Achievement Motivation, Expected Coworker Performance, and Collective Task Motivation:
Working Hard or Hardly Working?1

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Social loafing is the tendency of individuals to work less hard collectively than individually. The present study examined the joint influence of achievement motivation and expected coworker effort on collective task performance. Participants (N = 107) who qualified and were available after pretesting on an achievement motivation scale were randomly assigned to a work condition and coworker effort condition. Dyads were asked to generate as many uses for a knife as possible within a 12-min time period. Participants low in achievement motivation engaged in social loafing, but only when expected coworker effort was high, whereas participants high in achievement motivation did not engage in social loafing, regardless of expected coworker effort. The implication of achievement motivation for collective task performance settings is discussed.

Because groups and teams are taking on increasing importance in today’s organizations (e.g., Guzzo & Salas, 1995; Sundstrom, De Meuse, & Futrell, 1990), it is vital to understand what factors either enhance or detract from group performance and group member motivation. Common sense may suggest that working in groups should energize individuals and enhance their motivation and performance. For example, companies often rely on brainstorming sessions to come up with ideas for selling their products, with the assumption that working with others creates a synergy that will enhance group members’ individual contribution to the process. However, a large and growing body of research has demonstrated that individuals have a tendency to engage in social loafing when working on collective tasks.

In formal terms, social loafing is a reduction in an individual’s motivation and effort when working collectively as compared to either working individually or coactively (i.e., individually, but in the presence of others who are working on the

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same task). Researchers have found that social loafing is a robust phenomenon that occurs across a variety of tasks and populations (for a review, see Karau & Williams, 1993). Although social loafing appears to be ubiquitous, researchers have identified several social and situational factors that appear to moderate the process. Research has demonstrated that social loafing may be reduced or eliminated using a variety of methods, including increasing personal involvement with the task (Brickner, Harkins, & Ostrom, 1986), emphasizing the uniqueness of individual input (Harkins & Petty, 1982), evaluating individual and group input (Harkins & Szymanski, 1989; Szymanski & Harkins, 1987), and increasing group cohesiveness (Karau & Hart, 1998; Karau & Williams, 1997). Recently, researchers have initiated a promising line of research examining the impact of individual differences on social loafing (e.g., Smith, Kerr, Stasson, & Markus, 2001).

One individual-difference construct that may have special relevance to one’s efforts is achievement motivation. Those high in achievement motivation may show such a high level of motivation on achievement-related tasks that this motivation would transcend both individual and group contexts and reduce or eliminate the usual social loafing tendency. The present study examines the effects of achievement motivation and expected coworker effort on collective task performance. *Achievement motivation* is the tendency of an individual to work toward the achievement of personal goals or standards. This construct is defined operationally using scores from a scale developed by Cassidy and Lynn (1989). Expected coworker effort is manipulated by using a bogus message-switching technique. Participants in the study were led to believe that the effort exerted by their coworkers on the task would be either high or low. We hypothesize that participants low in achievement motivation will engage in social loafing, but only when expected coworker effort is high; whereas participants high in achievement motivation will not engage in social loafing, regardless of expected coworker effort.

**Collective Effort Model**

The hypotheses for the present study are derived from the collective effort model (CEM; Karau & Williams, 1993). The CEM accounts for group-level processes by incorporating key elements of both expectancy value theory and social comparison theory in specifying what factors influence individual motivation within groups. The CEM predicts that individuals will work hard at a task only when they expect that their effort will be instrumental in obtaining a valued outcome. According to the CEM, social loafing occurs when working collectively because the contingency between individual effort and obtaining valued outcomes is usually weaker than when working individually. The CEM accounts for these contingencies by specifying three additional factors associated with instrumentality: (a) the individual’s perception of the relationship between individual
and group performance; (b) the individual’s perception of the relationship between group performance and group outcomes; and (c) the individual’s perception of the relationship between group outcomes and individual outcomes.

