"It's Not Fair!" Cultural Attitudes to Social Loafing in Ethnically Diverse Groups

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Abstract

This paper presents the findings of a five year in-depth research project conducted in two New Zealand tertiary institutions. The study used both quantitative and qualitative research methods, including a survey of 190 students, observations of students involved in diverse group work, focus groups and semi-structured interviews, in an analysis of cultural differences in student attitudes to accountability in cooperative learning (group work). One of the essential pre-conditions of successful cooperative learning is individual accountability but in practice students frequently report issues with inequitable participation in culturally diverse groups. This paper examined the attitudes of Chinese and Western students towards accountability in diverse groups and found that concerns about social loafing and inequality were consistent across the cultures. The study did not support the claim by some researchers that people from collectivist cultures are less likely to withdraw their efforts from a group; the findings suggest that, on the contrary, some Chinese students were not only fully aware that they were not contributing equally in their groups but that they were also aware that it was not in their interests to do so. The paper suggests that, while many of the antecedents for student social loafing are generic, some antecedents for Chinese international students might be based on different cultural values, different prior experiences and inadequate linguistic proficiency, and that tertiary lecturers in New Zealand should be using a range of strategies to modify social loafing in diverse groups. This paper proposes generic and culturally specific strategies that would help promote equitable contribution and participation in ethnically diverse tertiary classrooms.

Keywords: Cooperative learning, social loafing, collectivism, individualism, cultural diversity

Introduction

"Only when all contribute their firewood can they build up a strong fire."

The sentiment expressed in this Chinese proverb underlines the importance of all members of a group contributing to a task. Lecturers working with student cooperative learning groups, however, are aware that this does not always happen. "Social loafing", the tendency

for individuals to reduce their efforts when working in groups, has been recognised since the beginning of the twentieth century when Ringlemann (1913) carried out an experiment comparing individuals and groups on a rope pulling task. He found that, although the group effort might have been expected to be proportionately greater, the total group result was much less than the sum of individual efforts. The experiment also showed that the total force exerted by the group rose as more and more people were added to a group pulling on a rope, but the average force exerted by each group member declined (Ringlemann, 1913). In 1974 Ingham, Levinger, Graves and Peckham extended Ringlemann's experiment and established that poor communication and coordination were not the primary reasons for the decrease in effort; they concluded that the main cause must therefore be lack of motivation. Latane, Williams and Harkins published in 1979 a study in which they coined the word "social loafing"; their research project compared group and individual effort involved in cheering, shouting and clapping and came to the same conclusions as Ringlemann. Later research explored the relevance of these findings to the workplace and, later again, to education. A review of more than 80 studies by Karau and Williams (1997) concluded that: "social loafing is a robust phenomenon that generalizes across a wide variety of tasks as well as most populations," (p.50), and they warned that: "any job setting in which people's unidentifiable efforts are combined into a single output might be susceptible to social loafing." (p.58).

    Over the last thirty years research on social loafing has concentrated on establishing ways in which the social loafing effect can be modified, focusing initially on the workplace. A large body of research suggested that identifiability and individual accountability (task visibility) is a major factor in reducing social loafing (Williams, Harkins & Latane, 1981; Harkins & Szymanski, 1989; George, 1992), as is keeping the size of the group small (George, 1992; Liden, Wayne, Jaworski & Bennett, 2004) and providing reliable performance evaluation mechanisms and clear standards (Szymanski & Harkins, 1987; Harkins & Szymanski, 1989). It was concluded that if mechanisms masking social loafing were reduced, the behaviour would then be moderated. Researchers also identified positive steps that could be taken to encourage fuller participation; felt dispensability (the extent to which a participant feels that his or her work is dispensable or indispensable) was seen to be an important variable (Harkins & Petty, 1982; Kerr & Bruun, 1983), as was task interdependence (Liden, Wayne, Jaworski & Bennett, 2004), individual evaluation (not just individual accountability) and the opportunity for self evaluation by groups themselves (Harkins & Szymanski, 1989). George (1995) found that a supervisor's contingent reward behaviour was negatively associated with social loafing which, of course, implied reasonably close supervision of group members. Providing individuals with feedback about their own performance, or the performance of the group, was also reported as reducing social loafing in Karau & Williams' meta-analysis (Karau & Williams, 1993). Brickner, Harkins & Ostrom (1986) found that enhancing members' personal involvement with the task reduced the effect, and Karau and Hart (1998) found that it could be moderated by establishing cohesive groups in which individuals' efforts were seen as useful and important to a valued group performance especially where results were believed to have consequences for their own self-evaluation (Karau & Williams, 1997). Establishing inter group competition has also been found to reduce the effect in cohesive groups (Harkins & Szymanski, 1989; Karau & Williams, 1997), and several researchers concluded that people tend to exert more effort

