Social Loafing and Culture: Does Gender Matter?

Diana Tsaw, Susan Murphy* and Jeremy Detgen

Social Loafing, defined as the tendency to reduce effort when working in a group, continues to be of interest both to researchers and practitioners. Causes of social loafing have been examined extensively, with several group member demographic factors found to be related to the phenomenon. The connection between motivation loss and culture has proven to be especially robust, as has the link between gender and behavior in work groups. We incorporate these literature streams by utilizing gender research which identifies both genetic and sociological differences as the source of behavior differences. We propose Confucian values as a theoretical framework to explain the relationship between gender, culture, and social loafing in the Chinese culture. We offer suggestions for future research and propose beginning with an analysis of Taiwanese work groups to test the hypothesized relationships.

Field of Research: Management

1. Introduction

The belief that working in groups will yield greater productivity than individuals working alone has led to the extensive use of groups in organizations. It is not surprising, therefore, that their effective functioning has received quite a bit of research attention. The increasingly global nature of organizations has made groups comprised of individuals from different cultural backgrounds commonplace as well. As a result, employees around the world are being confronted with co-workers of both genders with diverse cultural and socio-demographic backgrounds. A review of the literature on culture, and gender effects, suggests a need for research incorporating the impact of their differences on effort levels of group members. More specifically we use a Confucian values framework to analyze individual tendencies to social loaf in Chinese work groups with various cultural and gender profiles. We conclude with a discussion of the implications for organizations and business educators derived from the analysis, as well as proposals for future research.

2. Social Loafing and Culture

Among the many definitions of culture, perhaps the most commonly used in organizational research is Hofstede's (1980) definition of culture as collective programming of a group of people. Implicit in this conceptualization is that culture is learned over time and passed down generationally. The factors that shape the foundation of cultural values include national history and belief systems, and both religious and ethics/morals focused teachings (Hofstede & Bond, 1988). While variation among culturally similar individuals' values orientations is expected, between-culture differences in values have been found to be larger than within-culture differences. These shared values and belief systems cause national cultural values to manifest in the workplace by country as employees generally enter the

* California Lutheran University, 60 West Olsen Road, Thousand Oaks, Ca. 91360, Murphy@callutheran.edu

workplace with relatively stable values and belief systems (Hofstede, 1988). One well researched organizational variable is social loafing, which is defined as the decrease in the amount of individual effort put into a task while performing the task with other people (Latane, Williams and Harkins, 1979). Extensive research into the phenomenon of social loafing has been conducted in the United States as well as international settings.

Support for the proposition that the tendency to social loaf is culturally based comes from a number of sources. Often researchers utilize the frameworks developed by Hofstede (1980, 2001) to explore motivation loss in groups, specifically the individualism-collectivist dimension. In short, in the Individualistic model, the social unit is the individual, and individuals take care of themselves and put self-interest before group interests. Independence, competition and self-help are valued while recognition and reward for personal achievements and accomplishments is sought. In the Collectivistic model, the social unit is the family or country. Group interest is put before self interest and individuals depend on and provide support to others. If the group succeeds, the individual succeeds.

Comparisons of the effect of collectivistic and individualistic orientation on the presence and extent of social loafing are numerous (Earley, 1989, 1993; Gabrenya, Latane, and Wang, 1983). Earley (1989) found the dimension of individualism-collectivism to be relevant to social loafing. American managers holding individualistic beliefs engaged in loafing but Chinese managers holding collectivist beliefs did not. Overall, individualists were found to exhibit lower levels of performance in a group setting than when working alone. Collectivists, however, did not demonstrate any social loafing effect and performed better in a group than when working alone regardless of level of accountability. The reason, according to the author is that in a collectivistic society, individuals will subordinate personal interests to the goals of the group with whom they work and identify. Each person is cognizant of his or her own duties and responsibilities to the group; members of the group will not reduce effort because the group goal is the personal goal.

Another study by Earley (1993) found that group composition affected managers' levels of participation. Higher levels of efficaciousness resulted for managers (both alone and as part of the group) with collectivistic orientations when working in groups that shared that orientation. Conversely, managers with individualistic orientations were found to perform better while working alone than while working in a group, regardless of value orientation of group members. Said another way, social loafing applies to individualists who work in any type of group but only to collectivists who work in a group with a different value orientation. This work confirms that in addition to an individual's cultural orientation, the value orientation of the work group they are part of is related to social loafing. Along these same lines, Jackson and Harkins (1985) found that individuals in groups contributed effort in relation to the anticipated contributions of other group members. For example, they found that individuals did not loaf if they worked with others whom they expected to work hard, but did loaf if they expected their partners to loaf.

Together, these studies provide considerable support for the contention that culturally based values of group members are an important consideration in developing a model of group performance that includes social loafing. It seems clear

that the conditions under which loafing is exhibited differ by culture and values orientation. It is therefore reasonable to conclude that an individual's behavior when working in a group is influenced by their cultural background as well as the cultural values of other work group members.

