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The Relationship Between Quality of Life and Self-Determination:

An International Study

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Abstract

Background: The aim of this study was to evaluate the relationship between the self-determination and quality of life of persons with intellectual disabilities living in four countries (Canada, United States, Belgium, and France).

Method: Participants were 182 adults with mild intellectual disabilities living in community settings (with families, living independently or in supported living environments). Quality of life was measured with the *Quality of Life Questionnaire* (Schalock & Keith, 1993). Self-determination was measured using the Adult version of *The Arc's Self-Determination Scale* (Wehmeyer & Bolding, 1999). Discriminant function and correlational analyses were conducted.

Results: Discriminant function analysis indicated that essential characteristics of self-determination predicted membership in the high quality of life group and that overall self-determination and quality of life were significantly correlated, as were subscale scores.

Conclusions: The study replicates findings from a previous study with an international sample and confirms the importance of self-determination to enhance quality of life. Subsequent research should examine the direction of the relationship between self-determination and quality of life and examine the relationship of essential characteristics of self-determined behavior and core dimensions of quality of life in greater detail.

Introduction

A recent analysis of the international quality of life (QOL) literature (Schalock & Verdugo, 2002) and an examination of cross-cultural understandings of quality of life by people with intellectual disabilities (ID), their families, and direct support personnel (Schalock, et al., in press), have confirmed the multidimensional structure of quality of life suggested by Schalock (1996). Schalock suggested that quality of life is composed of core dimensions that include: (a) emotional well-being, (b) interpersonal relations, (c) material well-being, (d) personal development, (e) physical well-being, (f) self-determination, (g) social inclusion, and (h) rights.

There is both an empirical and theoretical link between self-determination (SD) and QOL (Wehmeyer & Schalock, 2001). With regard to the latter, in addition to Schalock's (1996) identification of SD as a core dimension of QOL, this construct has been identified as a defining feature for the SD construct. Wehmeyer (1996) defined SD as "acting as the primary causal agent in one's life and making choices and decisions regarding one's quality of life free from undue external influence or interference," thus suggesting that SD is best understood within the context of a person's overall quality of life. Wehmeyer and Schwartz (1998) conducted an examination of the relationship between SD and QOL for 50 adults with ID. That study's findings indicated that SD predicted membership in a high QOL group. In line with recent efforts to examine cross-cultural aspects of the QOL construct, we were interested in extending findings from Wehmeyer and Schwartz to an international sample.

Method

Participants

Participants were 182 adults (92 males and 90 females) with mild ID living in community settings (with family, living independently or in a supported living environment). Participants in

the sample were from Canada ($n=52$), United States ($n=26$), France ($n=81$) and Belgium ($n=23$).

Procedures

The study was initiated by researchers who are members of the *International Research Group on Quality of Life and Self-Determination* (<http://www.uqtr.ca/GIRAQ>). The measures used (described subsequently) were already available in English and French from previous collaborations. All researchers were familiar with the instruments and all pertinent documents (procedural guidelines and scales) were accessible through our Website. Investigators recruited participants and trained research assistants to complete data collection.

Analyses

We conducted a discriminant function analysis with QOL as the grouping variable and SD (individual domain scores) as predictor variables. One purpose of discriminant function analysis is to predict group membership on the basis of a set of predictor variables. To create dichotomous groups for the grouping variable (QOL), we conducted a median split of the sample based on total QOL scores. Thus, participants whose total QOL score fell below the 50th percentile (< 89) were assigned to the low QOL group, while persons whose scores were 89 and above were assigned to the high QOL group. The low QOL group consisted of 92 persons with mean QOL scores of 78.77 ($SD = 8.15$) and mean SD scores of 80.58 ($SD = 16.13$). The high QOL group consisted of 90 participants with mean QOL scores of 98.10 ($SD = 5.66$) and mean SD scores of 97.27 ($SD = 19.14$).

To further explore the relationship between SD and QOL, we conducted a correlational analysis of these two measures using a one-tailed Pearson product-moment procedure. All analyses were conducted using SPSS for Windows, version 12.0.

Instrumentation

Participant QOL was measured using the *Quality of Life Questionnaire* (QOL-Q; Schalock and Keith, 1993). The QOL-Q is a 40-item rating scale designed to measure overall QOL for persons with ID. The scale is administered in interview formats and yields data regarding overall QOL, consisting of scores from four subscales; satisfaction, competence/productivity, empowerment/independence, and social belonging. The original English version of the QOL-Q showed very good internal reliability ($\alpha = .90$) as well as interobserver reliability and concomitant validity. The French version (translated by Schmitt, M.J.; Association de la Bourguette for France and Lachapelle for Canada) of the QOL-Q also has adequate reliability and validity.

Self-determination was measured using French and English versions of the adult version of *The Arc's Self-Determination Scale* (Wehmeyer & Bolding, 1999), a 72-item scale. Section 1 measures autonomy, including the individual's independence and the degree to which he or she acts on the basis of personal beliefs, values, interests and abilities. The second section measures self-regulation in two subdomains; interpersonal cognitive problem-solving, and goal-setting and task performance. Higher scores reflect effective social problem-solving and goal-oriented behaviors. The third section is an indicator of psychological empowerment. High scores reflect positive perceptions of control. The final section measures self-realization, including self-awareness and self-knowledge. The Arc's scale, normed with 400 adults with cognitive disabilities, has adequate construct validity, discriminative validity, internal consistency (Chronbach $\alpha = .83$), and factorial validity (Wehmeyer & Bolding, 1999). The French version (Wehmeyer, Lachapelle, et al., 2001) has also been shown to have adequate reliability and validity (Lachapelle, et al., 2002).

