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Source: *Education and Training in Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities*, Vol. 31, No. 2 (June 1996), pp. 142-150

Published by: Division on Autism and Developmental Disabilities

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23879130>

Accessed: 27-06-2016 18:08 UTC

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# A Comparison of Self-Esteem and Job Satisfaction of Adults with Mild Mental Retardation in Sheltered Workshops and Supported Employment

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*Abstract: A sample of 200 adults with mild mental retardation was assessed on overall job satisfaction and self-esteem using the Vocational Program Evaluation Profile and the Coopersmith Self-esteem Inventory. The subjects worked either in a sheltered workshop or in a supported employment setting. Results indicated that there was a significant relationship between self-esteem and job satisfaction for both groups of subjects. In addition, subjects who worked in supported employment reported significantly higher levels of job satisfaction. There was also an interaction between place of residence and place of employment when looking at self-esteem; those who lived in a semi-independent home and worked in supported employment reported the highest levels of self-esteem. These results were discussed in terms of the social validity of supported-employment for persons with mild mental retardation.*

Self-esteem is a construct which has received considerable attention in the literature. Coopersmith (1967) indicated:

By self-esteem we refer to the evaluation which the individual makes and customarily maintains with regard to himself: it expresses an attitude of approval or disapproval, and indicates the extent to which the individual believes himself to be capable, significant, successful, and worthy. In short, self-esteem is a personal judgment of worthiness that is expressed in the attitudes the individual holds toward himself (pp. 4-5).

As Coopersmith (1967) pointed out, high self-esteem implies feelings of control, self-determination, and of autonomy. The individual with high self-esteem feels important to and valued by the other significant people in his or her life. Those with low self-esteem often lack self-respect and feel they are unworthy, insignificant, and inadequate.

Many theories which pair self-esteem with performance have been proposed in an at-

tempt to explain and predict behavior in various settings, including the workplace (Korman, 1976). This is especially important since work occupies a central position in people's lives. Neff (1968) reported over 25 years ago that the average individual spends two-thirds of his/her life engaged in work.

One important work related area which has been investigated is whether various work environments and job tasks affect workers' self-esteem. Research has shown that there is a positive relationship between self-esteem and job satisfaction (Synder & Ferguson, 1976).

The area of job satisfaction has been investigated extensively over the past 50 years. Purohit and Lambert (1983) report that since 1935, more than 2000 studies on job satisfaction have been conducted. Carroll (1969) feels that because researchers work on different aspects of job satisfaction, as well as use diverse approaches, it is difficult to compare the various results. She feels that one solution to this would be to come up with a definition of job satisfaction which would be commonly accepted. This is a difficult task, however, partially due to the many definitions already in use. One definition which has influenced significant research on job satisfaction was proposed by Scott, Dawis, England, and Lofquist (1960, p. 1):

Satisfaction includes overall job satisfaction

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and satisfaction with various aspects of the individual's work environment (his supervisor, his co-workers, the company or institution for which he works, his hours of work, and the type of work in which he is engaged). It includes the satisfaction of his needs and the fulfillment of his aspirations. It includes the realization of his vocational interests and the interests of most successful people working in his occupation.

There have been many theories developed which attempt to explain why people differ in respect to satisfaction with their jobs. Early theories looked at the nature of the job itself, and defined the satisfying work role as good pay, opportunities for advancement, allowing peer interactions, and control over one's work.

Herzberg (1968) proposed a two-factor theory of job satisfaction. Here, the primary determinants of satisfaction of a job are the intrinsic aspects of the job motivator; e.g. recognition, promotions, etc.), and the primary determinants of job dissatisfaction are the extrinsic factors (hygienes; e.g. salary, working conditions, etc.). Herzberg (1968, p. 56) presented his motivator-hygiene theory as follows:

The factors involved in producing job satisfaction are separate and distinct from the factors that lead to job dissatisfaction. Since separate factors need to be considered, depending on whether job satisfaction or job dissatisfaction is being examined, it follows that these two feelings are not opposites of each other. The opposite of job satisfaction is not job dissatisfaction, rather no job satisfaction; and similarly, the opposite of job dissatisfaction is not job satisfaction, but no job dissatisfaction.

The discrepancy theory (Lawler, 1973) suggested that job satisfaction is determined by the difference between the work outcome the employee receives and the outcome level the employee perceives is due him/her. Thus, the discrepancy between received and expected levels of outcome can be used as measures of satisfaction.

Even though there are several theories proposed to explain job satisfaction, most researchers agree that it is a result of the in-

teractions of many variables; some combinations can result in job satisfaction, while others can lead to dissatisfaction.

