

EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

Student Perceptions of Social Loafing in Undergraduate Business Classroom Teams

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ABSTRACT

There is a rich body of research devoted to the causes and remedies of social loafing in workplace teams. However, the social loafing phenomenon remains underinvestigated from the perspective of students in undergraduate business classroom teams. In particular, how they define and respond to loafing remains unknown. This article reports findings from a two-stage study that shows social loafing as a more complex construct than current conceptions suggest. Moreover, students avoid confronting loafers and prefer to have instructors administer postpriori justice based on their self-report of individual contributions. Based on the findings and recent writings, the article speculates on the causes of these student responses to social loafing in classroom teams.

Subject Areas: Social Loafing in Classroom Teams.

INTRODUCTION

Many business school instructors assign undergraduate students to teams and hold them responsible for completing comprehensive class-related projects. The practice is likely to continue as long as potential employers and accreditation bodies such as the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB)¹ look favorably upon business programs that integrate teamwork in their curriculum (Bailey, Sass, Swierz, Seal, & Kayes, 2005; Bolton, 1999; Chen, Donahue, & Klimoski, 2004). Teamwork promises to help students derive integrated insights and develop innovative solutions by making use of multiple perspectives and orientations that a diverse set of participants can provide. Teamwork is adversely affected, however,

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¹AACSB International (The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business).

by social loafers who free-ride in the presence of others; reduce their physical, perceptual, and/or cognitive effort; and expect others to pick up the slack (Brooks & Ammons, 2003; Comer, 1995; George, 1992; Latane, Williams, & Harkins, 1979; Mello, 1993; Murphy, Wayne, Liden, & Erdogan, 2003; Ravenscroft, 1997). While this problem persists for many reasons, one relates to the loafers' often-substantiated belief that they will receive the same grade as the team, regardless of their contribution.

Social loafing—related literature defines it as an undesirable cause of distrust, lowered morale, and poor team performance. Understandably, scholars have devoted most of their attention to identifying its causes (e.g., Murphy et al., 2003) and have recommended changes in the team's sociotechnical environment to reduce its incidence (e.g., Brooks & Ammons, 2005; Kayes, Kayes, & Kolb, 2005). The literature is mostly silent, however, when it comes to students' perceptions of loafing in classroom teams and the implications they may hold for alleviating the problem. Key questions about how undergraduate business students think about and respond to social loafing, and what they expect their instructors to do, remain unanswered.

This article reports findings from a recent two-stage study of social loafing, which examined the perceptions of students based on their experiences in undergraduate business classroom teams. We focused on student perceptions that emerged from their experiences with teams responsible for completing comprehensive class-related projects. For a collective grade, instructors required students to meet within and outside class, engage in knowledge sharing and problem solving, and make oral and written presentations. Our attempt in this article is to present our data-derived findings and stimulate new discussion and research—versus an attempt to produce widely generalizable findings. This attempt is worthy because current thinking about team-based teaching and learning in general, and social loafing in undergraduate business programs in particular, remain uninformed by student perceptions. In this regard, we aim to make two contributions. First, we present evidence to suggest that students' definition is more complex than the literature's view of social loafing. While the literature views loafers as people who slack off, students view them as people who perform poor-quality work and who engage in distractive, disruptive behaviors. Second, we show that students do not confront loafers or attempt to alleviate the problem as it occurs. Instead, they seek postpriori justice from instructors and wish for grades that reflect their individual performance based on their self-reports. Given the complexity of the construct, and the evidence we gather about how students respond to social loafing, we speculate on the likely causes of their responses. This attempt is aligned with our interest in contributing to new thinking and discussion about social loafing in classroom teams and with the notion that sustainable solutions to social loafing continue to elude instructors and scholars because many of its causes remain unclear or unidentified. We begin with a brief review of the literature to make a case for exploratory analysis and discuss our method. Then we present the model we derived via our second-stage survey and follow up with a discussion of the complexity of student perceptions and the nature and possible causes of their responses.

PRIOR RESEARCH

In this discussion, we: (a) briefly review what is known about the causes and remedies of social loafing, as opposed to reconstructing exhaustive reviews of social loafing literature that have occurred elsewhere (e.g., Comer, 1995; Karau & Williams, 1993; Liden, Wayne, Jaworski, & Bennett, 2004; Murphy et al., 2003), and (b) show how the absence of research findings related to student perceptions of social loafing precludes a literature-derived hypotheses testing approach and justify our two-step study.

The literature is largely focused on social loafing as it occurs in work teams (e.g., George, 1992) and on identifying its causes, that is, on its linkages with intrinsic motivations and factors associated with the sociotechnical environment of the team. Implicit in most writings is the notion that loafing is triggered by cognitions and inferences. For instance, scholars note that people loaf because they intend to loaf (e.g., George & Jones, 1997) or when they think they can get away with it (e.g., Weldon & Mustari, 1988; Williams & Karau, 1991) or when they think others are getting away with it (Veiga, 1991). The belief or knowledge that evaluators cannot know the true extent of an individual's effort and cannot reward and punish individuals based on the team effort leads some to infer that there is not much to gain by doing more, and little to lose by contributing less (e.g., Gagne & Zuckerman, 1999; George, 1992; Guerin, 1999).

The nature of the task and one's role in the team seem related to social loafing. For instance, the incidence and extent of social loafing is higher when individual tasks are more invisible and unrecognizable than visible and recognizable (see Gagne & Zuckerman, 1999; George, 1992; Liden et al., 2004). Working on unmotivating tasks is widely viewed as a cause (e.g., George, 1992; Price, 1993), as is the failure to see one's work as meaningful (George, 1992) or the belief that one's contribution will not make much of a difference (Petty, Harkins, & Williams, 1980).

The nature of assessment and the expectations of rewards are associated with social loafing. The lack of appraisal or lower potential for evaluation from leaders or peers is widely associated with higher levels of loafing (Harkins & Jackson, 1985; Harkins & Szymanski, 1989; Liden et al., 2004). Moreover, loafing behaviors emerge when people believe that their own uniqueness and individuality will not be sufficiently rewarded in a team environment (Liden et al., 2004). Perceptions of social injustice and unfairness of review systems are also regarded as credible explanations for social loafing. For instance, social loafing emerges as retaliatory behavior when team members attribute low quality to their interaction with team leaders and believe that the team is socially unjust (Murphy et al., 2003).

