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The Job Satisfaction of the Instructional Therapist: Future Considerations in the Quality of Treatment

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Abstract

For learning in children with autism to be effective, a strong, unique, child-centered relationship between the Instructional Therapist (IT) and the child must be present. In essence, the attachment that the IT shares with the child must be nurturing in nature. An examination of the value of job satisfaction may be a promising avenue to pursue in order to cultivate environments that boost child-IT relationships and the overall quality of learning in children with autism. In this pilot study it is hypothesized that a positive correlation exists between job satisfaction of the IT and the level of learning in the child with autism. A total of 10 ITs completed the Job Satisfaction Index. Their scores were correlated with the scores of 10 Intensive Behavioural Intervention (IBI) sessions with 7 children with autism. Length of employment of ITs were also analyzed. ITs, on average, scored in the medium range on job satisfaction, while children with autism scored in the medium range on their IBI data scores. Data on the length of employment shows that the majority of ITs have been employed between one to seven months. The results of this study do not support the hypothesis but show that different questions need to be asked to assess what accounts for differential IT satisfaction scores and learning levels for children with autism. This paper hopes to initiate discussions about how to improve the quality of IBI from an intensive interaction standpoint between the child with autism and the IT.

In many cases, the child with autism is connected to a myriad of professionals and paraprofessionals proficient in helping children with disabilities, known commonly as a multidisciplinary team. Involvement with a multidisciplinary team can be economically costly for parents

(Bryson, Zwaigenbaum, & Roberts, 2005) and, typically, requires the investment of much time for applied services. One component of a multidisciplinary approach to autism is empirically based Intensive Behavioural Intervention (IBI) (McEachin, Smith, & Lovaas, 1993) which is, currently, the treatment of choice for children with autism in Ontario, as exhibited in the Ministry of Community, Family and Children's Services IBI initiative (Perry, 2002). Availability of government programs is reserved for those who meet specified criteria for the "early years" initiative (Perry, 2002). Families not receiving such services may employ private organizations to deliver IBI or independently hire Instructional Therapists (ITs). Considering private organizations and home-based programs are options frequently utilized by families, little research has been conducted on the barriers to implementing these programs (Johnson & Hastings, 2001). Central to any implementation of IBI is the intensive interaction between the IT and the child with autism. Thus, an analysis of factors affecting quality care, beginning with an examination of the IT's in-depth connection to the child with autism, is a beneficial and pragmatic step in the progression towards the ongoing development of quality IBI. This pilot study reports on the IT's job satisfaction and it's effect on learning in children with autism and focuses, specifically, on ITs in non-government IBI initiatives, hired through private agencies or independently.

Instructional Therapists and Children with Autism

Currently there are no regulations regarding who can act as an IT. In essence, this means that the background of the IT, as well as the training that the IT receives upon hiring, is subject to a high level of variability. ITs come from a diverse set of educational backgrounds and should be supervised by someone who has more applied experience in the field (Harris & Weiss, 1998). Developing relationships with, and getting to know, the child with autism is a foundational step that should be included in any preliminary training as an IT. Such preliminary training would be intended to further enhance the intensive 30 to 40 hours a week of IBI required for successful intervention with the child with autism (McEachin et al., 1993). The 30 to 40 hours a week of interaction between the IT and child could also serve as perpetual reinforcement of the preliminary training. This interaction potentially facilitates a 'timeless bond' and requires 'close proximity' interaction and 'contact seeking' (McGee, Menolascino, Hobbs & Menousek, 1987). These characteristics may be integral in an IBI program and factors that damage or threaten this interaction may also serve to compromise the IBI program.

Considerations of Job Satisfaction

'Job satisfaction' refers to a measure of attitude or evaluative judgments one makes about their job (Weiss, 2002). The definition used here reflects that used in the Job Satisfaction Index (JSI) (BCP Publishing Ltd, 1975). While research on job satisfaction exists for frontline workers in other professions (American Nurses Association Registered Nurses, 2005), no specific information exists about job satisfaction and ITs.

