"SOCIAL LOAFER BAIT" -
THEORY AND INITIAL EVIDENCE ON THE
TYPES OF PEOPLE SOCIAL LOAFERS TARGET

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Abstract

Social loafing is when a member of a group does not contribute towards group goals, but receives the benefits of the group's efforts. Student class groups are described as a "give some" social dilemma, which contributes to the problem of social loafing. Because of this structure, social loafing is a backward reward system that creates an economically rational decision to maximize loafer's utility. However, in order for the social loafer to receive the group's rewards, the group's contributing members must sufficiently achieve the group's goals. Thus, the social loafer must find at least one group member that CAN and WILL achieve the group's goals *and* ALLOW themselves to be social loafed on. *"Social Loafer Bait"* is the term used here to describe the profile of the ideal target for social loafers. Initial findings from an action research project intended to minimize social loafing are reported here. A total of 503 single-page, double-sided surveys were collected, which was roughly an 80% response rate that constituted approximately 30% of the student population at the time (Fall 2011). As hypothesized, students who CAN do a good job (those with a high GPA) were more likely to be social loafed on. Students who will ALLOW others to social loaf on them (females) were not more likely to be social loafed on, which was contrary to the hypothesis. Post-hoc analysis of the gender-social loafing relationship did, however, find females in the School of Business did experience more social loafing than males. Limitations and future directions of study are discussed, including applying more complex statistical methods and the discovery of a situational constraint that may cause student-athletes to be falsely perceived as social loafers.

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"it's the reward system, stupid!" - Kerr (1995)

Having college students *effectively* work in groups can be challenging. The need to have students work in groups is relevant, as many companies emphasize the ability to work well in teams as a hiring criteria. But just because students are assigned to groups does not mean these groups are good. The purpose of this paper is to focus attention on social loafing, which is when a group member(s) does less than their fair share while receiving the same reward as contributing members. My argument is that the reward system encourages social loafing, and that social loafing is an example of a "rational economic decision."

With this rational economic decision assumption as the foundation, the purpose of this paper is to consider what the social loafer likely looks for in the targets of his or her behavior. The term *"Social Loafer Bait"* is used here metaphorically as a profile of characteristics believed to attract social loafers in the same way that blood attracts sharks. Based on this theoretical profile, I describe initial results from a research project that examined this idea.

Literature Review

Groups as a "Give Some" Social Dilemma
A social dilemma is a context in which multiple individual's outcomes are influenced by the behavior of their own and other's behavior. In other words, group outcomes are affected by the contributions of the various group members. A "give some" social dilemma is a context where individuals must contribute towards a group goal (i.e., they must "give" their individual contributions towards collective group goals to achieve a common outcome) (Dawes, 1980). To illustrate this in a group context, consider the following from a student's perspective:

> A Student Scenario - *You have been assigned to a class group by your professor. One of your group's major project assignments is due at 8 a.m. on Monday. The only time your group can meet this weekend is between 7 and 10 p.m. on Sunday. Since this weekend is the university's homecoming, you know you will be busy all weekend and exhausted by Sunday night. You also know you have an important exam in your 9 a.m. Monday class, which you will not have had time to study for until Sunday night also. What will you do about the meeting?*

The student's decisions about the meeting are either to (1) go to the meeting and contribute towards the group project, or (2) skip the meeting and study for the 9 a.m. exam. The effects of these decisions on the group's project depend on the collective contributions of the overall group. If enough group members contribute *sufficiently*, the group will receive a good grade on the project. If collective group contributions are *insufficient*, then the group will receive a bad grade on the project. The combined effects of the student's choice with the group's collective contributions are depicted in **FIGURE 1**.