The CEM also suggests that an individual may be motivated to compensate for the poor performance of a coworker, under specific conditions, when working collectively on a task that leads to a valued outcome. This idea has been supported by previous research (Karau & Williams, 1997; Williams & Karau, 1991). Karau and Williams (1993) suggested that two important factors may motivate an individual to work harder at a collective task: (a) the expectation that others in the group will perform poorly on the collective task; and (b) the value of the group outcome. When working individually, people are likely to work hard only when they expect that their individual effort will be instrumental in obtaining valued outcomes. In a collective setting, individuals should exert the most effort when the group’s performance is contingent on their individual effort. Thus, the contingency between individual effort and group performance might be enhanced in individuals when coworkers are expected to perform poorly, provided that the group outcome is valued. Conversely, the contingency between individual effort and group performance should be attenuated when working with coworkers who are expected to work hard, because the group can still succeed on a given task even if the individual does not work hard. As a result, individuals may “free-ride” on the strong performance of other group members (Kerr, 1983).

Williams and Karau (1991) conducted three experiments to test these hypotheses. They found that participants engaged in social compensation (working harder collectively than coactively) when working with partners who were expected to perform poorly. This social compensation pattern emerged for expectations of coworker effort that were based on low levels of interpersonal trust or on a statement by the coworker that he was either low in ability at the task or did not intend to work hard on the task. These studies provide evidence that expectations regarding coworkers’ performance may affect individual motivation, such that individuals are likely to work hard on a collective task only when they believe that their individual contribution is important to obtaining valued outcomes.

The contingency between individual effort and a valued outcome may be influenced by several additional factors, including the potential evaluation of the group’s performance or the intrinsic meaningfulness of the task (Karau & Williams, 2001). In their revision of social comparison theory, Goethals and Darley (1987) stated that individuals are able to enhance and maintain a positive self-evaluation by identifying with successful or attractive groups. When working on a collective task, individuals should exert the most effort when the potential for positive evaluation is high; that is, when the group’s performance is contingent on their own individual effort. Thus, the contingency between individual effort and group performance might be enhanced in individuals when coworkers are expected to perform poorly, especially when the group outcome is valued.
The intrinsic meaningfulness of the task also may influence individual effort in collective tasks. Individuals performing an intrinsically meaningful task would not be expected to loaf on collective tasks because they may perceive that their individual effort will be important in obtaining valued outcomes, regardless of the performance of other group members. Indeed, several studies have found that individuals are less likely to engage in social loafing when working on tasks that are meaningful, attractive, or personally relevant (e.g., Brickner et al., 1986; Zaccaro, 1984).

Implications of Individual Differences on Collective Effort

Karau and Williams (2001) identified a number of individual differences that may affect individuals’ perceptions of the contingency between individual effort and valued outcomes, including self-efficacy, self-esteem, and locus of control. Of the studies that have been conducted, the majority of studies have generated encouraging results that support predictions generated by the CEM.

Social-loafing researchers have investigated the effects of several individual-difference factors on individual motivation. First, Sanna (1992) found that self-efficacy (situationally manipulated rather than examined as an individual difference) enhanced performance on a collective task when people could be identified and evaluated. Second, Early (1989) found that individuals from collective cultures worked harder collectively than alone, but only when working with members of their own group. Third, two recent studies found that individuals who viewed themselves as generally superior to others in performance tended to loaf on an easy task (Charbonnier, Huguet, Brauer, & Monteil, 1998), but tended to work harder collectively than coactively on a challenging task (Huguet, Charbonnier, & Monteil, 1999). Fourth, an unpublished study by Petty, Cacioppo, and Kasmer (1985) found that individuals who were high in need for cognition did not loaf when working on a cognitive task, possibly as a result of such a task being intrinsically interesting to these participants. Finally, a study conducted by Smith et al. (2001) found that individuals who were high in need for cognition did not engage in social loafing on tasks that were cognitively engaging, thereby extending the work of Petty et al. (1985). Collectively, these studies take an important step in examining the influence of individual differences on social loafing. However, no studies have yet examined the effects of achievement motivation—a variable that is likely to be centrally linked to one’s motivation across a range of settings—on collective task performance.

