TEACHING JOB INTERVIEW SKILLS TO RETARDED CLIENTS

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Six retarded adults were taught job application and interview skills including introducing oneself, filling out a standard job application form, answering questions, and asking questions. A combination of instructions, modeling, role playing, and positive and corrective feedback was used across a multiple baseline experimental design. After training, the clients' performance in each area improved substantially over baseline levels. In addition, the newly taught skills appeared to generalize to a different office, application form, and interviewer.

DESCRIPTORS: employment interview skills, group training, modeling, retarded adults

An increasing emphasis has been placed on teaching retarded citizens to live and function independently in the community. One of the most important community living skills is being able to support oneself financially. Many retarded people would be capable of living independently and would be able to support themselves financially if they had the requisite skills needed to find and keep a job. It has been estimated that with training and education, at least 75% of retarded citizens could be self-supporting, and an additional 10 to 15% could be partially self-supporting (President's Committee on Mental Retardation, 1969).

A number of reports have described programs designed to teach people the skills required to find and apply for a job. Some of these (e.g., Azrin, Flores, & Kaplan, 1975; Barbee & Keil, 1973; Braukmann, Maloney, Fixsen, Phillips, & Wolf, 1974; Furman, Geller, Simon, & Kelly,

1979; Hollandsworth, Dressel, & Stevens, 1977; Kelly, Laughlin, Claiborne, & Patterson, 1979; Venardos & Harris, 1973) provide empirical data showing the effectiveness of the programs in teaching the requisite skills and/or in helping people to secure jobs. The great majority of these studies, however, were conducted with people of average or above-average intelligence (e.g., students, economically disadvantaged people, and psychiatric patients). Many programs developed to teach job application and interview skills to people of less than average intelligence (e.g., Dogin, 1970; Pitch, 1972) apparently have not been empirically evaluated.

Two studies (Clark, Boyd, & Macrae, 1975; Grinnell & Lieberman, 1977) conducted with retarded people have included some type of empirical evaluation of the effects of training. In the Clark et al. study, retarded subjects were taught how to fill out certain biographic information, such as name, address, telephone number, and personal references, on job application forms, using instructions, models of correct performance, practice and verbal feedback, and praise and tokens contingent on correct performance. As training progressed with a number of different forms, the subjects became increasingly

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more accurate in filling out these items on new application forms. Grinnell and Lieberman used "microcounseling" to teach retarded subjects interview skills. The experimental groups received videotape reviews of their performance on practice trial interviews and/or social and monetary reinforcement for correct performance. The experimental group had significantly higher levels of appropriate eye contact and body posture than the control group.

To apply for a job, a person must not only fill out a job application and exhibit appropriate nonverbal interview behaviors, but also greet a receptionist properly, make one's purpose known, converse appropriately during the job interview, and dress and groom appropriately for the interview. The present study was designed to teach some of these skills to retarded people of varying intellectual capabilities using procedures that could be employed by teachers in many kinds of educational situations.

METHOD

Subjects

Participants were selected from residents living in two community group homes for retarded citizens. The teaching counselors of the homes designated residents who could read simple words and carry on a casual conversation but who had demonstrated a lack of proficiency in the job interview skills described below. From a total of 16 residents living in the two homes, the teaching counselors nominated six. Subsequently, the purposes and general procedures of the study were described to these residents and all six agreed to participate.

The participants were females, 19 to 41 years old. IQ scores previously obtained ranged from the low 50's to mid 70's with a mean of 61. All were employed during the day in sheltered workshops. Having limited vocational skills, none of the participants were initially contemplating a job change in the near future.

Setting

All training sessions were held in the residents' respective group homes. Two groups of three residents each were trained separately.

The regular probe sessions were held in an office in the downtown section of a local city. The last generalization probe was held in a large complex of offices in a different city. A tape recorder was used to record all probe interviews.

Procedures

General training procedures. Three job interview skills were trained: (1) Office Skills, which included introducing oneself to a receptionist, stating one's purpose for being there, and following directions; (2) Application Skills, which involved filling out standard job application forms; and (3) Interview Skills, which included good posture, appropriate voice tone and rate, and asking and answering questions appropriately. Originally the authors planned to teach good grooming, but because all the participants in the present study received consistently high ratings in this area throughout the experiment, this part of the training package was not included.

