

ATTITUDES TO WORK AND THEIR RELATIONSHIP TO SELF ESTEEM AND ASPIRATIONS AMONG YOUNG ADULTS WITH A MILD MENTAL HANDICAP

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INTRODUCTION

Paid work is an area of life offering great potential for the individual's sense of self worth, participation in society, the establishment of social networks, and most obviously, spending power. For people with a mental handicap, it may additionally offer proof of "normal" status (Edgerton, 1967) despite low pay and marginal positions (Edgerton 1967, Dijkstra, 1982). So great are these potential benefits that some authors have recommended a voluntary work model (e.g. Andriano, 1971) despite this being contrary to established social norms (Wolfensberger, 1972).

Yet while the benefits of work are taken for granted by authors, and professionals, few studies document the reactions of the handicapped people themselves, Flynn (1987) being an exception.

In particular, the conceptual area of the supposed benefits of work requires clarification. For example, many of the subjective benefits of work appear to accrue through the mechanism of reflected appraisals (see Burns, 1979) whereby fulfilling valued roles is incorporated into the individuals' self-concept via positive interaction with others.

However, social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) suggests that an important source of identity is also the propensity of the individual to compare him or herself with others. In a mainstreamed work environment an individual with disabilities may be forced into a situation in which the bulk of the comparisons he or she makes with others is negative, with adverse effects on his or her self esteem.

Further, the aspirations an individual makes and his or her perceived ability to fulfil them are an important source of self esteem (James, 1890). While aspirations to work are culturally normative, fulfilling those aspirations may be a source of anxiety for people with a mental handicap.

This paper describes two studies which investigate the experience of work among young adults with a mental handicap; their attitudes towards it, and its relationship to self-esteem, their aspirations and their expectations of fulfilling those aspirations.

Study 1

Method

Subjects were 50 young men and women attending four further education (FE) and three work placement (WP) courses in Devon. 26 were in FE classes; 24 on WP courses; 20 were female; 30 were male. This gender imbalance is due to the number of males on WP courses; of the 24 only 6 were female.

Placements were also categorised concerning the degree of integration/segregation which they provided. One FE placement, geographically isolated from the main college and not sharing any mainstream facilities with non-handicapped students was categorised as segregated. Another FE placement which was located outside the main college but shared canteen facilities with non-handicapped students was categorised as informally integrated. The remaining placements were located on the main college campus with students timetabled to take part in mainstream activities such as sports and crafts; these were categorised as formally integrated.

In practice however, this classification scheme broke down somewhat, as teachers made considerable efforts to achieve integration by means of trial work placements, even in the segregated setting. 10 of the 26 FE students and 22 of the 24 WP students had had work experience.

The students were aged 16 - 20 years (mean age 18 years, 3 months) with the WP students being slightly, but not significantly, older.

The I.Q. of the students as assessed for the study using the British Picture Vocabulary Test, represents a considerable range of 19 - 92 (mean I.Q. 50.96).

Following a pilot study which identified items in traditional self esteem questionnaires which people with mild-moderate mental handicaps find difficult, a self esteem questionnaire was constructed balancing positive and negative items and representing the dimensions identified by Coopersmith (1967) as being important for self esteem; namely Power over and Significance to others, Adherence to social values and virtues and Competence. A further 10 items representing feelings of stigmatisation were also included since the experience of stigma is likely to be relevant to the self-concepts of people with mental handicaps. The correlation of the self esteem items with the stigma items was 0.538 ($p < 0.001$); the scale alpha for this questionnaire was 0.8975, indicating acceptable scale homogeneity.

The students were guided through the questionnaire items by an interviewer who asked them to place a counter representing themselves on a picture of a ladder such that the top was positive and the bottom negative. The ladder had 5 rungs which were then translated into a Likert scale of 1 - 5, with 5 being positive and 1 negative.

