The effect was first demonstrated in the 1880s by Max Ringelmann, a French agriculturist (Kravitz & Martin, 1986). Ringelmann was studying the performance of workers as they either pulled or pushed a wooden cart. He had people try the task alone and then in groups of various sizes, much as a team of oxen might pull a load. Using a dynamometer, Ringelmann was able to calculate the amount of force being applied to the object. He found that individuals working in groups produced less force than individuals who worked alone. For example, a three-person group produced a combined force that was 15 percent less than three times the force an individual produced when working alone. Ringelmann attributed this outcome to a coordination loss, assuming that his participants were not working together efficiently. Social loafing may also have played a role (Ingham, Levinger, Graves, & Peckham, 1974). A variety of research has found that while working on physical tasks that do not require coordinated efforts, such as shouting, clapping, and pumping air, and on cognitive tasks, such as brainstorming or puzzle solving, people exert less effort in a group than when alone (for a review, see Karau & Williams, 1993). Individuals even remember less when working in a group setting than when working alone (Weldon & Bellinger, 1997).

1. What Causes Social Loafing?

Several factors produce social loafing. First, people don’t try hard when they doubt whether their efforts will improve the group’s performance or when they doubt whether a good performance on the part of the group will lead to a desired outcome (Shepperd & Taylor, 1999). For example, suppose you are part of a business team trying to land an important corporate account. You may withhold effort if you think no one listens to your ideas or if you think even good ideas are unlikely to win the account. In contrast, social loafing is reduced when people believe their contributions matter (Sanna, 1992; Shepperd, 1993).

The potential for self-evaluation also influences whether or not social loafing occurs. Two factors are involved here. First, your efforts need to be identifiable. If you can’t identify your contribution to a group project, you can’t evaluate your own performance. Second, some standard or basis for comparison must exist. Simply