The IT and Job Satisfaction

The job satisfaction of the IT is thought to be critically important. First, ITs serve as a 'forum of awareness' to other members in the community about IBI and autism. Second, they are able to provide enhanced integrity to the IBI program. Johnson et al. (2001) report that parents identify the shortage of trained staff as being a major barrier to implementing a home-based IBI program, and note that this shortage combines with difficulties in hiring and retaining ITs and finding appropriate training for ITs. We hypothesize that if ITs feel positive about their job this may help address the shortage of trained ITs by generating interest via 'word of mouth' and increased awareness among their peers. We further proffer that the very nature of the IT role, in that it is inherently defined by the degree and intensity of time spent with the child who has autism, may foster low job satisfaction given the difficult nature of the work. Low job satisfaction typically generates high turnover rates, absenteeism, and complaints to employers, poor health and dissatisfaction with supervisors (Bassett, 1994). Such factors may impede directly or indirectly upon the delivery of IBI to the child, consequently affecting the child's learning. Hence, job satisfaction may be a vital variable in the integrity of the IBI program.

Method

Participants

This study was pilot tested through a convenience sample of 10 female Instructional Therapists in the Greater Toronto area (GTA). Two ITs were employed in a home with a hired senior therapist and parental supervision. The other eight worked in one of two private organizational settings (one of which was a centre-based organization while the other was a home-based organization). There were 3 settings in total and both organizations had a clinical supervisor overseeing the program. All the IT participants had

training in autism spectrum disorders and in behaviour modification. The IT participants consented to a study of job satisfaction; however, they were unaware that data was also being collected on the child's learning behaviour (IBI). This was an effort to avoid confounding variables. After all of the data questionnaires were collected from the ITs, three were removed due to significant missing data, resulting in seven completed questionnaires.

There were seven children between two and ten years of age with autism participating in this study, all living in the GTA. Three children participated twice because they had more than one IT participating in the study, resulting in n=10. All children were involved in an IBI program in either the home-based or private organization setting. Consent forms sent to the parents (convenience sample) revealed the full nature of the study and requested that nothing be said to the participating ITs about the child's involvement in the study, and, with the parents' approval, allowed for the collection of the children's data. Due to the missing data on ITs, the resultant sample size for children with autism participants was n=6.

Measures

Job Satisfaction

Job satisfaction was assessed by the completion of the *Job Satisfaction Index* (JSI) (BPC Publishing, 1975). No psychometrics regarding reliability and validity on the Index were available. Nevertheless, the JSI measures current characteristics, attitudes and feelings as they relate to one's present job. The index allots 5 points for high job satisfaction, 3 points for medium job satisfaction and a value of 1 indicates low job satisfaction. Low job satisfaction scored between 28 and 80, medium job satisfaction between 81 and 150, and high job satisfaction 151 and above.

Learning

Learning was measured by the results of the child's IBI programs on the day the IT filled out the JSI. Programs, consisting of a discriminative stimulus, are administered daily in trials usually out of 10 that are then converted into a percentage (Maurice, Green, Luce, 1996). All programs collected were those where the children could respond independently to the discriminative stimulus. The researcher collected the percentages for each program administered on the day the IT filled out the JSI. The IBI scores were then averaged. Researchers commonly use IBI scores in their research with children with autism (see Maurice et al., 1996), affirming its validity and reliability.

Procedure

Each IT was given an envelope by the researcher containing the consent form, the JSI questionnaire and a demographic information page. The ITs were asked to fill out the contents of the envelope at the beginning of the IBI session and seal it. Thereafter, they commenced the IBI session with the child, which lasted for approximately two and a half to three hours. The researcher, after the IT's shift (and unknown to the ITs), collected the IBI scores.

Results

Descriptive statistics (see Table 1) indicate that the ITs, on average, scored in the medium range on job satisfaction (M=133.85, SD=46.36) while the child's learning also scored in the average range (M=67.2, SD=41.5). The JSI scores ranged from 113 to 153, and the range of learning was from 33.5% to 80%. Spearman r calculations demonstrate that there was a nonsignificant relationship (r=.288, p=.531) between job satisfaction and learning in children with autism as shown in the scatterplot (see Figure 1, next page). Demographic data collected on the ITs show that a majority have been employed between 1-7 months (see Figure 2, next page).

