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What is Social Facilitation?

- In the early 20th century, some social psychologists became interested in understanding the impact of the presence of others, who are not competing with him/her, on the individual's performance. They tried to study this effect when the present others were working on the same or a different task. Many of such social psychologists founded out through their studies that there is significant increase in the performance of the individual in the presence of others. This phenomenon was given the name of social facilitation.
- One of the earliest attempts was made Triplett (1898) who tried to study the performance (speed) of a cyclist cycling alone and in the presence of others. His study revealed that there was an increase in the performance when done in the presence of others. Let us now look at some more systematic attempts made by social psychologists to explore this phenomenon.



Series of experiments conducted by Floyd Allport (1920)

- Floyd Allport (1920) conducted a series of experiments to establish social facilitation as a human behaviour when performing a simple task like word association or a more complex task of writing against a given line of thought.
- *Experiment One* : In the first experiment, Allport studied the impact of the presence of others on word-association task where the participants had to write as many words that they could think of related to a word given at the top of a sheet of paper ('stimulus word' such as 'country' or 'mother') within a time period of a minute. The procedure was carried out with the participants working alone and then in the presence of two other persons. A total of 93% of participants performed better (wrote more words as a response to the stimulus word) when doing the task in the presence of others.
- *Experiment Two* : In the second experiment, Allport having noticed that there could be more number of thoughts coming to a person's mind than what one could write within a time period of one minute, repeated his previous experiment with one change. The change was that he instructed the participants to write every third or fourth words that came to their mind just after being given the stimulus word. In this experiment too, the participants performed better when doing the task in the presence of others. Allport was still curious to know whether the results would hold true for more complex tasks. Therefore, he went on to conduct a third experiment.

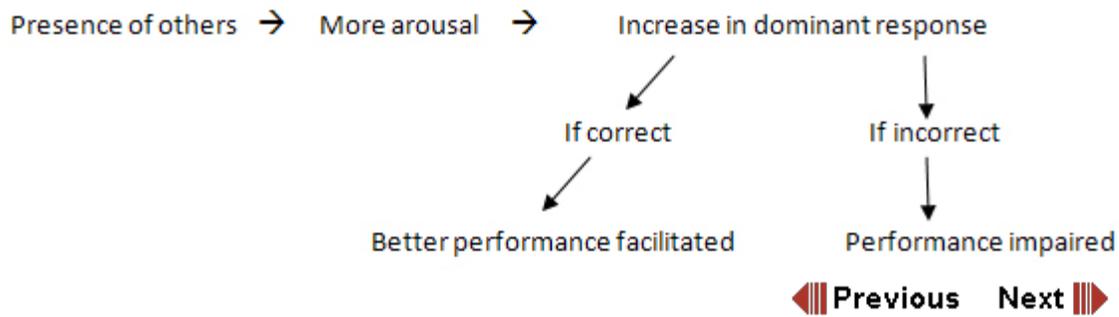
Floyd Allport's experiment on social facilitation involving complex tasks

- In order to understand the impact of the presence of others on a complex task, Allport repeated his previous experiments with one change that instead of a simple task of word association, he asked the participants to write as many arguments they as possible that could disprove the line of thought given a passage from the Roman text. Once the responses were collected, he examined the quantity and quality of arguments written by the participants. Here also, he found that the quantity and quality of responses produced in the presence of others were better than those produced when writing alone. Thus, Allport could illustrate the phenomenon of social facilitation as a social behaviour of humans while doing a simple or a complex task.



Explanations for social facilitation

- We will now consider some theories that explain social facilitation. These are drive theory and distraction conflict theory.
- Drive theory of social facilitation: Zajonc (1965) elaborated on the drive theory of social facilitation through a proposal that may be diagrammatically presented as follows :



Evaluating the drive theory of social facilitation

- Zajonc also proposed that social facilitation will be more if people are skilled rather than unskilled. The reason for this was that, according to this theory, the performance is enhanced if the dominant responses are correct. In case of skilled people, it is more likely that the dominant responses are correct.
- Social psychologists tested this theory and found significant evidence supporting its tenets. However, one question made some social psychologists intrigued: “Does facilitation occur due to mere physical presence of others or the concern over others’ evaluation also matters?”
- Eventually, social psychologists also noted the role of concerns for ‘evaluation apprehension’ and ‘self-presentation’ in the presence of others to be important in social facilitation.

Some debates on explaining social facilitation

- Research and theorization in the domain of social facilitation raised debates as although social psychologists saw merit in the logic that concerns for 'evaluation apprehension' and 'self-presentation' in the presence of others may be important for social facilitation to occur, instances were noted when mere presence of others rather than evaluation apprehension or self-presentation could lead to social facilitation. For example, Zajonc, Heingartner, & Herman (1969) noted that among animals, including insects, social facilitation could be observed. Since it may be difficult to assume that animals care for evaluation apprehension or self-presentation, these factor may not necessarily be taken as the factors leading to social facilitation.

A study by Schmitt et. al. (1986) added some more insights into the explanations for social facilitation. In their study, the performance on a simple task of typing out one's own name were compared in three conditions: (a) alone, (b) in the presence of people who wore blindfolds and earphone, and (c) in the presence of people without any blindfolds and earphones. In the second condition, when the audience could not hear or listen to the participants, their performance on the task got enhanced. However, interestingly, in the third condition, where the audience could see and listen to the participants, their performances increased even further. Clearly, the mere presence of others may lead to social facilitation but the impact of performance evaluation and self-presentation may further increase the social facilitation.

Distraction-conflict theory of social facilitation

- In another theory to explain social facilitation, Robert S. Baron (1986) and Sanders (1983) proposed that it occurs due to the arousal created by a conflict between people's tendencies to (a) pay attention to the task, and (b) pay attention to the others as co-performers or audience.
- Not only that this theory was upheld in many empirical studies conducted by social psychologists but it also explained the phenomenon of social facilitation among human beings as well as animals.

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