, Kaplan, & Metlay, 1988; Hackman, 1987; McGrath, 1984, 1986; Tubbs, 1984) have drawn from systems theory to specify the various inputs and processes contributing to such desired group outputs as productivity, member satisfaction, and task accomplishment, as well as the feedback loops by which information about a group's outputs may affect its future inputs and processes. McGrath (1984, 1986) has particularly emphasized group process, or group members' interactions in relation to their task and performance situation, as a keystone to group effectiveness.

Indeed, as early as 1972, Steiner noted that process losses, or faulty coordination of group members' efforts, could compromise group efficiency and effectiveness.

Hackman (1987) also addressed the importance of effort. In addition to having task-requisite knowledge and skills, as well as task-appropriate performance strategies to minimize the process losses Steiner (1972) observed, Hackman specified that group members must apply enough effort to execute their task successfully. To attain the process criterion of sufficient effort, Hackman prescribed an organizational context that supports and rewards group work, and an engaging group task and expert help to guard against "social loafing."

This reduction in individual effort that often occurs in groups (Steiner, 1972) was coined the social loafing effect by Latane, Williams, and Harkins (1979), after they found that individuals working alone shouted and clapped harder than those performing in groups. Social loafing effects have since been replicated on tasks requiring physical and perceptual effort (Harkins, Latane, & Williams, 1980; Harkins & Petty, 1982; Ingham, Levinger, Graves, & Peckham, 1974; Kerr, 1983; Kerr & Bruun, 1981) and cognitive effort (Harkins & Petty, 1982; Petty, Harkins, & Williams, 1980; Price, 1987; Weldon & Gargano, 1985; Weldon & Mustari, 1988).(3) To assist groups in avoiding this process threat of reduced effort, which, in turn, impedes group (and organizational) productivity, it is first necessary to understand factors that may contribute to it.

This paper reviews the literature on social loafing, highlighting those factors promoting member reduction of effort toward group tasks. First is a review of research on factors that research has consistently linked with social loafing, such as potential for evaluation of contributions and perceived dispensability of effort. Then, the contributions to social loafing of less extensively studied factors, such as perceived lack of influence over task outcomes and the wish to avoid the sucker role are considered. Previous attempts to understand social loafing have focused on the effects of just one or two variables at a time, and have yielded few definitive practical insights. Indeed, nearly all the research reviewed herein reports the occurrence of social loafing in co-acting groups in the laboratory (two partial exceptions are a simulated swim meet by Williams, Nida, Boca, and Latane, 1989, and a field study of salespeople by George, 1992). The model presented here seeks to explain loafing by accounting for the ongoing dynamics and processes of real work group-characterized by interdependence, boundaries that distinguish members from nonmembers, and role differentiation (Alderfer, 1977)--that generate ideas, solve problems, make decisions, and/or execute plans. This model of the factors affecting social loafing is offered to facilitate the transition of social loafing research from laboratory to field settings, where real work groups are simultaneously affected by a complexity of variables (Hackman, 1984).

A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE ON SOCIAL LOAFING

In an attempt to gain insight into the dynamics of social loafing (henceforth referred to as SL), researchers (e.g., Albanese & Van Fleet, 1985; Weldon & Mustari, 1988) have likened this reduction of peer member effort in small groups to economists' notion of free riding occurring in larger collectives. In economic theory, a free rider is someone who derives benefits from membership in a large group (such as a community) that are disproportionately larger than his or her contributions to the group. The social loafer, like the free rider, profits from the work of other group members without working up to his or her potential. As Weldon and Mustari state:

Loafers and free riders are allowed to benefit because, in each case, the outcome of group performance...is shared equally by all group members, regardless of their input. (1988, p. 331)

That is, in group situations where successful accomplishment of work confers equal rewards on each member, a member who does not perform maximally will reap the same extrinsic rewards as fellow group members who do. Insights into behavior occurring in larger groups have prompted explanations for SL in small groups.