Aspirations have been identified as important to the self concept (James, 1890). Therefore, the students also answered a series of questions about their aspirations in life and their expectations of being able to fulfil them. These are shown in Table 1. These were scored 3 (would like to), 2 (don't know/don't mind), and 1 (would not like to) to give an Aspiration score. They were then rescored 3 (will be able to), 2 (don't know), and 1 (will not be able to) to give an Expecta-

tion score, i.e., indicating whether the student thought him/herself able to fulfil the aspiration. An Aspiration - Expectation score was calculated for each student by subtracting the total expectation score from the total aspiration score.

TABLE I
Aspirations Expectations Items with mean scores

Item	mean score
1. Get a job	2.82
2. Earn a lot of money	2.62
3. Drive a car or motorbike	2.40
4. Have a girl/boyfriend	2.36
5. Live somewhere different	2.22
6. Get married	2.18
7. Have children	2.16
8. Have a girl/boyfriend 'outside' (i.e. not on their course)	1.96

Results

The W.P. students had a significantly higher mean IQ score (61.58) than the FE students (41.15), $F = 26.9$, $P < 0.01$. Setting placement aside, students who had had work experience also tended to have higher IQ scores (mean work IQ = 55.52; mean no-work IQ = 43.53, $F = 6.35$; $P < 0.01$). These findings reflect the course tutors' implicit policy of trying to arrange work experience for the more able students. The age of the students was not relevant as to whether they had had work experience.

The aspiration scores ranged from 8 - 24 (mean = 17.10); the Aspiration-Expectation scores ranged from 0 - 12 (mean = 5.04).

All the aspiration items were positively valued by the students with mean item responses ranging from 2.82 to 1.96 (See Table I). The item receiving the highest score was Get a job, closely followed by Earn a lot of money (2.62) and Drive a car/motorbike (2.40). This demonstrates the value of work and its material benefits to these students. Interestingly, in contrast to Edgerton's (1967) cohort members, these young people did not desire a non-handicapped girl or boyfriend. Indeed, many of the students already had a girl or boyfriend and did not desire to change them. This suggests that there is now less stigma associated with receiving special provision than Edgerton's ex-hospital patients experienced, since the students did not have to be seen to disaffiliate from their group in their choice of a friend. Unlike Edgerton's cohort members, these young people also did not desire marriage and children. The reason for this is presumably their youth.

The Self-Esteem scores ranged from 67-173 (mean 132.3). There was a non-significant tendency for individuals with high self esteem to also have high aspirations in life ($r = 0.203$, $p < 0.1$). The Self Esteem, Aspiration and Aspiration - Expectation scores were not related to the IQ, age, sex or type of placement of the students.

The Self Esteem scores were factor analysed using SPSSx. A principle components analysis confirmed the existence of one major factor with an Eigenvalue of 8.18445, accounting for 23.4% of the variance. Under varimax rotation, five main factors emerged, with Eigenvalues greater than 2, accounting between them for 51.5% of the variance. These were called I Positive Self, II Social Competence, III Being Different, IV Anxiety, and V Work Competence. Factors I, II and V were not related to the type of placement or work experience of the students, nor to their Aspirations, or Aspiration-Expectation scores. However, Factors III and V throw some light on the experience of work for these students. The items comprising Factors III and V are given in Table II.

TABLE II

Items Comprising Factor III (Being Different) and Factor V (Work Competence)

FACTOR	ITEM
III Being Different	I wish I were different.
	People treat me oddly.
	My family is disappointed in me.
	People treat me like a child.
	In groups I feel the odd one out.
V Work Competence	I get nervous.
	I am good at work.
	I do as I am told.
	I am lonely.
	I am good with my hands.
I make a mess of things I try.	
	I forget things.

Factor III (Being Different) was negatively correlated with the Expectation score ($r = -0.239, p < 0.1$). That is, students who feel themselves to be most "different", who feel they are treated oddly, or like a child, who feel the "odd one out" in groups, who feel they have disappointed their families, and who feel nervous, set themselves low expectations in life. Many students who answered affirmatively to these questions revealed fears of being laughed at or teased, and feelings of not having achieved accomplishments such as 'O' and 'A' levels which their parents had expected of them.

