Social Loafing in Cheerleaders: Effects of Team Membership and Competition

Charles J. Hardy and Bibb Latané
University of North Carolina

The group performance literature suggests that when individuals work together on a task, they tend to exert less effort than when they perform the same task individually (Jackson & Williams, 1985). This reduction of individual effort when individuals are collectively held responsible for a task has been termed social loafing (Latané, Williams, & Harkins, 1979). Social loafing has been demonstrated to occur in a variety of physically effortful tasks such as rope pulling (Ingham, Levinger, Graves, & Peckham, 1974), noise production (Latané et al., 1979), and force production (Kerr & Brunn, 1981). This effect has also been demonstrated for tasks requiring cognitive effort such as evaluation of essays (Petty, Harkins, Williams, & Latané, 1977), brainstorming, and vigilance (Harkins & Petty, 1982). Moreover, social loafing has been found to characterize the behavior of both males and females of all ages (Harkins, Latané, & Williams, 1980; Latané, 1986), in between- as well as within-subjects designs (Harkins et al., 1980; Kerr & Brunn, 1981), and in both individualistic and collective cultures (Latané, 1986). Thus, social loafing appears to be a rather robust phenomenon, threatening effective collective endeavor.

However, several factors have been identified that appear to moderate the magnitude of this effect. Specifically, loafing was eliminated when individual efforts were identifiable (Williams, Harkins, & Latané, 1981), when individuals perceived that they made a unique contribution to the group effort or performed difficult tasks (Harkins & Petty, 1982), when individuals performed with friends versus strangers (Williams, 1981), when conjunctive and disjunctive tasks were employed (Kerr, 1983), and when the task was personally involving (Brickner, Harkins, & Ostrom, 1986). However, the research conditions of many of these investigations created motivational properties that appear to be in opposition to those associated with established teams performing a team-related task under competitive conditions. That is, social loafing may be restricted to tasks that are seen as unimportant, meaningless, or lacking in intrinsic motivation, performed by relative strangers in noncompetitive contexts. The purpose of this study, therefore, was to investigate social loafing among established teams performing an intrinsically motivating team-related task under competitive conditions.

Requests for reprints should be sent to Charles J. Hardy, CB 8700, 26 Fetzer, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC 27599-8700.
Three questions guided this investigation: Do people loaf on tasks that are important and involving to them, or just on those they find trivial or meaningless? Would the presence of competitive motives, either individual or group, help arouse collective orientations and thus reduce or reverse the tendency to loaf when working with others? Do people loaf only when responsibility is shared with strangers, or does being jointly responsible with friends reduce the effect?

Although for most of us the ability to make lots of noise by yelling or clapping our hands together is not highly valued or rewarding, for cheerleaders, temporarily at least, it is. If social loafing is a phenomenon that occurs only for tasks viewed as unimportant and meaningless, cheerleaders should not loaf when performing cheering tasks. If people loaf only on tasks motivated simply by obedience to a supervisor, cheerleaders should not loaf when they are competing for recognition. Finally, if loafing occurs only when responsibility is shared with strangers, cheerleaders should especially not loaf when their friends are depending on them to help the team win.

Method

Participants

Participating in this study were 48 high school girls attending a cheerleading camp. They were randomly assigned to 24 dyads, with the restriction that half of the dyads be composed of members in uniform from the same cheering squad (team groups) and half be composed of members from different squads (stranger groups). The cheerleaders ranged in age from 15 to 17 years and had 2 to 5 years of cheerleading experience.

Procedures

Cheerleaders were recruited so that half of the 24 pairs were wearing uniforms and came from the same high school cheerleading squad, and half were from different schools. One member of our research team approached cheerleaders in their dormitory and asked them to "give us a hand for about 20 minutes so that we might measure how loud you cheer." The cheerleaders were ushered, two at a time, into a small room furnished with a screen and two chairs.

The cheerleaders then donned earphones and blindfolds (to control sensory feedback) and went through a series of 3 practice and 32 regular trials in which each person shouted and clapped alone and in pseudopairs an equal number of times. In the pseudopair condition, each cheerleader was informed that she was performing with a partner, but she was actually performing alone. This was accomplished through a multichannel stereo cassette tape that informed one member of the dyad that her partner would be performing alone while at the same time informing the other member that both she and her partner would be shouting or clapping together (Latané, 1986). This was followed by a countdown and the sound of six individuals shouting and clapping. The prerecorded feedback served to keep each participant from hearing her partner, thereby preventing the development of group norms and keeping each cheerleader from realizing that on the trials for which she believed she was performing with her partner, she was actually performing alone. This strategy allows for the separation of the effects of coordination losses and the economizing of individual effort (Latané et al., 1979).

During a rest period following this series of trials and before starting the