Achievement Motivation and the CEM

Achievement motivation has been viewed through many theoretical lenses, including Maslow’s needs theory (Cunningham, Wakefield, & Ward, 1975),
path-goal theory (Orpen, 1977), and goal-setting theory (Kalnbach & Hinsz, 1999). Expectancy value theories, such as the CEM, might offer researchers one of the most informative views of achievement motivation, especially in collective performance settings. Atkinson’s (1957) theory of achievement motivation influenced how Vroom defined expectancy in his expectancy value theory. However, the two perspectives appear to generate conflicting hypotheses regarding how this construct operates in performance settings (Eden, 1988). According to Vroom (1964), expectancy and effort are best represented by a linear function (i.e., as expectancy increases, so does one’s effort on a task), whereas in Atkinson’s theory, expectancy and effort are best represented by a curvilinear function in which individuals high in achievement motivation are maximally motivated when expectancy is at an intermediate level. Eden suggested that the apparent conflict between the two theories can be resolved if one considers that the dependent variable in most achievement motivation experiments is choice, whereas the dependent variable in most expectancy value experiments is the amount of effort exerted on a task. Given that individuals high in achievement motivation are likely to perceive different expectancies than individuals low in achievement motivation, we believe that the CEM offers a viable framework to examine achievement motivation in a collective performance setting.

The Present Study

The present study examines the joint influence of achievement motivation and expected coworker effort on collective task performance. Because theorists have suggested that achievement motivation is a multidimensional construct (Cassidy & Lynn, 1989; Elizur, 1979; Jackson, Ahmed, & Heapy, 1976; Spence, Pred, & Helmreich, 1989), we wanted to use a measure that assessed all of these dimensions as part of the composite score to avoid criterion deficiency problems. Cassidy and Lynn conducted a series of studies to develop a measure of achievement motivation that consolidated key factors identified in the extant literature on achievement motivation. For the purposes of the present study, we define achievement motivation as the tendency of an individual to work toward personal goals or standards, and use the composite score from the scale developed by Cassidy and Lynn to operationalize achievement motivation.

We frame our hypotheses in terms of the CEM. The CEM suggests that individual motivation might be increased by identifying factors that strengthen expectancy on group tasks, without undermining instrumentality and outcome valence. Goal setting is one factor that might influence an individual’s expectation that his or her effort will lead to a good performance (Karau & Williams, 2001). Researchers have found that individuals high in achievement motivation set more difficult goals (Yukl & Latham, 1978) and are more strongly committed to their goals (Hollenbeck, Williams, & Klein, 1989) than are individuals low in
achievement motivation. Individual motivation also might be increased by identifying factors that increase instrumentality without undermining expectancy or outcome valence.

In collective settings, individuals high in achievement might perceive that their individual contribution to the group’s performance is unique and more important than individuals low in achievement motivation. Individuals high in achievement motivation also might value different outcomes than individuals low in achievement. We believe that individuals high in achievement motivation will value outcomes tied to achievement (i.e., individuals high in achievement motivation will find such a task intrinsically motivating) more so than individuals low in achievement motivation. As a consequence, individuals high in achievement motivation should work hard, regardless of whether the task is coactive or collective. In contrast, individuals low in achievement motivation might work hard collectively, but only when the contingency between individual effort and valued outcomes is strong (e.g., the performance of other group members is poor) and the only way to avoid a negative outcome is to put forth the necessary effort. This would suggest that individuals low in achievement motivation might be more influenced by external sources of motivation, such as obtaining a positive group evaluation, whereas individuals high in achievement motivation would be more influenced by the internal motivation of meeting their own standards on an achievement-related task. Therefore, we hypothesize that participants low in achievement motivation will engage in social loafing, but only when expected coworker effort is high, whereas participants high in achievement motivation will not engage in social loafing, regardless of expected coworker effort.