Factor V (Work Competence) was not related to the total aspirations score or the Aspirations-Expectation score. Nor was it related to actual work experience, so that students who had had work experience did not consider themselves to be more competent at work in comparison with their non-working peers. Students with work experience also tended to have higher aspiration scores (mean work aspiration score = 19.548; mean no-work aspiration score = 17.316; $t = 3.58$; $p = 0.075$), but these higher, perhaps more normative, aspirations were not reflected in smaller aspiration-expectation discrepancy scores. It seemed that the experience of working alongside non-handicapped colleagues set up a situation in which the students compared themselves unfavourably with others, so that they did not perceive themselves to be more competent, nor to be more able to fulfil their aspirations. Instead, self rated work competence was related to the degree of segregation experienced by the students: those who were most segregated considered themselves to be the most competent (mean score 22.667); that is, they considered themselves to be good at work, at making things, at following

orders and remembering things, and not being isolated in their working environment. In contrast, those who were informally integrated considered themselves to be the least competent (mean score 17.900); and those who were formally integrated fell between these extremes (mean score 20.708); $F = 4.03, p < 0.05$. Once again, these results point tentatively to the potentially adverse consequences of mainstreamed work placements to self esteem. While self esteem was no lower for students with work experience, neither was it higher: a handicapped student who compares him or herself with a more able group of colleagues may well come to question his or her competence.

Study 2

Method

Service providers within local mental handicap services were invited to nominate individuals whom they felt had low self esteem and who might benefit from taking part in a discussion group. Using age and verbal skills as criteria, 3 young men and 4 young women (average age 25 years) were selected to take part in the study. The group members were approached and asked if they would like to take part in the group. They also gave consent to be videotaped.

The study group ran for 13 weeks of 90 minutes sessions which were videotaped. The group was facilitated by a clinical psychologist, working in a Community Mental Handicap Team. The videotapes were transcribed and the transcripts formed the database for subsequent analysis.

The group members were also interviewed prior to the group to complete the Piers-Harris Self Esteem questionnaire which was modified to remove references to school, and an Attitudes to Integration Questionnaire which was constructed around the domains of Home, Work and Leisure. The items were dichotomously scored to bring them into line with the Piers-Harris Self Esteem Questionnaire.

Results

The Piers-Harris Self Esteem Questionnaire was significantly correlated with The Attitudes to Integration Questionnaire ($r = 0.879, p < 0.02$). This confirms the importance of self esteem if people are to feel positive about integration activities. When the domains (Home, Work, Leisure) of the Attitudes to Integration Questionnaire were separately correlated with the Piers-Harris Self Esteem Questionnaire, only the work domain was significantly related to self esteem ($r = 0.787, p < 0.05$). The work domain items are given in Table III.

TABLE III

Attitudes to Integration Questionnaire: Work Domain Items

Awareness of stigma/labelling

I hate telling people where I work.

Yes/No

I have a real job.

I'm better than most of the others at work.

At work I can laugh at some of the worse ones.

Normalization Issues

If I had to work somewhere else I would be the odd one out.

I would be good at working somewhere else.
I would not be able to get a job outside the ATC.
I would like to go to work like other people.

Protection — control VS autonomy — democracy

I do as I am told at work.
I help the others at work.
My supervisor trusts me to run messages.
People laugh at me at work.

Among a rich variety of topics which the group discussed a salient item was the group members' experiences of work. A clear continuum of preferences emerged, with being at home the least valued option, followed by sheltered work, and with paid work being seen as the most valued. One group member put it:

"I think if I were at home like Jean (another group member) I would find it hard because . . . you haven't got anything in particular, no sort of routine . . . you'd feel you're not much use to anybody, that's the worst. I think that would be the worst thing 'cause you're not contributing anything to the community outside. Whereas (in the sheltered workshop) in a way, you do feel that you are. Well, not in the sense of an outside job, but you do have to be aware of other people and problems around you. And you . . . have to try to help them and help yourself and help the whole community in a way that is almost as important as a job outside." (My emphasis).