The same four components were used to teach all three skills: instruction and providing rationales, modeling, role playing, and constructive feedback. These were based on similar procedures developed by Phillips, Phillips, Fixsen, and Wolf (1974) and detailed in Kirigin, Ayala, Braukmann, Brown, Minkin, Phillips, Fixsen, and Wolf (1975).

Instruction and rationales involved describing the general skill to be taught, explaining how the resident might benefit from learning the skill, and describing the specific target behaviors (e.g., greeting the receptionist, making eye contact) and their sequence within the larger skill area (e.g., Office Skills).

Each participant received a detailed outline of the behaviors within each area which either the participants or the experimenter read out loud.

The participants were then prompted to ask any questions about the outline and rationale. The modeling portion of the program started when all participants could correctly answer questions about the rationale and general area to be trained.

Modeling consisted of the experimenter demonstrating in sequence each behavior on the outline. The experimenter also demonstrated various incorrect behaviors and discussed with the clients the reason the behavior was incorrect, and what might be a more appropriate behavior in that situation.

During *Role playing*, each client practiced and perfected each behavior on the outline one at a time, and then chained them together as a total sequence.

Feedback was given after each participant had practiced a single behavior or chained sequence. Positive feedback consisted of praise for behaviors performed correctly. Corrective feedback consisted of a description of any behaviors that were performed incorrectly and a suggestion of what behaviors might be more appropriate in that situation.

When each person was able to perform the entire sequence of behaviors correctly in the group-learning situation, she then began to practice the sequence individually, in order to approximate more closely the conditions of an actual job interview. Once all individuals in a group could individually perform an entire sequence, they were given a probe.

Specific Training Procedures

Office and interview skills. The experimenter gave each participant an outline of the behaviors for the skill to be learned. *Office Skills* included introducing oneself, stating a purpose for being there, and following instructions. *Interview Skills* included good posture, eye contact, and appropriately answering and asking questions. The participants or the experimenter read the outline out loud and it was then discussed. The experimenter modeled the first behavior on the

outline, each person practiced that behavior, and the experimenter provided feedback on that practice.

When all the individuals in that group could perform the first behavior correctly three consecutive times, the experimenter modeled the second behavior. Practice by the participants and feedback from the experimenter followed. This sequence was repeated until all persons within a group had successfully performed each separate behavior three consecutive times.

The experimenter then modeled the entire sequence of behaviors on the outline and each group member was instructed to try the whole sequence. If she could perform the entire sequence without a mistake, the experimenter praised her and instructed her to perform the sequence again until three consecutive correct sequences were performed. If, however, she made a mistake in the sequence, she was instructed to start at a point in the sequence before the mistake was made. If she made a mistake a second time, she was required to practice the individual behaviors that were performed incorrectly. When the participant could correctly perform the individual behaviors three consecutive times without error, she was again instructed to practice part of the sequence. When that part was performed correctly three consecutive times, then she was instructed to try the entire sequence again. This procedure was repeated until each person could perform the entire sequence correctly in the group setting three consecutive times.

Individual training then began. Each participant practiced individual behaviors and then the entire sequence by herself until she could perform it correctly at least three consecutive times, with at least two days separating each of the three performances of the sequence. When all three members within a group had met this criterion, each was given a probe.

Application skills. The experimenter again gave each participant an outline of the behaviors for this area. The outline included instruction in

legibility, neatness, spelling, and completeness of information. The participants or the experimenter read the outline out loud and it was discussed. The experimenter then handed each person a five-sheet "information package," which consisted of questions most commonly found on standard job application forms (e.g., name, address, social security number, employment history) and space to write in the correct answers. The experimenter demonstrated how to fill out the sheets and, beginning with the first item ("date of application"), read each item out loud and had each participant fill in the appropriate information.

The experimenter gave feedback on the participants' answers, neatness, and correctness of information and corrected spelling as was necessary. An initialled note was made by each question when help was needed. If a person consistently answered a particular question incorrectly, this question and its appropriate answer were practiced on a separate piece of paper until the correct answer was given three consecutive times. As each individual finished filling out the information sheets, she was given a new set and instructed to copy from the one she just did onto the new set. When the participant could successfully copy from the original information sheets onto the new sheets without making more than 10% errors in any category, she was given a practice application to fill out, using the information sheets to copy from when necessary.

