

Social Loafing and Its Effects in Workplace

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ABSTRACT

The concept of social loafing has been discussed and researched by the organizational researchers since 1913. Social loafing refers to the tendency of the individual to expend less effort when working in a group rather than individual. Research evidence indicate the existence of the social loafing not only in physical task but also cognitive task. A large number of variables found to moderate social loafing. Researchers identifies various variables such as Individual and group task, gender, technology, group size, group cohesiveness, task responsibility, intrinsic motivation all are associated with social loafing. The present paper reviews the research on social loafing.

Keywords: *Social loafing, Organization, Task, Employee*

The concept of social loafing propounded by a French agricultural engineer Maximilien Ringelmann in the year 1913, also known as Ringleman effect. They found that when group of individuals pulled the rope, they exert less efforts individually which leads to lower productivity. It has also been reexamined by Ingham, Levinger, Graves and Peckham (1974) and found that curvilinear decline of individual effort when they are doing a task in a group. The detrimental effect of the social loafing on the individual as well as organization was also studied by Latane, Williams and Harkins (1979).

Does social loafing exists?

Till date researchers are intrigued by a focusing on a few questions such as:

- Cause of social loafing.
- The reason of individuals under performance/ de-motivation in a group activity.
- Lack of individual reward or feedback for the individual effort encouraged in a group task.
- Whether social loafing exists only in physical activities or in cognitive task when performed in group.

Social Loafing and Cognitive Task:

Researchers already established social loafing exists in physical task. Research findings also confirm that it is also exists in cognitive task performed by a group. The experiments conducted by Petty, Harkings, Williams and Latane (1977) on three different groups. The first group was assigned the task of editing a poem and the group members believe that it is their sole responsibility. The second group comprises of four members whereas third group

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believe they consists of sixteen members. The findings of the study confirm that social loafing does exist in cognitive task. They found that as no individuals offered reward for the good job or individual feedback, which compels the researcher to focus on that area. Robbins (1995) also found that social loafing also takes place in the thought-provoking task in spite of unique contribution of the individual in group activity.

Ingham et. al., (1974) and Latane et. al., (1977) replicated the experiment with cheering and clapping. Their findings contribute two elements:

- i) Ringelmann's study can be replicable.
- ii) The reason of decreased effort by the group members was neither due to lack of coordination among them nor the difficulty level of the task.

According to Latane et. al. (1979) social loafing is a type of social disease and it has negative impact on individuals, organization, and the society at large. People loaf in a group in order to save their energy and also consider that their output will be rewarded at the individual level (Harkins, Latane and Williams, 1980). This adoption of social loafing as a strategy has not been explored by the researcher.

Once the researcher established the fact that social loafing exists in a group then they focus on the antecedent and deterrent of social loafing. Williams, Harkins and Latane in their study along with cheers added one more variable that is, microphone. Each individual participants have been attached with a microphone in order to convince them that the individual effort will be measured. It leads to strengthening of the participants belief of measuring the personal effort which in turn discourages social loafing. They also emphasized on the measurement of the individual output when one is working alone.

People loaf when they come to know that their output was not measured when working alone, perform poor as a result productivity decreased. The article written by Harkins & Petty (1982), published in Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, emphasized on effects of task difficulty and task uniqueness on social loafing. They found that social loafing depends on the hard/difficulty level, knowledge/skill and interesting/easy part of the task. If the task is difficult then the group members working hard to accomplish the task. If the group members either possess prior knowledge or skill required to perform the task social loafing is decreased. Harkins and Petty added one more variable in their experiment, uniqueness. If the individual members in the group think that they either possess knowledge or skill which is unique contribution to tasks in the group and no other members can contribute their skill/knowledge, then they loaf less.

Zaccaro (1984) emphasizes on task attractiveness in an attempt to expand social loafing which has been refined by the work of Latane et. al., (1970). They found interaction among group members, task commitments, individual identity act as deterrent of social loafing.

Social Loafing and Group Cohesiveness:

High cohesiveness and high interaction among member as well as individual effort lowers social loafing. After their study on 1982, Jackson and Williams (1985) emphasized upon the task difficulty in individual and group level. They found difficult task results enhanced performance when performed in group whereas the simple task can be performed at individual level. So, management must evaluate the difficulty level of the task before assigning it as individual or group level. They also found group cohesiveness an important determinant whether the individuals in the group loaf or not which needs further research.