Method

Participants and Design

Undergraduate students (N = 888) enrolled in Introduction to Psychology courses at Virginia Commonwealth University were pretested on the achievement motivation scale developed by Cassidy and Lynn (1989). Achievement motivation scores were normally distributed. Participants whose scores fell in the top 25% of scores (high achievement motivation) and the bottom 25% of scores (low achievement motivation) were contacted via telephone or e-mail and asked to participate in the present study until a sufficient sample from each group was obtained (N = 107; high achievement motivation = 53, low achievement motivation = 54; male = 39, female = 68).

Participants pretested on achievement motivation were then randomly assigned to a work condition (coactive vs. collective) and an expected coworker effort condition (high vs. low). All experimental sessions were run with 2 participants who were told either that the experimenter was only interested in their
group scores (collective condition), or that the experimenter was interested only in their individual scores (coactive condition). Coworker effort was manipulated using a message-switching technique, such that participants were informed that their coworker was going to work hard at the task (high-effort condition) or that their coworker was not going to work hard at the task (low-effort condition). The gender composition of the dyads had no significant effect and did not significantly alter the pattern of the results and therefore was excluded as a factor in the final analysis. Data from 6 participants were excluded from the final analysis because they worked on the idea-generation task with a close acquaintance, which may have had a significant effect on their performance and subsequent ratings of their coworker. In addition, one dyad contained a participant who was not pretested on the achievement motivation measure. As a result, the participant’s data were not included in the final analysis.

**Achievement Motivation Measure**

Cassidy and Lynn’s (1989) scale assesses achievement motivation as a multidimensional construct consisting of seven dimensions: work ethic, pursuit of excellence, status aspiration, competitiveness, acquisitiveness for money and material wealth, mastery, and dominance. Although the scale is composed of several subscales, the scale is designed to provide a composite score for achievement motivation (Cassidy & Lynn, 1989). Thus, an achievement motivation score was calculated for each participant by summing the totals from each of the seven subscales, with higher values indicating higher achievement motivation. Based on responses from the pool of 888 respondents from which the participants were recruited, the internal reliability of the 49-item scale was good, as indexed by a Cronbach’s alpha of .87.

**Procedure**

The procedure used in the present study was a modified version of the one used by Karau and Williams (1997, Experiment 2). Dyads were asked to arrive at the group dynamics laboratory at a scheduled time. As each participant arrived, he or she was greeted by the experimenter and seated at a large table. In the middle of the table were two large cloth dividers that were in place to prevent participants from monitoring each other’s work rate during the experiment. Each participant was provided with 50 blank slips of paper, a pencil, and a pair of headphones that was attached to a tape recorder shared by both participants.

The experimenter informed participants that the purpose of the experiment was to examine the effects of standardized communication on worker satisfaction and performance. Participants were told that the use of electronic mail (i.e., e-mail) was increasing in business settings and that employees in large
corporations have developed banks of preselected messages to simplify their e-mail communications, but little research had been conducted investigating the impact of this communication strategy on employee satisfaction and performance. Each participant was informed that he or she would be allowed to send two messages to his or her coworker from a standardized list of messages in an effort to simulate this communication strategy. No other communication between the two participants was allowed.

The experimenter then described the idea-generation task. Participants were told that they would be asked to generate as many uses as possible for an object (i.e., a knife) within a 12-min period (Harkins & Petty, 1982) and that it was the quantity, not the quality, of ideas that was important. The experimenter instructed participants to write only one use for the object per slip of paper and to place each slip into the appropriate box. In the coactive condition, each participant was provided an individual box into which he or she placed slips of paper and was told that the experimenter was interested only in his or her individual performance. In the collective condition, each participant was able to place the slips of paper into a shared box, through slits in the cloth dividers, without being able to monitor the other participant’s work rate. Participants in the collective condition were told that the experimenter was interested only in the collective performance of the group. In an effort to ensure that the task was perceived as at least somewhat meaningful and relevant to achievement, all participants were told that recent research had suggested that performance on the idea-generation task correlated highly with both intelligence and achievement. Additionally, participants were informed that they would be listening to music during the idea-generation task (this was done to prevent participants from monitoring their partner’s work rate).