Fifteen different application forms obtained from local businesses were used in training. Although the information requested on each application was substantially the same, the wording for many questions varied from application to application. For example, a request for an applicant's telephone number could be phrased "Telephone," "Home Telephone No.," or "Phone No." A job description could be a "Position," "Title," "Duties," "Work Performed," or "Job Description." The information sheets included many examples of these different ways of asking for the same information.

Participants were trained to recognize the var-

ious forms of the same question and match that question with the correct answer. The number of questions and different forms of those questions each individual was trained to recognize and answer varied according to the reading and comprehension ability of each individual. Barbara, Roberta, and Rachel, who had only minimal reading skills, were required to answer questions only in four major areas: personal information (which included name, address, phone number, and social security number), educational history, personal references, and job history. These questions were chosen because almost all job applications ask for this basic information. Thus, these areas received the most extensive training. The other three women were required to complete the entire application form.

All participants were judged to have completed Application training when they could fill out, at least, the sections that were specifically trained, on three different applications in three consecutive sessions, with at least 2 days between each session. No more than 10% errors in any of the application rating categories was allowed. A probe was given to each person in a group when all members within each group had completed Application training.

Point Economy and Session Time

To increase motivation, each individual received points for performance and cooperation during the training sessions. A point economy was already operating in the two group homes. The residents regularly earned points for academic work. The training sessions were considered academic work and points were given to each person at the end of a training session based on her cooperation and performance. These points could later be exchanged for privileges or a small amount of money.

Each training session lasted approximately 45 min. There were three to four sessions per week and the number of weeks spent on one area varied with the difficulty of the material in each area and each group's speed of progress. Training in Office Skills to criteria took an average of

9 hours per group of three participants; training in Application Skills to criteria took an average of 30 hours per group; and training in Interview Skills to criteria took an average of 18 hours per group.

Probe Procedures

In order to assess systematically each person's acquisition of the skills that were taught in the training sessions, a "probe" was given when all the individuals within a group had met the criteria for completion of a certain area. The regular probes were all held in an office in the downtown section of the city. "Regular" probes were given when the members of a group had met the criteria for completing a particular skill area. A last "special" generalization probe was given at the end of the study.

For all probes, each participant was instructed to wear something "appropriate for a job interview" and to bring whatever she felt she might need at the interview (after Application Skills training, the women were instructed to bring their information sheets).

The participants came into the office one at a time. A receptionist was instructed to let the applicant begin the conversation, and only after 5 min of silence to ask for her name and purpose for being there. The receptionist then directed the applicant to a table where she was given a standard job application form, which was used for all regular probes but was never used in training sessions. When the applicant finished the application, the receptionist took it back to the interviewer who reviewed it in order to obtain initial information that could be used as a basis for some questions in the interview.

In the regular probes, three different people portrayed the receptionist in different interviews, but the interviewer was always the same person. In the outer office and interview room, two observers were stationed behind the receptionist or interviewer, rating the applicants' performance. Although some of the applicants had previously been to the office where regular probes were held, none was acquainted with the receptionists,

the reliability observers, or the interviewer. Receptionists, reliability observers, and the interviewer were all aware that a study was being conducted but none was aware of what the experimental conditions were, when training occurred, or which applicants had received training in which areas.

The receptionist brought in the applicant when the interviewer indicated he was ready. The interviewer began by asking some general informational-type questions. He then described the job, omitting the pay rate, working hours, and location of the business. The interviewer then asked questions that were related to the job description. When he had finished with all his own questions, he invited questions from the applicant. If she did have questions, the interviewer answered them completely. If she said "No," he waited approximately 10 sec to give her a chance to think about it. If she still said she had no questions at the end of that time, he went on to end the interview. He thanked the applicant for coming in and advised her that he would have his secretary call her if he decided to hire her. Interviews averaged 10 min in length.

The applicants were not given any feedback or points after the interview, and, if an applicant asked how she did, she was told that everyone "did fine."