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They also found social loafing is not bad rather is an effective strategy to reduce the stress of the individual when working in a group.

In 1998, Hoeksema-Van Orden studied on fatigue as a cause of social loafing. He found individuals inclined to loaf when they were sleep deprived and fatigue. Fatigue can be caused in three different ways: Individual work a) in the task for 25 minutes b) three and half hours continuously c) for 20 hours in total (deprived them of sleep). Results found that simple tasks were more susceptible to social loafing than complex task. Their findings corroborate William and Jackson (1995) studies.

In order to combat it, two suggestions were given by the researcher:

- i) Giving feedback to the group members about their individual contribution publicly.
- ii) Task should be assigned individually.

Social Loafing and Self- evaluation:

Szymanski & Harkins (1988) emphasized on self-evaluation for reducing social loafing. They tested two elements such as

- i) Social standard in the year -1987 &
- ii) Objective standard in the year -1988

Harkins and Szymanski (1988) found once the individual familiar with the task, the feedback on improved performance motivate the individual to perform better. George (1992) found that in sales people two factors such as a) task visibility and ii) task involvement is negatively associated with social loafing. According to him, intrinsic task involvement can be increased through a) job enrichment (Hackmen & Oldham, 1980) and b) accountability. In 1995 she emphasized upon two types of rewards such as i) Contingent reward and ii) non-contingent reward. According to her the contingent reward by the authority /supervisor have a detrimental/ negative effect on social loafing where as non-contingent reward has no effect. In the same manner, contingent punishment is not act as deterrent on social loafing whereas non –contingent punishment have a positive effect on social loafing.

According to George, managers should think judiciously before punishing the employee as the long term effect of reprimanding an employee are not effective as the reward for the desirable behavior. The findings of the George also corroborate the findings of Schnake (1991). Schnake (1991) found that goal setting instead of punishment is considered to be more effective strategy for reducing social loafing.

In 1998, Charbonnier et. al., found individuals are motivated when they are validating themselves, that is, to consider themselves as unique as well as better than others make a difference in the group activity. They not only find that they are unique in group activity rather resistant to work in a group in future.

Social Loafing and Gender:

Karau and Williams (1993) emphasized on the role of the culture in social loafing. Individualist western culture loaf more compared to the collectivist- Eastern oriental cultures. In their study, participants were undergraduate within the age group 18-22 and group partners were strangers (Charbonnier et. al, 1998). Karau and Williams (1993) found that like culture and individual beliefs gender plays a significant role in social loafing. Kugihara (1999) found females loafed less in comparison to males. Stark, Shaw, & Duff (2007) also found social loafing in genders in both self as well as peer evaluation. Jackson & Harkins (1985) and

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Hoeksema-van-orden(1995) in their study found social loafing only in one gender either male or female, not mixed one.

The social loafing has been studied at individual and group level by Liden, Wayne, Jaworski and Bennett (2004). They proposed four hypotheses at individual level:

- i) Individuals perception of task.
- ii) Interdependence is negatively related to social loafing.
- iii) Individual perception is negatively related to social loafing.
- iv) Individual perception of fair play and fairness in the distribution of the reward (distributive justice) is negatively related to social loafing.

On group level, they proposed three hypothesis :

- i) The size of the group has positive effect on social loafing.
- ii) Group cohesiveness has negative effect on social loafing.
- iii) When individual finds the coworker loaf, then individual p[reparation leads to propensity to loaf.

The hypothesis supports the findings i) group size and ii) group cohesiveness. Perceived co-worker loafing is negatively related to social loafing which contradicts the findings of Mulvey. It focuses on causes of social loafing.

Social Loafing and Personality:

The effects of personality on social loafing has been studied by i) Klehe & Anderson (2007) and ii) Tan & Tan (2008). They have studied the relationship between i) Social loafing and Organizational Citizenship Behavior (OCB), ii) Motives and contextual factors. Their findings of the studies are as follows:

- i) Organizational Citizenship Behavior (OCB) was negatively related to social loafing
- ii) Conscientiousness was negatively related to social loafing.
- iii) Organizational Citizenship Behavior (OCB) is positively related to conscientiousness.
- iv) The contextual factors of task visibility, task interdependence, group cohesiveness and felt responsibility are negativity are related to social loafing (Tan & Tan, 2008).