Causes of social loafing are also associated with the composition of the team and nature of relationships among participants. Working in larger teams (Liden et al., 2004), with highly dissimilar people (e.g., Earley, 1993) seems to spur loafing. Low social cohesiveness in groups (e.g., Liden et al., 2004; Szymanski & Harkins, 1993) and the need not to appear as a sucker or as someone who is too competent are also regarded as contributory factors (e.g., Comer, 1995). A potentially controversial study finds women less likely to engage in social loafing than men (Kugihara, 1999).

Social loafing seems to be reduced when teams are smaller (Chidambaram & Tung, 2005; Mello, 1993; North, Linley, & Hargreaves, 2000), evaluation is cognizant of individual effort (e.g., Harkins & Jackson, 1985; Mello, 1993), peer evaluations are used (Brooks & Ammons, 2003; Druskat & Wolff, 1999), and the team is coached and led (Bolton, 1999; Bacon, Stewart, & Silver, 1999). Pedagogical research has produced similar findings, and scholars have advocated for improved formation processes for teams (Butterfield & Pendergraft, 1996), as well as a variety of team exercises and assessment instruments for reducing social loafing (Bailey et al., 2005; Brooks & Ammons, 2003; Dineen, 2005; Kayes et al., 2005).

Research devoted to social loafing in work teams has: (a) explained its basic nature, that is, slacking off in the presence of others, and (b) identified its complex root causes and shown why it persists in work teams. What it does not allow, however, is drawing of hypotheses about: (a) student perceptions of what social loafers do in classroom teams, (b) how students respond to the presence of social loafers and loafing, and (c) what students expect their instructors (and others) to do about the problems of social loafing. Yet, it is important to develop and test such hypotheses and inform future efforts that aim to reduce the problem in undergraduate business classroom teams. The current literature strongly implicates a two-stage study, the first aimed at identifying and developing constructs, measures, and hypotheses using an exploratory approach, and the second aimed at testing hypotheses using a survey.

METHOD

Exploratory Study

Data were collected by one coauthor in the following way. First, in two sections of the undergraduate Organizational Behavior course, she defined social loafing and provided a brief review of literature. Then, she asked students to write a brief note that outlined their past experiences with social loafing, described what the social loafer did, and explained how these behaviors impacted the team. All students were traditional-age (19–23 years), residential juniors and seniors pursuing an undergraduate degree in business administration at a state college. Students received participation points for turning in their written responses. Next, the instructor asked students to convene in their preset classroom teams, use their written notes as guidelines, and collectively address the following questions:

- Discuss instances of social loafing each team member has observed/experienced in previous teams.
- What exactly did the social loafer do in each case?
- How did the social loafing impact the team in each case?
- How have you dealt with social loafers in previous teams; that is, what exactly did you do when faced with social loafing in your team? What happened as a result?
- Why do you believe the social loafer(s) did what they did?
- What are some of the things you wish your professor had done to prevent social loafing?

- What policy would you formulate to prevent social loafing in your classroom teams?

The instructor briefly participated in each team's discussion and made notes about students' responses and perceptions. Additionally, each team was asked to provide a written description of the discussion that occurred and present the collective responses to these questions as well. The instructor's notes and the written responses from each team were content analyzed. In pursuit of designing scales with content validity, we wanted to know what students think about when they think about their experiences related to each of the questions. During the content analysis, we focused on the: (a) breadth of issues raised in response to each question and (b) key commonalities and differences in student responses. The analysis yielded a list of issues discussed by students in response to each of these questions.

Second, in the following week, when the classes met again, the coauthor conducted class discussions about social loafing in both sections. Both discussions were tape recorded and transcribed. The purpose was to: (a) ensure we were developing concepts with content validity and had identified the breadth of issues related to each concept and (b) identify potential linkages among constructs that deserved additional confirmatory analysis. During each class discussion, the instructor drew seven columns on the whiteboard, labeled as: (a) What social loafers do, (b) The impact of social loafing on the team, (c) Why you think social loafers do what they do, (d) What did you/your team do in response to the social loafing? (e) What was the response from the social loafer? (f) What should the professor have done? and (g) What policy would be useful for preventing social loafing in the future? One team was asked to make a presentation of their group discussion, write their responses in the columns on the whiteboard, and describe the discussion that occurred in their team. Other students were asked to indicate, with a show of hands, if their team had also discussed similar issues. They were also asked to inform the class about additional items they had identified. During this discussion, the instructor sought clarifications and asked for concrete examples. All student responses were recorded on the whiteboard as the class progressed. To ensure connectedness among responses, a facilitator recorded each concrete example of social loafing with relevant information regarding how it impacted the team, what the team did in response, why the team felt the social loafer was behaving that way, what they expected the instructor to do, and the policy that they thought would prevent such social loafing.

Content Analysis and Hypotheses

At the end of the two-stage exploratory study, we had accumulated the following material: instructor of students' responses and perceptions, the written account of each team's responses to our questions in stage one, transcripts of tape-recorded class discussions, instructor notes of potential relationships among concepts, and a record of the notes made on the whiteboards in stage two. The content analysis was iterative and followed a two-step process. First, based on the evidence, we made a list of all the issues raised by students and identified the most frequently raised issues. The guiding purpose of the content analysis was to develop scales with content and construct validity and identify possible linkages among constructs. Second, we made a list of possible linkages among constructs either directly reflected or

implied by student responses. We specifically identified instances in the data to support our emerging notions about the linkages among concepts.