on challenging, meaningful tasks (Harkins & Petty, 1982; George, 1992; Karau & Williams, 1993) and on tasks where there is some sort of reward (Earley, 1993). Researchers also looked at the effect of individual personal differences on the potential for social loafing; Charbonnier, Huguer, Brauer and Monteil (1998), for instance, found that individuals who believe that they are better than others are more likely to reduce their contribution to group tasks. Complicating factors are, of course, the "sucker effect" where group members are sometimes reluctant to work harder to make up for members who do not contribute what is seen as their fair share (Kerr, 1983; Schnake, 1991) and the associated social compensation effect where people will sometimes increase their own efforts for a valued outcome when the team's overall output appears inadequate (Karau & Williams, 1997). Interesting aspects of these experiments were the findings that sometimes social loafing is unconscious (Latane, Williams & Harkins, 1979) and the mixed findings for experiments examining the connection between the degree of social loafing and the threat of punishment (Schnake, 1991; Miles & Greenberg, 1993; George, 1995; Kunishima & Welte, 2004).

With the increased use of group assignments and tasks in education the workplace issue of social loafing became an educational issue. It is generally accepted that the modern workplace requires employees to have the ability to work together collaboratively (Drucker, 1994; Aggarwal & O'Brien, 2008) and that cooperative learning experiences at tertiary level should prepare students for the modern team based workplace (Feichtner & Davis, 1992; Chen, Donahue & Klimoski, 2004). Despite claims that group learning was an effective pedagogical method (Johnson, Johnson & Stanne, 2000) lecturers and students alike reported that a major disadvantage of cooperative learning was the propensity for unequal contribution of team members and the consequent unfair allocation of marks (Williams, Beard & Rymer, 1991; Strauss & U, 2007; Jassawalla, Sashittal & Malshe, 2009). As a number of the early social loafing laboratory experiments were carried out with students it is not surprising that some of the same principles for reducing this problem in the workplace were found to apply in the classroom. Similarities appeared to be that if students are identified by high individual accountability (Johnson & Johnson, 2009), if the groups are kept small (Kerr & Bruun, 1983; Aggarwal & O'Brien, 2008), if the process incorporates peer ratings (Kaufman, Felder & Fuller, 1999), particularly multiple peer evaluations (Aggarwal & O'Brien, 2008), and if tasks have reliable performance assessment mechanisms (Michaelsen, Fink & Knight, 1997), the likelihood of social loafing is reduced. Additionally, if an educational task is structured so that it cannot be completed easily by one person, the group will be motivated to complete it cooperatively and if the task requires a variety of skills and abilities more students are likely to be involved (Cohen, 1994). Regular feedback is as important a component in the process for student groups (Michaelson, Fink & Knight, 1997) as it is for workplace groups.

Although there are many similarities with social loafing in the workplace, research by Jassawalla, Sashittal & Malshe (2009) suggests that apathy and social disconnectedness are important additional antecedents in classroom social loafing behaviour and that these factors produce the disruptive behaviour and poor quality work that are problems in many classroom teams. They also concluded that classroom loafers often believe that they have contributed as much as any other members and that reasons for loafing are therefore not always the result of conscious choice making, a perspective that is consistent with a suggestion made by Latane,

Williams and Harkins (1979). Many educational researchers have concluded that training students in appropriate group behaviour is essential if teams are expected to be able to deal with social loafing themselves (Oakley, Felder, Brent & Elhajj, 2004; Jassawalla, Sashittal & Malshe, 2009) and Chen, Donahue and Klimoski (2004) argue, moreover, for the importance of changing attitudes to group work and warn that: "developing positive attitudes and self-efficacy beliefs about working in teams is more difficult than developing teamwork knowledge and skills" (p.37).