A number of research was done on contextual factors such as:

- i) Task visibility – George (1992), Jones, (1984), Latane et al (1979).
- ii) Task Interdependence – Liden et al (2004), Pearce & Gregersen (1991), Williams & Karau (1991).
- iii) Group cohesiveness – Karau & Hart (1998)

The above study describes the role of personality on social loafing which help the employer to curtail social loafing in the work place while recruiting and hiring.

Social Loafing and Work Group:

Bluhm (2009) stated when individuals working in a group, the task accomplishment is everyone's satisfaction. The individual need not have to work hard, the way they used to do when they are doing the work alone. As a result of which the individual experience less stress and strain when working individually and conserve their energy in a group task.

According to Davis (1969) withholding the effort is a common phenomenon in work group. The rope pulling study of Ringelmann indicated that if the group size increased to 8, the

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members individuals performance fall to 49% (Moede, 1927) as compared to individual's pulling on rope.

According to Kidwell & Bennelt (1993), the common terms used for social loafing are shrinking or free riding or withholding the effort. Brubaker also stated that free rider behavior is also known as cheating strategy. Each individual is a cheater, hypocrisy in their approach avoiding paying the price, betraying the confidence of the group. The free rider takes the advantage of the collective effort by refraining themselves from individual contribution.

Adams argue (1965) that, people assess both the input (investment/contribution) and output (result) received compared to the input/output of others. The fair outcome is often termed as distributive justice (Deutsch 1985, Homans 1961) in which the unfairness is being perceived by the individual as unfair outcomes.

Social loafing divides the group into two, whether the group members can be frustrated or not. (Felps et. al, 2006, Stouten et al, 2006, 2009). If the group members feel that they are loafed by their coworkers in the past, it leads to withdrawal behavior in future due to anger and frustration (Felps, Mitschell & Byington, 2006). By taking revenge they may try to balance or correct it (Stouten, De cremer & Van Dijk, 2006) or to loaf at their level. Once the group members notice that their coworkers loaf then it is being spread through entire group members (Robbinson & O Leary Kelly, 1998) which leads to malfunction of the entire group.

Social loafing also occurs in virtual teams (Bryant, Albring, Murthy 2009, Furumo, 2009). Cyber loafing in the workplace also takes place (time spent by the individual in non-work-related activities during working hours) (Henle & Blanchard 2008, Henle, Kohut & Booth, 2009).

Social Loafing and Leadership:

In 2006, Ferrante, Green & Foster (2006) studied the role of group leader on social loafing. In this context, they have focused on a) organizational justice and b) Procedural Justice. They emphasizes on two types of leader: a) Incentivized Leader b) Formal Leader. They found teams having formal incentive leader perform better and loaf less compared to the team having no formal leader. But the limitations of the study was : i) 90% of the participants were male, within the age group of 19-24, ii) social loafing was self reported by the team members but not by team leaders. So, the pitfalls of the study can be addressed by the future researcher. The individuals preference of group work studied by Stark, Shaw and Duffy (2007).

Greenleaf (1977), and Liden et al. (2008) examined the role of servant leader in social loafing. The servant leader not only focus on the group members commitment and growth but also promoting empathy, ethics and community service. Servant leaders as servant to members selflessly giving emphasis on subordinates development and interest (Van Dierendonck, 2011). According to George (1992) social loafing in laboratory work group consistent with the organizational work group. Laboratory research revealed leader play a pivotal role in structural function of the group to intervene and control whether group members confronted with social loafing.

Social Loafing and Technology:

Technology played a pivotal role and changed the dynamics of working in a group. Groups can be formed people from different states and countries. In 2010, Alnuaimi, Robert &

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Maruping conducted the experiments on technology driven teams and social loafing. They found that three elements as antecedents /constructs of social loafing: i) Diffusion of responsibility, ii) Blame is attributed, and iii) Adoption of technology leads to dehumanization.

CONCLUSION

Over the years, research studies on social loafing have evolved and confirmed that social loafing exists. Social loafing less likely to occur when employees believe that individual performance is identified, measured, and individual outcome is important. It is also less likely to occur when there is a group cohesiveness, task visibility and uniqueness of individual members. Self-evaluation has negative effect on social loafing. Though many researchers viewed social loafing as negative and consider it as a kind of social disease whereas other researchers consider social loafing as positive and adaptive.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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