The Correlation Between Moral Disengagement and Social Loafing in Student Work Groups

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Social loafing | Moral disengagement

Research

Social loafing is a classic group psychology phenomenon (Ringelman, 1913) that exists widely in various settings, like workplaces and classrooms. For a century, scholars have carried out extensive research on the influencing factors of social loafing (Karau Williams, 1993, Akgunduz Eryilmaz, 2018). Some influencing factors that have been discovered include the presence of social evaluation (whether efforts are assessed or measured individually), social environment perception (individuals' belief that other members also loaf on the task), group size, nature of the task and team cohesion.

However, existing literature mainly researches contextual factors, and few studies have investigated the influence of individual factors. The most updated research on individual factors includes turnover intent and work insecurity (Akgunduz Eryilmaz, 2018) and motivation and mindfulness (Miheli Culiberg, 2019). Although a small portion of existing research involves moral perspectives like moral meaningfulness (Miheli Culiberg, 2019) and work ethics (Wang Li, 2014), most are founded on business backgrounds or organizational contexts. A school is a unique organization that differs significantly from a business or commercial organization. The specificity of educational goals and the immaturity of educational objects make social loafing in student workgroups in the school environment unique. Therefore, it is necessary to explore the causes and influencing factors of social loafing in student workgroups.

Moral Disengagement and Social Loafing. Moral disengagement is a form of self-deception in which the individual detaches themselves from the ethical standards in the particular context. Bandura (1986) first proposed the concept of moral disengagement in his seminal book on social cognitive theory to explain why individuals engage in immoral behaviors without experiencing guilt and psychological pain. Moral disengagement produces specific cognitive tendencies, like redefining one's behavior to make it seem less harmful, minimizing one's responsibility in the consequences of the behavior, and reducing the recognition of the victim's suffering. (Bandura, 1986).

Many scholars have researched this phenomenon and drawn corresponding conclusions. Ju Di's (2020) research pointed out that moral disengagement helps employees rationalize their social loafing behaviors in the workplace. This conclusion implies that moral disengagement may affect the occurrence of social loafing.

Correspondingly, Zhong Xi, Wang Tian, and their research group (2020) have pointed out that as the Machiavellianism level (i.e., the tendency of individuals utilizing others to achieve personal goals) increases, the positive impact of the broken of psychological contracts on moral disengagement and the positive impact of moral disengagement on unethical behaviors of employees also increases.

Moral disengagement may increase the level of social loafing. In short, individuals with high moral disengagement levels disable the mechanism of self-condemnation (Detert et al., 2008) and engage in unethical behaviors like social loafing behavior.

Based on the above analysis, hypothesis is proposed as follows:

Moral disengagement increases the level of social loafing.

Research value. First of all, it is of great academic value and applied value to studying Chinese students' social loafing. On the one hand, team activities have become an important measurement and educational carrier to enhance students' cognitive and social development. The other reason is that specific solutions based on academic research are urgently needed to work on social loafing in Chinese

Significance Statement

As tasks become more challenging and complex, team collaboration becomes increasingly critical. Unfortunately, the "free ride" phenomenon, also known as "social loafing," exists in various team settings to varying degrees. In the 1880s, engineering professor Max Ringelmann observed that players' effort in a collective tug-of-war was only half of the sum of individual efforts (Kravitz, Martin, 1986). This phenomenon was contrary to the traditional viewpoint of "when everybody adds fuel, the flames rise high" and began receiving widespread attention from academia and the public. Given the popularity of teamwork in educational settings, the consequence of social loafing behaviors is hard to underestimate. On the one hand, the school advocates teamwork and collaboration; on the other hand, social loafing remains prevalent in most student workgroups (Jassawalla et al., 2009). Students often reduce their efforts during teamwork due to the diffusion of responsibilities or the temptation to "free ride." The free-riding members would not only decrease the team performance but also reduce the sense of fairness of other members and affect team cohesion since the educators correspondingly receive a false representation of individual students' efforts. However, what causes the high occurrence of social loafing in student workgroups? This study adopts an individual lens while examining this phenomenon among students between the ages of thirteen and twenty.

students shaped by Chinese culture and confronted with dramatic societal changes and values.

Second, moral disengagement has a contributing effect on social loafing has been found in the student workgroups. This study finds that students' moral disengagement, that is, the process in which people convince themselves that ethical standards in a particular context do not apply to them, may be a crucial cognitive reason that encourages students' social loafing. With the improvement of the quality of education in our country, students' cognitive ability, divergent thinking, and creativity have all been greatly improved, but the moral standard of students has not been developed simultaneously. Studies have found that the more creative people are, the more they find ways to explain their ethical misconduct (Moore, Detert, et al., 2012; Treviño et al., 2014). Their are essential explorations of moral disengagement in the study of social loafing of student workgroups. Therefore, this study provides a way to think academically in coping with social loafing from the perspective of educational psychology or social psychology.