Each participant was then given an identical list of 10 messages to choose from and was asked to select two messages to send to his or her coworker. Participants were asked to select one message from the first five options (statements reflecting individual interest in the study) and a second message from the last five options (statements reflecting their anticipated effort on the task). Participants were then asked to select two sealed envelopes from a letter holder, with slots that had numbers corresponding to the numbers of the messages selected, and hand them to the experimenter for delivery. The sealed envelopes were not numbered and were used to reduce the suspicion that the experimenter would be able to detect which messages were selected until the termination of the experimental session.

Expectations about coworker effort were manipulated by varying the contents of the envelopes prior to the experiment such that the first five envelopes contained identical bogus messages reporting participant interest in the study, and the last five contained identical bogus messages reporting participant anticipated effort on the task. In the low coworker effort condition, the first message was
always “This task seems extremely interesting,” whereas the second message was always “My effort on this task will be extremely low.” In the high-effort condition, the first message was always “This task seems extremely interesting,” whereas the second message was always “My effort on this task will be extremely high.” The content of the first message was held constant to ensure participants’ perceptions regarding their coworkers’ effort was not confounded by their coworkers’ interest in the study.

Once the participants read the two messages sent to them by their coworkers, the experimenter asked participants to put on their headphones, pressed “Play” on the tape recorder, and left the room. The tape contained instructions that asked participants to generate as many uses as possible for a knife within a 12-min period. The participants were prompted to begin the task by a tone, which was followed by 12 min of music. After the music ended, participants were instructed to stop writing and to take off their headphones. The experimenter then administered the post-experiment questionnaire. After completing the questionnaire, participants were debriefed and dismissed.

Results

Social loafing was assessed by comparing the mean number of uses generated in the coactive condition with the mean number of uses generated in the collective condition. In the coactive condition, each participant had his or her own box, so counting the number of uses generated by each participant was not problematic. By comparison, in the collective condition, in which participants placed uses into a shared box, the experimenter assessed the number of uses generated by each individual by subtracting the number of blank slips not used by each participant from 50.3

Manipulation Check

**Importance of the task.** In order to appropriately test the CEM, it was desirable that outcome valence was equivalent for all participants, regardless of achievement motivation, expected coworker effort, or condition. A 2 × 2 × 2 (Work Condition: Coactive vs. Collective × Achievement Motivation: High vs. Low × Expected Coworker Effort: High vs. Low) between-subjects ANOVA of the rated task importance shows that none of the main effects or interactions were significant at the .05 level. Thus, participant ratings of task importance did not differ across conditions ($F$s < 1.0).

The coworker effort manipulation was assessed by asking participants to rate their coworkers’ effort on the task using a 7-point scale with higher values

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3Remember that all participants were given 50 blank slips of paper at the beginning of the experiment.
indicating greater effort on the part of the coworkers. A $2 \times 2 \times 2$ (Work Condition: Coactive vs. Collective $\times$ Achievement Motivation: High vs. Low $\times$ Expected Coworker Effort: High vs. Low) between-subjects ANOVA was conducted, using ratings of coworker effort as the dependent variable. A main effect for manipulated coworker effort was found, $F(1, 99) = 65.21, p < .01$, such that coworker effort was rated higher in the high effort condition ($M = 6.30$) than in the low-effort condition ($M = 4.20$). Additionally, participants were asked to rate their coworkers’ ability to do well on the idea-generation task. The results of this analysis mirror that of the coworker effort ratings, such that a significant main effect for coworker ability was found, $F(1, 99) = 22.44, p < .01$. Coworker ability to do well on the task was rated higher in the high-effort condition ($M = 6.32$) than in the low-effort condition ($M = 5.08$). No other effects for either coworker effort or coworker ability were significant ($Fs < 1$).

A logistic regression was performed on the question asking if the experimenter was interested in individual or collective performance. The predicted main effect for work condition was significant, $t(99) = 3.01, p < .01$. In the coactive condition, 70% of the participants felt that the experimenter was interested in their individual performance, as compared with 41% of individuals in the collective condition. No other effects were significant. A logistic regression on judgments of whether or not the experimenter could monitor individual performance shows a significant main effect for work condition, $t(99) = 2.64, p < .01$. In the coactive condition, 63% of the participants felt that the experimenter was able to monitor their individual performance, as compared with 37% of individuals in the collective condition. Again, no other results were significant ($ts < 1$).