The study of job satisfaction is important in that how satisfied a person is with his or her job can have dramatic effects on their life. Job satisfaction has been found to be correlated with attitudes toward one's life (Rice, Near, & Hunt, 1980), and with general happiness (Benin & Nienstedt, 1985). Winefield, Tigge-man, and Goldney (1988) reported unsatisfying work was psychologically equivalent to unemployment. The same authors report that the unemployed have lower self-esteem than those who are employed.

It is crucial to determine the degree to which the individual is satisfied or dissatisfied with his or her job, since his or her feelings of personal worth and life satisfaction can be influenced by his or her overall level of job satisfaction or dissatisfaction. As Kahn (1981) indicates, it is important to note that working in satisfying and fulfilling jobs influences not only productivity and performance, but also the non work aspects of life as well. Therefore, an individual's satisfaction with work can influence his or her satisfaction with life in general.

#### *Relationship Between Job Satisfaction and Self-Esteem*

An individual's self-esteem is not only shaped during early development and various life experiences, but also by a collection of variables in the work setting. Super (1957, p. 292) summarizes the relationship between work and self-concept nicely by stating:

Since work has a central role in human life, it is not surprising that vocational development is easily viewed as the implementation of a self-concept. If a person cannot "be himself" in such a major segment of his life, if the role in which he is cast while on the stage on which he spends so much of his time is not congenial, it seems unlikely that his life satisfactions can be significant or that his general adjustment can be good.

Lopez and Greenhaus (1978), found that there is a positive relationship between self-esteem and job satisfaction, but were not able

to determine if high self-esteem causes job satisfaction, or if job satisfaction causes high self-esteem.

Despite the focus on self-esteem in general personality theories, little research has been conducted on self-esteem in those who are mentally handicapped. The same holds true regarding limited research on job satisfaction of persons with mental retardation. Understanding the correlates of self-esteem in individuals with a mental disability is important since it has been demonstrated that self-esteem is related to employment.

#### *Self-Esteem and Job Satisfaction in Persons with Developmental Disabilities: The Sheltered Workshop*

Just as a job is an important variable related to self-esteem for the non handicapped individual, work has an increased meaning for people with disabilities and also carries a measure of esteem for these individuals (Vash, 1981).

Since the 1960's there has been an increasing recognition of the potential for individuals with disabilities, especially mental retardation, to lead productive lives. Wolfensberger (1980) emphasized the concept of normalization for those with disabilities, and felt that every individual should be given the opportunity to hold a meaningful job regardless of their disability. Research has shown that many individuals with disabilities can work competitively with performance levels similar to their non-handicapped peers (Cuvo, Leaf, & Borakov, 1978).

In the past, employment for the individual with mental retardation was primarily limited to a sheltered workshop setting. Whitehead (1979), reports that between the late 1960's and 1970's there was a 300% increase in the growth of sheltered programs. A major part of this growth was in programs for those with developmental disabilities. The job in the sheltered workshop usually consists of piece work or assembly line work with few variations. This setting invariably limits the occupational alternatives open to those with a mental disability.

If the work a person performs is an important factor in his or her identity, then people in lower status occupations would be sub-

jected to reduced feelings of personal worth. Kornhauser (1965) found this to be the case; that workers in low-level occupations have more negative feelings about themselves than those in higher-level occupations. Rosenberg (1979) concluded that persons with mild mental retardation have job needs which are the same as non-handicapped workers in the general population. Such matters as adequate wages, vacations and feelings of self-esteem are important to persons with mild mental retardation as they are to anyone else.

#### *Advocacy for Supported Work Settings*

The advocacy for supported/integrated work settings for persons with developmental disabilities has escalated in recent years (Brown, et al., 1984). Supported employment provides an alternative to the traditional sheltered workshop services for individuals with developmental disabilities (Moseley, 1988).

Supported employment is considered to be competitive work in integrated settings for persons with developmental disabilities. (Traditionally, competitive employment was not considered for individuals with a developmental disability.) Supported employment is more than mere physical presence in an integrated setting; the focus is on employment to afford workers true integration. This means not only sharing the same physical work space, but social integration as well.

A primary focus of the research on supported employment during the latter part of the 1980's was on the effectiveness of this approach, or on the transition of the workers from a sheltered employment setting to community work settings. Few studies have actually looked at the various aspects of a job which relate to the employee's satisfaction with the job and self-esteem. McAfee (1986) reported that workers with disabilities and non disabled workers appear to express job satisfaction/dissatisfaction for similar reasons. Mosely (1988) interviewed individuals in supported employment, asking them to compare their current job with prior experiences in sheltered workshop settings. The individuals interviewed reported greater satisfaction with the supported employment job, specifically with the increase in pay and ability to do a job without being distracted by others.

