

Social Loafing and Personal Involvement Among Jordanian College Students

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ABSTRACT. The generalizability of social loafing (the phenomenon that people exert less effort when performing in groups than when performing individually) was tested, using Jordanian college students. Subjects in groups of four were asked to think of as many ideas as possible to explain their opposition to a proposed comprehensive examination. The degree of task involvement and output identifiability were manipulated. Consistent with previous findings in the United States, the Jordanians' performance was not as good when they worked collectively as it was when they worked alone. The social loafing effect was eliminated when the Jordanians performed highly involved tasks, regardless of the identifiability of their output.

PEOPLE EXERT LESS EFFORT when they work in groups than when they work alone. Latané, Williams, and Harkins (1979), who called this phenomenon social loafing, reported that subjects put forth less effort when clapping and shouting as a group. Social loafing has also been observed in the group performance of other tasks, such as the evaluation of poems and editorials (Petty, Harkins, Williams, & Latané, 1977), vigilance (Harkins & Petty, 1982), simple and difficult maze problems (Jackson & Williams, 1965), pumping air (Kerr & Bruun, 1981), and thought generation (Brickner, Harkins, & Ostrom, 1986).

The validity of the phenomenon of social loafing has been tested under several conditions and with several tasks. Social factors appear to influence the magnitude of the social loafing effect. For instance, social loafing has been partially or entirely eliminated when individuals' performances are identifiable within the group (Brickner et al., 1986; Williams, Harkins, & Latané, 1981), when individ-

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nal responsibility for the final outcome is lessened (Petty et al., 1977), when the task is involving (Bruckner et al., 1986), or when the task is difficult (Harkins & Petty, 1982; Jackson & Williams, 1985).

A few studies have examined loafing tendencies in different societies, or differences in loafing that have resulted from differences in socialization (Gabrenya, Wang, & Latané, 1985). Some of these studies in other societies showed evidence of social loafing in group performance (Gabrenya, Latané, & Wang, 1985; Weiner, Pandey, & Latané, 1981), and others showed that group performance was better than individual performance (Earley, 1989; Gabrenya, Wang, & Latané). These mixed findings might be due to differences in cultural values or to methodological problems, such as the type of task used.

The literature on social loafing suggests that the generalizability of this phenomenon is limited, particularly in non-Western societies. In the present study we examined the generalizability of social loafing in Jordan, where group cohesiveness and cooperation are emphasized (Pickthall, 1981). We also examined the effect of identifiability of output and task involvement, two factors that have been shown to mediate social loafing in the United States.

Method

Subjects

One hundred eighty Jordanian undergraduate psychology students (90 men and 90 women) completed a questionnaire about their attitudes toward a variety of issues. Embedded in this questionnaire was an item that assessed the students' attitudes toward taking a comprehensive examination upon graduation. After securing the results, we randomly selected 63 Jordanian undergraduate students (32 men and 31 women) from a subsample of 105 students (50 men and 55 women) who had a negative attitude toward the comprehensive examination. These students were asked to participate in the present experiment 2 weeks later. Only those students who had a negative attitude toward the comprehensive examination were asked to participate in the experiment because these students were in the majority and were expected to be highly motivated in their opposition to the comprehensive examination.

Design and Procedure

The subjects were randomly assigned to one of four conditions in a 2 × 2 design (Task Involvement: high vs. low × Level of Output Identifiability: high vs. low).

The subjects were seated at a desk in groups of four and told that they would be participating in a study about a proposed comprehensive examination for college students. The subjects were told that because they had all demonstrated a

negative attitude toward the comprehensive examination, they were being asked to think of as many ideas as possible to explain why they opposed such an examination.

The subjects in the high involvement conditions were told that the comprehensive examination would be adopted at their university by the end of the academic year. The subjects in the low-involvement conditions were told that the comprehensive examination would be adopted by another Jordanian university.

