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EXTRINSIC AND INTRINSIC ORIGINS OF PERCEIVED SOCIAL LOAFING IN ORGANIZATIONS

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It was hypothesized and found that task visibility and intrinsic task involvement would each be negatively associated with "social loafing" in an ongoing organization. Individuals engaged in social loafing put forth low effort when performing work in groups. Intrinsic involvement was not a significant predictor of social loafing when task visibility was controlled. However, as hypothesized, intrinsic involvement moderated the relationship between task visibility and social loafing in such a way that the relationship was strongest when intrinsic involvement was low.

One well-documented explanation for productivity losses in groups is the tendency for individual effort to decrease when people work in groups rather than individually; this tendency has been termed "social loafing" (Latane, Williams, & Harkins, 1979) and has been shown to occur for a wide variety of tasks (e.g., Earley, 1989; Harkins, Latane, & Williams, 1980). Why does social loafing occur? Prior research suggests that both extrinsic and intrinsic task-related factors are partially responsible for its occurrence. However, researchers have studied the phenomenon exclusively in laboratory settings and have not determined the extent to which those results generalize to ongoing work groups in organizational contexts. Hence, this research sought to increase understanding of social loafing as it occurs in ongoing groups. More specifically, I developed hypotheses concerning both the extrinsic and intrinsic origins of social loafing and their joint effect on individual effort in work groups.

The extrinsic explanation of social loafing focuses on the fact that individual contributions to a group product are often unidentifiable (Williams, Harkins, & Latane, 1981); when this is the case, motivation may be low since the perceived relationship between individual effort and sanctions or rewards is weak (Jones, 1984). An individual may not be able to claim any benefits from high levels of effort nor incur any penalties for low levels of effort when individual contributions to group performance are not identifiable (Jones, 1984). Indeed, laboratory experiments have documented that

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social loafing does not occur when individuals working in a group think that their individual efforts or contributions are identifiable to others (Williams et al., 1981).

In a laboratory, identifiability is an absolute; at the start of a study, subjects are told whether or not their individual efforts are identifiable. In actual work settings, it is likely that workers' perceptions of identifiability or task visibility vary. Essentially, I suggest the following: perceptions of task visibility (Jones, 1984) are likely to vary across workers, and it is those perceptions that influence social loafing. Perceived task visibility is the belief that a supervisor is aware of individual effort on a job. When task visibility is low, workers think that it is difficult for their supervisor to determine how hard they are working and how much effort they exert on the job; social loafing may occur because workers believe it will go unnoticed and thus, negative consequences will not ensue. Conversely, when perceived task visibility is high, workers believe that their supervisor is aware of levels of individual effort and thus, are less likely to engage in social loafing. Hence,

> *Hypothesis 1: Task visibility is negatively related to social loafing.*

However, although extrinsic motivation is a powerful force (Lawler, 1971), workers can be intrinsically interested in the work they do (e.g., Hackman & Oldham, 1980). When intrinsic motivation is high, supervisors may not need to monitor workers' efforts very closely to sustain adequate levels of performance. Consistent with this reasoning are research findings that intrinsic involvement in a task itself eliminates social loafing in laboratory situations (e.g., Harkins & Petty, 1982; Brickner, Harkins, & Ostrom, 1986). For example, Harkins and Petty (1982) found that social loafing did not occur when individuals thought that they could make a unique contribution to group performance, even when their contributions were unidentifiable. Building from these findings, Brickner, Harkins, and Ostrom (1986) found—again, in a laboratory setting—that social loafing did not occur when a task was high in personal involvement, but it did occur for tasks low in personal involvement. Hence,

> *Hypothesis 2: An individual's intrinsic involvement in work is negatively associated with social loafing.*

I defined intrinsic involvement as beliefs that the work being done is meaningful and significant and that one's own efforts are an important contribution to the employing organization.