An interesting development in research on social loafing occurred when researchers examined the varying levels of social loafing among people from collectivist cultures and people from individualistic cultures; it seemed possible that Hofstede's research (1980) might lead to an identification of different cultural attitudes to social loafing but much of the subsequent research is contradictory. Gabrenya, Latane & Wang (1981; 1983) found a relationship between social loafing and cultural values when the experiment was carried out with students in the United States, but did not find the same relationship when the 1981 experiment was carried out with students in Taiwan in 1983. In the 1983 study they concluded that there were not cross cultural differences in attitudes to social loafing and that: "Our Chinese findings appear to fit a growing set of cross-cultural data that supports the cross-cultural generality of social loafing" (p.379). Earley (1989; 1993) concluded that social loafing was less prevalent among individuals from collectivist cultures who were working with an in-group (people of similar trait and background characteristics); he claimed that they are culturally more concerned with the achievement of the group rather than with individual achievement whereas workers from individualistic cultures accord more importance to personal achievement. He did add, however, that: "collectivists may exhibit 'social loafing' or reduced performance under conditions of low shared responsibility for performance" (p.578). Hong, Wyer Jr & Fong (2008) reported findings that agreed with the proposition that the collectivist Chinese are less likely to social loaf than the individualistic North Americans although they did suggest that the tendency might vary across situations. Other researchers question these conclusions; Karau and Williams (1993), for instance, found that although the effect of social loafing was reduced for subjects in Eastern cultures, it was still significant and their study found no difference in group members from individualistic and collectivist cultures. When the hypothesis was applied to contemporary multicultural educational groups it became very apparent that international students from collectivist cultures were not immune from social loafing (Wagner, 1995; Dalglish, 2002; Jassawalla, Sashittal & Malshe, 2009). Some researchers suggest that a relevant factor might be the higher modernization of Chinese students as more modernized individuals in a collectivist culture tend to be less social-oriented and more self-oriented (Yang, 1981; Parker, Haytko & Hermans, 2009). Wagner (1995), however, found that while social loafing was apparent across the individualistic/collectivist divide, the moderating influences of group size, identifiability and low shared responsibility, which were effective in reducing social loafing with students from individualistic cultures, were less effective with students from collectivist cultures, and he suggested that different controls and justifications might influence these participants.

While there is extensive literature identifying methods of controlling social loafing, there has been little research exploring the similarities and differences between Western (individualistic) and Eastern (collectivist) student attitudes to social loafing. Jassawalla, Sashittal and Malshe

(2009) comment that: "What is curiously missing in the rich body of research is the perspective of the student"; this is particularly so of students in diverse groups. This exploratory study examines the attitudes of New Zealand domestic and international students to social loafing and suggests strategies that tertiary lecturers of diverse classes might use to ensure that social loafing in multicultural groups is minimized.

Methodology

Primary data used in this paper has been drawn from an ongoing five year research project which used both quantitative and qualitative research methods to examine the perceptions of domestic and international students in New Zealand towards cooperative learning.

In 2005 the researchers held workshops with tertiary lecturers in three New Zealand cities to explore issues with cooperative learning in multi-cultural classrooms resulting from the influx of international, predominantly Chinese, students into New Zealand tertiary institutes.

In 2006, questionnaires consisting of 41 closed questions and five open questions on cooperative learning were distributed to a convenience sample of students from undergraduate courses in the business, Information Technology and hospitality faculties at two tertiary educational institutions; 190 student questionnaires were returned representing a response rate of 60%. The sample population reflected the student profile of the institutions at that time with 35% of the participants New Zealand European, 32% Chinese, 10% Maori, 10% Pacific Island, 5% Indian and 8% of other international origin. Responses were collated, analysed and compared with the issues identified in the workshops.

In 2007 qualitative data was collected from semi-structured focus groups facilitated in English and Mandarin with 16 Chinese international students and further focus groups and interviews were conducted with New Zealand domestic students in 2008 and 2009. Students who participated in the focus groups and interviews were drawn from the same courses at the same educational institutions as the questionnaire respondents. All focus groups and interviews were audio taped, transcribed verbatim and analysed for major themes and consistency with the quantitative data.

From 2008 to 2010 the research findings were complemented with observations of culturally diverse groups of students involved in cooperative learning in the classroom and in prolonged group work on capstone projects.