Seltzer (1984) evaluated job satisfaction of individuals in a workshop setting who once held competitive employment. He found that these workers were extremely dissatisfied with their workshop job in comparison to their competitive employment. The highest rate of dissatisfaction was reported due to low pay and the type of repetitive tasks performed. Jiranek and Kirby (1990) looked at job satisfaction and feelings of psychological well being for individuals in a workshop setting, competitive employment, or unemployment. Their subjects included persons with mild mental retardation as well non disabled individuals. They concluded that for both groups: competitive employment was a more positive alternative than unemployment in terms of psychological well being; persons with mental retardation had lower psychological well being than the non disabled group; for persons with mental retardation, competitive employment was a more positive alternative to sheltered workshop employment in terms of job satisfaction but not psychological well being; and for those persons with mental retardation self-esteem in competitive and sheltered employment were higher than in unemployment.

Warth (1990) evaluated the effects of supported employment on individuals with developmental disabilities. Among her findings were the following: all workers integrated well with others, made new friends, and showed increases in independence. Of special significance were improvements in self-esteem and self-confidence.

#### *Purpose*

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between self-esteem and job satisfaction of individuals with mild mental retardation in two different employment settings. In addition, this study attempted to determine the sources of self-esteem and job satisfaction within these two employment settings. It was hypothesized that:

1. There is a positive relationship between self-esteem and job satisfaction for both groups of subjects. If, for example, the sheltered workshop subjects report high self-esteem, they will, in turn, report

overall job satisfaction. If, on the other hand, they report low feelings of self-esteem, then they will also report job dissatisfaction. The same should hold true for the subjects in supported employment. This relationship between self-esteem and job satisfaction has been demonstrated in persons without disabilities. Furthermore, Jackson (1984) indicated that there is a need to obtain from those persons in supported programs an evaluation of their own status, since, rehabilitation agency personnel views do not necessarily concur with the views of those placed in competitive employment.

- 2a. The level of job satisfaction of those individuals in the supported employment setting will be significantly higher than individuals in the sheltered workshop setting.
- 2b. In turn, the self-esteem of those individuals in the supported employment program will be significantly higher than those individuals in the sheltered workshop setting. Quinn and Shepard (1974) had found that low pay and piece-rate payments were negatively correlated with sense of competence and work role self-esteem. Mortimer and Finch (1986) added to this finding by indicating that encountering the same job conditions over a long period of time would have an increasing and cumulative psychological effect. Generally, those in the sheltered workshop setting perform repetitive type tasks, are paid piece-rate, and receive low wages. Those in supported employment usually do not do piecework and receive at least minimum wages. Thus, when these factors are considered, those in supported employment programs should demonstrate higher job satisfaction and self-esteem.
3. There will be an interaction between place of residence, place of work, and self-esteem. It was felt that those in semi-independent living settings and supported employment will report higher levels of self-esteem than the other groups (for example those who live in group homes and work in a sheltered workshop). Those who live in semi-independent settings have more indepen-

dence than those who live in a group home. If these semi-independent individuals hold a supported employment type job, their independence is fostered to an even greater degree. Thus, they should report higher levels of self-esteem.

## Method

### Subjects

Two groups of 100 subjects each consisted of individuals with mild mental retardation who attended sheltered workshop settings and supported employment programs. The subjects were randomly selected from a pool of available subjects that met the following requirements:

1. Have a primary diagnosis of Mild Mental Retardation, with an IQ between 50–69.
2. Have been at the same program or work setting for a minimum of three months.
3. Be between the ages of 21–40.

### Data Collection

*Demographic Information.* All subjects completed (or were assisted with completion) a demographic page which included: name or I.D. number, gender, date of birth, type of program setting currently in (sheltered workshop or supported employment), length of time in current setting, place of residence (e.g. home, group home, etc.), length of time in current living environment, and ethnicity.

*Self-Esteem Assessment Tool.* To measure self-esteem, the Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory, Adult Form (Coopersmith, 1981) was employed. This tool was selected due to its widespread use and overall research acceptability in assessing self-esteem. If any of the subjects were unable to read the items on the checklist, a proctor read the items to the subject, and recorded the subject's response. The responses allowed for each item were changed from "like me" and "unlike me" to "yes" and "no" to enhance comprehension of the items for the subjects.