We asked the subjects in the high-identifiability conditions to put their ideas in separate boxes so that we would be able to identify individual output. One box was placed in front of each of the 4 subjects. The subjects in the low-identifiability conditions were asked to put their ideas in one box. This procedure, which was used to ensure the unidentifiability of the subjects' output, is commonly used in research on social loafing (Szymanski & Harkins, 1987).

The subjects in all of the conditions were told that the purpose of the experiment was to collect as many ideas as possible opposing the comprehensive exam and that their task as a group was to generate the most ideas. The subjects were also told that the quality or the importance of their ideas was less important than the quantity of their ideas. The subjects were given 10 min to brainstorm.

At the end of the experiment the subjects completed a questionnaire that included manipulation checks. The subjects were then debriefed and dismissed and were asked not to discuss the experiment with other students.

Results

We analyzed the data using a 2×2 (Task Involvement: high vs. low \times Level of Output Identifiability: high vs. low) analysis of variance (ANOVA).

The subjects were asked several questions after they had finished their brainstorming session so that we could assess their beliefs and understanding of the procedures. The subjects believed that their responses would be considered in the decision of whether to assign a comprehensive examination upon graduation. At the end of the experiment, all the subjects reported that they had a negative attitude toward the examination.

To assess the identifiability manipulation, we asked the subjects whether they thought the experimenter had been able to distinguish between individual responses. One hundred percent of the subjects in the high-identifiability conditions believed the experimenter could identify their individual responses, whereas only 12% of the subjects in the low-identifiability conditions believed the experimenter could identify their individual responses. A one-way ANOVA performed on the number of thoughts generated by the men ($M = 5.13$) and the women ($M = 4.88$) indicated that there were no significant gender differences, $F(1, 60) = 2.92$, ns . A two-way ANOVA performed on the number of ideas generated by the subjects revealed two main effects for output identifiability and task involvement. The

subjects whose outputs were highly identifiable tended to generate more ideas ($M = 5.50$) than did the subjects whose outputs were less identifiable ($M = 4.47$), $F(1, 60) = 5.236$, $p < .05$. The subjects with high-involving tasks tended to generate more ideas ($M = 5.44$) than the subjects with low-involving tasks did ($M = 4.53$), $F(1, 60) = 4.042$, $p < .05$.

These findings indicate that the subjects in the low-involvement conditions generated fewer ideas ($M = 3.63$) when output was less identifiable and more ideas ($M = 5.44$, $p < .01$) when the output was highly identifiable. The subjects in the high-involvement conditions generated a high number of ideas, for both the high-identifiability condition ($M = 5.56$) and the low identifiability condition ($M = 5.31$, *n.s.*). The two-way interaction was not significant, $F(1, 60) = 3.004$, $p < .088$.

Discussion

The data for the identifiability manipulation indicated that social loafing occurred in this study. The subjects in the pooled conditions (low identifiability) tended to generate fewer ideas than those in the high-identifiability conditions, suggesting that the subjects worked better individually than together. This finding suggests a new emphasis on individualistic, rather than traditional, values that may be attributable to the social, economic, and political changes experienced by Jordan and other Muslim countries in the last decade (Tay, 1983).

Consistent with earlier findings on the effect of task involvement on group performance (Brickner et al., 1986), the subjects in the high-involving tasks tended to generate more ideas than the subjects in the low-involving tasks did, suggesting that involving tasks eliminated the social loafing effect; the students seemed to exert more effort when they believed the group task would affect them personally.

The analysis of the cell means indicated that subjects in the low-involvement conditions generated more ideas when the output was identifiable than they did when the output was less identifiable. In the high-involvement condition, however, the subjects tended to generate more ideas in both the high-identifiability and low identifiability conditions. Thus, the subjects in the high-involving tasks generated more ideas, regardless of the identifiability of their group output.

Overall, the results of this study replicate previous findings in the United States and provide evidence for the occurrence of social loafing in other societies. However, this research must be replicated in Jordan with subjects from different socioeconomic and educational levels, to control for recent changes in Jordanian values, and with additional types of tasks and factors, such as task difficulty or self- or external evaluation. Research on social loafing must also be conducted in other societies in the region so that the generalizability of this phenomenon can be tested.

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