Results

Results drawn from this research project demonstrate clearly that social loafing and the associated issues of social compensation, expectations of underperformance, perceived dispensability, unfair assessment outcomes and ultimate dissatisfaction with the group work experience is a major cause of concern for both New Zealand and international students involved in this study. Seventy eight percent of the students who responded to the open questions in the questionnaire identified unequal participation and contribution by group members and unfair group assessment methods as reasons for dissatisfaction with group work, and these issues were further highlighted in the focus groups and interviews which followed the initial

survey. Eighty seven percent of New Zealand students and 63% of Chinese students held the expectation that participation in group work and contribution to the outcomes of the group would be shared equitably among the group members but it was evident from responses to the open questions, from the focus groups and from the interviews that this was generally not the case. The following statements from New Zealand students demonstrate the frustration felt when social loafing affects a group: "(I do not like) having to carry those that do not contribute equally. If they do not do their agreed/assigned tasks it can impact on the rest of the group;" "(I do not like it) when people in the group do not input or pull their weight and just let one or two people do the work," and "Some students are just there for the ride and are not as committed as you are." Chinese students offered similar views: "Some of the group members don't do much work; they rely on someone to do the jobs for them;" "To be honest, in doing group assignments, many Chinese students get a free ride, especially for those who do not have high expectations, who just need a pass, who want learning to be a leisure time. The number is not small." Students also spoke of the additional pressures imposed on the group when members did not contribute fully or effectively. "If you have a team member who is not committed, it can cause the group to get behind schedule and put pressure on other members," wrote a New Zealand student, and another stated: "The stress at the end was phenomenal pulling the whole thing together and picking up what had not been done by one member."

Another major area of concern for both New Zealand and Chinese students was the perception that methods of assessing group work were unfair particularly where a common group mark was awarded to all members of the group. Group members who had contributed least to the group outputs received the same mark as those who had contributed most and, in fact, benefitted from 'free riding' in the group. Seventy-five percent of New Zealand students and 63% of Chinese students surveyed considered it unfair when students received a high group mark even though they had contributed little to the group processes and outputs. A Chinese student in the focus groups commented: "I think group assignments and group marks should consider each individual's levels of participation and contribution. It is unfair to have the same marks for all the group members. People who participate and contribute more should be awarded more marks."

Students were also concerned about the quality of work produced by group members and the impact of low quality work on marks. In the questionnaires the achievement of high marks was rated by both New Zealand and Chinese students as the most important outcome of assessed group work, and this view was reinforced in the focus groups and interviews. A New Zealand student stated: "Our marks are affected by the work (or lack of work) of others," and another disliked "having to depend on others' work when the quality and standard are lower than my own." A Chinese student stated: "Kiwi (New Zealand) students... do not have pressure if their marks are low. For us Chinese students, marks are very important. Our parents have set a high standard for us" and another stated: "Some people may get lower marks because other members do not contribute or the contribution is of low quality." Chinese students in New Zealand are often studying at a tertiary technical institute as a pathway to higher level study at a University and need high marks to be accepted: "If you want to study a higher degree, you need good grades for cross-crediting. Good grades can help you shorten your time of study and save money for you. If you cannot get a B, it is the same as a fail." For these students a group

assessment presented difficulties when all members of the group did not share the same attitude toward the tasks and the same work ethic. One Chinese student in the focus groups stated: "On many occasions, students have different objectives. Some just want a pass. For me, I tell them, I want the best grade. I will do my best. I also want everyone else to do their best." Another Chinese student expressed a similar view: "The group's objective is important: to pass or to get good grades? How do you balance? It is the members' decision. If the majority of students want a pass, the one who wants a good grade can be isolated."

For some New Zealand and Chinese students the desire for high marks and the need to successfully complete the assessment led to the social compensation effect where some group members did more work in order to reach a valued outcome. A New Zealand student stated that it was: "easier to do the work myself because having to rely on others who didn't want to pass with high marks disadvantages my mark." A Chinese student explained: "My friend this semester felt pain in doing her group assignment because none of the members would like to do the assignment. She ended up doing the assignment all by herself. What could she do? She is an international student. She has to pay high fees. She has to pass." Another New Zealand student attributed this issue directly to culturally diverse groups: "In a multi-cultural group I was left to do 80% of the work. In a non mixed race group this problem did not exist."

Group members who did not contribute equally to the group processes and outputs did so either consciously or unconsciously. Eighty-five percent of New Zealand students and 70% of Chinese students surveyed were confident that they could work well in groups with 76% of New Zealand students and 49% of Chinese students stating that they had been considered a valuable member of the groups in which they had participated. The majority of these students, however, expressed dissatisfaction with other group members who did not make an equal contribution to group outputs. There was an acceptance, however, on the part of some Chinese students, that contributions would be determined by the skills and strengths that each member brought to the group: "Indeed, because of friendship, some people are willing to do more for those who are happy to do less of nothing. It is natural for those strong ones to do more. I want to do more but I do not have such skills."

