Employment and choice-making for adults with intellectual disability, autism, and down syndrome

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ABSTRACT

Background: Adults with disabilities are employed at a significantly lower rate than adults without disabilities. Of adults with disabilities in the workforce, more individuals work in a facility setting rather than a community setting, despite efforts to improve community inclusion. Choice-making has been proposed as a predictive factor for employment for individuals with disabilities.

Aims: The purpose of this research was to examine the current state of employment for three groups of adults with intellectual disability (ID): individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), individuals with Down syndrome (DS), and individuals with idiopathic ID. Choice-making and its relation to improved employment outcomes was explored.

Methods: This study used National Core Indicator’s Adult Consumer Survey datasets from years 2011–2012 and 2012–2013. Factor analyses revealed latent variables from six choice-making questions in the Adult Consumer Survey. Ordinal logistic regression was used to identify factors related to employment status.

Results: Adults with DS had the highest rates of paid community jobs, but adults with ID had the highest rates of choice-making. ID severity level and short-term choice-making had the greatest effects on employment status in all three groups.

Conclusions: Employment rates remain low despite national efforts to find jobs for people with disabilities. Choice-making is a unique factor that was found to be associated with employment status and provides a target for interventions to increase employability.

What this paper adds

This paper provides updated employment statistics for individuals with intellectual disability, autism spectrum disorder, and Down syndrome. Employment for individuals with disabilities is gaining national attention, and research examining possible variables associated with successful employment is steadily growing. This study furthers the investigation into unique factors associated with successful employment that can be targeted for intervention. This paper specifically examined whether making choices that effect day-to-day life, such as choosing your daily schedule, what to buy with spending money, and what to do in your free time, are correlated with positive employment outcomes. This skill can readily be increased through intervention, and could prove to increase the employability of adults with disabilities.
1. Introduction

In America, employment is considered to be important for adults at the individual and societal levels. For adults with disabilities, employment has been shown to improve quality of life (Eggleton, Robertson, Ryan, & Kobler, 1999; Garcia-Villalaisar, Wehman, & Navarro, 2009; Persson, 2000). Employment provides structure, a source of social supports, and income. With income, individuals are provided with opportunities to make more decisions and move towards greater independence. Research finds that adults with intellectual disability (ID) seek economic independence and rate community employment as an important goal (Migliore, Mank, Grossi, & Rogan, 2007).

Despite the importance of employment for adults with disabilities, unemployment rates for this population remain stubbornly high. The national rate of integrated community employment among all adults with disabilities during the 2013 fiscal year was just 18.6% (Butterworth et al., 2015). The Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that as of May 2016, the employment participation rate (those working or actively seeking employment) of workers without disabilities was 68.4%, whereas the participation rate of workers with disabilities (which includes a broad range of disabilities) was only 20.5% (Department of Labor, 2016). Adults with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) are one of the few etiologically known ID groups with a specific employment estimate; approximately 25% of adults with ASD are employed (Holwerda, van der Klink, Groothoff, & Brouwer, 2012). There are no current national rates of employment specifically for adults with Down syndrome (DS).

Despite policy efforts that placed a greater importance on employment outcomes, employment data continues to document a downward trend in community employment rates from a high of 25% reported in 2001 (Butterworth et al., 2015). Additionally, rates of facility-based work and community-based day programs have increased (Butterworth et al., 2015). In their national report on employment services and outcomes for individuals with disabilities, Butterworth et al. (2015) discuss findings that show individuals with disabilities experienced higher levels of job loss during the economic recession of 2007–2009, and did not benefit from recovery efforts as much as their non-disabled counterparts. Efforts to improve work participation include Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) law of 2004, Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) law of 2014, policy bulletins from the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS), and the national movement called “Employment First.” The purpose of IDEA is to provide educational opportunities for children with disabilities to, “prepare them for further education, employment and independent living” (Individual with Disabilities Education Act, 2004). Some of the major implications for individuals with disabilities that came out of the WIOA in 2014 mandated that states’ public vocational rehabilitation agency focus on pre-employment and transition services, along with more attention to the general workforce development system and American Job Centers. In addition to these other efforts, CMS issued a policy bulletin in 2011 with the purpose of establishing integrated employment as a priority goal for participants on Home and Community Based Services waivers (CMS, 2011). Employment First is a framework focused on bringing about system-level change and places a priority on community-based, integrated employment for adults with disabilities (Department of Labor, 2016).

Due to an increased spotlight on employment for adults with disabilities there is a need for research on the individual characteristics that are associated with employability. The National Longitudinal Transition Study—2 (NLTS-2) provides rich information on transition services, including factors associated with secondary and post-secondary school employment. Of note, the strongest predictor of post-secondary school employment for individuals with ID, ASD, or multiple disabilities two years past graduation was paid work experiences during high school (Carter, Austin, & Trainor, 2012). Specifically for students with ASD, increased social skills, lack of comorbid ID, successful high school graduation, and the receipt of career counseling were all associated with greater odds of employment within the two years after high school (Chiang, Cheung, Li, & Tsai, 2013). Other research on predictors of employment rarely uses job placement as a specific outcome; rather, it is one part of a global adult outcome variable that also includes residential status, social connections, etc. (see Eaves & Ho, 2008; Helles, Gillberg, Hillberg, & Billstedt, 2015; Howlin, Goode, Hutton, & Rutter, 2004).

Studies that have targeted factors associated with work participation consistently report on a variety of demographic characteristics and IQ scores. IQ has little clinical relevance for vocational training. IQ is thought to be stable throughout adulthood, thus increasing IQ scores is not a realistic treatment outcome (Neisser et al., 1996). Other characteristics that have been examined in relation to employment include social skills, the presence of a secondary disability, mental health, problem behavior, years of education, empowerment, intensity of support needs, work expectations, and self-determination (Esbensen, Bishop, Seltzer, Greenberg, & Taylor, 2010; Holwerda, van der Klink, de Boer, Groothoff, & Brouwer, 2013; Lawer, Brusilovskiy, Salzer, & Mandell, 2009; Martorell, Gutierrez-Recacha, Pereda, & Ayuso-Mateos, 2008; Schaller & Yang, 2005; Wehman et al., 2014; Wehmeyer & Palmer, 2003).

Wehmeyer (1997) identified the importance of self-determination on adult outcomes for individuals with disabilities and outlined a framework for self-determination. Self-determination includes autonomous functioning, for which choice-making skills are a critical first step (Wehmeyer, 1997). Choice-making skills of adults with disabilities have been analyzed in regards to their association with outcomes including employment, independent living, and community access (Shogren, Wehmeyer, Palmer, Rifenbark, & Little, 2015; Wehmeyer & Garner, 2003). Additionally, choice-making skills have a significant impact on personal functioning, including decreasing inappropriate behavior and increasing appropriate behavior (Cannella, O’Reilly, & Lancia, 2005). Therefore, if increased choice-making ability is indeed associated with better employment outcomes, it would be an ideal skill to target as an intervention goal or educational objective.

In the present study, choice-making and employment outcomes were examined for three groups of adults with intellectual disability: 1) adults with ASD and ID, 2) adults with DS and ID, and 3) adults with idiopathic ID. The three research groups were chosen for several reasons. It has been mentioned previously that adults with disabilities have lower employment rates than their non-disabled counterparts, but many of these estimates group all developmental disabilities (Butterworth et al., 2015), or report on
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