Figure 1
Social Loafing as a "Give Some" Social Dilemma

Group's Collective Choices

Your Choice	*Insufficient* Contribution	*Sufficient* Contribution
Contribute to Group Project (Go to the Meeting)	*Bad project grade, Not as prepared for exam*	*Good project grade, Not as prepared for exam*
Withhold Effort from Group Project (Study for Exam)	*Bad project grade, Prepared for exam*	*Good project grade, Prepared for exam (Social Loafing)*

If the student chooses to contribute (i.e., goes to the meeting) but the group's contributions are insufficient, then the results are a bad group grade and the student is not as prepared for the 9 a.m. exam. This is the worst possible scenario as a bad group grade is a *"punishment"* and not being prepared for the exam is another punishment. This situation represents a double punishment. If the student contributes to the group and the group's contributions are sufficient, then the results are a good grade (a *"reward"*) and not being prepared for the exam (a punishment). This scenario is a "wash" in that the student receives one reward and one punishment. If the student chooses to withhold effort by not contributing toward group goals (i.e., skips the meeting in order to study for the 9 a.m. exam) and the group's contributions are insufficient, then the results are a bad group grade (a punishment) and the student is prepared for the exam (a reward). This is another wash scenario in that the student receives one reward and one punishment. If the student chooses to withhold effort and the group's contributions are sufficient, then the results are a good group grade (a reward) and the student is prepared for the exam (a reward). This is the best possible scenario as a good group grade (a reward) is combined with being prepared for the exam (a reward), thereby representing a double reward situation. The last scenario is the one that *"maximizes utility"* for the student, which makes it *"economically rational."*

The scenario in the bottom right quadrant of **FIGURE 1** describes social loafing, where a student benefits on the efforts of others (i.e., sufficient contribution of the other group members) without them having to contribute. Decades ago, Kerr (1995) described how *"Fouled Up Systems"* can

cause unintended consequences. I refer to these as *"Backward Reward Systems"* because these can *discourage good behavior* and/or *encourage bad behavior*. The problem is the backward reward system depicted in the bottom right quadrant of **FIGURE 1** encourages the bad behavior of social loafing. Although "bad" from the perspective of effective group work, social loafing is clearly the economically rational decision that is encouraged by the backward reward system.

Social Loafer Bait - A Profile of Persons Targeted to be Social Loafed On
Building on the assumption that social loafing is economically rational and a backward reward system, the next issue concerns selection of groups with types of group members to social loaf on. In order to receive the double rewards of social loafing, it is imperative to be in a group whose collective contributions will be sufficient while the social loafer withholds his/her effort.

So what is the profile of the person most likely to successfully achieve group goals, even if some members social loaf? I term this profile *"Social Loafer Bait."* By "bait" I apply a metaphor inspired by Steven Spielberg's classic movie, *"Jaws."* During one scene the sheriff is shoveling blood into the water behind the boat. All of a sudden the huge shark's head breaks the surface of the water and leads the sheriff to utter the great line - "You're gonna need a bigger boat." This metaphor views social loafers as the shark. Sharks are attracted by blood in the water, which I argue include certain characteristics of other group members. I believe these certain characteristics attract social loafers. These characteristics are depicted in **FIGURE 2**.

Figure 2
Social Loafer Bait Profile

Characteristic	Characteristic Manifestation
The person CAN do a good job.	"Smart" (High IQ / High GPA)
The person WILL do a good job.	"Personality" (High conscientiousness / Strong MBTI Judger)
The person will ALLOW social loafing.	"Guilt Works on Them" Strong MBTI Feeler / Female

MBTI – Myers-Briggs Type Indicator

The person that exhibits the social loafer bait profile is one who (1) CAN do a good job, (2) WILL do a good job, and (3) ALLOWS others to social loaf on them. The person who CAN do a good job is smart enough to make a good grade for the group, even if no other members contribute. This characteristic may be manifested by high intelligence (IQ) and/or high grade point average (GPA). Schmidt and Hunter's (1998) meta-analysis of selection methods found general mental ability (e.g., IQ) was the best predictor of future job performance. So, to ensure others do the group work well persons with the highest IQ and GPA are the best targets. The person who WILL do a good job has a personality causing them to go crazy when things are done poorly. These people are highly structured and perfectionists. This characteristic is manifested by high conscientiousness and as a strong "Judger" on the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) (Myers, 1980). Schmidt and Hunter's (1998) meta-analysis also found conscientiousness to be the personality measure that best predicted future job performance. To ensure others will do the work well highly conscientious persons are very good targets. MBTI judgers preference is to break down large goals into smaller tasks and work over time to complete the overall goal. They do so to avoid the stress of deadlines. Targeting strong judgers means that, by delaying one's contributions, these people may well complete the goal by themselves. The person who will ALLOW others to social loaf on them care how their actions affect others. These people are susceptible to the use of guilt as a means of manipulation. This characteristic is manifested as a strong MBTI "Feeler" and females. MBTI feelers consider the effects on others as the "data" upon which decisions should be made. If a decision is likely to harm another (e.g., withholding a social loafer's points on a group project) they feel bad, so a social loafer's use of guilt may sway these people into allowing their behavior without penalty. Females are stereotypically more caring than males, and are more likely to serve as the primary care-givers within the family unit. Consequently, social loafers may productively tap this caring role (especially if the culture and/or religion tends to relegate females to a subservient position) with guilt or language that portrays their behavior as uncaring and/or unladylike (e.g., describing them using the "b-word").