Perceived Lack of Potential for Evaluation of One's Contributions

Olson (1965) posited that individuals reduce their contributions to endeavors in larger collectives because their efforts are not noticeable to others. Harkins and Jackson (1985) reasoned that it is not simply noticeability or identifiability of member effort that can eliminate SL. Rather, they argued that previous research on SL had simultaneously manipulated identifiability with potential for evaluation of individual efforts (Harkins & Petty, 1982; Kerr & Bruun, 1981, Williams, Harkins, & Latane, 1981).

When participants in these studies worked alone, they thought their outputs could be evaluated by comparison to those of group members performing the same tasks. When participants worked in groups, however,

members' outputs were pooled, leading them to believe their contributions could not be gauged according to those of group members. Harkins and Jackson (1985) manipulated comparability by telling some research participants they would be generating uses for an object that was the same as (comparable to) or different from (not comparable to) the object of the other members of their group. They manipulated identifiability by having some participants believe the experimenter would know how many uses they personally had generated, whereas others believed the experimenter would be unable to identify what each group member had contributed. Results indicated that those in the identifiable-comparable condition generated significantly more uses than those in the other three groups. Harkins and Jackson (1985) thus concluded that group members are motivated to exert effort when their outputs will be evaluated.

In another study, Harkins (1987) reported that an individual working on a task with another person worked harder when contributions were evaluated by the experimenter. Szymanski and Harkins (1987) found that the extent of SL diminished when members' individual performances at generating uses for an object could be evaluated by the experimenter or by themselves (according to a standard). In Williams et al.'s (1989) simulated swim meet, collegiate athletes whose speeds were announced--thus allowing evaluation by themselves, teammates, and experimenters--swam faster in relays than did those whose individual speeds were not announced. Further, when individual times were announced, athletes swam faster in relays than in individual competitions; when times were not announced, the opposite occurred.

Goethals and Darley (1987) proposed that social comparison occurs at the group level, such that individuals are motivated to glean information about their group's standing relative to that of other groups. Harkins and Szymanski (1989) thus predicted that the potential for group-level evaluation, as well as individual-level evaluation, could eliminate SL. Results of their experiments indicated that study participants who could evaluate their group's pooled performance according to a standard (an objective one for an optimizing task or a social one for a maximizing task) performed as well as solo performers--even when no individual-level evaluation was possible. Moreover, only this ability for group members themselves to evaluate their group's performance, not the potential for the experimenter's evaluation of their group, eliminated SL. Apparently, the potential for evaluation of individual performance by the individual himself or herself or by an outsider can eliminate SL. In contrast, at the group level, only the potential for evaluation by oneself can eliminate SL. In sum, SL seems to occur when individuals lack motivation to perform either because there is no potential for external evaluation of their individual contributions (and thus there is no risk of social rejection for profiting from others' effort while not pulling one's weight) or for internal evaluation (there is no opportunity to satisfy one's quest for knowledge about one's own ability or the ability of one's group as compared to a standard).

Perceived Dispensability of Effort

Another explanation for SL is that individuals work less as group members than as solo performers because they deem their efforts as dispensable to the group's task accomplishment. The thinking is not that loafing occurs because members see no value in extending themselves when their contributions cannot be evaluated (as they will neither gain positive regard for working hard nor risk disapproval for shirking, nor will they be able to procure information to rate their own or their group's proficiency), but because they feel that as the performance unit grows, their input becomes less necessary to do the job. Petty et al., observing that subjects put more cognitive effort into evaluating expository writing samples and were better able to identify strong and weak arguments when they performed individually than when they worked in a group of 10, concluded that individuals are less inclined to work hard "when they share responsibility for the task with others than when they alone are responsible" (1980, p. 90).

This explanation for SL also stems from the work of Olson (1965). Olson asserted that in a small group, each member's input makes a considerable impact on group performance, as it represents a significant portion of all input made toward task accomplishment; as group size increases, however, any one member's contribution has a lesser impact, as it constitutes a smaller proportion of total input. Orbell and Dawes (1981) and Albanese and Van Fleet (1985) concur that a member's belief that the group does not need his or her input to achieve its task-- that his or her contribution is of negligible consequence--prompts a reduction of effort.