Students described social loafers as people who: (a) slacked off and avoided work; (b) performed poor-quality work; and (c) engaged in distractive, disruptive behaviors. There was strong agreement that the social loafers impacted the team's performance, relative to that of other teams. There was very little evidence to suggest that loafers were being confronted while they were exhibiting such behaviors. Instead, students wished that the instructors would grade them based on their individual contributions. Thus, we derived the following hypotheses about the relationships between social loafing behaviors, team outcomes, and team member expectations from instructors:

- H1: Students will view social loafers as people who: (a) slack off, (b) perform poor-quality work, and (c) are distracted and disruptive.
- H2: Students will view social loafing behaviors as causing poor team performance.
- H3: Students' response to social loafing will be to expect the instructor to grade their individual contributions.

Content Validity of Scales

The information redundancy across the multiple transcripts of class discussion and student/instructor notes indicated that we had captured most of the important elements active in this phenomenon. These iterative procedures also helped us to identify irrelevant, confusing, or conceptually overlapping items and purify scales. After a satisfactory conclusion on the item pools and finalization of the instrument, we reviewed the final instrument for comprehensiveness, question clarity, questionnaire format, appearance, and the flow of questions. All the scales used in this study are new and developed using the multistage approach discussed above, and our approach to scale development is consistent with Churchill (1979) and Gerbing and Anderson (1988).

Survey

A questionnaire was administered to 394 undergraduate business students in 24 sections taught in a business school with which one coauthor is affiliated.² All participants were full-time, traditional-age (20–23 years), undergraduate students in a residential campus of a state university. The instructor in each class informed students that they were participating in a study of social loafing and asked them to complete a survey. Students were asked to answer all questions and refrain from completing the survey if: (a) they had never experienced social loafing or (b) they had already completed the questionnaire in another course. All students present

²The sections included (number of sections in parentheses) were: Econometrics (1), Entrepreneurship (1), International Business (2), International Economics (1), Labor Economics (1), Leadership (1), Management Information Systems (2), Marketing (3), Organizational Behavior (4), Organizational Strategy (4), Production and Operations Management (2), Public Relations (1), Sports Economics (1).

when the surveys were administered completed the questionnaires. No extra credit was awarded for participation in the survey. The data were input by a work-study student and double-checked for recording errors by the authors.

Model Development

We derived our model using the following process. First, we conducted an exploratory factor analysis to check whether the items for each scale were loading on their hypothesized constructs, that is, (a) social loafing meant slacking off; poor-quality work; and distractive, disruptive behaviors; (b) it resulted in poor overall performance of the team; and (c) students expected instructors to revert to individual rewards for performance (see Tables 1 and 2). The key learning that emerged was: (a) social loafing as slacking off was conceptually inseparable from poor

Table 1: Details of constructs and items.

Construct	Please Indicate the Extent to Which You Agree with the Following Statements:
Social loafer contributed poorly to the team.	[5-point itemized rating scale, ranging from “ <i>describes the most</i> ,” to “ <i>describes the least</i> .”] The social loafer. . . Came poorly prepared for the meetings. Had trouble completing team-related home work Did a poor job of the work she/he was assigned. Did poor-quality work overall on the team.
Social loafer was distractive and disruptive.	[5-point itemized rating scale, ranging from “ <i>describes the most</i> ,” to “ <i>describes the least</i> .”] The social loafer. . . Had trouble paying attention to what was going on in the team. Engaged in side conversations a lot when the team was working. Mostly distracted the team’s focus on its goals and objectives
Poor comparative team performance	[5-point Likert scales] As a result of social loafing. . . The team had fewer good ideas than the other teams The team missed deadlines The team’s final presentation was not as high quality as that of other teams
Student expectations from instructor (reward individual performance)	[5-point Likert scales] I wish the professor would. . . Evaluate individual effort on teams in more ways. Let the team make a report on what each member did. Make the team report mid-semester on who is doing what. Let me make an end-of-semester written evaluation of how others contributed

Table 2: Descriptive statistics for key constructs.

	Alpha	Mean	SD	Distractive	Contributed Poorly	Poor Comparative Performance	Expectations from Instructors
Social loafer distractive, disruptive	.683	3.14	.925	1			
Social loafer contributed poorly	.821	3.71	.895	.397*	1		
Poor comparative team performance	.654	2.63	.941	.245*	.241*	1	
Expectations from the instructor	.743	3.95	.819	.135*	.197*	.171*	1

*significant at $p < .01$.

performance, that is, two items related to slacking off (came poorly prepared for the meetings and had trouble completing team-related homework) loaded on the same factor as items related to poor performance (did a poor job of the work she or he was assigned, did poor-quality work overall on the team). On the other hand, items related to distractive, disruptive behaviors loaded cleanly as predicted, as did the items related to poor comparative performance and student expectations of instructors. While alphas for two of the scales have acceptable values of at least .7 (Nunnally, 1978), the other scales have alphas that are slightly lower. While this may be a limitation of the study and may advise us to exercise caution while interpreting the results of the study, it is not uncommon to have constructs with alphas below the .7 level in published studies, especially when new scales are being developed (e.g., see Moorman, 1995; Moorman & Miner, 1997).

Second, because our qualitative data suggested that social loafing was more than slacking off, and likely referred to poor-quality work, and distractive, disruptive behaviors as well, we used confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to test the notion that social loafing is a second-order construct and assess the unidimensionality of scales (e.g., Gerbing & Anderson, 1988). We used EQS software to do the CFA; specifically, we utilized the elliptical solution (ERLS) because it enhances the ability to estimate the model even when the data are nonnormal (Bentler, 2004). As the results of the CFA show, all items load significantly on their hypothesized constructs (see Tables 3a and 3b for fit indices). Joreskog and Sorbom (1993) indicate that, along with the χ^2 statistic, other goodness-of-fit indices must be considered while assessing the model fit because the χ^2 becomes inflated with larger sample size. Following this suggestion, we also evaluated Bentler–Bonett normed fit index (BNFI), Bentler–Bonett nonnormed fit index (BNNFI), comparative fit index (CFI), root mean square approximation (RMSEA), and average off-diagonal absolute standardized residuals statistics for assessing model fit (Bentler, 2004; Joreskog & Sorbom, 1993). Values approaching 1.00 for CFI, NFI, and BNNFI and values less than .1 for the residuals reflect good model fit to the data.

Table 3a: Results of confirmatory factor analysis.