In the laboratory, the extrinsic and intrinsic origins of social loafing can be treated as independent. In actual work situations, however, this independence is unlikely. That is, when task visibility is low and work is performed in groups, individuals may perceive their efforts as dispensable and not necessary for a group to be effective (Kerr & Bruun, 1983). If people see their

efforts as dispensable, it is likely that they will see their work as making less of a contribution and as less significant and meaningful than they would otherwise. Moreover, individual inference processes may result in a positive association between the extrinsic and intrinsic factors. For example, if individuals perceive task visibility to be low, they may also evaluate the work they do as not meaningful and significant and as making little organizational contribution: if my supervisor is not aware of my efforts, they must not be that important. Conversely, if individuals do evaluate their work as high in meaning, significance, and contribution, they may be more likely to infer that others will be aware of their efforts. Hence, I expected the intrinsic and extrinsic origins of social loafing to be correlated positively.

Given that expected association, it is not clear which, if either, cause is dominant. Results of the laboratory experiments conducted on social loafing do not provide a firm answer to this question. However, there is one critical difference between social loafing in the laboratory and social loafing in actual organizations. A fundamental source of motivation for most workers is work's economic instrumentality (e.g., Brief & Aldag, 1989). Indeed, the manifest function of work is to provide a living for the worker (Jahoda, 1981), and few workers would remain on their jobs if economic outcomes were eliminated (Rice, Phillips, & McFarlin, 1990). Hence, a very basic notion of economic exchange underlies the relationship between an individual and an organization (Jones, 1984).

Jones (1984) reasoned that economically motivated individuals exert effort on the job to the extent that they think their effort will be rewarded or their lack of effort faulted. If people think that their supervisor is generally not that aware of individual effort and work is performed in groups, it may be economically rational for them to engage in social loafing (Albanese & Van Fleet, 1985). That is, if individuals perceive task visibility to be low, they will think they can reap the benefits of overall group performance at little personal cost in terms of effort expended. Hence,

> *Hypothesis 3: Task visibility will dominate intrinsic task involvement in terms of relative ability to predict social loafing in an ongoing organization.*

However, I expected intrinsic involvement in work to moderate the relationship between task visibility and social loafing. Thus,

> *Hypothesis 4: Intrinsic involvement moderates the relationship between task visibility and social loafing such that the relationship is stronger when intrinsic involvement is low than when intrinsic involvement is high.*

Since workers must be physically present on the job, high intrinsic involvement in their work may lessen social loafing even when task visibility is low since job performance may be self-reinforcing and a means to alleviate boredom. When tasks are intrinsically involving, performing them is rewarding

regardless of supervisory awareness of efforts. Conversely, when intrinsic involvement is low, workers will be highly motivated to engage in social loafing. In such cases, performing tasks for their own sake is not likely; therefore, performance should be more contingent upon perceptions of task visibility than it is when intrinsic involvement is high.

In addition, when intrinsic involvement is high workers may feel that their efforts are very important for the success of their group and thus may be unlikely to engage in social loafing even if task visibility is low. This argument is based in part on the fact that people generally consider themselves to be above average on a variety of dimensions (Goethals & Zanna, 1979; Jellison & Riskind, 1970; Myers, 1980). If the work to be done is considered high on significance, meaningfulness, and contribution, individuals may see their own above-average efforts as making an important contribution to group performance. Conversely, when intrinsic involvement is low, workers may feel that their efforts are not really needed or are not that important for group performance, since other members of the group will duplicate their efforts and are probably capable enough for the tasks at hand; in such circumstances, social loafing will be more strongly associated with task visibility than it is when intrinsic involvement is high. Harkins and Petty's (1982) laboratory finding that social loafing did not occur both on a difficult task and a task in which people could make a unique contribution fits this reasoning; under these two conditions, individuals might have felt that their own above-average efforts made an important contribution to group performance. Hence, they did not engage in social loafing even though their individual contributions were not identifiable. Thus, social loafing may occur because individuals think that their efforts are not really needed and will be duplicated by others; when intrinsic involvement is high, individuals may think that their own contributions are highly important for group performance in part because of people's tendency to consider themselves as above average (Harkins & Petty, 1982).