There is empirical support for the notion that SL is related to members' perceptions of dispensability. Harkins and Petty (1982) presented subjects with the task of generating as many uses as possible for a particular object. They predicted that subjects given an object for which it was easy to come up with many uses would work less if their inputs were combined with those of others than would subjects working alone at the task, but that subjects presented with an object for which it was difficult to generate multiple uses would work the same regardless of whether their inputs were summed with those of others or they performed solo. They reasoned that subjects

doing the easy task would sense that some other member(s) in their group would generate the same uses and render theirs redundant, but that subjects doing the difficult task would deem their suggestions unique and necessary. Results bore out their predictions.

The link between reduced member effort and feelings of dispensability in groups was also demonstrated by Kerr and Bruun (1983). These researchers found that high-ability group members worked harder at disjunctive tasks than at conjunctive tasks, but low-ability members worked harder at conjunctive tasks than at disjunctive tasks. The abler individuals felt dispensable at conjunctive tasks, on which the score of the group's worst performer determined the group's score, whereas their less able counterparts felt unnecessary at disjunctive tasks, on which the score of the group's best performer determined its score. Thus, there is evidence that individuals will be more prone to reduce their effort in groups to the extent that they feel their input is dispensable, and that one's relative task ability can affect one's feelings of dispensability in a group.

Weldon and Mustari (1988) assessed the impact of both perceived lack of potential for evaluation and perceived dispensability on SL. In their experiment, subjects wee given the task of using various criteria to evaluate a job. In one condition, the experimenter clearly emphasized the anonymity of individual inputs; in the other, anonymity was not mentioned. Hence, the perceived potential for evaluation (by the participants or the experimenter) was lower in the explicit-anonymous condition. Within each condition, some believed they were performing alone; some, as dyad members; and some, with 15 others. Results showed that individuals who performed the task under the assumption that their judgments would be considered along with those of 15 others used less complex decision-making processes than did individuals performing alone or in pairs. No difference in performance was detected between individuals performing alone and in dyads. Subjects' responses to a post-experimental questionnaire indicated that those who were one of 16 "felt more strongly that participation was a waste of time, [and that their input probably duplicated the input of others" (Weldon & Mustari, 1988, p. 347). Nevertheless, those performing alone and in dyads in the explicitly anonymous condition (in which there was less potential for evaluation) exerted somewhat less effort than their counterparts in the implicitly anonymous condition--though not nearly so little effort as those in 16-member groups in either condition. This suggests that even when performance cannot be evaluated, someone who feels indispensable may refrain from loafing.

Thus there is evidence that people may reduce effort in a group when they believe their contributions will not be evaluated, because, as discussed, there are neither social rewards for working hard nor social sanctions against shirking, nor is information to be gained about one's own or one's group's ability. There is also evidence that feeling dispensable may lead to "self-marginalized" loafing by individuals who reduce their effort when they deem it unnecessary. Instead of trying to determine which of these two factors is a more potent antecedent of SL, it may be more fruitful to recognize each as important. By applying elements of Lewinian field theory (1951), which characterizes a social system as a dynamic tug-of-war between its driving forces and restraining forces, we may interpret both perceived lack of evaluation potential and perceived dispensability as forces driving SL in groups. Conversely, we may consider perceived evaluation potential and perceived indispensability of efforts as forces restraining SL. That is, in a given group, SL is more likely to occur if both (a) no standard exists to compare and evaluate member or group contributions, and (b) members believe their efforts are superfluous for goal accomplishment, than if only either (a) or (b) is present. Further, it becomes possible to think about the extent to which SL is present in a given group in terms of the sum potency of driving versus restraining forces. Which other factors driving SL have been studied empirically?