Items	BEHAVE1	BEHAVE2	EFFECT	EXPECT
Distractive, disruptive. <i>The social loafer</i>				
... had trouble paying attention	1** (fixed)			
... engaged in side conversations	1.51 (8.24)*			
... mostly distracted team's focus	1.58 (8.22)			
Poor contribution. <i>The social loafer</i>				
... came poorly prepared for team meetings		1** (fixed)		
... had trouble completing team-related work		.97 (10.04)		
... did a poor job of work that was assigned		1.40 (13.11)		
... did poor-quality work overall		1.34 (13.16)		
Poor performance: <i>As a result of social loafing. . .</i>				
... The team had fewer good ideas than other teams			1** (fixed)	
... The team missed deadlines			.74 (7.15)	
... The team's final presentation was not as high quality as that of other teams			1.25 (7.89)	
Expectations: <i>I wish the professor would</i>				
... evaluate individual efforts on the team in more ways				1** (fixed)
... let the team make a report on what each member did				1.27 (8.79)
... make the team report mid-semester "who is doing what"				1.27 (9.02)
... let me make an end of the semester written evaluation of how others contributed				1.29 (9.03)

*Factor Loading (*t* statistic).

**Indicant loading fixed at 1 to set the scale.

Fit Indices

$$\chi^2 = 219.644$$

$$df = 71$$

$$\text{Bentler-Bonett normed fit index (BNFI)} = 0.871$$

$$\text{Bentler-Bonett nonnormed fit index (BNNFI)} = .882$$

$$\text{Comparative fit index (CFI)} = .908$$

$$\text{Average off-diagonal absolute standardized residuals} = .044$$

Table 3b: Confirmatory factor analysis: Social loafing as a second-order factor.

Items	Loafer Distractive Behavior	Loafer Poor Work
Had trouble paying attention	1**	
Engaged in side conversations	.689 (7.85)*	
Mostly distracted the team's focus	.747 (7.80)	
Came poorly prepared		1**
Had trouble completing team-related work		.567 (9.33)
Did a poor job of the work assigned		.851 (12.47)
Did poor-quality work overall		.864 (12.52)
First-Order Factor	Factor Loading (<i>t</i> -value)	
Loafer poor work		.729 (10.29)
Distractive, disruptive behavior		.620 (10.29)

*Standardized factor loading (*t* statistic).

**Indicant loading fixed at 1 to set the scale.

Variance of the second-order factor fixed to 1 to set the scale.

Fit Indices

$$\chi^2 = 107.545$$

$$df = 13$$

$$\text{Bentler-Bonett normed fit index (BNFI)} = .910$$

$$\text{Bentler-Bonett non-normed fit index (BNNFI)} = .870$$

$$\text{Comparative fit index (CFI)} = .919$$

$$\text{Root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA)} = .1$$

$$\text{Average off-diagonal absolute standardized residuals} = .081$$

Third, to assess discriminant validity of the constructs, we performed CFAs with the two-step nested model approach using EQS (see Gerbing & Anderson, 1988). Briefly, in the first step, the measurement items are allowed to load on their theorized constructs while the factors are allowed to covary. In the second step, the covariance between the two factors is set to one. Discriminant validity is established by assessing the difference between the χ^2 of the free covariance model and that of the constrained model. A significant $\Delta\chi^2$ indicates discriminant validity. We compared all construct pairs using the above two-step process and the discriminant validity of each construct was established.

Fourth, after establishing reliability and validity of scales, we used the EQS software to simultaneously test the hypotheses using a structural equations modeling methodology. Specifically, we used elliptically reweighted least square (ERLS) method offered by EQS to test the presence of relationships among various constructs. The ERLS method assumes a multivariate elliptical distribution that is a more generalized form of the multivariate normal distribution assumed by the commonly used maximum likelihood (ML) method (Tippins & Sohi, 2003). According to Sharma, Durvasula, and Dillon (1989: p. 220), "the performance of ERLS is equivalent to that of ML for normal data and superior to that of other

Table 4: Measurement and structural parameters from the hypothesized model.

Structural Model	Beta (<i>t</i> value)
BEHAVIOR 1 → IMPACT	.253 (3.20)**
BEHAVIOR 2 → IMPACT	.295(4.06)
IMPACT → EXPECTATION	.274 (3.50)
Measurement model	
Behavior 1 →trouble paying attention	1*
Behavior 1→engaged in side conversations	.717 (7.18)
Behavior 1→distracted team's focus	.750 (7.05)
Behavior 2 →came poorly prepared for meetings	1*
Behavior 2→had trouble completing assignments	.569 (9.20)
Behavior 2→did poor job of work assigned	.853 (12.16)
Behavior 2→did poor-quality work overall	.461 (12.16)
Impact → fewer good ideas	1*
Impact →missed deadlines	.461 (6.5)
Impact →final presentation was not high quality	.738 (7.19)
Expectation →evaluate individual efforts	1*
Expectation →report on what each member did	.663 (8.24)
Expectation →mid-semester report on who is doing what	.707 (8.45)
Expectation →report on how others contributed	.703 (8.43)
Goodness-of-fit statistics	
χ^2	240.853
<i>df</i>	74
Bentler–Bonnett normed fit index (NFI)	.889
Bentler–Bonnett nonnormed fit index (NNFI)	.901
Comparative fit index (CFI)	.919
Average off-diagonal absolute standardized residuals	.081

**Parameter estimates are standardized with *t* values shown in parentheses; all values significant at $p < .01$.

*Indicant loading fixed at 1 to set the scale.

estimation techniques for non-normal data.” Importantly, we analyzed the structural and path model simultaneously. This provides a rigorous estimation of the model under consideration. The results of the analysis are shown in Table 4.