Method and Procedures

In this study, a questionnaire survey was conducted to recruit subjects through the WeChat platform, and students from several middle schools and universities in Beijing were investigated. This study promised the confidentiality of the participants and asked them to review their performance in a specific group for some time answer according to the actual situation. To stimulate the enthusiasm of answering the questionnaire, this study provided each participant with a reward of 4 yuan. In order to meet the research purpose and improve the quality of the questionnaire, the subjects were asked to choose a group that met the following six requirements in the questionnaire instruction:

(1) The group is formed to complete a specific task.

(2) The group's performance will be evaluated as a whole.

(3) The respondents participated in the group's activities in the past three months.

(4) The group consists of at least three members.

(5) The respondent has been involved in the group's activities for at least three days.

(6) The respondents have participated in the group's activities at least once a week (online and offline).

In this study, 139 students were invited to participate in the study. After excluding invalid samples with obvious missing important variables, a total of 131 valid questionnaires were collected (the effective rate was 94.2 percent).

For the gender ratio of respondents, girls accounted for 69.5 percent while boys accounted for 30.5 percent; for the collected data, respondents are widely distributed in different grades. Among them, 1.5 percent of the respondents came from Grade 9, 52 percent from Grade 10, 1.5 percent from Grade 11, 3.1 percent from Grade 1 in the university, 6.9 percent from Grade 2 in the university, and 47.3 percent from Grade 3 in the university.

Measurement of Variables. The measurement tools used in this study were all published, scholarly-reviewed scales. In addition, to control variables, all variables in the study were measured by Likert seven-point scale, with one representing "completely inconsistent" or "strongly disagree" and seven representing "completely consistent" or "strongly agree." In order to adapt to the specific situation of this study, necessary adjustments were made to some items in the scales. The measurement methods of each variable are as follows:

(1) Moral Disengagement: Seven measurement items were selected from the scale developed by Bandura (1986). A representative item includes, "it is tolerable to take something without the owner's permission if it is just borrowing." The Cronbach's alpha coefficient of the scale in this study is 0.880.

(2) Social Loafing: Eight measurement items were selected from the scale developed by George and J.M. (1992), one of which was a reverse scoring question. Representative items include While others are working hard, I feel that me doing less will not affect the final result of the project. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient of the scale in this study is 0.785.

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Table 1

Descriptive statistics analysis

Variables	M	SD	1
1 Moral Disengagement	2.60	1.20	-
2 Social loafing	3.01	1.04	0.60**

Note: n=131; * *p* <0.05, ** *p* <0.01, ***p <0.01

Fig. 1. Caption

(3) Control Variables: Based on previous research results, this study used team size, team activity mode, activity duration, activity frequency and team member status as control variables (Chidambaram, 2005).

Results

Descriptive statistics and correlation analysis. Table 1 presents the mean value, standard deviation, and correlation coefficient of each variable. Moral disengagement is significantly positively correlated with social loafing, with an absolute correlation coefficient of 0.60. This result lays a foundation for further analysis below, indicating that the data in this study are suitable for further analysis of the effects of various variables on social loafing.

Hypothesis testing. In order to test the effect of moral disengagement on social loafing, team size, communication mode, duration and activity frequency were used as control variables to conduct hierarchical regression analysis of moral disengagement on social loafing. The results showed that the effect of moral disengagement on social loafing was significant ($= 0.58$, p ¡ 0.001), and the regression equation was significant (R^2=0.30, F=62.95, p ¡ 0.001). Hypothesis 1, "moral disengagement increases the degree of social loafing," is supported.

Research Discussion. Ethics educators have pointed out that ethics instruction is key to reducing academic misconduct like social loafing (Wang and Calvano 2015). Thus, it is crucial to study the individual factors, factors internal to students themselves, that affect social loafing behavior. This study discusses the relationship between social loafing and moral disengagement, which previous studies have not thoroughly discussed.

Moral disengagement and social loafing:. Bandura was the first to put forward the theory of moral disengagement from the social cognition perspective to explain the psychological process behind the emergence of non-moral behavior. When an individual morally dismisses responsibility, the person will sever the causal link between his immoral behavior and its consequences and willfully ignore the negative consequences of his behavior. Studies have also found that when adolescents morally disengage themselves, their internal regulating mechanism will fail and become dull, and they quickly get rid of guilt generated by violating moral standards and freely display immoral behaviors (Detert et al., 2008). Students' have an increased tendency to defend themselves, ignore consequences, and avoid social comparisons, which in combination can lead to increased social loafing and suboptimal team performance.

Research Conclusion and Implications

Limitations. While this study provides unique insight to current literature on the social loafing phenomenon, it is not without limitations.

First, mediator variables were not included in the model of this study. Future research can further explore the intermediate mechanism of social loafing to achieve a deeper understanding of social loafing and construct corresponding theories.