METHODS

The data for this research came from a larger study involving salespeople working for a large retailer in the southwestern United States (George, 1991). All the salespeople included in the study had the same job title. They were organized into primary work groups, each of which was responsible for such tasks as customer service and housekeeping in a given area.[1] Questionnaires and postage-paid return envelopes were distributed to the salespeople

[1] The groups had daily, weekly, and monthly goals. The first depended on the particular tasks that needed to be accomplished on a given day, such as unloading a truck and setting up the new merchandise, whereas the weekly and monthly group goals pertained to the sales performance of the group. A variety of group incentives were used, including recognition, money and merchandise, competitions and contests, and special acknowledgments like a banquet for an outstanding group. The company also used individual incentives and goals, and individual performance was assessed along a number of dimensions (e.g., cooperation).

at work. They were instructed to complete the questionnaires and return them directly to me, so management never had access to the completed questionnaires. Complete confidentiality was guaranteed, and participation was voluntary.

The salespeople's supervisors were asked to complete a rating form for each of their subordinates. A measure of social loafing was included in the rating forms. The supervisors received the forms at work with postage-paid envelopes in which they could mail their completed forms directly to me. Completion of the rating forms was voluntary, and complete confidentiality guaranteed.

Salespeople returned 221 of the 565 questionnaires distributed, for a 39 percent response rate. Of the 33 supervisors given rating forms, 26 returned completed forms, for a 79 percent response rate. Because of missing data, the numbers of respondents used for the analyses ranged from 182 through 221. The majority of the salespeople were women (84%). Education levels varied, but 49 percent of the respondents reported having attended college or technical school. Approximately 44 percent were married.[2]

Measures

Task visibility. Task visibility was measured with a six-item scale (see the Appendix). Scale items referred to the salespeople's beliefs about the extent to which their supervisors were aware of how much effort they exerted on the job and how hard they worked.[3]

Intrinsic involvement. As indicated above, three indicators of intrinsic involvement were used. I chose these indicators so as to be consistent with both the job design and social loafing literatures (e.g., Hackman & Oldham, 1980; Harkins & Petty, 1982). The first indicator, *task significance*, was measured with the task significance scale of the Job Diagnostic Survey (JDS; Hackman & Oldham, 1980). The second indicator of intrinsic involvement, *task meaningfulness*, was measured with the JDS scale entitled "experienced meaningfulness of the work." The third indicator, *contribution*, measured the extent to which the salespeople thought that they could make an

[2] The retailer's upper management indicated that the demographic profile of the respondents in this study was typical of their salespeople in general, thereby providing some evidence for lack of nonresponse bias.

[3] Prior to developing the task visibility and social loafing scales, I discussed the two constructs, their relevance to the respondents, and ways to measure them with the store's upper management. After the scales were developed, I collected some additional qualitative data from a group of salespeople and a group of supervisors and upper managers, seeing each group separately. I described task visibility and social loafing and discussed them with the group until I felt confident that they understood the constructs. I then asked them to read the items and indicate if they did, in fact, capture the constructs. There was general agreement in both groups that the items did measure their respective constructs. Additionally, the social loafing scale was significantly associated ($r = .72$, $p < .001$) with a one-item scale, also completed by the supervisors, which asked them to indicate the extent to which the salesperson they were rating put forth less effort than the other members of his or her work group.

important contribution to their organization with three items, which appear in the Appendix.

Social loafing. Social loafing was measured with a ten-item scale (see the Appendix) measuring the extent to which a salesperson tended to put forth low effort on the job when other salespeople were present to do the work.

