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Subject: Social Loafing

Group work is apart of most people's daily life. It can be perceived as a positive form of collaboration or an impediment to efficiency. Potential benefits of group or team work include increased performance and higher quality products (Tata 2002). Brooks and Ammons (2003) note that collaborative learning and peer review are important and positive aspects of groups. Conversely, Faris and Brown (2003) mention that groups may cause less people to participate while few individuals are able to dictate the work environment. In this paper I will examine the negative side of group work, in a review of the concept of social loafing.

Social loafing is an interesting concept that often creeps into the group environment. Hurley and Allen (2007) define social loafing as "the tendency to withhold or reduce effort in groups when one's contribution relative to other group members cannot be assessed." "Social loafing refers to the tendency for individuals to progressively reduce their personal input to a collaborative task as group size increases" (North, Linley, and Hargreaves 2000). Social loafing is widely considered to be an on-going problem with group work. However, some researchers (Guerin 2003) argue that social loafing is an arbitrary concept that is over simplified, and that it is just one aspect of many overlapping behaviors. They argue that different arrangements of social consequences simply produce different behaviors. But, most research I have found explains social loafing as a unique concept with specific causes. One of the bigger issues surrounding social loafing is the inability to prevent it.

Across various research camps, the causes for social loafing are similar and the repercussions are widespread. However, discussions vary by how general to consider it as a

problem. For instance, results from a study on upper division psychology students showed that social loafing exists tested as true on any task that requires cognitive or physical effort (Chapman and Arenson 1993). This would seem to be a very overwhelming and general assessment. In much of the discussion on social loafing, there is a desire to generalize the causes, but most is somewhat restrained. The issue does not seem to be near any type of resolution.

Guerin (2003) notes: “Because an individual’s visibility to outsiders is reduced when he or she is in a group, groups... usually involve less individual evaluation, less accountability, less responsibility, and less punishment.” Accountability is a key concept in social loafing. Carron, Burke, and Prapavessis (2004) refer to Social Impact Theory, which explains that the group diffuses scrutiny, while downplaying the role of each individual. As the individual is hidden in the mix, they are able to put forth less effort. Karau and Williams (1995) discusses the importance of Evaluation Approach theory and the Dispensability of Effort. The evaluation theory explains how individuals, when able to hide in the crowded group, will not work as hard. Also, individuals will tend to contribute less if they feel that their input is not essential to the high-quality group product, which is explained in the theory of Dispensability of Effort (Karau and Williams 1995).

The group environment may cater to poor performance. Groups can serve as a source of psychological protection, as the cohesion of the group supports their performance even as it worsens (Carron, Burke, and Prapavessis 2004). Members of groups will also maintain a stable relationship so that they will continue to be supported. “Individuals selectively present aspects of their self and/or omit self relevant information in hope of making a favorable impression on others” (Carron, Burke, and Prapavessis 2004).

“Co-performers” can act as a distraction to individual performers (Carron, Burke, and Prapavessis 2004). Carron, Burke, and Prapavessis (2004) raise the example of a stutterer’s tendency to speak more pronounced when alone and not being viewed in comparison with others. They make the claim that group pressure or influence may be causing members to loaf.

In examples of sports teams, researchers raise interesting claims, regarding the need for identifiability. In studying a professional swimming team, Williams, Nida, Baca, et al (1989) found that swimmers performed better when told of their time on each lap. However, in swimming as an individual, the lap time had no noticeable effects. They concluded that people’s group output, once identifiable, will bring them to their individual level (Williams et al 1989).

In a study on group cheering, individual clapping was expressed at only 82% of potential when the clapper perceived their clapping with another person, and 74% as much when perceived with 5 other people (Latane et al 1979). The noise produced by the individual would diminish as the group size increased. Anshel (1995) came to a similar conclusion in his study of a rowing group. However, they find that personal identification does not affect loafing as much because even dedicated rowers would loaf. However, it could be argued that even with tasks that we cherish, we can lose personal identification or value of a given task as it becomes tiresome or redundant.

In their study on 110 undergraduate students, North, Linley, and Hargreaves (2000) note that the school setting is no different when it comes to social loafing. They found in studying student activities that loafing occurred more so in large groups rather than smaller ones. However, they did not conclude that this loafing phenomenon outweighs the importance of having a collaborative, group learning environment. Social loafing was considered an element of group work that is important to keep in mind.

Social loafing can be argued to be a result of a poor work dynamic (Hurley and Allen 2007). The kinds of symptoms of poor work dynamic include a lack of communication, lack of consensus, lack of coherence in labor distribution, and wasted time due to irrelevant input (Hurley and Allen 2007). Gardner and Korth (1998) explain that attitude, motivation, learning preference, learning style, and specific educational activities all affect desire to work in a group, which in turn explains why some may loaf. Part of work dynamic is individual perceptions and the behavior that creates them.

Tata (2002) raises the issue of social loafing perceptions and how loafing can be misunderstood or understood through modes of communication. For example, Tata discusses the importance of the kind of accounts that workers communicate to each other when they are not completing tasks on time. These accounts take the form of concessions, excuses, and refusals. When co-workers concede that their work has not been completed, they are less likely to be perceived as a loafer (Tata 2002). However, when co-workers give an excuse or refusal, they are more likely to be considered a loafer (Tata 2002).

Tata (2002) goes on to discuss the negative effect perceptions of loafing have on the work environment. When co-workers perceive a loafer in their midst, they may express negative reactions, lessened desire to work hard, and less effort (Tata 2002). In this case, the possible loafing and perceptions are affecting the work dynamic unlike previous research, explaining the opposite relationship.

There are a number of recommendations discussed in the research, which are important to consider. Chapman and Arenson (1993) mention that high personal involvement, increased uniqueness of one's contribution, raised accountability, raised group cohesiveness, and more emphasis on evaluation will all help in mitigating social loafing.

As a way of sparking more individual contribution, Nemeth et al (2004) explain that freedom or permission to critique, even criticize, is important in creating an atmosphere of freedom while enhancing the generation of creative ideas. Encouraging debate also may lessen fear of criticism or evaluation (Nemeth et al 2004). However, Asmus and James (2006), expressing a different viewpoint, maintain that fear of criticism of ideas might hamper individuals from offering their thoughts.

Asmus and James (2006)

An important theory for understanding social loafing came from the Collective Effort Model (Karau and Williams 1995). Karau and Williams (1995) note that this model “combines expectancy-value models of effort (which suggest that people seek to maximize the expected utility of their efforts) with self-evaluation processes in group contexts.

