

Describe and evaluate psychological explanations of social facilitation

Social facilitation can be defined as 'an improvement in performance produced by the mere presence of others'. There are two types of social facilitation: co-action effects refer to the fact that people perform better when they see others working compared to when they are alone. Another type called the audience effect occurs when someone performs a task in front of an audience. For sportspeople, the fact that the mere presence of others can affect performance is of considerable interest.

There are a number of explanations of social facilitation. Perhaps the best known is Zajonc's drive theory (1965). According to this, social facilitation depends on the nature of the task, namely, how simple or well-learned the task is. Put simply, 'an audience impairs the acquisition of new responses and facilitates the emission of well-learned responses'. It's suggested that this occurs because there is an evolutionary advantage to a species for mere presence of others to induce a ready state of alertness. An instinctive response to the presence of others is to increase the drive level (or level of arousal). This increase causes us to produce our dominant or 'best learned' or habitual responses in that situation. With simple tasks, those dominant responses are likely to be correct and the presence of others will facilitate (or improve) performance (task enhancement). However, with difficult tasks the reverse is likely to be true and results in task impairment. The arousal produced by a combination of task difficulty and presence of others results in a level beyond the optimum for ideal performance.

Critics have argued that even on well-learned tasks, a skilled athlete can perform badly in front of others. Think of all the favourites that have failed to win gold medals at the Olympics. This is explained by the inverted U theory. Oxedine (1970) found that the amount of arousal necessary for optimal performance depended on the nature of the skill involved. Complex skills such as golf need a lower level of arousal because arousal interferes with fine muscle movement and co-ordination. However, in less-skilled sports that require strength, endurance and speed, arousal is extremely useful. So, the applicability of the drive theory depends on the nature of the sport involved. There are other factors where arousal can be detrimental to performance. For example, open skills which take place in a constantly changing environment (such as a basketball match) make more cognitive demands than closed skills where the performer knows exactly what is required and under what conditions (such as gymnastics or diving). The level of expertise is another important factor. The more experienced performer needs much higher levels of arousal in order to achieve optimum performance. An inexperienced performer will need to use cognitive abilities to control their movements and additional arousal may interfere with the concentration levels required to perform the skill successfully.

According to Cottrell (1968), it's not the presence of other people that is important for social facilitation to occur but the apprehension about being evaluated by them. We know that approval and disapproval are often dependent on others' evaluations and so the presence of others triggers an acquired arousal drive based on evaluation anxiety. In support of this, Cottrell *et al.* (1968) found no social facilitation effect when a person performed a skill in the presence of a two-person audience who were either blindfolded or showing no great interest in the study. In contrast, a non-blindfolded audience that fully attended to the task did produce a social facilitation effect. Cottrell also showed that the more expert the audience, the more performance was impaired due to the greater evaluation apprehension. Markus (1979) found support for Cottrell on an easy task (undressing and dressing in one's own clothes) but support for drive theory on a more difficult task (dressing in a lab coat and special shoes).

Zajonc added to his model by proposing that socially generated drive may be the product of uncertainty. The presence of others means that they might take some action and this leads to greater uncertainty and thus a decline in performance.

Other theories have been proposed to explain social facilitation. These include Baron's distraction-conflict theory. This suggests that we have a limited attention capacity and, whilst little attention is needed for simple tasks, far more is needed for complex ones. According to Baron (1986), whilst distraction alone can impair task performance, attentional conflict can also induce a drive that facilitates dominant responses. The presence of others makes competing demands on our attention and this can impair or enhance performance depending on the nature of the task in hand.

There are a number of non-drive explanations for social facilitation. One of these involves self-awareness theory (Carver & Scheier, 1981), where we compare our actual task performance (actual selves) to how we'd like to perform (ideal selves). Any discrepancy between them motivates us to close the gap. This means that on easy tasks there's improved performance, but on difficult tasks the discrepancy is so large that people give up trying, resulting in poor performance.

Despite the fact that there is no one explanation to explain social facilitation, it remains an important topic in social psychology. It is particularly studied in the field of sport, despite that fact that in a meta-analysis of social facilitation experiments involving over 24,000 participants, Bond & Titus (1983) found that the mere presence of people accounted for no more than 0.3–3.0 per cent of the variation in performance.