**Performance data.** A $2 \times 2 \times 2$ (Work Condition: Coactive vs. Collective $\times$ Achievement Motivation: High vs. Low $\times$ Expected Coworker Effort: High vs. Low) between-subjects factorial ANOVA was conducted on the performance data. A priori orthogonal contrasts were also conducted for each coactive–collective comparison. A significant main effect for achievement motivation was found, $F(1, 99) = 23.65, p < .01$. Participants high in achievement motivation generated significantly more uses ($M = 32.53$) than did participants low in achievement motivation ($M = 23.59$).

There was a significant two-way interaction between work condition and coworker expected effort, $F(1, 99) = 9.12, p < .01$. Participants generated more uses for the object coactively ($M = 32.07$) than collectively ($M = 25.46$) when coworker’s effort was expected to be high (a social loafing effect). However, when the coworker’s effort was expected to be low, participants tended to generate more uses collectively ($M = 29.36$) than coactively ($M = 25.12$), though this latter difference was not statistically significant.

Most importantly, the predicted significant three-way interaction between work condition, expected coworker effort, and achievement motivation was significant, $F(1, 99) = 5.66, p < .05$. Table 1 shows the pattern of means that
produced the three-way interaction. Participants high in achievement motivation generated an equivalent number of uses, regardless of work condition or expected coworker effort ($F_s < 1$). In contrast, participants low in achievement motivation generated significantly more uses coactively than collectively when expected coworker effort was high (social loafing), $F(1, 99) = 14.83, p < .01$, but generated an equivalent number of uses coactively and collectively when expected coworker effort was low, $F(1, 99) = 2.54, p > .10$. Thus, as predicted, participants low in achievement motivation engaged in social loafing, but only when working with a high-effort coworker; whereas participants high in achievement motivation worked just as hard collectively as coactively, regardless of coworker effort. These results suggest that achievement motivation is an important factor in determining individual effort on collective tasks.

Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to examine achievement motivation and expected coworker effort on collective task performance. The results suggest that individuals high in achievement motivation appear to be resistant to the otherwise pervasive tendency to engage in social loafing. Instead, they appear to work very hard on an achievement-related task, regardless of whether they are working individually or collectively, and regardless of whether they expect their coworkers to work hard or to slack off on the task. In contrast, individuals low in achievement motivation appear to behave in a more strategic fashion: engaging in social loafing when the group is likely to perform well without their best efforts, and increasing their collective effort only when it is essential to avoiding a group outcome that has negative consequences for themselves individually. Taken as a whole, these results both provide further support for the CEM and suggest that achievement motivation is linked to higher effort, provided that the task is relevant to personal achievement in some way.

Consistent with the findings of Williams and Karau (1991), there was a significant two-way interaction between work condition and expected coworker effort. Participants worked less hard collectively than when working coactively, but only when coworker effort was thought to be high (a social loafing effect). According to Karau and Williams (1993), individuals should exert the most effort when the potential for positive evaluation is high and the group’s performance is contingent on their individual effort. Thus, the contingency between individual effort and group performance might be enhanced in individuals when coworkers are expected to perform poorly, especially when the group outcome is valued. As a result, the only means of receiving the valued individual outcome would be through a favorable group evaluation. Consistent with this logic, participants tended to work harder collectively than coactively when working with a coworker exerting a low level of effort.
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The pattern of means for the three-way interaction between achievement motivation, expected coworker effort, and work condition is intriguing. In the present study, participants high in achievement motivation did not engage in social loafing, regardless of work condition or expected coworker effort, whereas participants low in achievement motivation did engage in social loafing, but only when expected coworker effort was high. There are many possible explanations for this interesting effect, which we frame in terms of the CEM.