As is common in this stream of literature, both Hofstede (2001) and Earley (1989, 1993) used an American sample to represent an individualistic society and a Chinese sample to represent a collectivistic society. Recent research delves more deeply into the values that underpin Chinese cultural values and perhaps more fully accounts for work group behavior. To this end we utilize a Confucian values framework formulate proposed relationships in work groups that corporate gender and culture.

3. Confucian Values and Context

As the extensive body of cross-cultural research suggests, the rules of conduct and behaviors associated with the core values that an individual has internalized prove to be useful in predicting workplace behavior. Researchers seem to be in agreement that to truly understand the Chinese culture one must understand Confucianism. Confucius, in T*he Analects* encouraged the development of values and rules of behavior that would result in a peaceful and harmonious society (Bond, 1988). While *The Analects* was proposed by Confucius to address a very limited range of situations, such as training and developing government officials, its application to the workplace by previous authors has proved to be useful and appropriate (Salen, 2008).

Importantly, the central premise of T*he Analects* is that of the individual as a social being. The in-group status that is assumed when applying them is crucial to understanding predictions of behaviors across situations. An in-group is formed only when a number of people living and/or working together, over time, develop interdependence and trust. The goal of harmony is furthered by good interpersonal relationships, with avoidance of direct and open conflict, and the private settlement of differences through negotiation and compromise (Ip, 2009). Hong (2008) observes that member underperformance will result in conflict within a group when group harmony and group success are equally important. Reactions to underperformance generally fall into one of two categories: either group members will compensate for the underperformance by exerting more effort so that group success and harmony are not disturbed; or they will reduce effort to avoid standing out with higher levels of performance. The emphasis on group harmony leads Hong (2008) to suggest that Chinese workers will strive to mirror the efforts of their coworkers, thus preserving interpersonal relationships where each member of the group is dependent on the other.

This calls to mind the link drawn between Collectivism and Confucian values by Hofstede and Bond (1988), and critiqued by Fang (2003). Ip (2009) asserts that Confucian values and behaviors compatible to being a social being: are the most central for Chinese, including being honorable in dealings with other human beings, loyalty to the family, the community one lives in and, by extension, to the company one works. While Hofstede and Bond (1988) suggest that the values associated with collectivism will determine behavior, Fang (2003) points out that the specific

contexts and situations, such as whether the other group members are considered in-group, will suggest different behavior for the same values.

4. Reciprocity and Social Loafing

Several Confucian values are relevant when examining social loafing in a cross cultural context. The core element of *Shu*, represents reciprocity and is perhaps most useful in the context of the work group. Hofstede (1980) casts reciprocation of greetings, favors and gifts as a negative value. However, while the prevailing Western perspective promotes this element as a Confucian version of the Golden Rule ("Do unto others what you would desire others to do unto you"), a more accurate depiction of the concept includes the obligation to help others achieve their expectations, or advance in their ventures, as one would want others to facilitate their achievement of success (Bo Mou, 2008). Further, reciprocity carries with it the obligation to repay beyond that which one was given, so that 'Deal with a person as he deals with you' and 'pay a man back in his own coin' doesn't quite capture the spirit of the value (Fang, 2001).

Similarly, Zhang (2006) notes the generally derogatory tone that has accompanied the Western translation *of other value terms associated with reciprocity, which are often* equated with *"*networking", "making connections", and "exchange of favors" in a manner suggestive of corruption, From this point of view such values are synonymous with unethical or corrupt business practices (Zhang, 2006). More accurately, when taken in a context of valuing interpersonal relationships these values are about reciprocity in the manner of matching behavior that results in something positive for oneself with similar behavior directed at the other person. You are obligated to "return the 'favor' as it were, but only if this someone is a member of your in-group where trust and interdependence have been developed and tested." Furthermore, these values demand not only that one must reciprocate duty and loyalty from others, but that disloyalty, when displayed, should be reciprocated, resulting in the rejection of the perpetrator (Bo Mou, 2004). When examined in light of specific contexts, Fang (2003) points out that the previously mentioned greater loyalty afforded to other in- group members demands that the individual actively facilitate development and growth of those individuals into effective group members. There is an obligation to help other members achieve success, and reciprocity mandates that others will engage in similar behaviors to facilitate in-group member's success. The mutual support and co-operation that will result are highly valued for their contributions to group harmony.

A final Confucian value that is relevant in our discussion is the concept of face. In Chinese society, face is a self-regulating moral mechanism and can be linked to family and group (Goffman, 1955). Ting-Toomey's (1988) study of the facework literature, presents Chinese, "face" as multi-dimensional, with positive and negative connotations depending on the context in which it is used. For example, "yao mianzi", which literally means "want face", has a negative connotation, and is equivalent to English/American sense of having false pride or showing off. "Gai mianzi, give face, has a positive connotation because it implies being mindful of another's feelings, and not publicly exposing their mistakes or even incompetence. "Liyen" literally means throw away face, and is negative in tone, suggesting shameful, unconscionable, and dishonorable, behavior. Several of these dimensions

of face are logically related to social loafing. Social loafing, or under-contributing, suggests behaving in a dishonorable way, and can be criticized as 'tui liyen".   Face in this regard has positive social value and functions as an effective mechanism for regulating and mobilizing members of a work group, where as Hofstede's (1991) interpretation of face has a more negative implication. "Yao mianzi", which does have a negative connotation form a Confucian values standpoint, would prevent over-contribution.   Schütte and Ciarlante, (1998) impart this dual meaning by noting that Chinese strive to gain face for the family through the accumulation of wealth, prestige, status, power and so on, but also seek not to lose face by neglecting responsibilities.

