

*A PREWORK ASSESSMENT OF TASK
PREFERENCES AMONG ADULTS WITH AUTISM
BEGINNING A SUPPORTED JOB*

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A prework paired-task assessment was evaluated for identifying work preferences among 3 adults with autism beginning a supported job. When the workers began the job, choices were provided between more and less preferred tasks (determined by previous assessment). Results supported the assessment for identifying single task preferences, but did not reveal preferences of 2 workers for alternate tasks. Results are discussed in terms of evaluating other prework assessments that may reveal task-alternation preferences.

DESCRIPTORS: autism, supported employment, preferences, assessment

An ongoing issue in developing community work options for adults with severe disabilities is determining work preferences among potential supported workers. Ensuring that workers with disabilities have opportunities to express and obtain work-related preferences is a component of supported-employment legislation, and can have many benefits for supported workers (Parsons, Reid, & Green, 1998). However, identifying preferred work tasks among people with severe disabilities can be difficult due to cognitive and communicative challenges.

One means of assessing job preferences is a paired-presentation method that involves presenting workers with repeated choices between pairs of materials representing two work tasks, and then determining which task is chosen more frequently across multiple

pairings. This type of assessment was initially applied with persons with mental retardation in sheltered work (Mithaug & Hanawalt, 1978) and, more recently, in community-based supported work (Parsons et al., 1998). The current investigation evaluated the prework assessment with adults with autism beginning a supported job.

METHOD

Participants, Setting, and Experimental Procedure

Participants were 3 men (ages 25, 26, and 29 years) with autism as well as severe or profound mental retardation. None of the participants communicated vocally. The setting was a publishing company where the participants worked part time with a job coach doing clerical tasks. The procedures involved an initial prework preference assessment before the workers began a new job involving office cleaning duties and a sub-

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sequent preference assessment during the actual job. The latter assessment examined the consistency of task preferences identified during the prework assessment.

Prework assessment. The cleaning job included four tasks (dusting, mopping, vacuuming, and cleaning sinks) that involved work in three offices. Task preferences were assessed individually using Mithaug and Hanawalt's (1978) procedures. Participants worked on chosen tasks following each choice to ensure that they associated choices with the work involved. This process has resulted in clear identification of task preferences among people with severe (Reid, Parsons, & Green, 1998) and profound (Parsons *et al.*, 1998) disabilities.

All paired presentations of task materials were conducted in a hallway. After the worker chose a task by touching or pointing to work materials, the job coach directed him to an office where he worked on the chosen task for 3 min. The worker was observed at 30-s intervals for occurrence of work engagement, defined as manipulating materials in a manner to complete the task, or looking at the job coach providing instructions. Engagement was observed to ensure that workers experienced activities associated with each task choice. After working on the chosen task, the paired-presentation process was repeated until all six combinations of tasks had been presented (representing one session). At least three (maximum five) sessions were conducted with each worker. Reliability checks on worker choice and engagement were conducted during 20% of all sessions. Occurrence agreement averaged 100% for choice and 91% for engagement.

Results of the prework assessment indicated that each worker had a strong (chosen on at least 80% of pairings) or moderate (chosen between 50% and 80%) preference for at least one task (see next section for individual results). All workers also engaged in work performance during the majority of

observations with each chosen task, averaging at least 59%, and all workers chose every task at least twice, such that they experienced the work associated with each task.

Preferences expressed on the job. The target behavior during the on-the-job assessment was choice of tasks during the work routine. To compare results of the prework assessment to choices made on the job, a more preferred task was paired with a less preferred task. Vacuuming (more preferred; chosen on 73% of prework pairings) and dusting (less preferred; chosen on 40%) were the tasks presented for Mr. Martin. For Mr. Graham and Mr. Roberts, tasks presented were vacuuming (more preferred; 60% and 89%, respectively) and mopping (less preferred; 47% and 22%). Reliability checks were conducted during 25% of all choice pairings, with no disagreements on worker choice.

When the new cleaning duties began, the job coach worked individually with each worker for three 10-min periods. At the beginning of each period, a worker was asked to choose between tasks that the prework assessment had shown to be more and less preferred. After the worker chose a task, he worked on the task for the 10-min period. The choice was repeated at the beginning of the two remaining work periods, with the side location of the materials counterbalanced (none of the workers demonstrated a tendency to select materials on only one side). Mr. Roberts received choice presentations over 4 days, and Mr. Graham and Mr. Martin received presentations over 5 days (on two occasions there were shortened work days).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

When given a choice of work tasks on the job, each participant chose the task that the prework assessment had indicated was more preferred more frequently than the task in-