Our analysis suggests that the model fits the data well. The results show that the model had a χ^2 of 240.853 with 74 degrees of freedom. Further, the values for CFI (.919), NFI (.889), NNFI (.901), as well as the average standardized residuals (.081) indicate a good model fit. The standardized item loadings and the associated *t* values for the measurement model reconfirm that all items had significant loadings on their hypothesized constructs. The results of the structural model suggest that all the hypothesized paths were supported in that we empirically show that there are significant relationships among loafer's social loafing behavior, its effects on group performance, and the group's expectations from the instructor. Specifically, the results indicate that the social loafer's distractive behavior (H1; $\beta = .253$, $t = 3.20$) and loafer's poor work quality (H2; $\beta = .295$, $t = 4.06$) significantly affect the group work quality. Therefore, Hypotheses H1 and H2 are supported. The results further suggest that the groups whose work quality is affected by social

loafing expect their instructors to evaluate them differently (H3; $\beta = .274$, $t = 3.50$). Hence H3 is also supported.

UNDERSTANDING STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF SOCIAL LOAFING

Nature of Social Loafing

Figure 1 shows the key differences between our data-derived view of social loafing and the literature's view and highlights the value added by our study. Briefly, students view loafers not only as slackers but as people who perform poor-quality work, that is, they fail to complete team-related work, come ill-prepared to team meetings, and do a poor-quality job of the work they are assigned. Items related to slacking off and those related to poor contribution load on the same factor; that is, for students, doing less and contributing poorly are conceptually inseparable. In other words, in their view, loafers are poor contributors in terms of quantity *and* quality of work. Moreover, students view social loafers as those who engage in distractive, disruptive behaviors, that is, they engage in side conversations during team meetings, fail to focus on the process in which the team is engaged, and distract the team's focus from its goals.

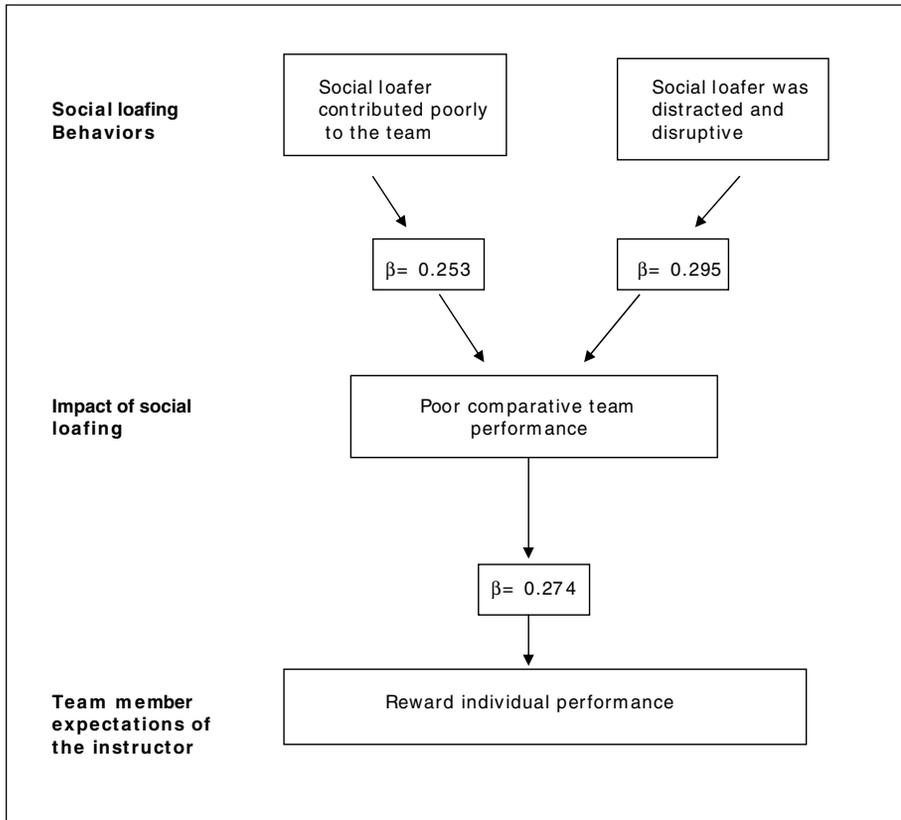
Current thinking about social loafing, strongly reflected in George's (1992) widely adopted scale, refers to multiple aspects of slacking off in the presence of others—with the expectation that no harm can come from others picking up the slack. George's (1992) scale assesses the extent to which a person defers responsibility, avoids work, leaves early, takes it easy, expends less effort than others, does not do his or her share of work, and spends less time on task (p. 291). Differing with this view, student perceptions show social loafing as a second-order construct, consisting of two separate factors, that is, poor-quality work and distracted, distractive behaviors. As Table 3b shows, these items exhibit significant loadings on their respective first-order factors. The two first-order factors, in turn, load significantly on the second-order factor (see the standardized loadings and associated t statistics in Table 3b). The fit indices for the second-order factor model, all of which appear acceptable, are: $\chi^2 = 107.545$, with 13 degrees of freedom, BNFI = .091, BN-NFI = .87, CFI = .919, RMSEA = .1, and Absolute Standardized Residuals = .081. In other words, students seem cognizant of not just the relatively lower quantity

Figure 1: Data derived versus literature's view of social loafing.

Factor 1		Factor 2
Social loafing as slacking-off	Social loafing as performing poorly	Social loafing as engaging in distractive, disruptive behaviors

Shaded box indicates the current literature's view of social loafing

Figure 2: A model of social loafing in undergraduate classrooms based on student perceptions.



of work performed by the loafer in terms of slacking off or avoiding work, but also by the (poor) quality of work that they perform and the distractive, disruptive behaviors that get in the way of their own participation in the team. The inference we draw from student perceptions is that their view of loafing is shaped by how it affects them, rather than how it affects other indicators of team performance such as team learning, morale, and creativity. Clearly, they do not regard a person as a loafer if all they do is expend *less* effort; instead they view a loafer as someone who performs poorly and distracts them from their own focus, that is, as someone who gets in the way of their own peak performance.