Hypotheses

Based on the discussion in the previous section I offer the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: **Persons who CAN do a good job will be greater social loafer targets.**
  Hypothesis 1: GPA is positively related with experienced social loafing.

Hypothesis 2: **Persons who ALLOW social loafing will be greater social loafer targets.**
  Hypothesis 2: Females experience social loafing more than males.

Methods

Action Research Approach
This study was part of a larger project designed using an action research approach. The focus of the project was intended to develop interventions designed to minimize social loafing in class groups. I am much less interested in understanding why social loafing occurs than I am in stopping it, which is why male and female teams designed interventions during Fall 2011 to be implemented during Spring 2012. This initial paper from this project uses pre-test data (Fall '11).

Undergraduate Management majors enrolled in a senior-level course were recruited to participate as part of a class project. These students agreed that social loafing was a problem in groups, and female students believed they were greater targets of social loafing than males were. A female team and a male team were assigned with each having a different purpose. The female team focused on an intervention designed to minimize female's acceptance of being social loafed on. The male team focused on an intervention designed to encourage social loafers to stop their behavior. Both teams helped develop, distribute, and collect the survey data presented here.

Sample and Data Sources
A total of 754 single-page, double-sided surveys (34 questions) were distributed. These surveys were distributed initially to members of fraternities and sororities, then to 18 freshman- or senior-level classes at a small, private university in the southern United States. A total of 503 surveys were collected, which represented a gross response rate of 66.71%. While this was an impressive number, this does not represent the true response rate. Since fraternity and sorority members were surveyed first, some of them may have also received the survey in their classes. Students may also have received the survey in multiple classes. So, students were asked to complete the survey only once. To avoid misrepresenting the response rate, faculty were given a sheet with their packet of surveys noting the "Total number of surveys received" (i.e., how many surveys were in their packet), the "Total number of surveys distributed to students" (i.e., if a student indicated they had already completed the survey the faculty would not "distribute" one to that student), and "Total number of surveys completed." The total number of surveys NOT distributed was 116, making a sample of 638 unique recipients. Hence, the true response rate was 78.84%. Finally, the 503 responses corresponded to roughly 30% of the total student population at the time.

Measures - Dependent Variable
Social Loafing was measured as the mean of 4 items adapted from a survey previously used in a university context (Mulvey and Klein, 1998). These items assess the extent to which respondents report having experienced social loafing in groups or teams at their university. This survey determines if they have experienced social loafing rather than if they have social loafed. Given that social loafing may be seen as bad behavior, a direct measure of whether or not a person social loafed was not used because respondents might not answer truthfully. Items used were:
1.   "Most group members I have worked with try as hard as they can." (**R**)
2.   "Most group members I have worked with have contributed less than I anticipated."
3.   "Given their abilities, most group members I've worked with do the best they can." (**R**)
4.   "Most group members I have worked with are 'free-loaders.'"
The Likert-type response options were 1 (strongly disagree), 2 (disagree), 3 (neither), 4 (agree), 5 (strongly agree), and 6 (not applicable). Items 1 and 3 were reverse-scored (**R**).