Since validity for the Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory (SEI) had not been established for adults with mental retardation, a pi-

lot study was conducted with 20 mildly mentally handicapped adults (10 in a workshop setting and 10 in a supported employment setting) for this purpose. Two staff members who knew the subjects well ranked ordered the subjects according to the level of self-esteem they attributed to them. Each of these subjects then completed the SEI, with help from a different staff member. A Spearman  $r$  (rho) rank order correlation coefficient was computed for both groups of subjects. For those in the sheltered workshop setting, Spearman  $r$  was .957, while for those in supported employment, the coefficient was .924. Therefore, it was determined that this self-esteem assessment tool (SEI) was valid for this population, and was used in this study.

*Job Satisfaction Assessment Tool.* To measure job satisfaction, a modification of the Vocational Program Evaluation Profile (VPEP), (Rosenberg, Cheyney, & Greenberg, 1990) was employed. This tool was selected due to its prior successful use with persons with mental retardation as well as the inclusion of individuals with mental retardation in the standardization sample.

The modifications of VPEP centered around changing the words related to school to those relating to sheltered workshops or supported employment programs. It should be pointed out that validity and reliability data for the modified VPEP was gathered by the authors. Thus, it was not necessary to conduct a pilot study using this modified version to determine these statistical measures.

If any of the subjects were unable to read the questions independently, a proctor read the questions to the subject, and assisted in the recording of the responses.

## Results

### Demographic Information

Table 1 displays the demographic information.

### Self-Esteem

The overall group mean score for the SEI was 69.56 ( $SD$  17.68). When looking at the self-esteem scores broken down by work setting, those in the sheltered workshop scored a

**TABLE 1**

**Demographic Information**

	Ethnicity		
	White	African-American	Hispanic
Male (n = 132)	68.9%	24.2%	6.8%
Female (n = 68)	55.9%	38.2%	5.9%
Total Group (n = 200)	64.5%	29.0%	6.5%

  

	Place of Residence			
	Family	Group Home	Semi-Independent	ICF/DD
Male (n = 132)	6.1%	35.6%	34.8%	23.5%
Female (n = 68)	7.4%	29.4%	41.2%	37.8%
Total Group (n = 200)	6.5%	33.5%	37.0%	23.0%

  

	Place of Work	
	Workshop	Supported Employment
Male (n = 132)	43.2%	56.8%
Female (n = 68)	63.2%	36.8%
Total Group (n = 200)	50.0%	50.0%

mean SEI of 61.84 (*SD* 15.39) while those in supported employment scored a mean SEI of 77.28 (*SD* 16.48). This difference was statistically significant ( $p < .01$ ). For those who live with their family, the mean SEI score was 47.69 (*SD* 19.28). For the subjects who live in a group home, the mean SEI score was 62.57 (*SD* 13.42). For those in a semi-independent living environment, the mean SEI score was 83.73 (*SD* 12.69). Finally, for the subjects who live in a ICF/DD, the mean SEI score was 63.13 (*SD* 13.22). When looking at the independent variables place of work and place of residence in reference to self-esteem, there was a significant interaction ( $p < .01$ ) effect. The highest mean self-esteem score was obtained from those in semi-independent homes and at a supported employment job. Refer to Table 2 for information on self-esteem means.

*Job Satisfaction*

The mean score for the 200 subjects was 79.42 (*SD* 21.53). When looking at place of employment and job satisfaction, the mean

job satisfaction score for those in workshop settings was 63.69, while for those in supported employment programs it was 95.16. This difference was statistically significant ( $p < .001$ ). For the subjects who live with their family, the mean job satisfaction score was 61.48 (*SD* 15.52). For those who live in a group home, the mean score was 74.01 (*SD* 23.16). For those in semi-independent living

**TABLE 2**

**Self-Esteem Scores (Means)**

Overall Mean Score (n = 200)	69.56
By Place of Work	
Workshop (n = 100)	61.84
Supported Employment (n = 100)	77.28
By Residence	
Family (n = 13)	47.69
Group Home (n = 67)	62.57
Semi-Independent (n = 74)	83.73
ICF/DD (n = 46)	63.13

**TABLE 3**

**Job Satisfaction Scores (Means)**

Overall Mean Score (n = 200)	79.42
By Place of Work	
Workshop (n = 100)	63.69
Supported Employment (n = 100)	95.16
By Residence	
Family (n = 13)	61.48
Group Home (n = 67)	74.01
Semi-Independent (n = 74)	88.71
ICF/DD (n = 46)	77.44

situations, the mean score was 88.71 (*SD* 13.74). Finally, for those in ICF/DD settings, the mean job satisfaction score was 77.44 (*SD* 24.68). Thus, those who live in semi-independent environments reported the highest level of overall job satisfaction. Refer to Table 3 for information regarding overall job satisfaction means.