Student Perceptions of Effects and Remedies

Figure 2 shows the model of social loafing in undergraduate business classroom teams based on student perceptions. In addition to identifying two separate factors of the constructs, students indicate that social loafing results in poor comparative performance; that is, their team had fewer good ideas and missed deadlines, and their team’s final presentation was not as high quality as that of other teams. Students

also expect instructors to provide them with multiple opportunities to report on who is doing what and how much, and reward them for their individual performance. The finding that students expect instructors to do something about social loafing is not surprising; neither is the desire for end-of-teamwork reviews to slam social loafers (see Bacon, Stewart, & Silver, 1999; Brooks & Ammons, 2003 for similar findings). The literature falls short, however, in many ways by not recognizing the complexity of the construct based on student perception and not identifying how students respond to social loafing. The literature also offers no explanation for the nature of students' response; that is, why do intelligent students capable of handling an undergraduate business curriculum fail to confront loafers and alleviate the problems they create, even when they know that loafing causes their team to perform poorly in comparison to other teams? Instead, why do they want instructors to grade them on their individual performance, mete out postpriori justice by awarding them the grade they deserve based on their self-reports of individual contributions, and award a lower grade to loafers?

These are important questions raised by our model that have attracted virtually no discussion in the literature. Yet, speculating on the causes is important because: (a) social loafing seems prevalent—not one of the students present in 23 sections of the classes from which our data were collected declined to participate by citing “no experience with social loafing” (no student declined to participate for any reason) and (b) loafing persists despite many attempts to identify its causes and the implied remedies, suggesting among other things that its true causes may remain unidentified. Hence, we draw on the findings from our first-stage qualitative study and recent thinking and speculate on the likely causes of such behaviors, so that they can serve as fodder for new thinking about sustainable solutions to social loafing in undergraduate business classroom teams. In particular, we speculate that: (a) social loafing is rooted in the preuniversity socialization of traditional-age undergraduate business students, (b) these responses are triggered by the differences in the way students and instructors define teamwork, and (c) the anxiety of teamwork coupled with segmentability of team assignment contributes to social loafing.

Preuniversity Socialization as a Cause

Current writings, mostly in the context of work teams, implicitly suggest that loafers' cognitions are shaped by the sociotechnical environment, which leads them to infer that they can get away with doing less. Whether loafing in classroom teams is similarly linked to cognitive evaluations or not, our findings suggest that some causes are rooted in the learning that occurred before engaging in class-related teamwork, that is, issues that current literature devoted to teaching and learning in undergraduate business classrooms has mostly neglected. In particular, we speculate that students want to be graded on their individual effort in teams when social loafers are present because their preuniversity socialization processes have: (a) rendered them poorly prepared to confront the deviant behaviors represented by social loafers or to take responsibility for collective outcomes and (b) caused them to behave as free agents instead of team players.

It is important to recognize that all of the sampled students in both stages of the study were traditional-age resident undergraduates and away from home for

only 2 or 3 years. In their experience, teamwork has, more often than not, involved close, and often stifling, adult supervision. Designated adults were held responsible for important team-related work including selection of players, negotiation and enforcement of rules, and monitoring of behaviors during play. Referees and coaches blew the whistle at every foul. For many, adult supervision involved vocal parents vigorously advocating on their behalf from the sidelines (e.g., Elkins, 2003). It appears likely that this socialization has failed to foster learning about selecting teammates based on diversity of skill sets, developing interdependent relationships, and defining and enforcing rules of engagement. We identify this as a likely cause because the desire for a grade based on self-reported individual contribution, instead of collectively produced outcomes, smacks of free agency. In other words, students seem to have learned to operate as free agents in team environments because they are used to having their individual contributions monitored with the same vigor as their team's collective achievements. While some have attributed this dysfunctional individualism to American cultural norms (e.g., Keleman & Spich, 1985; McKendall, 2000), others, such as the American Academy of Pediatrics, have attributed it to byproducts of adult supervision.³ Hence, we speculate that their preuniversity socialization, shaped by the nature of teamwork, adult supervision, and/or cultural norms has prevented the learning of skills necessary for effective teamwork. Consider that, in undergraduate business classrooms, it is not unusual for traditional-age students to find themselves with people they have not selected, without clear rules of engagement, and almost entirely without adult supervision. Instead of working out the rules of engagement, most have learned to look for adult intervention or to the referee to administer justice when behavioral infractions occur. It follows, therefore, that they define social loafing of other team members as not their problem or that they define their own behavior as free agents in teams and have instructors reward them postpriori regardless of the team's collective outputs. The nature of their socialization might offer one explanation for why, despite the prevalence of social loafing behaviors, undergraduate students: (a) do not confront social loafers in an effort to change their behavior in any significant way while it is occurring; (b) expect the instructor to change the way the team is assessed, so that the consequences of individual behavior are not collectively but individually borne; and (c) choose remedial action postpriori, with the onus of administering justice on the instructor and not while the social loafing is occurring—which would place the onus of remedial action upon them.

Mismatched Expectations as a Cause

While instructors' intents of forming teams could relate to creating forums for students to engage in intense information exchange, cross-fertilize ideas, and gain experience with teamwork, students seem to define their participation in teams in wholly different ways. Our qualitative data suggest that students define teamwork as an opportunity for individuals to cooperate on a comprehensive project because

³Committee on Sports Medicine and Fitness and Committee on School Health. 2001, Organized sports for children and preadolescents, *Pediatrics*, 107 (6): Vol. 107 No. 6 June 2001, pp. 1459–1462 (AMERICAN ACADEMY OF PEDIATRICS (2001). <http://aappolicy.aappublications.org/cgi/content/full/pediatrics;107/6/1459>.

it is too big for one individual to complete. The team is implicitly viewed as a forum for simple addition of individual outputs, and not so much as a forum for developmental and multiplicative solutions that arise from intense interpersonal interaction and knowledge sharing. In other words, the project is viewed mostly as a collection of individual assignments to be pieced together toward the end, just before it is turned in and presented. Aligned with this line of thinking, the complex team task is divided into equitable segments, and each team member is held individually responsible for its completion (you take question one, he will take question two, and I will take question three. . .). Individuals work mostly in isolation or in smaller subsets of the team. While interaction occurs, a significant portion is devoted to discussion of who will do what or who has done what. In a general way, it appears that teams produce less than a sum of individual outputs, often reflective of negative rather than positive synergies. In this context, when one or more member exhibits social loafing behaviors, that is, distracts the team and contributes poorly, it is defined as an individual failing and not a collective team responsibility. Others feel that they have kept *their* end of the bargain and look upon the instructor to reward them and punish the loafer based on their evaluation of their own and others' contributions. We infer that common ownership stake in the team's collective intents and commitment to team outcome is, for all practical purposes, negligibly low. The considerable gap between the intents with which students are assigned to teams and students' perceptions based on their experiences deserves future academic scrutiny.