Taken together, an examination of Confucian values relating to reciprocity and face in conjunction with the importance of the in-group designation and privacy conventions held by the Chinese culture may prove useful in explaining the apparent absence of social loafing in the Chinese workplace.   Therefore, we suggest that the following relationships may be expected in the Chinese workplace:

> *Proposition 1: Chinese workers will not social loaf nor will they over contribute when the workgroup contains in-group members only.*
>
> *Proposition 2: Chinese workers may social loaf or over contribute when the work group contains out-group members.*

5. Gender and Social Loafing

Cultural differences are only one aspect of the programming that shapes behavior transferred from generation to generation. Gender also has an effect on the values of, and in turn, behavior exhibited by males and females in work groups. Specifically, support for gender based differences in effort levels, and the tendency to social loaf, can be found in the work of several authors. These differences, attributed to the individual versus collective nature of men and women, respectively, have roots in evolution as well as society.

The evolutionary explanation suggests that men genetically feel the need to provide while women feel the need to raise children (Kashima 1995).   Survival required men to hunt and provide the means of life for the family. While there might be interactions with fellow hunters, the goal was always to bring back food on an individual basis. Women, on the other hand, evolved to work together because successfully raising offspring is facilitated by working together. Women, feeling more relatedness and thus more collective, feel a greater sense of duty to help the people they are connected to. Men relate to the group as a whole, not individuals and aim to serve themselves before the group. Bond and Hofstede (1988) offer empirical support for an evolutionary explanation with their analyses revealing that women's values differ less among societies than do men's values. . Using the authors terms, women in feminine countries have the same nurturing values as men; in the masculine countries they are somewhat more assertive and competitive, but not as much so as the men. Overall, these countries show a gap between men's values and women's. In sum, despite societal changes, evolutionary effects continue to contribute to the explanation of gender-based behavior in groups.

Societal expectations explain behavior beyond that attributed solely to gender. One study found that Japanese male infants of 3 to 4 months were noisier than Japanese female infants of the same age, whereas in the United States the opposite was found to be true. Another Japanese study of social loafing tendencies discovered that "about 20% of men and 60% of women" did not loaf (Kugihara 1999). Taken together these studies, which found significant differences between men and women provide at least preliminary support for an evolutionary and societal explanation for gender based differences in group behavior.

Gabrenya, Wang, and Latané (1985) found consistent differences between men and women across cultures with regards to social loafing. In both Chinese and American cultures, social loafing varies between men and women, with women loafing less. This suggests that culture and gender provide separate influencing factors on people's tendencies to loaf. According to Kashima (1995) gender and culture do not overlap much in their affect on group behavior. In one of the first studies which examined both gender and culture in group effort, Gabrenya Wang, and Latané (1985) found that Chinese students exhibited less social loafing than American students and women expressed less social loafing than men across cultures. Men tended to loaf more as they increased in grade level, yet women maintained a relatively constant level of loafing. So, while social loafing does exist in both men and women, women generally loaf much less. For men, the tendency may be contingent upon the situation. Given our survey of the literature, we hypothesize that although gender and social loafing will vary by culture females will be less likely to loaf. The magnitude of the difference, however, is predicted to vary. As noted, previous research on culture and social loafing has consistently shown a relationship; with social loafing being almost non-existent in some cultures. It should be noted that even when unusual, social loafing is more likely to be exhibited by men than women. Genetic and evolutionary characteristics that even cultural differences cannot overcome have been suggested as the source of these distinctions. Regardless of the vastly changed roles of men and women, these genetic and historical roles persist in driving men and women to behave in distinct ways. Men continue to be more individualistic and women relational (collectivist), independent of cultural values.

> **Proposition 3: Chinese men will be more likely to social loaf than Chinese women in work groups containing in-group members only.**
> **Proposition 4: Chinese men will be more likely to social loaf than Chinese women in work groups containing out-group members.**

6. Conclusion

This effort offers preliminary work on the development of a model of social loafing that incorporates culture and gender. Using a Confucian values context to reexamine an individualism/collectivism theoretical rationale, and an evolutionary /societal rationale respectively we have proposed a number of relationships regarding Chinese work groups and social loafing. Further refinement of the proposed relationships and research testing these proposals would be a logical next step. A sample of Chinese and American groups should be surveyed, with the goal

of testing the propositions outlined in this paper and providing a preliminary sense of the relative importance of culture and gender in the tendency to social loaf.

The implications for business and business educators of such research are clear. Organizations are increasing utilizing work groups to support organizational goals, and the trend shows no signs of reversing. The trend toward globalization, likewise, seems to be permanent. Knowledge about how these factors interact may allow managers to foresee issues related to work group functioning.

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