In an attempt to simulate conditions that were even closer to those found in the natural environment, a "special" generalization probe was given at the end of training in all areas for all participants. No observers were present, the applicants had never been in the office complex or met the interviewers before, and they were asked to fill out an entirely different application form. The interviewers for this probe regularly conducted job interviews as part of their professional duties. No instructions were given to them except to request that they omit the pay rate and working hours in their job descriptions. Interviews in the generalization probe averaged about 10 min in length.

The applicants were not given any specific feedback, but were told that all of them had

"done very well." They were later told this last interview concluded the training program and were thanked for their participation.

Scoring of Behaviors and Reliability¹

During the regular probe interviews, the experimenter and a reliability observer independently scored the participants' office and interview behaviors. Applications were individually scored at a later time by one observer and the experimenter.

The behaviors for Office Skills were rated on a 1 to 3 scale or a "Yes," "No" basis. Interview Skills were rated on a scale of 1 to 5 or on a "Yes," "No" basis. The number of possible ratings corresponded to the perceived complexity of the behavior being rated. Thus, "Yes" or "No" behaviors (e.g., closing the office door) were specific in nature, whereas behaviors rated on a 5-point scale (e.g., appropriate eye contact) could encompass a much broader range of performance. On the applications, each question was rated as either "correct" or "incorrect" with respect to each category. In addition, the entire application was rated on a 1 to 5 scale on overall legibility and quality.

During the special generalization probe, the receptionist scored the Office Skills behaviors, and the interviewers scored the Interview Skills behaviors. Applications from this probe were scored later by the experimenter. As no observers were present during this probe, no reliability was taken on the participants' behaviors in any area.

Agreements on scoring each behavior were counted when the experimenter and observer agreed on a "Yes," "No" rating or agreed on the numerical rating on the 1 to 3 scale or the 1 to 5 scale. During the probes, the reliability of scoring Office Skills averaged 90%, with a range of

70 to 100%. Reliability of scoring Application Skills averaged 87% with a range of 72 to 99%. If agreements were counted when two scores differed by only 1 point for items rated on the 5-point scale, average agreement rose to 95%. For Interview Skills, reliability averaged 67%, with a range of 39 to 89%. If on the 1 to 5 scale, scores differing by only 1 point were counted as agreements, average agreement rose to 89%.

Design

The design of the present study was a multiple baseline across behaviors, with each participant serving as an individual control. An initial baseline probe was given to all participants and subsequent probes were given when a group (or both groups) had reached criterion during training. All participants received the first posttraining probe about 1 month after the baseline probe. After this, however, the two groups received probes at different times because some participants required longer training times than others.

For Mildred, Sylvia, and Cathy, training in a skill area was followed by only one probe before training in the next area was begun. Thus, they received one baseline and three posttraining probes, one following each skill area taught (Cathy received two posttraining probes before leaving the study). Barbara, Roberta, and Rachel received retraining in Office Skills after the third probe and then were given another probe before training was started on Interview Skills. Roberta and Rachel also received additional training in Interview Skills and another probe when it was felt that their interview performance in probe five did not represent their capabilities. Thus, Barbara received four posttraining probes and Roberta and Rachel received five.

The special generalization probe took place within a few days after the last regular probe for Rachel and Roberta and approximately 2 months after the last regular probe for the other women. All participants received one review

¹Copies of the rating sheets and standard application form used in this study are available from James A. Sherman, Department of Human Development and Family Life, University of Kansas, Lawrence, Kansas 66045.

Fig. 1. Office, Application, and Interview Skills of Mildred, Sylvia, and Cathy before and after training.

practice session in all three skill areas between the last regular probe and the special generalization probe.

RESULTS

Figures 1 and 2 illustrate the effects of training on participant's performance of Office, Application, and Interview Skills. Ratings from each interview for each skill area were averaged and are plotted along the ordinate; probe interviews are listed along the abscissa. The break

between connected data points represents the point at which training was begun for each area. The dotted vertical line illustrates the multiple baseline sequence of training.

The Office and Interview Skills data for these figures are the average ratings across all items for each applicant for each interview. All "Yes" ratings were considered as equal to a "3" or "5," the highest numerical rating for the particular area. All "No" ratings were considered as "1," the lowest numerical rating for both training areas.