**Conclusions**

When looking at self-esteem scores in relation to place of residence, those who live in semi-independent settings scored the highest. Those who scored the lowest live with their families. Subjects who live in semi-independent settings are basically responsible for their own activities of daily living, maintaining their apartment, as well as choosing how to spend their leisure time. Those who live with their families often have to engage in the activities their family chooses. Those in apartment settings live independently with minimal supervision, as compared to those who live with their family, with almost constant supervision.

In looking at self-esteem in relation to place of employment, those in supported employment programs scored higher than those in workshops. These findings support research discussed earlier; those in supported employment programs tend to have a more normalized job with options to engage in a greater variety of activities. This is quite different from the sheltered workshop programs in

which the workers often sit side by side and are required to do the same routine activity on a daily basis. Those in supported employment also have more contact with non-handicapped individuals as compared to those in the sheltered workshops who work by the same peers and interact with the same staff members on a daily basis.

In looking at the overall job satisfaction scores in relation to place of residence, those who live in semi-independent settings reported the highest levels of job satisfaction. The subjects in the semi-independent setting are responsible for transportation to and from work, and for arranging all other activities around their work schedule. This gives them a feeling of control over their life as compared to those who live with their family who are often taken to work by parents, and rely on their parents to make decisions relating to work. This can foster dependence which can contribute to low self-esteem, and in turn, low levels of job satisfaction.

In looking at overall job satisfaction in relation to place of employment, those in supported employment settings scored significantly higher than those in workshop settings. As discussed previously, the supported employment setting is a more normalized job with greater variety of activities.

Another interesting finding was the interaction between place of work and place of residence on self-esteem. Those who live in semi-independent settings and work in supported employment programs reported the highest levels of self-esteem. Again, those in supported employment programs always scored higher than those in workshops on self-esteem and job satisfaction, no matter where they lived (group home, semi-independent homes, or intermediate care facilities).

Finally, there were no significant main effects for gender on any of the dependent measures (self-esteem or job satisfaction).

The results of this study support the findings of Test, Hinson, Solow, and Keul (1993) who looked at the social validity of supported employment. Three areas of social validity were examined:

1. outcomes (job satisfaction, wages)
2. procedures (workers' perception of their job)



- goals (community integration, friendships, and empowerment).

These authors concluded that in order for supported employment to be a successful alternative, independent variables which result in quality supported employment outcomes need to be identified. These independent variables can include things such as amount of pay, hours of work, location of work, relationship with supervisor/peers, vacation time, the work task itself, etc. Using the assessment tool VPEP helped identify such variables that lead to job satisfaction/dissatisfaction.

The supported employment subjects who participated in this study did indicate that they were satisfied with their jobs, while those in workshops indicated a lesser degree of overall job satisfaction. This study suggested that the type of employment we find for the person with mild mental retardation does make a difference in their overall self-esteem and job satisfaction.

It would seem that the workshop setting can serve a very positive function for individuals with mild mental retardation. It can be used effectively in preparing the individual for competitive employment. Specific skills can be taught, including appropriate social skills which are geared toward the type of job the worker wants to secure. The workshop should serve as a transitional placement for persons with mild mental retardation.

Finally, since these findings clearly demonstrate that adults with mild mental retardation are more satisfied when they live in a less restricted environment (semi-independent living), and work in integrated settings, special education programs at the secondary level should set goals for the students to be as independent as possible. Such secondary programs need to gear the special education student towards living in a normalized setting and working in an integrated competitive job. Sheltered workshops need to be a temporary placement, whereby the worker is trained for the specific job he or she wants, while advocates should actively seek job placement for the individual in the community.

### Limitations

The fact that the subjects were not randomly assigned to the two work conditions (shel-

tered workshop or supported employment) is one limitation of this study. Since job placement is based on several factors including abilities, subject preferences, parent preferences, etc., it is not possible to randomly assign an individual with a disability to a work setting. It might be possible in future studies to randomly assign workers to different types of supported employment (e.g. a grocery store vs. a cleaning job) or workshop settings (e.g. a large industrial setting vs. a small community setting), and different types of group homes (e.g. a large 15 bed home vs. a small 4 bed home) or semi-independent living environments (e.g. a condominium vs. a single family home). Such random assignment is, however, difficult, if not impossible to carry out due to the various rules and regulations developed for programming and training those with a developmental disability. Simple random assignments might be possible (e.g. randomly assigning workers to one of two work locations) which might provide further insight to self-esteem and job satisfaction among those with mental retardation.

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Received: 10 November 1994  
Revision Received: 27 July 1995  
Initial Acceptance: 18 September 1995  
Final Acceptance: 10 October 1995