OTHER FACTORS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO SOCIAL LOAFING

Perceived Lack of Influence over Task Outcomes

Price (1987) has reasoned that just as the perception that one is dispensable may increase SL, so may the perception that one cannot directly influence a task outcome. Whereas perceived dispensability may be interpreted as one's belief that the group does not require one's efforts and that the group will complete its task at some minimal satisfactory level even without one's personal contributions, a perceived lack of influence refers to one's belief that the group will not achieve a certain desired level even with one's efforts--that no matter how high the caliber of one's contributions, the group will still fail to reach its goal.(4) Price (1987) conducted an experiment in which some subjects gave an opinion about a business case while others made a decision. Within each condition he manipulated identifiability, such that only some of the subjects believed the experimenter would be able to evaluate their responses. Results supported his assumptions: in the decision-making condition, evaluation potential had no effect on effort, whereas in the opinion-giving condition, group members whose outputs could not be evaluated loafed to a greater extent than those whose could. Those who made a decision for action in Price's (1987) investigation sensed more influence over task outcomes than those expressing a

mere opinion, which may not have been incorporated into the ultimate decision for action. The former were thus more motivated to maintain effort as group members rather than loaf, even when nobody could have evaluated their individual efforts.

Comer (984) similarly found a link between sensed lack of influence and SL. In this study, all subjects performed a motor task individually, in two-person groups, and in four-person groups. Monetary rewards were promised to the best individual, dyad, and group of four. Subjects believed that the experimenter, but not their groupmates, would be able to evaluate each group member's individual contributions. It was predicted that those performing as dyad and group members would exert less effort because they would reason that even their most diligent displays could not compensate for possibly incompetent or lazy co-workers. Indeed, results showed that subjects performed significantly better as individuals than as group members, and most reported that in the individual trial, independence from co-workers' possibly poor performance afforded them maximum influence over succeeding at the task and thereby earning the reward.

Whereas a single worker directs the outcome of a task as a function of his or her own effort, as people are added to the task group, the individual feels less certain about his or her ability to influence the successful accomplishment of the task. Relatedly, Messick, Allison, and Samuelson (1988) and Sniezek and May (1990) have found that individuals' efforts toward group work are inhibited by their uncertainty about the contributions of the other members with whom they are interdependent for doing work and earning rewards. Because individuals who work with others in a group forfeit the assurance of personal control over the outcome of the task, their effort declines. That is, motivation decreases as expectancy of a desired outcome decreases (Bandura, 1982; Vroom, 1964). These results indicate that a perceived lack of influence is a force that can drive "disheartened" loafing, and that a sense of influence can restrain the driving force of lack of evaluation potential.

Perceived Loafing by Other Group Members

The perception that one's fellow group members are loafing may increase the likelihood of one's own loafing. Veiga reported that group members who believe their co-workers are "generally unwilling to commit themselves to accomplishing the task at hand" will reduce their own contributions to the task (1991, p. 882). It has been proposed that people reduce their own contributions in groups because they wish to avoid playing the being taken advantage of by group members who loaf while they contribute, sucker role--and Kerr (1983) has documented that individuals are more likely to loaf if their able coworkers loaf over time. He found that individuals who believed they were teamed on a disjunctive task with competent, yet underperforming partners exerted less effort than individuals paired with incompetent partners or individuals working alone. Because the task was disjunctive, if at least one dyad member achieved the requisite score, the dyad would be successful. Kerr (1983) concluded that individuals did not mind carrying incompetent partners, but were averse to having partners who could have succeeded, but did not work, as the beneficiaries of their efforts. Likewise, Jackson and Harkins (1985) observed that individuals exerted less effort shouting if they believed their partners were not going to try hard; and Schnake (1991) found that in groups in which all performed the same task without having to interact and all received the same reward, members reduced effort when they believed co-workers were withholding effort. As Albanese and Van Fleet have asserted, an individual member may loaf "so as not to be victimized by other [loafers]" (1985, p. 252). Group members may loaf because they desire to preserve equity by not having others gain from their efforts without expending effort themselves (see Adams, 1965, for an explanation of equity theory).

Perceived loafing by one's fellow group members may promote one's own loafing not only by engendering one's wish to avoid being exploited by group members, but also by reducing one's sense of influence. One who perceives or anticipates shirking by group members may conclude that his or her group will fail to perform its task if the remaining nonshirkers cannot shoulder the extra burden themselves. The feedback from continually perceiving that one's group is unable to attain its goals may eventually cause one to conclude that one's own efforts are useless for controlling the task outcome, and to give up and loaf oneself--a chain of events like those described as learned helplessness (Seligman, 1975). (As more members begin to loaf, of course, group performance will continue to deteriorate.) In sum, perceived loafing by one's fellow group members may drive SL. First, beliefs that co-workers are shirking may heighten one's wish to avoid exploitation, which contributes to "retributive" loafing. Second, beliefs that co-workers are shirking may also contribute to one's perceptions of diminished influence over task outcomes and lead to "disheartened" loafing.