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Satisfaction and Learning

	N=	*Max.*	*Min.*	*Range*	*Mean*	*SD*
Satisfaction	7 ITs	153	113	40	133.85	46.36
Learning	6 children with autism	80	33.5	46.5	67.2	41.3 (of 100)

Discussion and Future Considerations

The results of this study did not find that an IT's job satisfaction was correlated with the child's ability to learn in a trial. These results raise questions as to whether or not job satisfaction translates into better work ethics and/or stronger ties between the IT and the child. The range of satisfaction scores demonstrates that some ITs find their job highly satisfying while others do not. Most ITs are moderately satisfied. Similarly, most children in this study scored in the mid-range of learning. Better questions need to be asked to assess what accounts for differential satisfaction scores, as it most likely is not the learning ability of the child. In addition to suggesting that IT job satisfaction (as measured in this study) is

not a significant factor in the actual learning of a child with autism, this research is important for other reasons. It demonstrates that there are factors not accounted for that influence job satisfaction which may impact upon a successful IBI relationship between the IT and the child. These results will hopefully inspire future research to uncover some of the variables that are necessary to further IT development.

Figure 1. IT scores on JSI correlated with the child's IBI scores

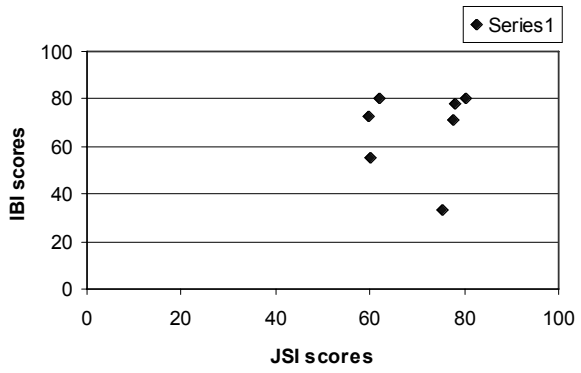
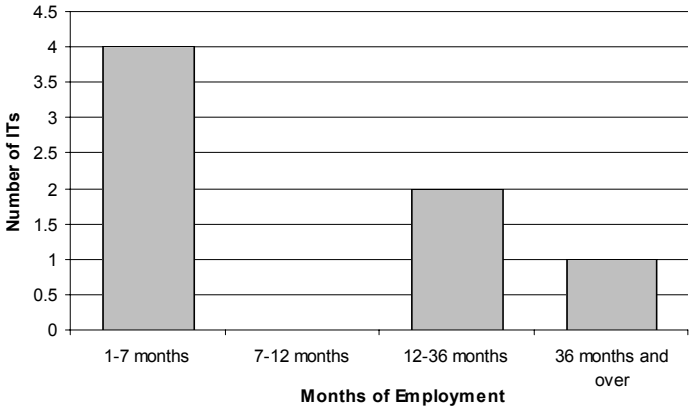


Figure 2. Number of months in which ITs have been employed delivering IBI across 3 settings



Past research has been conducted about how to improve the quality of IBI with children who have autism (See, Maurice, et al, 1996). Other research has identified the shortage of ITs as problematic (Johnson, et al. 2001). The present study is unique in the sense that it is one of the first to look at job satisfaction and IBI, as well as acting as a forum for research on ITs. The present design is limited, as a more valid and reliable measure of job satisfaction needs to be developed for future research. In future studies, area sampling and the use of large population sizes may provide for better internal validity. Also, for reasons of non-intrusiveness, IBI data was collected only once as a measure of learning. Future research, however, should consider collecting data more than once to accurately measure the child's learning.

Future research could also employ a longitudinal study of ITs during their employment (starting at time of hire) as an IBI therapist. Tracking variables such as job satisfaction, termination of employment, sick leave, and how these correlate with different durations of employment and home- vs. center-based scenarios. Also useful, would be an analysis of the opinions of ITs on their role as an IBI therapist. Other questions of importance include the relationship between the length of employment and job satisfaction, and beneficial versus unbeneficial training strategies to use with ITs at the time of employment. Finally, future research should connect the positives and negatives of working as a frontline worker in IBI therapy to the learning experienced by the children with autism.

Overall, the findings of this study are beneficial considering the current changes in the community, as new college courses, training programs, and professional standards for ITs are being developed (Ontario Association for Behavioural Analysts in Ontario, 1998). This research is intended to give a professional voice to ITs while acknowledging the conditions of hiring, training, employment and related issues both for the IT and for the parent charged with the responsibility of providing IT support to their child with Autism. In addition, this research hopes to promote discussions on how working conditions for ITs directly and indirectly affect children with autism in IBI programs, for example, through rapport building, transitions, and other variables. It is acknowledged that there are countless factors that need to be studied for this research to be applicable. It is, nevertheless, important to take steps in cultivating quality IBI through the IT as they have the advantage over other professionals of building a longer term relationship with the child who has autism.

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