Anxiety and Segmentability as a Cause

We speculate that interaction between the anxiety provoked by classroom-related teamwork and the segmentability of the team project lies at the root of social loafing. From our qualitative data, we are hard pressed to identify students who exhibit positive excitement about class-related teamwork. Instead, we find students ambivalent and mostly wary of class-related teamwork—a notion that is supported by recent findings (e.g., Connerley, 2001; Ettington & Camp, 2002). This appears to motivate students into finding the shortest possible way of completing their task. Moreover, if students can find a way of segmenting the tasks in ways that would require them to complete only a fraction of the collective work, they are apt to do so. The anxiety-provoking class-related assignments coupled with segmentability of the team assignment appears to create an environment ripe for social loafing (see Ettington & Camp, 2002 for some supporting evidence).

It is important to note that the interaction between anxiety and segmentability of task also offers one explanation for why students seek postpriori justice. In particular, when team tasks are segmented and completed independently, temporal issues get in the way of team members taking responsibility for confronting or managing social loafing behaviors. For instance, once the work is divided and perfunctory interaction has occurred, team members confront the consequences of the social loafing in terms of poor performance at a late stage. In other words, it is while collating the outputs of individuals mid- or end-of-semester, during final presentation, or after receiving the collective grade that the impact of social loafing is truly felt. If the collective team's grade seems lower than what their

individual contribution deserves, it is attributed to the individual loafer and not the team dynamics. Hence, it follows that team members want to influence the instructor's decision about grades and make it dependent on individual and not collective effort.

IMPLICATIONS FOR INSTRUCTORS AND PROGRAM ADMINISTRATORS

The nature and extent of student–instructor interaction and the teamwork-related guidelines that instructors provide vary significantly and contribute to the problem of social loafing. It is not uncommon, when students complain about their teams, for instructors to essentially respond by saying: *you are adults, work it out* (Bolton, 1999; Ettington & Camp, 2002; McKendall, 2000; Vik, 2001 for similar views). The problem with this line of thinking is that it assumes students can figure out processes for managing social loafing and are emotionally prepared to manage deviant behavior within their teams without adult supervision—both somewhat unrealistic expectations. It may help instructors to know our finding that traditional-age undergraduate business students seem ill-equipped to: (a) define ground rules, much less enforce them within their teams and (b) administer negative consequences to social loafers without getting into uncharted territory where they run the risk of making themselves vulnerable to the unpredictable and defensive responses of others. While it is clearly important for students to learn about navigating in these uncharted terrains and to learn to deal with the defensiveness of others, they appear unlikely to venture into it alone or unaided.

In a general way, our qualitative data find evidence to support the notion that the instructions and requirements for team assignments are content heavy and process poor (e.g., Ettington & Camp, 2002). While this clearly varies with instructor, in general, students are clearer about what the team is expected to do than they are about managing the complex interactions and interdependencies entailed by teamwork. Classroom team assignments that can discourage loafing are likely to require students to: (a) develop ground rules for performance and (b) define processes for monitoring performance and handling distracted, distractive behaviors (see Page & Donnelan, 2003 for similar views). Similarly, in addition to assessing the content of the team's assignment, it seems important to assess the nature and extent of interaction, cross-fertilization of ideas, and collaboration that occurs in classroom teams—and reward students based on their contribution to these processes as well.

Finally, our study calls for fresh thinking about programmatic changes. Classroom teamwork requires students to learn new and unlearn old ways of thinking and doing. In particular, for effective teamwork, students are called to make a transition: (a) from playing in teams that have preset rules designed and enforced by referees to playing in teams where they negotiate and enforce rules and manage behavioral infractions without adult intervention and (b) from thinking of themselves as free agents to thinking of themselves as part of a team with collective responsibilities. Traditional-age undergraduate students in business programs seem ill-equipped to make this transition on their own and need help from better-defined team tasks and better-designed programs. If undergraduate business programs view learning of

teamwork skills as a relevant learning outcome, our study provides some evidence that decentralized approaches to teaching teamwork are not producing adequate results in some areas; that is, students are not learning effective ways of managing social loafers. If preparing students to function in teams is important, our study argues in favor of across-the-curriculum, dedicated coursework taught by subject matter experts, with syllabi designed to familiarize students with theory and to provide opportunities for practicing newly learned skills (see Page & Donelan, 2003 for similar views).

CONCLUSIONS

There clearly are weaknesses of our study that preclude wide generalization of results; our findings may well reflect nongeneralizable peculiarities of the classroom teams in one university. We could have taken a larger sample in our first and second stages, used other scholars to analyze our qualitative data to provide evidence of internal validity, sought correlates of social loafing behaviors in lifestyle- and demographic-related variables, conducted a time-series analysis, or collected data via an experiment. Given what we have done, however, it seems important to recognize that social loafing in undergraduate business classroom teams is complex, and that in the very least, there are meaningful differences in the literature's view and student perceptions of the phenomenon. Our study suggests that social loafing refers not only to slacking off, but also to poor contribution and distractive, disruptive behaviors. It is also important to note that causes of social loafing in undergraduate business classroom teams, particularly those composed of traditional-age students, may lie in their preuniversity socialization, in addition to the intrinsic motivation of the loafers and the sociotechnical environment of the team.

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APPENDIX 1: A SURVEY OF SOCIAL LOAFING IN CLASSROOM TEAMS

Social loafing is a problem faced by teams when one (or more) member does less than his or her share of work, and expects other members to pick up the slack. We want to learn about your experiences with *social loafers* on your teams.