Individualism vs. Collectivism

Embracing the cultural value of individualism vs. collectivism (see Triandis, Bontempo, Villareal, Asai, & Lucca, 1988; Wagner & Moch, 1986) may affect one's tendency to engage in SL. Individualistic societies emphasize the achievement of personal goals over group goals, whereas collectivists are acculturated to put group goals before their own self-interests. Whereas collectivists may feel responsible and necessary for group success and believe their like-minded fellow group members will similarly pull their weight, less group-oriented individualists may be more likely to loaf. Earley (1989) found that collectivists loafed less at an in-basket task, even when their efforts were pooled with those of others and thus could not be evaluated. He reasoned that individualism vs. collectivism moderates one's tendency to loaf. More recently, Earley (1993) differentiated between ingroups and outgroups. In this study, all research participants could evaluate their own performance according to their practice trial output. However, only those in the individual condition were led to believe their individual output could be evaluated by the experimenter. Earley observed that collectivists exerted greater effort when they thought they were working with others who were similar to them than when they thought they were working alone or grouped with different others, and that collectivists had greater confidence in an ingroup's vs. an outgroup's outputs. He concluded that collectivists do loaf when working in a group with which they do not closely identify, because they cannot count on fellow group members' performances;(5) and that collectivists in groups with similar others will be less apt to loaf, as they perceive groups as more successful and group members as more reliable than do individualists. Individualism thus contributes indirectly to SL, in that individualist group members will be more likely to perceive a lack of influence and to be more concerned about avoiding the sucker role.

Unmotivating Task

Hackman (1987) recommended that giving groups engaging tasks could alleviate SL. Indeed, research indicates that loafing declines if group members are performing motivating work. In Brickner, Harkins, and Ostrom's (1986) research, students were asked to give their thoughts about (a) the imminent institution of comprehensive senior exams at their university (high-involvement task), or (b) the institution of such exams at their school after their graduation or (c) at another school (both low-involvement tasks). Those performing the low involvement task loafed when their outputs were pooled and thus not subject to evaluation by the experimenter. Those performing the high involvement task, however, did not loaf even when the potential for evaluation did not exist.

Williams and Karau (1991) reported that subjects whose performances at an idea generation task would be pooled with those of co-workers who said they were not going to work hard, exerted more effort than those whose performance would not be pooled. The researchers concluded that the former tried to compensate for their shirking co-workers in order to salvage the group's performance at the meaningful task.(6) George (1992) also found that salespeople's intrinsic task involvement was associated with less SL, as assessed by supervisors' appraisals of their effort at tasks for which the group members shared responsibility.(7) Additionally, Price (993) reported that business student research participants who were highly aroused by their experimental task--likely because they thought their performance would affect their course grade--did not loaf. It thus appears that task motivation moderates the extent to which perceived lack of potential for evaluation and the wish to avoid the sucker role lead to SL. That is, if motivation is high, because the task and/or its outcomes matter/s to the performer, loafing will be less likely. It is plausible that task motivation may also moderate the impact of other factors (perceived dispensability and perceived lack of influence) driving loafing. On the other hand, if the task is unmotivating, there will be no restraint on these factors.