Chinese students in the focus groups expressed the view that their contribution to group work was limited by their language skills, their cultural background and their lack of prior experience with group work as an assessment method. There was general dissatisfaction with a teaching and learning technique that was unfamiliar to them: "An individual contribution rather than teamwork is stressed in China" and "We learn slowly. It is time wasting." They described their difficulty in expressing sophisticated concepts in English and their concerns about the possibility of losing face if they had difficulty in communicating. "I have tried very hard to contribute as much as I can. However, at meetings, it is difficult to use my poor English to express complex ideas. Kiwi students, because of their English skills, often have good ideas that can be expressed in their own language. But I cannot do so. Sometimes they have heated debate; it is very difficult for me to jump in." Others raised issues of cultural conditioning which prevented them from disrupting the group harmony or asserting themselves in the group. "Most of the time Kiwi students do the talking. We just listen. Chinese students do not speak until they are certain." "I think cultural upbringing is also an issue. In our group discussion Chinese students do not want to disagree with others even though we think they are wrong….

They are not brave enough to disagree with others and then voice their views. Our educational system has cultivated our personalities." As a result their participation in group discussion was limited, often leading to disengagement from the group and the reinforcement of stereotypical views held by domestic students that international students will underperform in groups.

There was an expectation by some Chinese students that New Zealand students, with their superior English skills and better understanding of the requirements of the assessment, would do the majority of the work in multicultural groups and that Chinese students would either contribute to the best of their ability or receive a "free ride". Where it was perceived that successful group outcomes could be achieved with limited input from Chinese group members they reduced or withdrew their contribution. These Chinese students expressed a pragmatic attitude towards group work with the expectation that New Zealand students would not only do the work, but would achieve good grades for all the group members. One student in the Chinese focus groups expressed the view that: "Non-native English speakers passively depend on Kiwi students whose mother tongue is English. We trust them and believe they can get good marks for us. We do not have to worry about the assignments," and another stated: "They (New Zealand students) often do the assignments by themselves. I do not have to do anything. It is fantastic." Some of the students acknowledged a sense of guilt over their lack of contribution: "I tell myself that getting good grades for not doing anything is unfair," but others believed that the New Zealand students preferred to do the work themselves: "Sometimes, we do not have to do anything. We just tell them (New Zealand students) our ideas. They use our ideas and write up a report."

Some comments from New Zealand students in both the questionnaires and the interviews expressed cultural stereotypes and expectations of underperformance by international students in multicultural groups that may help to explain why Chinese students felt their contributions were not essential to achieving group outcomes. One New Zealand student stated: "It would be extremely hard for me to work in a group if it was dominated by Chinese international students. The language barrier would be too difficult to overcome." New Zealand students reported that they expected some group members' contributions to be either minimal or non-existent and others to be of substandard quality.

Discussion

The results of this project show conclusively that the majority of students surveyed and interviewed in this study were aware of the problem of social loafing and believed that it was unfair. This belief was common to New Zealand domestic students who were from an individualistic culture and the Chinese international students who were from a collectivist culture. In most cases the dissatisfaction originated from assessment systems in which students in a group were all given the same mark regardless of individual input.

This study did not support the claim of some researchers that individuals from collectivist cultures are less likely to socially loaf; comments from Chinese students in focus groups made it very clear that not only were they fully aware that they were not contributing equally in their groups but that some were also aware that it was not in their interests to do so.

The findings from this study therefore support the proposition that social loafing occurs

across a multicultural student population. This paper suggests that, while some of the antecedents are generic, some might depend on varying cultural values, prior experiences, and linguistic levels, and that, therefore, tertiary lecturers need to use a range of strategies to modify the effect in diverse groups.

One of the reasons why the social loafing effect is a problem in diverse student groups may well be the pragmatism that is often demonstrated by both collectivist and individualistic students. Tweed and Lehman (2002) report that several researchers (Salali, 1996; Winter, 1996) have suggested that for cultural reasons Chinese students are more likely than Western students to view education as a means to an end. This practical orientation towards education may intensify when ethnic Chinese study in Western countries because education can provide a path to higher status jobs when discrimination and other barriers block certain routes (Sue & Okazaki, 1990) (p. 94). This, they argue: "contrasts with the Western philosophical orientation derived from Dewey (1916) that learning should be its own end and that education loses meaning if focused on an extrinsic goal" (p.95). This study suggests that, as they frequently cannot see the pedagogical value of group work ("I cannot see its real benefit.... It is time wasting"), some Chinese students may concentrate on its practical value — the better grades it can deliver — and conclude that if they can get better grades by allowing the domestic students to do most of the work, why not do so? A sense of guilt was not enough to stop this Chinese student social loafing: "Chinese students rely almost entirely on Kiwi [New Zealand] students... In this way we can get high marks.....Sometimes I have a sense of guilt. I shift too much work to others. I know it is not good to get high marks this way."

