ASSESSING THE LONELINESS OF WORKERS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES

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Introduction

Professionals generally agree that young adults with learning disabilities (LD), especially those who are below average in their intellectual and educational abilities, may face severe problems in developing and maintaining employment, independence and interpersonal relationships (Byran, 1994). However, in spite of these difficulties, it is also generally accepted that integrated employment is the most suitable for most persons with LD (Wehman et al., 1988). A possible reservation of this policy of total integration is that perhaps for some people with LD, this may not be the most appropriate path to take because of its possible negative social ramifications. One such social ramification is that of loneliness at work, an issue that has been raised when discussing integration of people with LD (Bender and Wall, 1994; Margalit and Efrati, 1996).

Studies on children with LD have indicated that these children often report feeling lonely and rejected by peers in school (Bender and Wall, 1994; Margalit, 1994). The question is whether these children continue to experience loneliness when they graduate from school and enter the workforce in the community. Although opportunities for social interaction exist, it is not always clear whether this interaction occurs and people with LD are accepted and socially integrated in their place of work. If workers with LD or any disability may experience fewer interactions at work, it would seem important to know what they experience and how they perceive the situation (Chadsey-Rusch et al., 1992). As there is a dearth of research on loneliness of persons with LD working in the open market, the purpose of the present study was to investigate this issue.

Another important issue when studying loneliness is the question of the measuring instrument to be used with persons with LD. Self-report instruments are generally used to assess loneliness in the general population (Weiss, 1982). However, there is a question whether existing self-report questionnaires are suitable for persons with LD given the...
nature of their handicap. The problem is further compounded by the fact that there are no questionnaires available to measure loneliness among persons with LD. In an attempt to solve this problem, possible questionnaires used with other populations were sought. One questionnaire that measured loneliness at work of persons with mental retardation (Chadsey-Rusch et al., 1992) was uncovered.

Chadsey-Rusch et al. (1992) carried out a study to determine whether a reliable instrument could be developed to measure the loneliness experienced by workers with mental retardation. Although the investigators of the above study considered their study exploratory in nature, they felt that the questionnaire that had been developed was a reliable instrument that could be used to assess loneliness with adults who have mild and moderate mental retardation. It was decided to use the questionnaire for two reasons: firstly, as this appears to be the only questionnaire available to measure loneliness at work for people with disabilities, and secondly, although the population of the study was classified as persons with LD, they were persons who were generally functioning cognitively below the mean IQ score for the general population. It has also been suggested (Heber, 1958) that persons whose intellectual level is more than one standard deviation below the mean may have similar difficulties in employment as persons with mild mental retardation. Therefore, a second purpose of the study was to evaluate whether Chadsey-Rusch et al.’s (1992) questionnaire was suitable and appropriate for our population of persons with LD.

Method

Participants

The study included 82 participants (43 males and 38 females) with LD (mean age = 26.6, SD = 5.85) and an age range of 21 to 38. All participants were diagnosed in the past as having a learning disability with limitations in their functioning and adjustment and were graduates of special schools or special classrooms. They were all either living at home or in apartments set up by NITZAN, a voluntary organisation that takes care of persons with LD. All the participants were employed in the community or undergoing vocational training.

Instruments

The Worker Loneliness Questionnaire (Chadsey-Rusch et al., 1992) was used to measure loneliness of the participants. This instrument was developed to measure the loneliness experienced by workers with mental retardation. The questionnaire includes 21 items divided into three factors: loneliness ($\alpha = .65$); social dissatisfaction ($\alpha = .80$); and interests and leisure pursuits ($\alpha = .69$).

Procedure

Permission was sought and obtained from the parent organisation to interview the participants in their social club or apartments. The participants were approached by the staff in the clubs and apartments and their permission was obtained to participate in the study. Only after the participants expressed their willingness to be interviewed were they approached by the investigator and
interviewed individually, either at the social club or in their apartments. The time required to fill out the questionnaire ranged from a quarter to half-an-hour.

**Results and Discussion**

The alpha reliability coefficient for the total scale in the study was .68, and the alpha scores for the three subscales were loneliness .62, social dissatisfaction .65 and interests and leisure pursuits .30. Only the score for the subscale loneliness obtained in the present study ($\alpha = .62$) was similar to the alpha score presented in Chadsey-Rusch et al.'s (1992) study ($\alpha = .65$). The other two subscales obtained in the present study were lower as compared with Chadsey-Rusch et al.'s, but they are sufficiently high enough to conclude that the scale was a reliable instrument for measuring loneliness among persons with LD.

The results of the study indicate that out of the 82 participants, only 11 reported feelings of loneliness and social dissatisfaction. Although there were more females than males in the group that reported feelings of loneliness, there was no significant difference between the mean score for males ($M = 30.27$, $SD = 5.18$) and the mean score for females ($M = 32.28$, $SD = 4.2$), on a t-test, $t(80) = 1.89$, $p > .05$.

A review of the work placements did not reveal a pattern or plausible explanation for these feelings of loneliness. The lonely group were working in similar kinds of occupations as those who did not express feeling lonely. In some cases, those who felt lonely were employed in a similar job and place of work as those who reported not feeling lonely. There was also no evidence to conclude that the persons who reported feeling lonely were more handicapped than those who did not report feeling lonely. While problems and issues at the work site cannot be ruled out as causing feelings of loneliness, there are other possibilities to explain these feelings. One could be related to the personal ability of these persons to relate to others, initiate, and nurture social relationships on the job. Perhaps their social skills were not yet sufficient for integration in a work place. The great majority of participants (71) did not report feelings of loneliness and social dissatisfaction, and loneliness was not a pervasive general feeling for these persons. The results of the study indicated that, on the whole, vocational integration in the community for persons with LD does not necessarily lead to loneliness and vocational integration is a viable and desirable outcome for them.

Although the results of this study indicated that the persons with LD responded reliably to the questionnaire and generally expressed feelings of not being lonely at work, these results must be interpreted with some reservation. An important issue that may have had an impact on the results was the validity of self-reports. Although self-reports of psychological measures are regarded as the optimum measures of feelings of loneliness, as they provide direct evidence for personal perception and feelings, there is a possible problem of validity related to the issue of social desirability (Zautra and Goodhart, 1979). Another limitation of the study was the small sample of participants that limits the external validity of the study.

The fact that some participants indicated that they were lonely at work necessitates the initiation of appropriate intervention techniques to deal with this issue. One possible direction, as suggested by a number of researchers (Chadsey-Rusch et al., 1992; Luftig, 1988; Williams and Asher, 1990), is training in social skills
and learning of appropriate social behaviours. If the principle of integration in the community is to succeed, rehabilitation agencies will have to invest more time in research and intervention on how to provide persons with LD with the skills that will ensure optimal social as well as vocational integration.

Summary

This study investigated the issue of loneliness at work of persons with learning disabilities and whether a questionnaire developed for persons with mental retardation was reliable for this population. Eighty-two participants responded to a questionnaire on loneliness at work. The scale was found to be reliable and the participants in the study did not report pervasive feelings of loneliness and social dissatisfaction. There was, however, some variability in the responses with some persons expressing loneliness and others not reporting it at all.

References