SOCIAL LOAFING IN REAL WORK GROUPS

As SL has generally been studied in the laboratory, there have been few attempts to track how one's experiences in a particular performance group may affect the proclivity to loaf. However, in the models of group effectiveness noted earlier (see especially, Greenbaum et al., 1988), feedback, that is, information or awareness of a group's process and outputs, is seen as having the capacity to change the group's and/or any of its members' subsequent behaviors. As Harkins and Szymanski (1989) observed, even members of short-lived co-acting groups in laboratory experiments are concerned about their own and their group's performance. In real ongoing interacting groups, we can assume that there will be opportunities for evaluation. Group members will know what and how proficiently everyone is contributing. That is, it is not simply the potential for valuation, but actual evaluation itself that is operative in real groups. Further, group members will also engage in group-level evaluation. As Goethals and Darley noted, "comparison will take place whenever another group is salient, available, or similar" (1987, p. 33). In a laboratory experiment, group-level evaluation can occur only if the experimenter graciously provides a standard for comparison to those performing their unfamiliar task in co-acting groups (typically composed of undergraduates who have little experience working in groups). In real interacting groups, however, members may gauge their present group's progress and outputs by those of other

similar groups in their organization, as well as by those of other work groups to which they have belonged in the past. Thus a model of SL in real groups must account for the effect of feedback generated by available, not simply prospective, evaluation.

Perceived Group Performance Problems

Perceived group performance problems may be another antecedent of SL. In a group where nothing seems to click, the feedback of this troubled status may contribute to one's loafing by reducing one's sense of influence over task outcomes. Indeed, Tindale, Kulik, and Scott (1991) have reported that individual group members who receive feedback that their group is performing poorly expect their group will also perform poorly on a similar task in the future. Such performance difficulties may stem, for example, from conflict concerning such issues as intimacy or authority (see Colman & Bexton, 1975), excessive attempts to preserve cohesiveness that sacrifice the quality of group activity (Janis, 1972), confusion about responsibilities, tasks, and procedures due to the group's energy-intensive involvements with one particularly problematic member (Stohl & Schell, 1991), or inappropriate performance strategies or inadequate information on how to proceed at the task (Hackman, 1982, 1987). Just as perceived performance problems may exacerbate one's perceived lack of influence, perceived performance success may enhance perceived influence.

Perceived Relative Task Ability

The earlier discussion of perceived dispensability noted that an individual's superiority to co-workers on a conjunctive task or inferiority to co-workers on a disjunctive task increased tendency to loaf by heightening one's perception of being superfluous to doing the work of the group. Real work groups do not always (or even usually) perform tasks on which just one member's contributions determine the entire group's performance. Yet, individuals typically compare their abilities with those of their group members (Goethals & Darley, 1987), and because real groups generate feedback on each member's contributions, members' relative task abilities will be discernible as well as salient. It is likely that an individual who perceives he or she is less competent at the task (s) than other group members will have an enhanced sense of being unnecessary for doing the job, as a result of this sense of relative inferiority to others in the group. Such perceived dispensability will, in turn, contribute to SL. Indeed, Veiga (991) found that group members who deem another member more qualified to perform the task will curb their own effort. It is also plausible that an individual's perception of himself or herself as more competent at the task than others in the group will enhance his or her proclivity to loaf as a result of experiencing a keen lack of influence over task outcomes, as co-workers' lesser performances will impede this apparently superior individual's own level of achievement. Yamagishi (1988) did, in fact, observe that student subjects who were the highest performers (at a clerical computer matching test) in their co-active groups more frequently elected to exit their groups, so as to avoid having their scores pooled with those of group members, than did the medium or lowest performers.

There may be additional ways in which one's relative task abilities may affect one's loafing tendencies. Goethals and Darley's (987) discussion of the harmful consequences of social comparison process and Schlenker and Weigold's (1992) discussion of impression regulation can illuminate. Goethals and Darley (1987) have observed that social comparison can create discomfort if wide discrepancies between group members' capabilities are revealed. They have further suggested that such variability in ability may characterize most work groups and that members of these groups may be motivated to avoid presenting ego-threatening information. Schlenker and Weigold (1992) have offered insights into how individuals may attempt to protect their groupmates and themselves from this information about their differing abilities. They have asserted that people will depict themselves as their social circumstances require:

Research has shown that people will even present themselves negatively if it serves their purposes--e.g., if they believe a self-glorifying claim will threaten the audience, or if they prefer to avoid excessive public expectations....Thus, people do not merely want to present themselves positively; people aim to accomplish goals, and these goals may involve modest or even unflattering self-presentations. (Schlenker & Weigold, 1992, p. 144)