This, of course, begs the question of why the domestic students allow the inequality to happen. One reason may be that classroom groups in New Zealand tertiary institutions are not usually trained adequately in group management techniques (Baker & Clark, 2010) but research findings from Williams and Karau (1991) and Plaks and Higgins (2000) lend weight to the additional suggestion that social loafing and social compensation may be two sides of the same coin: a pragmatic approach to education. Karau and Williams (1995) suggest that some members of groups will increase their efforts when they feel that their coworkers might perform poorly on a task that is valued, and Plaks and Higgins (2000) examine the role of gender and occupational stereotyping in making any decision to compensate. The findings of this study suggest that cultural stereotyping could well explain the willingness of domestic students to accept social loafing from international students and to expend more of their own effort in compensation. In a diverse classroom where Chinese international students (for whom English is a second language) are typically expected to underperform in groups and English native speaking students are typically expected to overperform, social compensation might be seen as the price that must be paid for a valued output. Social loafing and social compensation can therefore be seen as fundamentally pragmatic phenomena, a means to the mutually desired outcome of the high grades that are perceived by both international and domestic students as the most sought-after outcome of working in groups. This educationally undesirable behaviour, of course, is reinforced by its positive consequences: a better product and a higher grade.

Level of language may, therefore, be an antecedent for the social loafing effect demonstrated by some Chinese students studying abroad. One Chinese student explained: "Because of our language skills we do not speak very much. For example, in one of our papers a girl never

spoke a word in the group work because of her poor English spoken skills. She agreed with everything other group members had come up with. This means that she got a free ride." An associated factor may be the pressure of time not only for international students who may be struggling to keep up with studying in a second language, but also for many part time New Zealand students. Lack of previous experience in group work for students from China may also contribute to the general perception that it would be much more time-effective for the Western educated students to shoulder most of the responsibility. Some students came a long way to attend meetings, argued one Chinese student, and if they could not then express their ideas clearly "that would be disastrous...they should not waste their time."

Other factors may help explain why the findings from this study suggest that students from collectivist cultures are as prone to social loafing as students from individualistic cultures. The stereotypical view that collectivist workers will contribute fully in groups because of their cultural values is applicable only if the groups are what Earley calls "in-groups", that is, groups that, "share similar trait and background characteristics" (p. 321) and which become cohesive because of the common culture. Earley suggests that if members do not regard the group as an in-group, they will not feel compelled to contribute to group goals (Earley, 1993). He argues that if collectivists are compelled to work in an out-group, they will then feel free to allow others to do the work; this may help explain social loafing in diverse student groups and the attitudes of the Chinese international students in this study.

When students from different cultures are put randomly in groups, it is too simplistic to expect that Chinese students will immediately feel comfortable working collaboratively because of their collectivist cultural background. It can be argued that in this context of working with unfamiliar group members the collectivist student is likely to become as individualistic as the Western student. One Chinese student compared group work with employment and argued: "If other people work two days a week, yet you work five days a week you earn money for yourself, not the group;" this is hardly a traditionally collectivist sentiment. The inconsistent conclusions in Gabrenya, Latane and Wang's experiments (1981; 1983) may well be explained by the context of their studies; in the Taiwan experiment the individual's outputs were not easily distinguishable, the group members were not well known to each other, very little interpersonal interaction took place and social loafing was evident. This, of course, is very often the context that the international student from a collectivist culture experiences in a Western classroom; in such a context the collectivist international student is unlikely to feel any urge to adhere to the traditional cultural value of cooperation. Many researchers have suggested that team cohesiveness and positive personal relationships have a direct effect on the extent of social loafing in work teams (Karau & Hart, 1998; Karau & Williams, 1993; Liden, Wayne, Jaworski & Bennett, 2004); it seems logical that the same applies to classroom teams for all students but particularly for the relationship oriented collectivist student. The comment: "In many (but not all) work contexts, individuals do not necessarily know their coworkers or do not interact with them frequently enough to develop high levels of cohesiveness" (Liden, Wayne, Jaworski & Bennett, 2004, p. 700) is equally applicable to many diverse student groups; it is unfortunate that in most tertiary classrooms, lecturers who want to use cooperative learning techniques can find little time in a content driven syllabus for building team relationships or developing group well being. The apathy and social disconnectedness identified by Jassawalla, Sashittal & Malshe

(2009) may be for some students the inevitable consequences of lack of group cohesiveness; while the behaviour is certainly not restricted to students from collectivist cultures, lack of cohesiveness may well be more demotivating for these students.