Fig. 2. Office, Application, and Interview Skills of Barbara, Roberta, and Rachel before and after training.

The Application Skills data for this figure were calculated by dividing the number of answers which were completely correct by the total number of questions on the application. For an answer to be counted as completely correct, it had to be complete, legible, neat, within the space provided, spelled correctly, and include the correct information.

Mildred, Sylvia, and Cathy were required to fill out the entire application and their data represent the overall percentage correct for the entire application. The results for Barbara, Roberta, and Rachel, however, are plotted in two different measures: (1) the solid line represents the overall percentage correct with respect to the entire application; (2) the dotted line represents the overall percentage correct for only those parts of the application for which these

participants were required to provide answers during training sessions.

It is clear from the figures that all participants improved their performance within individual areas only after training had begun, although the degree of improvement varied across participants. Results from the special generalization probe indicate little change in ratings from the last regular probe for Office and Application Skills, but some decrease in ratings for Interview Skills.

DISCUSSION

The results of the present study demonstrate that certain job interview and application skills can be learned by people with mild to moderate retardation. The most striking results are seen in

the Office and Application Skills areas were performance after training substantially improved over baseline levels for all participants. Less dramatic, but still quite positive, results were obtained in the Interview Skills area.

The results also demonstrate the effectiveness of the specific training techniques that were used. As each behavior area was trained, performance levels in that area alone increased for all individuals (except for a slight rise in Interview Skills for Mildred and Sylvia).

There are two possible reasons for the difference in results between the Office and Application Skills and the Interview Skills. First, the behaviors trained in Office and Application Skills were more easily specified and perhaps easier to learn and retain than those required in Interview Skills. Second, all six participants initially demonstrated fairly low performance levels in most Application and Office Skills, their pretraining performance levels in the Interview Skills were not as low as for the other two areas.

Data from the special generalization probe again show the best performance in Office and Application Skills areas. Although there was some decline in performance in the special generalization probe as compared with the last regular probe interview, the performance levels in these two areas were still substantially above pretraining levels. Generalization was also shown in Interview Skills for three individuals (Barbara, Roberta, and Sylvia) where performance in the special generalization probe was above pretraining levels.

The results presented here compare favorably with results from previous research in this area. As Clark et al. (1975) found, it is possible to teach retarded persons to complete at least some parts of standard job application forms, and to have some generalization of performance to new forms. The present study extended this previous work to include training in additional biographic items on the application forms and training in office and job interview skills. A major factor in obtaining a job is often an applicant's ability to

present himself or herself well in a person-to-person interview. Therefore, instruction in this area would seem to be as important as instruction in filling out job application forms.

This additional instruction, of course, involved a greater expenditure of instruction time. The participants in the present study required varying amounts of training time, correlated to some extent with their general IQ and behavioral functioning levels. Roberta and Rachel, with IQ's of 51 and 55, respectively, and minimal reading skills, needed more training time and more probes to reach levels of performance that, while generally still below those of the other four subjects, were substantially above their own pretraining levels.

The participants in the present study were all members of group homes for the retarded and as such may not be completely representative of the mentally retarded population as a whole. Although the participants did not receive any instruction outside the training sessions that was directly related to the target behaviors, the group homes do promote an atmosphere of learning and self-improvement that may have aided the participants of this study simply by increasing their motivation and/or concentration. The procedures described in this study are not specific to the group home setting, however, and may be used by almost anyone acting in an instructional capacity. As the training methods do require extensive teacher participation, they may not be feasible in all situations.

One of the main goals of the group home system is to teach the residents to be as independent as possible. The residents are encouraged to learn as many self-care and home-care skills as possible, find a suitable job outside the sheltered workshop, and move to a more independent living situation. The present study was designed to help them find a suitable job outside a workshop. Although none of the subjects was ready for independent living at the time of the study and none was planning to apply for competitive employment, Barbara and Roberta have since

moved to semi-independent apartments and are planning to seek employment outside the sheltered workshop in the near future. The real measure of success of the present teaching methods will be when these residents do go out and use what they have learned in applying for "real" jobs.

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