First, the CEM states that factors that enhance expectancy—without also undermining instrumentality and outcome valence—should increase one’s motivation on a task. It is plausible that participants high in achievement motivation set higher performance goals than did participants low in achievement motivation, especially when working collectively on the idea-generation task. Second, the CEM states that factors that enhance instrumentality—without also undermining expectancy and outcome valence—should increase one’s motivation on a task. In the present study, participants high in achievement motivation might have perceived a stronger link between their individual performance and obtaining a valued outcome than did participants low in achievement motivation. Participants high in achievement motivation might have believed that their own interest and concern for achievement would be important in ensuring the group’s performance and that the contribution of the coworker would not be enough for the group to perform well. Third, the CEM states that factors that enhance outcome valence—without also undermining expectancy and instrumentality—should increase one’s motivation on a task. The CEM suggests that individuals are unlikely to systematically process all available information about the task or situation and are instead likely to focus on salient features (Karau & Williams, 1993). Considerations of personal cost and benefit may be more salient to those low in achievement motivation, whereas the achievement implications of the task may be more salient to those high in achievement motivation. Therefore, while individuals who are less concerned with achievement-related outcomes may behave strategically and work only when it is absolutely necessary to avoid a group outcome that has negative implications for the individual, individuals high in achievement motivation may be relatively inattentive to these concerns and may simply work hard, regardless of the situational context, when the task has a strong achievement component.

There is one unusually low cell in the three-way interaction that warrants further attention. When working coactively with a low-effort coworker, effort levels were noticeably low, albeit not significantly lower than the corresponding collective cell. One explanation is that when individuals are low in achievement motivation, there is no intrinsic interest or motivation to work hard on an achievement-related task. Hence, low achievement motivation individuals do not
work hard collectively, regardless of coworker effort, because they can hide in the group and not be held accountable for their performance. Similarly, when working coactively, they will only work hard if their effort is noticeably poor. Hence, when working in the presence of a low-effort coworker, individuals low in achievement motivation can take it easy and not perform noticeably poorer than the coworker, but when working in the presence of a high-effort coworker, their effort is necessary to avoid an unfavorable comparison with their coworker’s performance.

The present study documents that achievement motivation can affect individual motivation within groups, and it highlights several promising areas of investigation for future research. First, although we have demonstrated that achievement motivation has the potential to eliminate social loafing, we have not isolated which specific goals or motivations drive individuals high in achievement motivation to work hard on collective tasks. Future research could include assessments of the degree to which participants identify with various external and internal standards of performance, including items to assess intrinsic meaningfulness of the task, competitiveness, and perceived control. Second, the manipulation of coworker effort also affected participants’ ratings of coworker ability, albeit to a lesser degree. On the one hand, this result is interesting because it may suggest that effort and ability attributions about coworkers are often intertwined; an idea supported by previous research (Baumgardner & Levy, 1988; Shepperd, Arkin, Strathman, & Baker, 1994). Indeed, Williams and Karau (1991) found a similar, marginally significant tendency within a smaller sample of participants. On the other hand, although we have demonstrated the impact of expectations regarding coworker performance on individuals’ collective motivation, we were not able to determine whether these expectations were a result of attributions regarding effort, ability, or both. Future research could examine whether different bases for coworker attributions have differential effects on performance.

In closing, the present study demonstrates that achievement motivation has important implications for reducing or eliminating social loafing. The results of the study suggest that individuals high in achievement motivation may be less likely to be influenced by external sources of motivation than are individuals who are low in achievement motivation. Thus, high levels of achievement motivation may foster resistance or possibly even immunity to the tendency to take advantage of others and engage in social loafing when working collectively. If these results are found to replicate across tasks and situations, it may be possible to devise achievement-based interventions to reduce or eliminate social loafing in organizational contexts. Such interventions could involve using achievement motivation as a selection factor, carefully selecting team members who are committed to personal achievement of the task at hand, or designing the task or work environment to make achievement concerns more salient. The present study also provides further support for the CEM and highlights its potential as a
tool for isolating individual differences and other factors conducive to enhancing individual motivation on collective tasks. In order to gain a complete understanding of the processes that underlie social loafing, future research must continue to address the role of individual differences in collective performance settings.

References


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