An additional perspective on the assumption that Chinese students will participate fully in groups because of their collectivist cultural background is presented by some studies that suggest that there is lower social orientation among Chinese identified as modernized than among Chinese who are considered traditional, and that collectivist values are therefore weaker in this section of the population (Yang, 1981; Wong, 2002). This may well help explain the results of this project as students who study abroad are probably in this "modernized" category. It may, however, be a characteristic of young urban Chinese students in general; the authors personally spoke to students in Beijing who were adamant that their attitudes and behaviours were more individualistic than their elders. If young Chinese students are no longer as collectivist as their elders, using Hofstede's cultural dimension theory has limited value in predicting their behaviour in groups and the findings of this study are not so surprising.

One further reason for social loafing problems emerging across cultures in diverse groups may be provided by the social approval hypothesis. Self esteem and "saving face" are still very important to international students from collectivist cultures (Holmes, 2002) and they may feel justified in believing that it is much better to let someone else do the work well than do it badly themselves. Earley, writing about work groups, states that: "collectivists view their individual actions as an important contribution to the group's well being" (1993, p. 341), and this analysis may well be applied to student groups. If Chinese international students' efforts are not valued by themselves or by others in the group, it is inevitable that they will not consider the group an "in-group', will become demotivated and will reduce their efforts accordingly.

This hypothesis is consistent also with the theory of perceived dispensability in groups (Kerr & Bruun, 1983); research suggests that if people believe that the group task can be accomplished without much effort on their part, they are inclined to withhold their contribution. Harkins & Petty (1982, p. 1228) comment that: "only when the subjects feel that their efforts would add something that is unlikely to be duplicated by another group member would we expect social loafing to be reduced." Student comments about the difficulties of contributing to group discussions in English in the results of this study support this hypothesis. Interestingly, a 1988 experiment by Weldon & Mustari suggested that identifiability and individual accountability are not as important as indispensability in reducing social loafing; certainly perceived dispensability and low self-efficacy seemed to be an important antecedent to Chinese students' behaviour and attitudes in this study. The assumption of dispensability then becomes self fulfilling as both Chinese and domestic students assume that most of the work will be done by the English speaking students; the assumption could even lead to a situation of learned dispensability or helplessness which would then automatically surface in all diverse cooperative groups. Status characteristics theory, therefore, might be relevant to explanations of Chinese students' social loafing behaviour in diverse groups and moderating status expectations based on ethnicity might be a useful approach to reducing the problem.

The literature is clear from both workplace and classroom research that clear measurement and standards are essential in reducing social loafing (Harkins & Szymanski, 1989); this is important for students from both collectivist and individualistic cultures. The findings from

this research project indicate, however, that Chinese students were often bewildered by an unfamiliar measurement system which did not seem to have any relevance to the pedagogical outcomes with which they were familiar. "Group work has always been a headache," declared one Chinese student. "It is a waste of time." Chinese students are used to standards being set by the teacher and the textbook and being tested in an examination. If they are not clear what they are being judged on in group work, and if there are no marks for individual work, a natural reaction is for them to reduce their individual effort and leave the work to students who are clear about what is required.

 Although most of the students in this study were critical of those who did not pull their weight in groups, it was interesting that many believed that they themselves were valued members of their groups; they therefore tended to blame others for the inequity problems in groups. This supports research that suggests that sometimes social loafing can be unconscious (Latane, Williams & Harkins, 1979; Wagner, 1995; Jassawalla, Sashittal & Malshe, 2009) and suggests that cognitive discussion of social loafing in the classroom may be limited in value and that structuring the task and the context so that social loafing is difficult may be more useful.

The literature is very clear on the importance of incorporating individual accountability when structuring student group tasks (Johnson & Johnson, 1998); a common assessment mark can mask social loafing in the classroom as effectively as lack of accountability in the workplace. Peer assessment is one method of assessing individual performance of team members that allows lecturers to adjust their marks accordingly (Kaufman, Felder & Fuller, 1999). The literature is also clear that assessment criteria must be valid and reliable if social loafing is to be minimised, standards must be clear and assignments should be structured so that a range of skills is assessed (Michaelson, Fink & Knight, 1997). The context should be one in which students have received training in group management skills (de Vita, 2001), one in which they are given, and give themselves, on-going feedback on their performance (Aggarwal & O'Brien, 2008), and one where the group is not so big that lack of individual effort can easily be hidden (North, Linley & Hargreaves, 2000) and cohesiveness difficult to establish. Felder & Brent (2001) suggest numerous practical strategies to minimise social loafing: establishing and signing a group contract in each group, for example, and holding regular in-class troubleshooting exercises. Oakley (2003) advocates that student groups discuss scenarios about social loafing to prepare them for potential problems.

