

*INCREASING ONE ASPECT OF SELF-DETERMINATION AMONG
ADULTS WITH SEVERE MULTIPLE DISABILITIES IN
SUPPORTED WORK*

DENNIS H. REID

LOUISIANA STATE UNIVERSITY
HEALTH SCIENCES CENTER

MARSHA B. PARSONS

CAROLINA BEHAVIOR ANALYSIS AND SUPPORT CENTER

AND

CAROLYN W. GREEN AND LEAH B. BROWNING

WESTERN CAROLINA CENTER,
MORGANTON, NORTH CAROLINA

We attempted to increase one aspect of self-determination among 3 supported workers with multiple disabilities. Following Baer's (1998) self-determination conceptualization, the workers were exposed to two conditions that involved working more versus less independently based on availability of assistive devices. Next, their condition preferences were assessed and honored. All participants consistently chose the more independent condition. Results reflect how self-determination may be enhanced by giving workers increased control over work situations.

DESCRIPTORS: self-determination, severe multiple disabilities, choice

Assisting individuals with disabilities to experience self-determination by exerting increased control over their lives has been the focus of considerable discussion. However, due in part to the broad nature of self-determination (Wehmeyer, 1998), the concept has proven difficult to translate into practice. Enhancing self-determination is especially difficult when considering people with severe disabilities who experience significant challenges in expressing themselves.

Appreciation is expressed to Mary Hensley for her competent assistance with the procedures, and to Beckie McGee, Teresa Kenney, and Kelly Garcia for their assistance with data collection.

Requests for reprints should be addressed to Dennis H. Reid at the Carolina Behavior Analysis and Support Center, P.O. Box 425, Morganton, North Carolina 28680.

One conceptualization of self-determination that appears to be applicable for people with severe disabilities involves identifying what individuals want, and then arranging environments to accommodate what they want (Baer, 1998). Hence, self-determination might be increased by exposing individuals to two environmental conditions that differ only on a potential preference, and then providing opportunities to indicate the condition they prefer based on their relative frequency of choosing one condition when given equal access to both conditions (Baer, 1998). Repeated applications of this process eventually could lead to the arrangement of environments that are of an individual's own choosing. The purpose of this investigation was to demonstrate a means

of increasing one aspect of self-determination using this paradigm in a supported work situation with adults with severe multiple disabilities.

METHOD

Participants, Setting, Behavior Definitions, and Observation Procedures

Three adults, Ms. Elkins, Mr. Flynn, and Mr. Waters (aged 75, 51, and 32 years, respectively), with severe cognitive and physical disabilities participated. The participants were nonambulatory and communicated through gestures or brief vocalizations. The setting was a small publishing company where the participants worked part time with an individual job coach.

Three categories of supported worker behavior were defined: *choice* (pointing to materials representing a job task when prompted to choose by a job coach); *work* (manipulating materials in a manner necessary to complete a job task or looking at a job coach while he or she was providing instructions); and *productivity* (number of correct work units completed per minute, defined for each task; definitions are available from the authors). Two categories of job coach behavior also were defined, reflecting types and intensity of help provided for the workers: *assistance* (the most intense type of help, which involved manipulating job materials in a manner that completed part of the job task for the worker) and *instruction* (vocal or gestural directions, physical prompts, or praise and feedback).

Worker choice was recorded at the beginning of a work session (Phase 2). Observations of worker and job coach behavior were conducted during a 10-min sample of a work session. One minute of worker observation was alternated with 1 min of job coach observation until each worker and job coach had been observed for 5 min. During consecutive 10-s intervals, work behavior

was scored on a whole-interval basis and job coach behavior was scored on a partial-interval basis. Productivity was recorded at the end of each session. Reliability observations occurred during at least 36% of all observations, with no disagreements on worker choice or number of work products completed. Overall agreement on work behavior, assistance, and instruction averaged 97%, 94%, and 96%, respectively, and occurrence agreement averaged 97%, 81%, and 71%.

Experimental Conditions

Phase 1. Phase 1 assessed worker independence based on amount of job coach support provided while workers worked with and without assistive devices. Mr. Flynn's and Ms. Elkins' task was placing tabs on advertising fliers. Their adaptive device held the sheet of tabs and flier stationary so that each worker could complete the task using one hand. Mr. Waters' task was manually collating pages, and his adaptive device held stacks of pages in separate compartments. The participants worked for three 20-min periods during which observations were conducted. Participants were assigned to work under two conditions: working with and without the adaptive device. When working without the device, materials were simply placed on the participants' table tops. Job coaches provided only as much support as necessary to complete the job. Ms. Elkins, Mr. Flynn, and Mr. Waters were observed for five, four, and two sessions, respectively, with their devices, and four, five, and two sessions without the devices.

Phase 2. At the beginning of each work session, participants were given a choice of working with or without the adaptive device. Materials necessary to complete the job along with the adaptive device were placed on one side of a participant's table top and the materials without the device were placed on the other side. Participants were asked to choose whether they wanted to work with or without the device by pointing to one set