One could therefore expect "self-effacing" loafing by individuals who perceive their task abilities as superior to those of their group members. Such individuals might loaf so as not to deflate their less capable co-workers and/or to prevent these coworkers from (feeling dispensable and consequently) depending on them to complete a disproportionate share of the task. Impression regulation can also explain the behavior of individuals who perceive their task abilities as inferior to those of their group members. Wishing to make their relative deficiency

less conspicuous, they may reduce their contributions to the group. Individuals who engage in this "self-enhancing" loafing may prefer to give group members the impression that they are lazy rather than that they are incompetent. Thus, perceived relative task ability is explicitly included in the model of SL presented here.

A MODEL OF SOCIAL LOAFING IN REAL WORK GROUPS

Figure 1 illustrates the relationships among the factors that have been discussed as antecedents of SL. (Figure 1 omitted) In particular, the model indicates how performance feedback generated in a real work group and social comparison and self-presentation processes can affect members' perceptions of the group, other members, and themselves and thereby affect loafing tendencies.

It is hypothesized that:

1. Social loafing in real work groups increases with

* a wish to avoid the sucker role,

* perceived lack of influence over task outcomes,

* a wish to avoid appearing too competent,

* perceived dispensability,

* a wish to avoid appearing incompetent.

2. Task motivation moderates the effect on SL of a wish to avoid the sucker role, perceived lack of influence over task outcomes, a wish to avoid appearing too competent, perceived dispensability, and a wish to avoid appearing incompetent. Specifically, performing an engaging and meaningful task, as opposed to a boring one with a trivial outcome, will curb loafing.

3. The wish to avoid the sucker role increases with

* individualism vs. collectivism,

* perceived loafing by co-workers.

4. A perceived lack of influence increases with

* individualism vs. collectivism,

* perceived loafing by co-workers,

* perceived superiority to co-workers at the task,

* perceived group performance problems.

5. The wish to avoid appearing too competent increases with perceived superiority to co-workers at the task.

6. Perceived dispensability increases with perceived inferiority to co-workers at the task.

7. The wish to avoid appearing incompetent increases with perceived inferiority to co-workers at the task.

DISCUSSION

Models of group effectiveness (Gladstein, 1984; Greenbaum et al., 1988; Hackman, 1987; McGrath, 1984,

1986; Tubbs, 1984) have drawn upon systems theory to describe the various inputs and processes contributing to the outputs of group effectiveness and the feedback mechanisms between these outputs, processes, and inputs. McGrath (1984, 1986) singled out the group process component of the system as a key area for research on work groups. This paper has considered social loafing, a particular piece of a group's process that can impede group members from applying the requisite level of effort to their task (Hackman, 1987).

This paper has reviewed factors that may cause this decline in individual effort toward group tasks. In addition to considering factors more commonly linked with SL, the effects of other factors have been posited. Borrowing from field theory (Lewin, 1951), all of these factors have been conceptualized as forces driving an individual group member's propensity to loaf, so as to acknowledge the multiplicity of forces impinging on real work groups. Further, the impact of conditions facing real vs. laboratory groups has been acknowledged. Specifically, the ways in which feedback about group performance as well as social comparison processes and impression management activities may contribute to SL have been discussed.

Future research with real ongoing work groups must test the model of social loafing put forth here. A first key step is to devise operationalizations of the constructs in this model. Perceived group performance problems could be assessed with already existing scales (see, e.g., Hackman, 1982). Scales based on those designed and employed by George (1992) could measure the constructs of task motivation and social loafing. Perceived loafing by others and the wish to avoid the sucker role, as well as perceived lack of influence and perceived dispensability, would need to be deduced from the literature on social loafing cited earlier in this paper. Individualism--collectivism could be measured by scales developed by Wagner and Moch (1986), Erez and Earley (1987), and Triandis et al. (1988). Perceived inferiority/superiority to co-workers at the task could be tapped with items asking group members to rate their ability against that of co-workers. Measures for the wish to avoid appearing too competent/incompetent could be derived from the relevant literature on self-presentation (see, e.g., Schlenker & Weigold, 1992).