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Table 2

Hierarchical regression results of moral disengagement on social loafing

Variables	Social Loafing					
	Model 1			Model 2		
	b	*SE*	β	*b*	*SE*	β
Intercept	3.86	0.47		2.16	0.44	
Control variable						
Perceived insider status	.09	.11	.07	.05	.09	.04
Group size	-.01	.12	-.00	-.11	.10	-.08
Ways of communication	-.06	.19	-.03	.05	.16	.02
Duration of program	-.10	.07	-.14	.01	.06	.01
Activity frequency	-.31***	.09	-.32***	-.21***	.07	-.22***
Independent variable						
Moral disengagement				0.50***	0.06	0.58***
R^2	0.12			0.41		
$\triangle R^2$	0.12			0.30		
F	3.30**			62.95***		

Note. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Fig. 2. Caption

Second, the study selected basic demographics, team position, team size, communication style, duration and frequency of activity as control variables and may have ignored other potential control variables. Task characteristics, evaluation methods, member cultural background and other variables can also affect the degree of social loafing.

Third, the effective sample size of this study is relatively small, and the data source lacks diversity and may not effectively represent students outside Beijing. Thus, the results are limited and cannot represent the entire group of college and high school students, affecting the external validity of the conclusion. Therefore, future research can be extended through multi-source questionnaires.

Fourth, due to the limitation of conditions, the study did not adopt the longitudinal design method of phased data collection, limiting the ability to establish causality certainly. In future studies, rigorous longitudinal data collection is required.

Research Conclusion. Through empirical research, the following conclusion is drawn: Moral disengagement is positively associated with social loafing.

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Attachment: Questionnaire Items

Moral Disengagement

Bandura(1986)

It is acceptable to spread false information or opinions to protect the people I care about.

1 Strongly Disagree 2 Disagree 3 Somewhat Disagree 4 Uncertain 5 Somewhat Agree 6 Agree 7 Strongly Agree

If it's just borrowing, it is acceptable to take something without obtaining the owner's permission.

1 Strongly Disagree 2 Disagree 3 Somewhat Disagree 4 Uncertain 5 Somewhat Agree 6 Agree 7 Strongly Agree

Exaggerating one's qualifications or abilities is not a fault because some people do it frequently.

1 Strongly Disagree 2 Disagree 3 Somewhat Disagree 4 Uncertain 5 Somewhat Agree 6 Agree 7 Strongly Agree

When people are merely following orders from authority figures, they should not be held responsible if it leads to negative consequences. The authority figures should bear the responsibility.

1 Strongly Disagree 2 Disagree 3 Somewhat Disagree 4 Uncertain 5 Somewhat Agree 6 Agree 7 Strongly Agree

When people are doing something that is technically wrong, they should not be blamed if everyone else is doing the same. The so-called "safety in numbers" principle applies.

1 Strongly Disagree 2 Disagree 3 Somewhat Disagree 4 Uncertain 5 Somewhat Agree 6 Agree 7 Strongly Agree

It's not a big deal to attribute other people's ideas to myself.

1 Strongly Disagree 2 Disagree 3 Somewhat Disagree 4 Uncertain 5 Somewhat Agree 6 Agree 7 Strongly Agree

People who are abused usually bring it upon themselves.

1 Strongly Disagree 2 Disagree 3 Somewhat Disagree 4 Uncertain 5 Somewhat Agree 6 Agree 7 Strongly Agree

Social Loafing

George, J.M. (1992), "Extrinsic and intrinsic origins of perceived social loafing in organizations", Academy of Management Journal, Vol. 35 No. 1, pp. 191-202.

If given the opportunity, I would allow my peers to assist me with some tasks.

1 Strongly Disagree 2 Disagree 3 Somewhat Disagree 4 Neutral 5 Somewhat Agree 6 Agree 7 Strongly Agree

I never let my peers complete learning tasks for me.

1 Strongly Disagree 2 Disagree 3 Somewhat Disagree 4 Neutral 5 Somewhat Agree 6 Agree 7 Strongly Agree

If other members in the group are working hard, I will reduce my effort level.

1 Strongly Disagree 2 Disagree 3 Somewhat Disagree 4 Neutral 5 Somewhat Agree 6 Agree 7 Strongly Agree

I have failed to complete the tasks assigned to me.

1 Strongly Disagree 2 Disagree 3 Somewhat Disagree 4 Neutral 5 Somewhat Agree 6 Agree 7 Strongly Agree

I put in less effort than other members in the group.

1 Strongly Disagree 2 Disagree 3 Somewhat Disagree 4 Neutral 5 Somewhat Agree 6 Agree 7 Strongly Agree

I try to avoid doing menial tasks as much as possible.

1 Strongly Disagree 2 Disagree 3 Somewhat Disagree 4 Neutral 5 Somewhat Agree 6 Agree 7 Strongly Agree

I leave the tasks that should have been completed by me to others.

1 Strongly Disagree 2 Disagree 3 Somewhat Disagree 4 Neutral 5 Somewhat Agree 6 Agree 7 Strongly Agree

When others are working diligently, I pay less attention to the tasks I am responsible for.

1 Strongly Disagree 2 Disagree 3 Somewhat Disagree 4 Neutral 5 Somewhat Agree 6 Agree 7 Strongly Agree