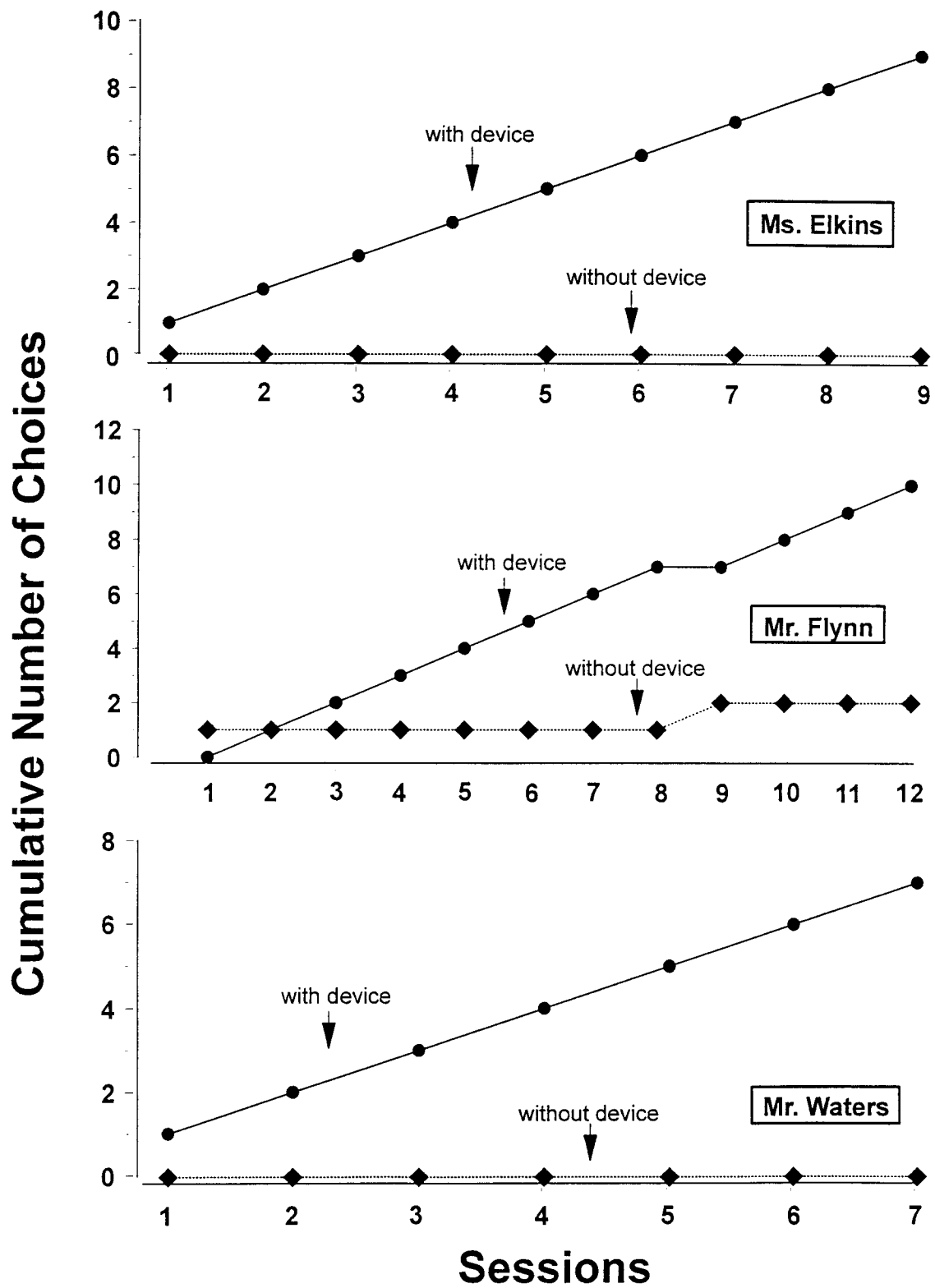


Figure 1. Cumulative number of choices by each participant for working with an adaptive device (more independently) and without a device (less independently) across work sessions.

of materials. After a choice, the requisite materials were provided and the participant worked for the 20-min session according to the condition chosen. Nine choice opportunities were provided for Ms. Elkins, 12 for Mr. Flynn, and 7 for Mr. Waters, with the position of the materials counterbalanced across opportunities.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Work behavior for each participant averaged at least 96% whether or not the adaptive devices were used. Productivity also remained consistent for Ms. Elkins and Mr. Flynn (average number of work units completed per condition changed less than 0.3 per minute). For Mr. Waters, productivity increased from an average of 4.2 per minute without the device to 5.0 per minute with the device. Regarding worker independence, the workers worked with less job coach support when using their devices relative to working without the devices. Worker assistance for Ms. Elkins averaged 17% with the device and 49% without the device. Respective averages for Mr. Flynn were 21% and 43%. Mr. Waters never required worker assistance. However, instruction for Mr. Waters averaged 13% when using the device compared to 20% without the device (instruction for Ms. Elkins and Mr. Flynn remained consistent across conditions). When given a choice of working with or without adaptive devices (i.e., more or less independently), each participant chose to work with the device on at least 83% of choice opportunities (see Figure 1).

Overall, these results appear to represent a means through which one aspect of self-determination can be increased for supported workers. By providing the workers with experience with two work conditions and then giving them a choice of the two conditions each day, the workers were controlling a potentially major aspect of their work

activities. The choices to work more independently coincided with the general view that enhancing independence is a desirable goal in supported work endeavors. If the workers had chosen to work under the condition with more assistance, however, some difficult decisions would have had to be made. Working with more versus less assistance can increase the cost of supported work and reduce the likelihood that people with severe multiple disabilities will obtain supported work opportunities. Such a potential outcome illustrates the concern expressed by Baer (1998) that if environments are arranged to support aspects of self-determination among people with severe disabilities, service providers may encounter situations they do not favor.

In considering the approach to increasing self-determination represented in this investigation, it should be noted that the process is rather time consuming (i.e., systematically exposing individuals to different environmental conditions, assessing condition preferences, arranging environments to provide ready access to preferences). Applying the process to a broader array of life domains would likely require a considerable time investment. Additional research seems warranted to examine the practicality of enhancing more comprehensive aspects of self-determination among people with severe disabilities, as well as to assess the impact on quality of life resulting from systematic attempts to enhance self-determination.

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- Received September 27, 2000*
Final acceptance May 8, 2001
Action Editor, Craig H. Kennedy