Once appropriate operationalizations have been developed, it will be possible to investigate the relationships proposed in Fig. 1 by having members of real work groups complete questionnaires containing the relevant scales. Ad hoc student project groups would be ideal for testing the model. Using such groups would afford both rigor (inasmuch as group task and tenure, and organizational resources would be equivalent across groups) and realism (in that members would interact, unlike participants in experimental pseudogroups). Further, individual-level and group-level comparisons and evaluation would be salient and readily available, as other groups would be performing the same task.

Using field theory (Lewin, 1951) to view those factors that promote social loafing as driving forces can inform designers and managers of groups as to how to circumvent loafing. Admittedly, the model proposed herein must be tested. In the meantime, however, it seems advisable for practitioners to minimize the likelihood of loafing by avoiding or removing these driving forces, or counteracting them with corresponding restraining forces. Because an open system (such as a work group) is affected by actions outside it, it is difficult to trace effects to specific causes (Thompson, 1967). It thus makes sense to create a redundancy of positive conditions to help effect a nurturing performance situation (Hackman, 1984).

Accordingly, designers and/or managers of organizational work groups should provide the following conditions to restrain loafing:

1. Compose groups in which every member brings a unique set of skills to bear on the task and in which members are at comparable levels at their respective areas of expertise, so as to increase each member's perceived indispensability and perceived influence over successful task outcomes. Ideally, as a group (especially an ongoing one) evolves, individual members will be continually acquiring new skills and learning from one another. Yet, at the time of group formation, each member's particular area of expertise should be made explicit to alleviate feelings of dispensability. Forming groups of equivalently skilled individuals will also prompt members to work as ably as they can, without concern about their comparative competence.

2. Limit group size to fit the task requirements so that members' efforts are clearly indispensable.

3. To reduce the impact of perceived group performance problems, remedy problematic process while it is not yet too late (see Greenbaum et al., 1991, for a review of instruments useful for diagnosing group problems as the basis for corrective feedback). If the group is experiencing performance difficulties, and members are not working up to capacity, a coach/leader can, for example, work with a group on developing more effective

performance strategies, or introduce intragroup communication networks that reduce coordination slippages and thereby restore members' perceived influence.(8)

4. Give groups greater discretion over planning and executing their work to increase task motivation.

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3 Researchers of social loafing have been able to attribute a reduction in member output to diminished effort (as opposed to ability) by systematically accounting for within subjects/repeated measures or between-subjects variance.

4 Consider this example differentiating between perceived dispensability and perceived lack of influence: one partner (Partner A) of a couple who believes that the other, neater and more domestically-inclined partner (Partner B) can take care of the housekeeping with minimal help from him or her, may feel dispensable and thus reduce his or her housekeeping efforts. Partner B, believing that no matter how often or how well he or she cleans, their home will never be as well-maintained as he or she would like, may feel a lack of influence over achieving this desired state of neatness, and thus reduce housekeeping efforts.

5 Moreover, Yamagishi (1988) argued that it is not that those from collectivistic societies are so group-centered that they would deem loafing irresponsible and impractical, but that these societies assure individuals' full participation in group endeavors by closely monitoring their members' behaviors and punishing shirkers. If his assessment is accurate, then Earley's (1993) research participants from a collectivistic culture may have loafed as outgroup members because they would not have expected group members to abide by collectivist principles in the absence of opportunities for social monitoring.

6 It is reasonable to believe, however, that over time, individuals would not only grow increasingly frustrated by and resentful of shirking group members, but would become unable to manage their mounting load of undone work.

7 The impact of the potential for evaluation cannot be determined. Although George (1992) did consider salespeople's perceptions of their supervisors' ability to monitor their individual contributions, she did not assess their perceptions of their own or their co-workers' ability to appraise members' outputs.

8 Feedback that the group's performance processes are ineffective may not exactly spur group members to alter their ingrained patterns of interaction. Rather, Gersick and Hackman (1990) warn that only an aptly-timed intervention by a leader or consultant may direct the group to recognize the need for different, more appropriate, ways of doing its work.

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