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Social loafing and self-beliefs: People's collective effort depends on the extent to which they distinguish themselves as better than others

[Social Behavior and Personality](#) , 1998 by [Charbonnier, Emmanuelle](#), [Huguet, Pascal](#), [Brauer, Markus](#), [Monteil, Jean-Marc](#)

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An experiment tested whether the belief that one is better than others on performance aspects of the self moderates social loafing, the tendency for individuals to expend less effort when working collectively than when working individually. French students performed an easy task either coactively or collectively. They were then asked to rate how they individuate themselves from others on personal abilities within various domains of social life. The loafing effect was especially strong in participants who perceived themselves as better than others, suggesting that self-beliefs related to one's feeling of uniqueness is a significant component of social loafing. This finding is discussed from the perspective of Karau and Williams' (1993) Collective Effort Model.

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A widespread belief in North America and Western Europe is that working collectively-should inspire individuals to maximize their potential and work especially hard. This belief is quite surprising, however, as in these two cultures most people's prime motivation is to assert their individuality and uniqueness and stress their separateness from the social world (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). For example, people from individualistic cultures believe that they are better than average in a variety of interesting and important ways (see Goethals, Messick, & Allison, 1991; Taylor & Brown, 1988, for reviews). They judge positive personality attributes to be more descriptive of

themselves than of the average person but see negative personality attributes as less descriptive of themselves than of the average person (Alicke, 1985). This effect has been documented for a wide range of traits (Brown, 1986) and abilities (Campbell, 1986; Larwood & Whittaker, 1977). Clearly, North America and Western Europe are individualist cultures where intuition might lead to the opposite belief: People should expend less effort when working collectively than when working individually.

In fact, there is substantial empirical evidence for this phenomenon. Identified under the label "social loafing" (Latané, Williams, & Harkins, 1979), the tendency for individuals to expend less effort when working collectively than when working individually is a well-demonstrated effect (see Karau & Williams, 1993 for a review of 78 studies involving physical, perceptive, and cognitive tasks). Extensive efforts have been made to clarify the role of social factors in the emergence of social loafing. However, the impact of dispositional factors has been neglected. For example, there is today no doubt that the lack of evaluation potential that may characterize collective work situations leads people to engage in social loafing (Harkins, 1987; Harkins & Jackson, 1985; Harkins & Szymanski, 1988, 1989, Szymanski & Harkins, 1987; Williams, Harkins, & Latane, 1981). But it remains unclear whether some individuals are more sensitive than others to the lack of evaluation when working collectively.

In this paper, it is assumed that self-beliefs related to one's feeling of uniqueness play an important role in social loafing. Specifically, it was predicted that participants who feel unique and believe that they are generally better than others are the most likely to loaf when their outputs are combined with that of others to form a single group product. The rationale for this hypothesis is presented below.

SELF-BELIEFS, FEELING OF UNIQUENESS, AND SOCIAL LOAFING

In their meta-analytic review of social loafing, Karau and Williams (1993) found that the degree to which the participants' dominant culture emphasizes individualistic versus collectivistic concerns moderated the loafing effect. The magnitude of this effect was found to be larger for participants from individualist-Western cultures than for participants from collectivist-Eastern or oriental cultures. Consistent with this, individuals attach greater importance to group performance and achievement in collectivist cultures (Triandis, 1989), where conceptions of individuality insist on the fundamental relatedness of people to each other (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Likewise, the magnitude of social loafing has been found larger in studies that used samples of only male participants than in studies that used either mixed samples or samples of female participants only. And women tend to be more group- or collectively-oriented than men and are generally characterized by an emphasis on their interrelatedness to others and to the environment (Josephs, Markus, & Tafarodi, 1992; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Thus, it may be that social loafing is in fact typical of people who are motivated to assert their individuality and uniqueness.

If this view of social loafing is accurate, we would expect that individuals who are motivated to see themselves as unique and believe that they are "above average" are the most likely to engage in social loafing. Karau and Williams' (1993) Collective Effort Model (CEM) is clearly in favor of this hypothesis. According to this model, "people will be willing to exert effort on a collective task only to the degree that they expect their efforts to be instrumental in obtaining valued outcomes" (p. 684). Outcomes such as evaluation and comparison of one's performance with the performance of others are typically

eliminated in the collective work condition, where individual outputs are combined to form a single group product. And individuals who see themselves as unique and better than others are the most likely to experience these outcomes as valuable and important: Not only may these individuals be motivated to seek a positive evaluation of themselves but they can also be especially keen on making others aware of their "particular abilities" (as a means to be socially identified as superior to others). Consequently, these participants might be especially inclined to see their efforts as less instrumental in obtaining valued outcomes when working collectively than when working individually. Put differently, the fact that working collectively eliminates the possibility to "self-validate" (in the sense of being positively evaluated) should encourage participants to engage in social loafing, especially when they are motivated to see themselves as unique and better than others.

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