Please respond to the following question based on your recent experiences with ONE social loafer in a team (if you have NOT had a social loafer in your team, please DO NOT COMPLETE the questionnaire). If you have had a *social loafer* in MORE THAN ONE TEAM, please reflect on each of those experiences *separately* (please ask for additional questionnaires from the professor).

1. What Did the Social Loafer Do?

Please indicate the extent to which the following behaviors DESCRIBE the SOCIAL LOAFER in your team. (1 = *Does NOT describe AT ALL*; 2 = *Describes the LEAST*; 3 = *Does not describe much*; 4 = *Describes SOMEWHAT*; 5 = *Describes the MOST*)

DESCRIBES NOT AT ALL					DESCRIBES THE MOST	
1	2	3	4	5	Member had trouble <i>attending</i> team meetings	
1	2	3	4	5	Member had <i>trouble paying attention</i> to what was going on in the team	
1	2	3	4	5	Member was <i>mostly silent</i> during the team meetings	
1	2	3	4	5	Member <i>engaged in side conversations</i> a lot while the team was working	
1	2	3	4	5	Member came <i>poorly prepared</i> to the team meetings	
1	2	3	4	5	Member <i>contributed poorly</i> to the team discussions when present	
1	2	3	4	5	Member had trouble <i>completing team-related home work</i>	
1	2	3	4	5	Member <i>mostly declined to take on any work</i> for the team	
1	2	3	4	5	Member did a <i>poor job</i> of the work she/he was assigned	
1	2	3	4	5	Member did <i>poor quality</i> work	
1	2	3	4	5	Member <i>mostly distracted the team's focus</i> on its goals and objectives	
1	2	3	4	5	Member <i>did not fully participate</i> in the team's formal presentation	

2. What was the Impact of the Social Loafer on Your Team?

Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements about the IMPACT the SOCIAL LOAFER had on your team (1 = *strongly disagree*; 2 = *disagree*; 3 = *neither agree nor disagree*; 4 = *agree*; 5 = *strongly agree*):

STRONGLY DISAGREE					STRONGLY AGREE	
1	2	3	4	5	... the team took <i>longer than anticipated</i> to complete its tasks	As a result of the SOCIAL LOAFING (indicated in Q2 above) . . .
1	2	3	4	5	... the team <i>meetings lasted longer</i> than expected	
1	2	3	4	5	... the team had <i>fewer good ideas</i> than other teams	
1	2	3	4	5	... team members had to <i>waste their time</i> explaining things to the social loafer	
1	2	3	4	5	... other team members <i>had to do more</i> than their share of work	
1	2	3	4	5	... other team members were <i>frustrated and angry</i>	
1	2	3	4	5	... there was higher level of <i>stress</i> on the team	
1	2	3	4	5	... other team members had to <i>re-do or revise</i> the work done by the social loafer	
1	2	3	4	5	... the work had to be <i>re-assigned</i> to other members of the team	
1	2	3	4	5	... the team's final <i>presentation was not as high quality</i> as that of other teams	
1	2	3	4	5	... the team <i>missed deadlines</i>	

3. What Were the Reasons for the Social Loafing?

Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements about WHY YOU BELIEVE this person ENGAGED in SOCIAL LOAFING BEHAVIORS (1 = *strongly disagree*; 2 = *disagree*; 3 = *neither agree nor disagree*; 4 = *agree*; 5 = *strongly agree*).

STRONGLY DISAGREE	STRONGLY AGREE			I BELIEVE that the SOCIAL LOAFER . . .
1	2	3	4	5 . . . <i>expected</i> others to pick up the slack <i>with no consequences</i> to him/her
1	2	3	4	5 . . . was <i>not interested</i> in the <i>topics/tasks</i> assigned to the team
1	2	3	4	5 . . . did <i>not care</i> about earning a <i>high grade</i> in the class
1	2	3	4	5 . . . did <i>not like</i> one or more <i>members</i> of the team
1	2	3	4	5 . . . just did <i>not seem to care</i>
1	2	3	4	5 . . . was just <i>plain lazy</i>
1	2	3	4	5 . . . <i>partied too much</i> and could not focus on the team's tasks
1	2	3	4	5 . . . did <i>not get along</i> with one or more members of the team
1	2	3	4	5 . . . was <i>not part of the clique</i> , and did not seem to belong in the team
1	2	3	4	5 . . . did <i>not have skills</i> to do the work assigned to the team

4. What Did You (or Team) Do in Response to the Social Loafers on Your Team (Please Tick All that Apply)

- Did nothing
- Talked to the professor about the problem we were having
- Left the team with the professor's permission
- Ignored the social loafer during the team meetings
- Tried to engage the social loafer during the team meetings
- Confronted social loafer after class and asked her/him to change behaviors
- Instead of confrontation, found INDIRECT ways of letting him/her know that we did not approve of his/her behavior
- Fired the member from the team
- Gave the social loafer poor marks in the 'end of semester' evaluations collected by the professor

As a result of the above actions:

- The social loafer contributed more to the team
- The social loafer contributed less to the team
- The social loafing continued as before
- We had to do more as a team
- The social loafer became defensive and withdrew further from the team

5. What Should Professors Do?

Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements about WHAT you believe the PROFESSOR SHOULD DO to manage the problem of social loafing (1 = *strongly disagree*; 2 = *disagree*; 3 = *neither agree nor disagree*; 4 = *agree*; 5 = *strongly agree*)

STRONGLY DISAGREE		STRONGLY AGREE		
				To manage the problem of social loafers in future, I WISH the professor would...
1	2	3	4	5 Evaluate individual effort on teams in more ways
1	2	3	4	5 Let the team make a report on what each member did
1	2	3	4	5 Give the team the power to assign 50% of the grade received by every member
1	2	3	4	5 Give each member the right to leave the team if others are not doing their work
1	2	3	4	5 NOT let me pick my group – because I cannot confront loafers who also happen to be my friends
1	2	3	4	5 LET me pick my own team, so I can avoid known social loafers
1	2	3	4	5 Make the team report <i>mid-semester</i> on 'who is doing what'
1	2	3	4	5 Let me make a formal written evaluation of what others are doing

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