RESULTS

Table 1 presents means, standard deviations, correlations, and coefficient alphas for the study variables. The zero-order correlations offer support for Hypotheses 1 and 2. Supporting Hypothesis 1, the correlation between task visibility and social loafing, −.29, was statistically significant at the .001 level. In support of Hypothesis 2, each indicator of intrinsic involvement was significantly and negatively associated with social loafing; these correlations were −.15 ($p < .05$) for task significance, −.22 ($p < .001$) for task meaningfulness, and −.21 ($p < .01$) for contribution. However, when I tested Hypotheses 1 and 2 by entering the four predictors of social loafing into a regression equation, only task visibility remained a significant predictor. These regression analysis results, which are presented under step one in Table 2, lend support for Hypothesis 1 but not Hypothesis 2. Consistent with expectations, task visibility was significantly and positively associated with each indicator of intrinsic involvement.

Hypothesis 3 predicts that when the combined effects of task visibility and intrinsic involvement are considered, task visibility will better predict social loafing. I tested this hypothesis by entering the four predictors into a regression equation and examining their beta weights. Table 2 (step one) presents results of this analysis.

In support of Hypothesis 3, the beta weight for task visibility was statistically significant (−.23; $p < .01$), whereas the betas for the three indicators of intrinsic involvement were nonsignificant. This analysis suggests that intrinsic involvement is not a significant predictor of social loafing when

TABLE 1
Summary Statistics

			Correlations[a]				
Variables	**Means**	**s.d.**	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**
1. Task visibility	28.87	7.89	(.84)				
2. Task significance	4.75	1.44	.23***	(.75)			
3. Task meaningfulness	4.56	1.20	.41***	.55***	(.76)		
4. Contribution	17.75	2.90	.15*	.47***	.42***	(.70)	
5. Social loafing	16.32	6.96	−.29***	−.15*	−.22***	−.21**	(.93)

[a] Coefficient alphas are in parentheses on the diagonal.

* $p < .05$
** $p < .01$
*** $p < .001$

TABLE 2
Results of Hierarchical Regression Analysis

Independent Variables	β	R^2	ΔR^2
Step one			
Contribution	−0.13		
Task meaningfulness	−0.08		
Task significance	0.01		
Task visibility	−0.23**		
		.11***	.11***
Step two			
Task visibility by contribution	1.32*		
Task visibility by task meaningfulness	1.26*		
Task visibility by task significance	0.13		
		.19***	.08***

