

THE EFFECTS OF CHOICE AND TASK PREFERENCE ON THE WORK PERFORMANCE OF ADULTS WITH SEVERE DISABILITIES

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We evaluated the effects of choice versus the assignment of tasks of varying preferences on the work engagement of adults with severe disabilities. The combined results of two experiments suggest that the relative preference for a task may be an important variable in the effectiveness of choice for some individuals.

DESCRIPTORS: choice, preference, severe disabilities, work performance

One benefit of choice making for adults with severe disabilities is increased work engagement (Parsons, Reid, Reynolds, & Bumgarner, 1990). However, the role of "choosing" relative to obtaining a preferred outcome is unclear. Understanding the variables that affect the benefits of choice making is important if we are to maximize choice-making strategies for persons with limited expression. In Experiment 1, we attempted to replicate the results of Parsons et al. (1990) regarding the effects of task assignment versus choice on time on task when task preferences varied. In Experiment 2, we examined the effects of choice on work performance when task preferences were held constant.

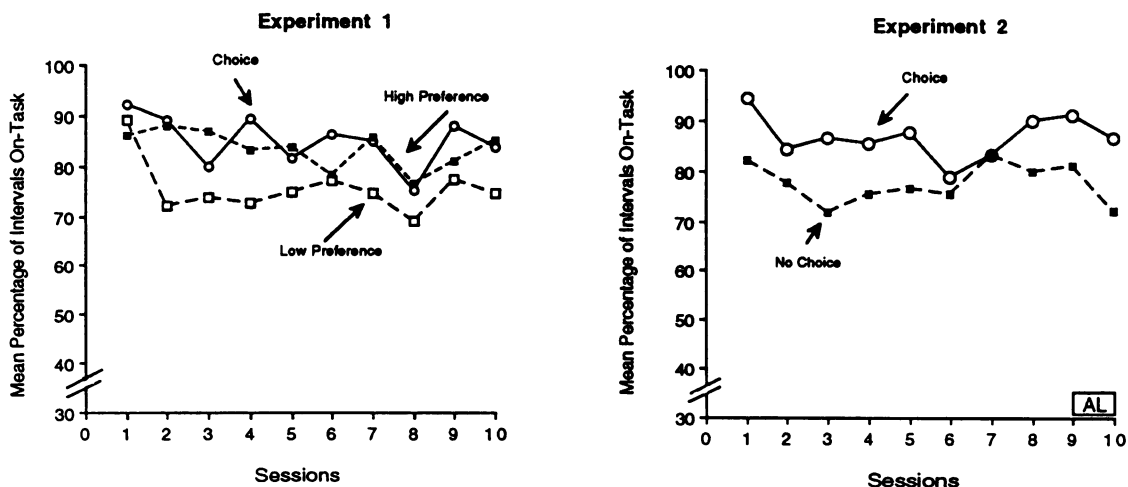
METHOD: In Experiment 1, 3 adults with severe or profound mental retardation participated. Observations were conducted in either a mailroom enclave or a segregated training center during the typical work routine. Each condition lasted 15 min. On-task behavior (see Parsons et al., 1990) was recorded using a 15-s momentary time-sampling procedure.

Procedures were similar to those of Parsons et al. (1990). The participants' relative preference for five familiar work tasks (stamping, stuffing envelopes, stuffing folders, labeling, sealing envelopes) was determined by Mithaug and Hanawalt's (1978) pair-wise assessment. One high-preference task (i.e., one that was selected on at least 75% of the pairings) and one low-preference task (i.e., one that was selected on no more than 25% of the pairings) were identified for each participant. The effects of the following three conditions were evaluated using a multielement design, counterbalanced across sessions: (a) assignment of a high-preference task, (b) assignment of a low-preference task, and (c) choice between the high- and low-preference tasks.

In Experiment 2, 5 adults participated, including the 3 from Experiment 1. Settings, tasks, observations, and procedures were the same as in Experiment 1, with the exception of task preference. The participants' preferences for the tasks were evaluated (or reevaluated if they had participated in Experiment 1) using the same assessment strategy. Two tasks within the categories of low-preference or moderate-preference (selected from 26% to 74% of the pairings) tasks were then selected for each participant. Using tasks of similar preference allowed us to evaluate choice independent from obtaining a preferred outcome.

The effects of choice (between tasks of the same preference category) and no choice (assignment of one of the tasks) on on-task behavior were evaluated using a multielement design counterbalanced across sessions. Interobserver agreement, calculated on an interval-by-interval basis on 30% of the sessions, averaged 93% (range, 83% to 98%) for Experiment 1 and 98% (range, 95% to 99%) for Experiment 2 for total occurrence and nonoccurrence of on-task behavior.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION: For Experiment 1, the mean percentage of on-task behavior for all the participants during the three conditions is shown in the figure. Overall, the results replicated those of Parsons et al. (1990). Engagement



was highest during the assigned high-preference task ($M = 84\%$) or the choice condition ($M = 85\%$) and was lowest during the assignment of a low-preference task ($M = 76\%$). Individual performance data were consistent with this pattern. When given a choice, participants most frequently chose their high-preference task (70% to 90% of the time).

For Experiment 2, the mean percentage of on-task behavior for all participants during the two conditions revealed minimal differences, with means of 93% (range, 89% to 97%) for the choice condition and 91% (range, 86% to 94%) for the no-choice condition (data not shown). The individual performances of 4 participants also revealed minimal differences between conditions. Three participants demonstrated a relatively strong preference for one of the choice tasks, selecting one task over another between 70% to 90% of the time. In contrast, for Al, differences occurred between the choice ($M = 87\%$) and no-choice ($M = 77\%$) conditions (see figure), although when given a choice, he did not demonstrate a strong preference for either task, choosing one over the other only 60% of the time. No relationship between higher on-task performance and a particular task was evident for any participant in Experiment 2.

The combined results of Experiments 1 and 2 suggest that the relative preference for a task may be an important determinant in the effectiveness of choice in influencing task performance. However, for 1 participant a differential effect occurred, suggesting that the act of choosing may be preferred over being assigned an equivalent option. The generality of these findings remains to be established.

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