Group members also described work in the sheltered work environment as "boring" and "frustrating". Yet powerful motives dissuaded them from trying to find a "proper job". These can be grouped around 4 reasons: (i) anomalous position; (ii) perceived incompetence; (iii) non-availability of jobs and (iv) fear of discreditation.

(i) Anomalous position

One of the group members had been dissuaded from trying to obtain a job by his father for fear that it would "mess up his money". He explained: "'Cause I'm drawing social security and . . . in that book I'm getting the money because I am classed unfit for work . . .". Thus, in seeking any kind of job, he would be in the anomalous position of seeking to do something he was "unfit" for. Furthermore, the extremely low wages that people with mental handicaps are "allowed" to earn further reinforces this perception of dissonance or incongruity between self image and work.

(ii) Perceived incompetence

Several group members discussed drawbacks which hinge on their perceived incompetence both to find and do paid work. One spoke of needing help with reading the cards in the job centre; despite the fact that his keyworker had judged him capable of doing this himself, his self-perceived incompetence lowered his confidence in this new situation to a sufficient degree to actually incapacitate him.

Another spoke about the problems she had at interviews:

"I've been to loads of interviews, but I have always been turned down:

I think the main reason why I think I've been turned down was because . . . at the interview they ask you certain questions and you don't know what to ask. So I think that's probably why I got turned down . . . I have not got a clue because they've just about said it all".

This same group member did once obtain a job but "they gave me the sack because they thought I was too slow".

(iii) Non-availability of jobs

One of the group members felt going to the job centre to look for a job was a waste of time because there weren't any jobs for him. Quite apart from the fact that there may really not have been anything suitable, on this occasion, this failure experience convinced him that there would never be any suitable jobs.

(iv) Fear of discreditation

By attempting to get an "outside" job, a person with a mental handicap may be implicitly attempting to "pass" i.e. act like a "normal" person (Goffman, 1963). This sets up tensions as the individual fears that he or she may be discovered ("discredited") to be pretending to an illegitimate status. One of the group members described experiencing anguish that her handicap was beginning to "show" and that people were "looking rather anxiously" at her in an integrated setting:

"Well, I think it was mainly because I had to ask, because I was having trouble with my — I can't explain, but I just felt awkward. So I thought they knew I was handicapped. They probably just guessed".

A further tension is that between "passing" and "coming out". This person was unable to diffuse the tension created by passing by mentioning her handicap because she was afraid that other people "might not want to get involved with anyone like it [i.e. handicapped] when they already have".

Discussion

These two studies show how complex is the response by the handicapped individual to work. On the one hand, work is perceived as highly desirable: the study 2 group members perceived "outside" work as important; the study 1 students rated obtaining a job and earning a lot of money as their highest aspiration. Moreover, in study 2, self esteem was significantly correlated with feeling positive (non-stigmatized and valued) about work.

Yet on the other hand, the subjective experience of work may carry many implicit messages about stigmatisation and incompetence. In study 1, students with work experience tended to have higher aspirations. If this reflects their feeling more "normal" by virtue of their taking part in a working environment, it might be expected that they would also have higher self esteem and feel more likely to fulfil their aspirations. In fact, this is not the case: students who had had work experience did not have higher self esteem and did not even consider themselves to be more competent at work than students without work experience; neither did they consider themselves as more able to fulfil their aspirations. Therefore it seems that those students "mainstreamed" in a work setting may take on normative social aspirations without necessarily feeling themselves to be

any more likely to fulfil them. Conversely, the non-working group did not consider themselves to be any less able to fulfil their more modest aspirations and in this respect may have been more "protected" in their self perceptions.

In support of the "protective" function to self esteem that non-integrated peer groups may serve, is the effect of geographical segregation on the work competence factor. The most segregated students considered themselves to be the most competent, while those who were informally integrated considered themselves to be the least competent. Those who were formally integrated fell between the two extremes. This rather complex result may be interpreted in different ways. The more glowing self appraisals of the segregated group may be due to "lack of realism" (cf Ringness, 1961) due to selective reflected appraisals or "defensiveness" (cf Guthrie, Butler and Gorlow, 1963). However, it is also exactly what social comparison theory would predict (cf Coleman, 1983): in comparison with their lower achieving reference group of peers it would be expected that these students should have a relatively positive view of themselves.