When implemented, these strategies can moderate the social loafing effect for students from both individualistic and collectivist cultures. This study, however, supports Wagner's proposition that: "Varieties of surveillance, control and sense making influence collectivist cooperation in much the same way that factors such as group size, identifiability and shared responsibility shape individualist behaviours" (1995, p.168) and suggests that time should be taken to help Chinese international students make sense of an unfamiliar teaching method.

Although the literature supports the importance of cohesive, relationship based groups for all members, it is crucial that Chinese international students feel that they are part of an in-group. This means that time must be found in a programme using cooperative learning to allow students from different cultures to get to know each other, to enable them to break down stereotypes, to build cohesive relationships, and to develop their own group culture. Likewise, it

is particularly important to Chinese students that they feel that they are not dispensable and that they can contribute something valuable and unique to the group. A lecturer must take the time to construct a task so that it requires a range of skills, not primarily fluent English, and to ensure that the whole class is aware of the range of skills required. Tasks which allow international students to use their own cultural perspectives and identities lead to an understanding that differences are complementary rather than mutually exclusive. Standards and measurement need to be clear for all students, of course, but Chinese students will almost certainly need the extra detailed explanation and clear written instructions that may not be necessary for students who have been used to working in groups throughout their prior education. Chinese students who are accustomed to close supervision may need to feel that the lecturer is aware of what is happening in the groups and is in control of the process even while students are carrying it out. Although there is extensive research examining the influence of the individualistic/ collectivist dimension on group behaviour, there is not a great deal on the significance of the power distance dimension and the difficulty Chinese students sometimes have with the perceived lack of control by Western lecturers, and in particular with the concept of peer assessment. Chinese students who are used to the fiercely competitive post-Mao Chinese education system (Agelasto, 1998) may feel more comfortable if there is an element of intergroup competition in the group work and even, Hong, Wyer and Fong (2008) argue, when performance is made public. They may also feel more positive if steps are taken to explain the pedagogical reason for group work and the importance of the cooperative skills it develops; research has established that a meaningful, motivating task which is personally involving is one of the most important factors in reducing social loafing (Brickner, Harkins, Ostrom, 1986; George, 1992) so it is not surprising that students who cannot see the point of the collaborative tasks they are given in New Zealand classrooms take the opportunity to reduce their input. Many Chinese students straight from school are not aware that tertiary institutions in China have been incorporating group work into their programmes for the same reasons as those in the West and may feel more comfortable with an unfamiliar pedagogical technique if this is explained to them. It might also be advisable to encourage Chinese students to enroll in extra English lessons as very often the colloquial language used by students in groups, as well as the speed of the delivery, means that second language students are inevitably left behind. This all takes time, but to ignore its importance is counterproductive in the long run. Interestingly, research shows international students' learning goals and perceptions becoming similar to those of local students over time (Volet & Renshaw, 1995); one might speculate that inadequate preparation for Western approaches and standards might be a significant antecedent to social loafing by international students and that New Zealand lecturers should be able to shorten the period of adjustment for them.

Conclusion

Social loafing is a major issue in student groups affecting students from both individualistic and collectivist societies. Students from both cultures are guilty of it, dislike it, and usually do not know how to manage it. There are numerous reasons for social loafing, but there is no single answer that will eliminate the effect; the literature, however, indicates a number of practical strategies that lecturers might use to minimise the effect.

Many of these strategies are generic and are applicable to students from both individualistic and collectivist societies, but this paper argues that the antecedents of social loafing in students from collectivist societies may be different from those in students from individualistic societies and that, therefore, there may be a need for additional strategies for these students. Lecturers should not expect that students from collectivist societies will function effectively in groups simply as a result of their cultural heritage.

Latane, Williams and Harkins (1979) predicted that the cure for social loafing "will come from channeling social forces, so that the group can serve as a means of intensifying individual responsibility rather than diffusing it." (p. 832). This paper has proposed methods of channeling these social forces in the 21st century tertiary classroom.

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