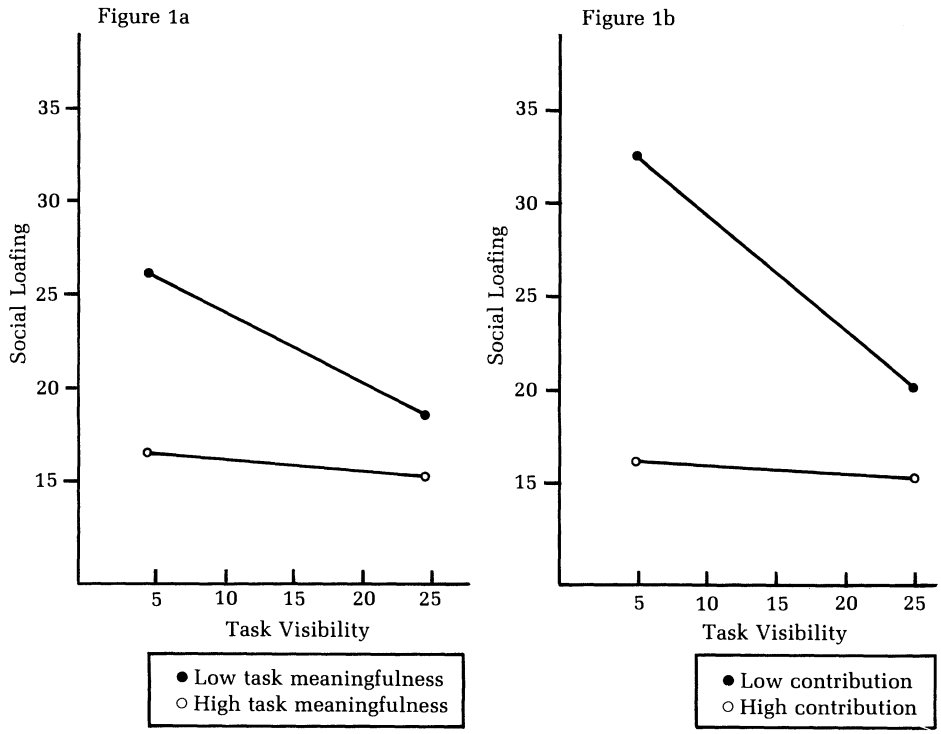
* $p < .05$
** $p < .01$
*** $p < .001$

task visibility is taken into account, but task visibility remains a significant predictor when intrinsic involvement is considered. Using a formula provided by Cohen and Cohen (1983: 479), I tested whether the differences between the betas were statistically significant. In partial support of Hypothesis 3, the difference between the coefficients for task visibility and task significance was statistically significant at the .05 level. However, the differences between the coefficients for task visibility and those for contribution and task meaningfulness did not reach conventional levels of statistical significance.

Hypothesis 4 predicts that intrinsic involvement will moderate the relationship between task visibility and social loafing. This hypothesis was tested using hierarchical regression (Stone & Hollenbeck, 1984). I entered task visibility and the three indicators of intrinsic involvement at the first step. At the second step, the products of task visibility and each measure of intrinsic involvement were entered as a set. A significant interaction effect is indicated by a statistically significant proportion of the variance in a dependent variable being explained by the set of product terms in a regression equation already containing the main effects. As indicated in Table 2 (step two), the task visibility by intrinsic involvement interactions as a set accounted for a significant proportion of variance in social loafing beyond that accounted for by the main effects ($\Delta R^2 = .08$, $p < .001$). These results support Hypothesis 4. The interactions of task visibility with both contribution and task meaningfulness were statistically significant, whereas the task-visibility-by-task-significance interaction was nonsignificant.

Figure 1 depicts these interaction effects graphically. I regressed social loafing on task visibility for conditions of low and high task meaningfulness and low and high contribution, forming these conditions by splitting the respondents into subgroups based on the median of each of the two indica-

FIGURE 1
Graphs of the Moderating Effects of Task Meaningfulness and Contribution on the Task Visibility–Social Loafing Relationship[a]



[a] The equations for the graphs are as follows: for low task meaningfulness, $\hat{y} = -.42$ *task visibility* + 28.99; for high task meaningfulness, $\hat{y} = -.05$ *task visibility* + 16.66; for low contribution, $\hat{y} = -.65$ *task visibility* + 36.41; and for high contribution, $\hat{y} = -.08$ *task visibility* + 17.65.

tors (task meaningfulness, 4.75; contribution, 18.00). In support of Hypothesis 4, the relationship between task visibility and social loafing was strongest when both indicators of intrinsic involvement were low. Providing additional evidence, the subgroup correlations indicate a strong negative relationship between task visibility and social loafing when intrinsic involvement is low and a very weak negative relationship when intrinsic involvement is high. The correlations between task visibility and social loafing were as follows: $-.37$ ($p < .001$) for the low task meaningfulness subgroup; $-.06$ (n.s.) for the high task meaningfulness subgroup; $-.53$ ($p < .001$) for the low contribution subgroup; and $-.11$ (n.s.) for the high contribution subgroup.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study suggest that both extrinsic and intrinsic forces influence social loafing in ongoing work groups in organizational contexts.

Findings were consistent with the results of prior research conducted in the laboratory (e.g., Williams et al., 1981): social loafing was more likely to occur when individuals perceived task visibility to be low. In addition, intrinsic involvement, as indexed by task significance, task meaningfulness, and contribution, was associated with low social loafing, a finding also consistent with the results of laboratory studies suggesting that various types of intrinsic involvement lower levels of social loafing (e.g., Brickner et al., 1986; Harkins & Petty, 1982). However, when I considered the combined effects of the extrinsic and intrinsic influences, task visibility remained a significant predictor with intrinsic involvement controlled, but intrinsic involvement was not a significant predictor with task visibility controlled. This finding supports economic explanations for social loafing suggesting that, since the employment relationship is fundamentally one of economic exchange, workers will be motivated to engage in social loafing when they think that their behavior is not being monitored (Jones, 1984). Nonetheless, it should be kept in mind that the beta for task visibility significantly differed from the involvement beta for only one of the three indicators of intrinsic involvement.