The intermediate group (i.e. formally integrated) may be more "realistic" in that their social comparisons take place within a broader social reference group, but it is a surprise to find the informally integrated group, many of whom did have work experience, feeling relatively pessimistic about their work competence. This may be due to the fact that many students who have had work experience or who are on W.P. courses are more intelligent, somewhat older, and may have been exposed both to more failure experiences concerning work and to more able reference groups from which to draw their social comparisons. The pessimism of the study 2 group members concerning their ability to find and remain in work bears witness to the importance of minimising failures in this area.

Therefore, any recommendations about work have to be made with caution. The participants on W.P. courses tended to have higher I.Q.'s than those on F.E. courses; also, setting placement aside, those with work experience tended to have higher I.Q.s than those without. This clearly reflects work placement strategies adopted by service providers within each type of placement. While not the democratic ideal espoused by normalisation theorists, this reflects the current economic situation, and perhaps has the merit of lessening the number of potential failure experiences and adverse social comparisons for the less able. On the other hand, it may be that the more able will be more discouraged by such failures and comparisons. Keyes (1959) provides a graphic account of the ways in which I.Q. may interact with a persons' awareness of his or her status in a mainstreamed work environment. Yet because the potential benefits of work are so great, it would be rash to advocate preventing people from entering the workplace simply because they might fail or compare themselves adversely with others. Instead, service providers may have to provide more support in facilitating an individuals entry into employment than they might expect. This support includes practical, emotional, theoretical and social components.

On a practical level, individuals may need more assistance than might have been expected. The study 2 group member whose keyworker, knowing he was able to read, sent him to the job centre, actually needed extra help in identifying relevant jobs in an unfamiliar situation. The other study 2 group member who found interviews difficult, despite her apparently high level of verbal ability, needed extra support in this area.

On the emotional front, many people entering mainstream society (not necessarily only to work), may need help in stigma-management techniques. When "passing" can create such anguish, it may be preferable to enable people to acknowledge their handicap in a casual, stigma-free way (see Szivos and Travers, 1988; Zetlin and Turner, 1984).

Rather than merely assuming that work experience will provide subjective benefits in terms of filling normative social roles and deriving positive reflected appraisals from them, service providers should also attempt to gain theoretical familiarity with a range of psychological mechanisms relevant to mainstreamed working conditions. Positive "attitudes" to work may belie a series of negative psychological processes. These processes and mechanisms include the internalisation of failure due to adverse social comparisons of ability with others, and to the discrepancy between normative aspirations and one's likely ability to fulfil them. It may be that a number of reference groups, including handicapped peers as well as non-handicapped others, may be most beneficial to an individual's self esteem.

And finally, although activity on a social-political level may be outside the scope of many practitioners, it should be noted that current social policies which label people as "unfit to work" expose them to many ills. Among these are the impossibility of characterising what they do as "work"; a consequently poor self image; and exploitation in being allowed to "earn" a pittance for a week's boring and frustrating activity.

SUMMARY

Work is a highly valued activity and is consequently thought of as providing a valuable source of self esteem for people with a mental handicap. Two studies explore the attitudes to work of young adults with a mild-moderate mental handicap, and their relationship to self esteem, perceived work competence, aspirations and expectations to fulfil aspirations.

In the first study 50 students in different educational and work settings were interviewed about their self esteem and aspirations/expectations. It was found that work experience did not improve self esteem, nor perceptions of their work competence, nor their expectations of being able to fulfil their aspirations. In the second study, 7 young adults discussed their experiences of work. Many of these were negative and encompassed feelings of their anomalous position, perceived incompetence, lack of suitable jobs and fear of discreditation. Explanations are discussed in terms of social comparison and stigma theory, and some recommendations are made concerning the degree of practical, emotional, theoretical and social support people with mental handicaps may need on entering employment.

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