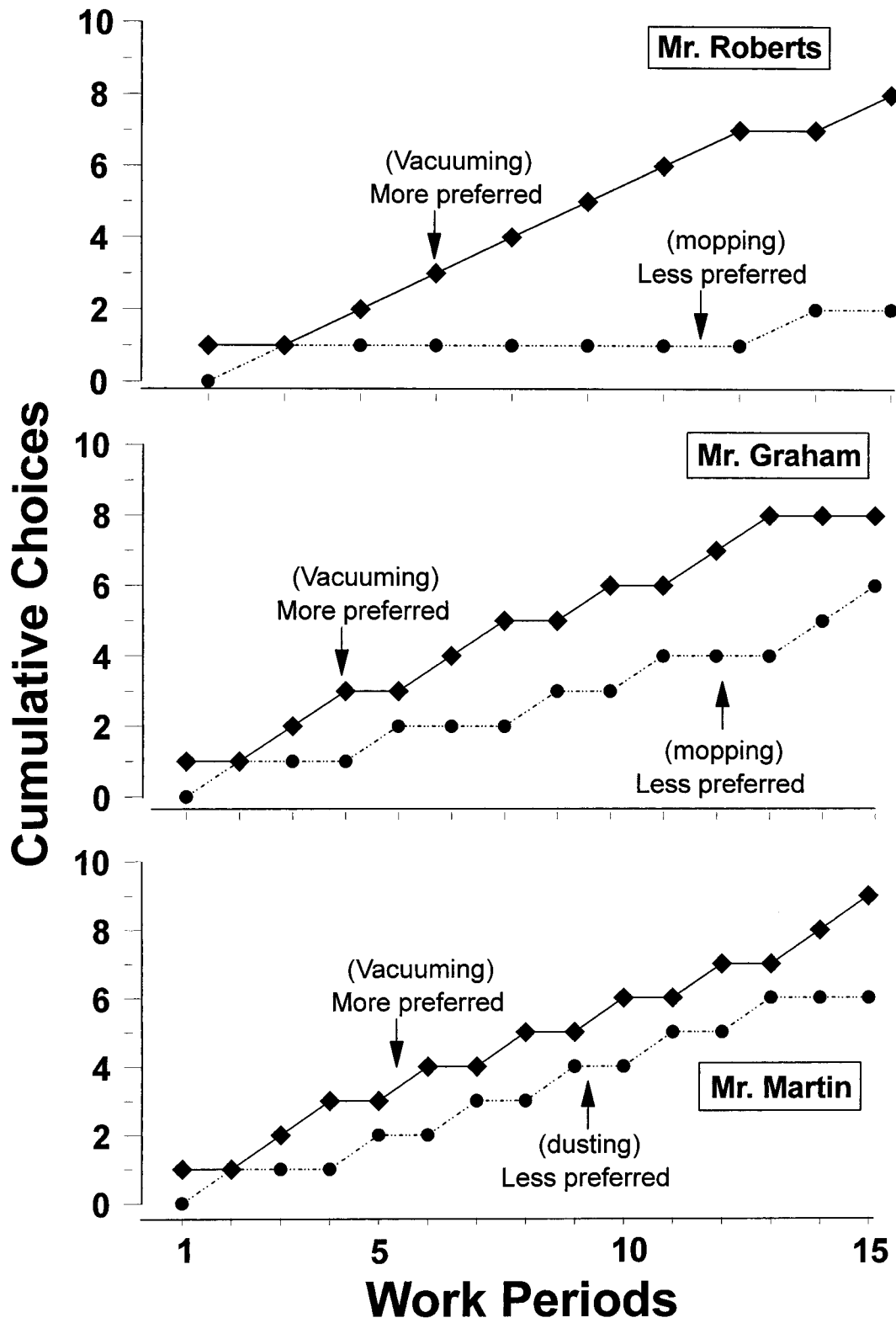


Figure 1. Cumulative number of choices for each worker across work periods for tasks that the prework assessment had identified as more and less preferred.

licated to be less preferred (Figure 1). Mr. Roberts chose his more preferred task during 80% of the choice opportunities, Mr. Graham chose his during 57% of the opportunities, and Mr. Martin chose his during 60% of the opportunities. Although the differences in choosing the more versus less preferred tasks were not as great for Mr. Graham and Mr. Martin, the differences were very similar to those observed on the prework assessment. Also, Mr. Graham and Mr. Martin displayed an alternating choice pattern by choosing the more preferred task more frequently for the initial daily work period and then usually alternating task selections across remaining periods. Mr. Graham chose the more preferred task on the first trial of the day on 100% of the work days, and Mr. Martin did so on 60% of the work days. For both workers, the second daily choice was different from the first on 100% of the days. The third choice was different from the second on 75% of the days for Mr. Graham and 80% of the days for Mr. Martin.

These results appear to support the prework paired-presentation method for identifying tasks that workers with autism are likely to choose to work on most frequently when beginning a supported job. The process also was limited in that it did not reveal an apparent preference of 2 workers to alternate work tasks during the actual job routine. Regarding the latter finding, however, it is difficult to determine whether a preference existed for task alternation rather than a single task. However, several features of the results seem to support a preference

for alternating tasks. Specifically, on 100% of the second choice opportunities during the day, each worker chose a different task than that chosen on the first choice opportunity. During the third choice for the day, each worker chose a different task relative to the second choice on at least 75% of opportunities. If the workers did not prefer a given task, choices would be more equally distributed (i.e., approximating 50%) across the choice opportunities. In addition, each worker chose his more preferred task on the majority of the first choices of the day, suggesting an initial on-the-job preference for one task over the other and then a preference to subsequently change tasks over the course of the day. Future research is needed to develop ways of predicting worker preferences during the regular job routine that reveal preferences for task alternation.

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