

## WORK-RELATED INTERPERSONAL SKILLS TRAINING FOR MENTALLY HANDICAPPED ADULTS: AN EXPERIMENTAL PROGRAM

B.Z. Dalfen and Frank McGilly

The McGill School of Social Work is collaborating with two Montreal agencies working with mentally handicapped populations in an experimental program of training in work-related interpersonal and social skills. The research project is funded by the Office des personnes handicapées du Québec. The partner agencies in the project are Miriam Home and Jewish Vocational Services.

Our general perspective on the needs of a large number of individuals who experience repeated difficulty with holding jobs (Porter 1990) is that, contrary to the prevalent trend in training programs, the principal need of these individuals is training in the interpersonal and social skills required for success in work settings, rather than training in specific job skills. Employers themselves are able to train new workers in direct job skills.

The experiment<sup>1</sup> (WRIST -- Work Related Interpersonal Skills Training) applies this perspective to mentally handicapped young adults. The design calls for a succession of experimental and control groups, assigned at random from the populations served by Miriam Homes and Jewish Vocational Services (JVC), with additional recruits from other Montreal-area agencies. Since successive experimental and control groups enter the program at intervals, the design incorporates time-series comparisons. Standardized intelligence and

personality tests assure comparability of experimental and control groups. All are between the ages of 20 and 45. The groups are similar in gender mix.

The control groups receive the standard program of training of the partner agencies, both of which are highly regarded professionally. The experimental groups receive special training, for half of each working day, for fourteen weeks, directed at developing the participants' skills in relevant interpersonal and social behaviour: co-operating with fellow workers, receiving directions, punctuality, asking questions when necessary, reliable attendance, appropriate conversation, etc. The training makes use of role plays, training videos (Foss and Vilbauer 1994), exercises and discussions. The other half-day is spent at work sites, where supervisors and fellow workers have been enlisted as collaborators.

All participants are assessed at the point of entry, using well-tested instruments (TICE 1986, QABS, FAI 1983, PCI 1983)<sup>2</sup>. Observations of their

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1. The theoretical perspective underlying the experiment leads to the hypotheses that the behaviour, not the character, of the individual is the relevant variable. No pathology is assumed. On the contrary, the program adopts a stance of normalization.

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2. FAI (1983) : Functional Assessment Inventory. Nancy M. Crewe & Gary T. Athelstan, Materials Development Centre, University of Minnesota.  
PCI (1983) : Personal Capacities Inventory. Nancy M. Crewe & Gary T. Athelstan, Materials Development Centre, University of Minnesota.  
QABS (n.d.) : Quebec Adaptive Behaviour Scale. Atelier Québécois des Professionnels sur le Retard Mental, & Département de Psychologie, Université du Québec à Montréal.  
TICE (1986) : Test of Interpersonal Competence in Employment. Gilbert Foss, Doug Cheney & Michael Bullis, University of Oregon. See Bullis & Foss (1986), Foss & Vilbauer (1994), below.

behaviour are made at the termination of their training periods. Their work adjustment is assessed at intervals after they begin their "real" jobs. Participants (experimental and control groups)

are assisted in securing employment. Over time, the success of the members of the experimental and control groups in the work setting is to be assessed and compared<sup>3</sup>.

#### REFERENCES

BULLIS, M. & FOSS, G. (1986). Assessing the employment related interpersonal competence of mildly mentally retarded workers. *American Journal of Mental Deficiency* 91/1.

FOSS, G. & VILHAUER, D. (1994). *Working I: Attitudes and Habits for Getting & Holding a Job*, and *Working II: Interpersonal Skills Assessment and Training for Employment with 24 Video lessons with Assessment Scale*, Santa Barbara: James Stanfield Co.

PORTER, KH. (1990). *Making Jobs Work: what the research says about effective employment programs for AFDC recipients*. Washington, D.C.: Centre on Budget and Policy Priorities.

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3. Necessarily, we must abstract from economic conditions in conducting and discussing this experiment. The state of the labor market at any moment is of course a factor in the work success of any class of individuals, and must be taken as a given. What we can say is that facile dismissals of training programs on the grounds that «there are no jobs» can not stand up to the recorded experience of this population.