However, intrinsic involvement is not unimportant for understanding social loafing. Rather, I found that intrinsic involvement moderated the relationship between task visibility and social loafing, as was hypothesized. For two of the indicators of intrinsic involvement, task meaningfulness and contribution, that relationship was relatively strong when involvement was low and very weak when involvement was high. Hence, it may be more appropriate to view intrinsic involvement as a moderator of the relationship between task visibility and social loafing rather than as a direct influence on social loafing. To the extent that future research replicates this finding, it has important implications for managers. For example, when work is performed in groups and the situation—the type of task, for instance—dictates that task visibility will be low, it may be crucial for employers to try to maintain high levels of employees' intrinsic involvement. This could be achieved in a variety of ways. The job might be redesigned or enriched (Hackman & Oldham, 1980), or effort might be devoted to communicating to workers the importance of their efforts for the success of their group and organization. Nonetheless, it should be recognized that certain jobs are very dull, boring, and simple for most workers to perform, and sometimes it is not economically feasible to redesign such jobs. When that is the case, it is important for employers to maintain high levels of task visibility by, for instance, monitoring individual output, having a strong supervisory presence, and keeping groups small. The greatest reduction in social loafing is likely to occur when individuals are made accountable for specific tasks. Conversely, on jobs that are high on intrinsic involvement, task visibility may not need to be as salient a concern, even when the work is performed in groups. Hence, when intrinsic involvement is high, organizations may be able to save on supervisory costs, since close monitoring of workers may not be necessary.

This study is not without limitations. For example, it should be noted

that all the questionnaire respondents had a low-level job in their organization. Whether these findings generalize to workers in higher-level positions with more responsibility is an empirical question. It should also be acknowledged that generally low levels of social loafing were reported. Hence, there may have been some restriction of range on this variable.

These and other limitations notwithstanding, the results of the current study suggest that both the extrinsic and intrinsic explanations of social loafing are important for understanding this phenomenon as it occurs in work groups in ongoing organizational contexts. By increasing our understanding of the effects of task visibility and intrinsic involvement on social loafing, researchers will be in a better position to try to reduce its occurrence.

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APPENDIX

Task Visibility

Responses were made on a seven-point scale ranging from 1, "strongly disagree," to 7, "strongly agree"; responses to the items were summed.

1. My supervisor is generally aware of when a salesperson is putting forth below average effort.
2. My supervisor is aware of the amount of work I do.
3. It is generally hard for my supervisor to figure out how hard I am working (reverse-scored).
4. My supervisor usually notices when a salesperson is slacking off.
5. It is difficult for my supervisor to determine how hard we are working (reverse-scored).
6. It is hard for my supervisor to determine how much effort I exert on the job (reverse-scored).

Contribution

The response format was the same as that for task visibility.

1. I think that I can make a unique contribution to how successful [organization name] is.
2. How I perform my job is important for [organization name].
3. [Organization name's] success hinges on salespeople like myself.

Social Loafing

Supervisors were instructed to indicate how characteristic each of the items were of the salesperson they were rating on a five-point scale ranging from 1, "not at all characteristic," to 5, "very characteristic"; responses to the items were summed.

1. Defers responsibilities he or she should assume to other salespeople.
2. Puts forth less effort on the job when other salespeople are around to do the work.
3. Does not do his or her share of the work.
4. Spends less time helping customers if other salespeople are present to serve customers.
5. Puts forth less effort than other members of his or her work group.
6. Avoids performing housekeeping tasks as much as possible.
7. Leaves work for the next shift which he or she should really complete.

8. Is less likely to approach a customer if another salesperson is available to do this.
9. Takes it easy if other salespeople are around to do the work.
10. Defers customer service activities to other salespeople if they are present.

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