Measures - Independent Variables
Two demographic variables were used as independent variables: *GPA* and *Gender*. *GPA* was a single item where students were asked to check a box next to the appropriate answer to the question, "Approximately what is your (college name) GPA?" Responses were coded 1 (1.99 or less), 2 (2.00-2.49), 3 (2.50-2.99), 4 (3.00-3.49), and 5 (3.50 and above). Since some of

respondents were first-semester freshmen, under the question was the statement (High school GPA if you don't have (college name) GPA yet). A response labeled "High School" with the same GPA coding scheme was provided for these students. During data preparation, I substituted student's high school GPA for freshmen who did not respond to the college GPA item and provided a high school GPA. *Gender* was a single categorical item (i.e., Male/Female).

Survey Distribution
Student participants who were members of fraternities or sororities distributed and collected the surveys to their clubs at a weekly meeting. I chose to survey large, required general education freshman-level courses, and selected which class after reviewing enrollment and the instructor on the university course schedule website. The senior-level courses selected were ones with large enrollment and were required for each senior in the school rather than for specific programs (e.g., a senior level course for School of Business students rather than solely for Management majors). I showed the list of classes to the student participants. They were asked to approach instructors whom they had taken classes from requesting they distribute the survey, and have the instructors return them via campus mail. I personally approached instructors whom none of the students distributed surveys to. Since the possibility a student(s) could be given the survey in multiple contexts (i.e., in their fraternity or sorority and more than one class), we (1) surveyed fraternities and sororities first then (2) asked students in classes to not complete the survey more than once. The approach, which was based on Balance Theory (Heider, 1958), yielded a response rate nearly four times the typical response rate of 20%.

Results

Descriptive statistics on all variables are shown in Table 1. The table also shows the zero-order correlations among all measures and inter-item reliability (alpha) for social loafing.

Means and (Standard Deviations)
The mean of social loafing was 2.75 (0.75) which translated to a "Slightly Disagree" average varying from "Disagree" to "Slightly Agree." I use the term "slightly" to denote the average being .25 points towards "Disagree" from "Neither," and the upper range being halfway between "Neither" and "Agree." Contrary to my assumption, these results indicate social loafing was not a significant problem throughout the university. The mean of GPA was 4.10 (0.90) which translated to an average of "3.00-3.49" varying from "2.50-2.99" to "3.50 and above." A total of 490 students responded to the gender question (2.6% missing data). There were 296 females (60.4%) and 194 males (39.6%). The larger percentage of females in the sample was slightly larger than the percentage for the overall student population.

Zero-order Correlations and Hypothesis Testing
Social loafing was significantly correlated with GPA (.19, $p<.01$) as hypothesized. Thus, Hypothesis 1 was supported. Social loafing was not significantly correlated with gender (.06, $p>.05$). Hence, Hypothesis 2 was rejected. The largest correlation was between GPA and gender (.32, $P<.01$).

Post-Hoc Zero-Order Correlation Analysis

The non-significant correlation between social loafing and gender puzzled myself and my female students, as this was contrary to our collective experience. We wondered if social loafing varied by the student's primary school. Since the survey included an item, "Which is the school(s) of your major(s) or minor(s)?," we could classify students by their school. Students were classified by their major (e.g., Business, Education, etc.). If they had more than one major, these students were classified in both schools. Zero-order correlations were run on social loafing-gender for each school. The only school in which the correlation was significant was Business (.24, $p < .05$, N=90). This was an intriguing finding, and one that matched our collective experience. Therefore, our hypothesis that females are social loafed on more than men was false for the overall university (Hypothesis 2 rejected), but it was true for female students in the School of Business. This result parallels the findings of Stark, Shaw, and Duffy (2007) who observed women being social loafed on more than men over a longitudinal study of class groups.

Discussion

What have we learned?
The premise of this paper is that the "give some" social dilemma nature of student groups creates a backward reward system whereby social loafing is the economically rational decision. This premise *assumes* the group's collective effort will be sufficient to achieve group goals (i.e., a good group project grade in **FIGURE 1**). Social loafing by withholding effort when the group's collective efforts are insufficient partially protects the loafer (i.e., a wash), but it does not maximize utility. In order to maximize utility, the social loafer needs to find a group whose members will achieve the group goals without his or her effort *and* will share group rewards with the loafer.