Results

Table 1 provides the means and standard deviations for QOL.Q scores for the overall sample. Table 2 provides means and standard deviations for scores from *The Arc's Self-Determination Scale* for the overall sample. Table 3 provides the means and standard deviations for predictor variables (e.g., component elements of self-determined behavior) from the discriminant function analysis by QOL group status. Univariate statistics generated by the discriminant function analysis procedure indicated significant differences between SD subscale scores based on QOL group membership. Table 4 provides univariate F-ratios and p-values for each independent variable, as well as Wilks Lambda for these variables.

On the basis of all predictor variables, a single discriminant function was calculated with Chi-square = 48.241 ($p = .0001$) and Omnibus Wilks' Lambda = .76. Examination of the canonical discriminant functions evaluated at group means (or group centroids) showed that this discriminant function distinguished the high QOL group (function = .561) from the low QOL group (function = -.549).

Table 5 provides results from the correlational analysis. There were significant correlations between SD and QOL total scores, and for all but one subscale scores for both instruments.

Discussion

The results from this international dataset with regard to the contribution of SD to QOL mirrored findings from Wehmeyer and Schwartz (1998), and suggested that subsequent data collection on an international level is warranted and can contribute to understanding the relationship between SD and QOL. The discriminant function analysis indicated that each of the essential characteristics of self-determined behavior (autonomous functioning, self-regulation, psychological empowerment, and self-realization) predicted membership in the high QOL group

and suggested that, overall, SD contributes to enhanced QOL, as theorized by Schalock (1996) and Wehmeyer (1996). It was inappropriate to enter total SD scores into the function because there were no other predictor variables, but in subsequent research we will collect data on other potential contributors to QOL and will be able to say more about the contribution of SD.

It is interesting to note that QOL.Q mean scores obtained by participants in the present study were higher than those observed by Wehmeyer and Schwartz (1998), whereas SD mean scores were much lower. Although it is important to exercise caution in generalizing this result to a wider audience, it does bring up an interesting question as to whether support services across these countries have become effective at *doing things for* persons with ID (thus enhancing quality of life), but not at giving them opportunities to *do things for themselves*, such as make decisions and choices, solve problems, and exercise self-determination. The correlational results confirm the relationship between self-determination and quality of life, but also point out the relatively complex relationship between component elements of each.

The sample was too small to conduct between country analyses, and our principal concern is not so much in comparing between countries but in using an international data set to better understand the SD construct and its relationship to QOL. One frequent criticism of SD is that it has been understood principally within the context of western, developed countries, such as the U.S., Canada, or the U.K. (Lachapelle & Wehmeyer, 2003). However, there is an emerging literature base that suggests the construct is applicable to other countries and within diverse cultures, including within Native American cultures ([Frankland, et al., 2004](#)), and Korean (Lee & Wehmeyer, 2004), Taiwanese (Zhang, et al., in press), Japanese (Ohtake & Wehmeyer, in press), and Spanish (Peralta & Zulueta, 2003) societies. The intent of the ongoing research of this international research group is to expand the data collection to additional English and French

language countries, as well as to Spanish language countries so as to be better able to examine both the relationships between SD and QOL, but also to determine the nature and direction of that relationship and, ultimately, to influence practice to promote both outcomes.

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Table 1

Means and SD for Quality of Life overall sample

Variables	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Min</i>	<i>Max</i>
Total Quality of Life	88.31	11.99	57	120
Satisfaction	22.83	3.18	12	30
Compétence / productivité	22.99	5.59	10	30
Empowerment / independence	22.22	4.17	11	30
Social / Participation	20.25	3.83	11	30
belonging				

Table 2

Means and SD for Self-Determination overall sample

Variables	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Min</i>	<i>Max</i>
Total Self-Determination	88.86	19.57	26	146
Behavioral Autonomy	58.62	15.14	0	96
Psychological Empowerment	11.52	2.71	3	16
Self-Regulation	8.00	4.12	0	21
Self-Realization	10.76	2.07	5	15

Table 3

Means and SDs for Predictor Variables by Quality of Life Group

<i>Variable</i>	<i>High Quality of Life</i>		<i>Low Quality of Life</i>	
	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>
Autonomous Functioning	64.03	15.29	53.34	13.02
Self-Regulation	8.99	4.15	6.99	3.86
Psychological Empowerment	12.69	2.33	10.37	2.56
Self-Realization	11.51	1.8	10.02	2.02

Table 4

Analysis of Discriminating Variables and Canonical Discriminant Functions

<i>Variable</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Significance</i>	<i>Wilks' Lambda</i>
Autonomous Functioning	25.99	.0001	.874
Self-Regulation	11.33	.001	.941
Psychological Empowerment	40.76	.0001	.815
Self-Realization	27.17	.0001	.869

Table 5

Self-Determination and Quality of Life correlational matrix

	SD Tot	Auton.	S.-Reg.	Psy. Emp.	S.-Real.
QOL Tot	.49**	.38**	.34**	.55**	.37**
Emp/Int	.45**	.40**	.35**	.41**	.15*
Comp/Prod	.31**	.20**	.31**	.40**	.26**
Comm. Int	.34**	.29**	.16*	.38**	.27**
Satisf.	.30**	.24**	.08	.38**	.38**

* $p < .05$ 2-tailed ** $p < .01$ 2-tailed