The proposition here is that loafers target other group members who exhibit a *Social Loafer Bait* profile. Finding at least one member who CAN and WILL achieve the group's goals, *and* will ALLOW them to social loaf is critical to maximizing utility. Students with higher GPA did experience more social loafing (Hypothesis 1 supported), although females did not experience social loafing more than males university-wide (Hypothesis 2 rejected). Post-hoc analysis of gender-social loafing by school suggests the problem was isolated to the School of Business, which was consistent with previous research (Stark et al., 2007). Overall, results of the study provide initial support for the idea that students with a social loafer bait profile are targeted.

Limitations
The major limitations of this paper is the sample, design, and analysis used. Data were gathered from a single, small, private, southern university in the United States. The ability to generalize these findings to other contexts is questionable. A cross-sectional design was used, so no causal interpretations should be made. Finally, the analysis used zero-order correlations for hypothesis testing, which is a weak method. To more fully test the validity of the social loafer bait profile will require categorizing students by combining CAN with will ALLOW (i.e., GPA with gender) via cluster analysis while including control variables (e.g., "opportunity" to social loaf) in a regression or causal modeling analysis. Inclusion of Big 5 and MBTI personality measures would also allow a more comprehensive evaluation of the social loafer bait profile concept.

Future Directions
In order to confidently assess whether or not social loafing is a problem and develop theory-based interventions to minimize it if so, it will be necessary to verify these results over time and in multiple contexts (i.e., at other universities). As noted previously, this paper reports on data gathered as part of a intervention project. These data represent pre-test observations (i.e., O_1), so future data are anticipated to address the temporal issue. My hope is that I will be able to partner with other universities so as to determine if these results replicate or are unique to this university. My plans also include a more thorough analysis of these data using more complex methods (e.g., regression). The original research proposal submitted to the university Human Subjects Review Board included a survey of school deans. This survey was ultimately not practical, but I anticipate being able to gather information about schools that may help interpret these findings. For example, a key question regarding social loafing in class groups is the extent to which groups are used as a teaching method. If groups are not or rarely used, then social loafers do not have the "opportunity" to social loaf. Since the use of groups is a common practice in business programs, this may help explain support for Hypothesis 2 was limited solely to Business while Hypothesis 2 was rejected university-wide.

Finally, my goal with this project included the intent to minimize the bad behavior of social loafing in class groups. My intent preceded direct evidence about social loafing beyond my personal experience. In a way I "jumped the gun" by having students work on interventions to reduce social loafing. I selected an action research approach so as to be able to alter the project as evidence indicated. I also used this project for a practical teaching purpose, namely, that I was able to assign a group of students to a specific task that was of interest to me as well as them. I learned much from them, and I was able to direct their learning towards a better understanding of research methods. For the female group, they also were able to receive credit for their Spring 2012 senior-level Management class as they implemented their intervention. Analysis of this intervention's effects are anticipated in the future. This continuity allowed me to work closely with a group of highly talented and motivated young women, which was really fun for me. I also had one of the most interesting classes of my academic career during the development of the male group's intervention (Fall 2011). The group identified student-athletes as being more likely social loafers than social loafed on. Their intervention was presented to the class, which is when the class exploded with emotion because roughly half of the students were student-athletes. After the discussion it became clear to me that the emotion expressed was because the intervention was directed at changing the individual student-athlete's behavior when the cause may well have been beyond their control. In other words, the male group's intervention (which I agreed with at the time) likely committed the fundamental attribution error (Ross, 1977). Student-athletes must answer to their coaches in order to participate, and competitive athletes *want* to play. Some of the student-athletes would not have been at the university had they not had the financial support (i.e., scholarships) they receive playing their sport. Since student-athletes are beholden to coaches for playing time and scholarships, it is *economically rational* for them to do what their coach tells them. If this conflicts with a class group, then the class group's demands are secondary and the student-athlete may be viewed as a social loafer. A future direction is dealing with social loafing as a situational factor for student-athletes.

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Table 1
Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

	Mean	SD	1.	2.
Dependent Variable				
1. Social Loafing	2.75	.75	(.73)	
Independent Variables				
2. GPA	4.10	.90	.19**	
3. Gender		.06	.32**	

* p<.05; ** p<.01; *N's* = ranged from 402 to 483; coefficient alpha for Social Loafing is provided on the diagonal.