

SOCIAL INTERACTION AND INTELLECTUAL DISABILITY

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Social interaction with adults with severe intellectual disability: Having fun and hanging
out

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Abstract

Background. Social interaction is integral to social inclusion. Little is known about the nature of social interaction between adults with severe intellectual disability and those with whom they engage. Method. Participants were six adults with intellectual disability and people identified as those with whom they shared demonstrable pleasurable interactions. Data were collected through observation and interviews and data analysed using a constructivist grounded theory approach. Results. An overarching category of sharing time together with two main sub-categories of *Having fun* and *Hanging out* emerged. Having fun was composed of routines and comedic interaction; hanging out was comprised of contact and presence. Conclusions. Legitimizing mirth and sharing time in social interactions may supplement paid worker job satisfaction and increase opportunities for social inclusion by people with severe intellectual disability.

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Introduction

Social interaction is integral to the development of relationships, which in turn are important to people's well being (Argyle, 2001; Duck, 1998; Duck, 1995). Many adults with intellectual disability experience difficulty developing relationships, a problem exacerbated for those at the severe end of the spectrum who generally have limited communication (McLean, Brady & McLean, 1996). As a consequence, adults with severe intellectual disability may be at a greater disadvantage socially than people with mild intellectual disability. Furthermore, people with severe intellectual disability have fewer relationships, overall, than adults at the mild end of the spectrum; existing relationships have been found to be predominantly with paid workers and family (Robertson et al., 2001; Krauss & Erickson, 1988; Krauss, Seltzer & Goodman, 1992; Kennedy, 2001; Kennedy, Horner & Newton, 1990). Unfortunately, paid workers have been observed to provide limited opportunities for social interaction (Schepsi & Reid, 1994; Hile & Walbran, 1991; Markova, Jahoda, Carttermole & Woodward, 1992). Interactions in congregate care have been described as brief and infrequent, comprising mostly instructions (Hile & Walbran, 1991, Markova et al, 1992; Schepsi & Reid, 1994). Similarly, more recent studies conducted in day centres and group homes have revealed limited opportunities for social interactions between staff and service users. Paid workers have been observed to (a) control interactions (Antaki, Finlay & Walton, 2007); (b) use more instructions than questions (McConkey, Morris & Purcell, 1999a); (c) show difficulty interpreting the nonverbal signals of their clients (Finlay Antaki, Walton & Stribling, 2008; McConkey, Purcell & Morris 1999b); and (d) lack understanding of the extra time needed to interact successfully (Purcell, Morris & McConkey, 1999).

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Although information is available on the preponderance of instrumental interaction, little is known about social interactions between people with severe intellectual disability, and their families and friends. The focus of this paper is on social interactions; those that have “no obvious instrumental purpose” (Finlay et al. 2008, p.532) and are perceived as pleasurable. Enjoyable interactions have been reported by family members who have positive relationships with adults with severe and profound disabilities (Bogdan & Taylor, 1998; Taylor & Bogdan, 1989). Similar reports have been made by friends, but little detail has been provided about the nature of their social interactions (Newton, Olson & Horner, 1995; Jameson, 1998; Landesman-Dwyer, Berkson & Romer, 1979). Landesman-Dwyer et al., in a study examining friendships, observed 208 adults with varying levels of intellectual disability from 18 group homes and found peers spent more time socialising with each other than with staff or visitors. They also found greater socialising between peers in dyads than with paid staff, and that social interactions were with chosen peers. Although this study provided evidence that adults with severe intellectual disability desired social interaction with each other, it did not shed light on how social interaction might be supported or facilitated for this group.

Social interaction involves sharing time together that is not always purposeful but is mutually rewarding (Duck, 2007). For people without a disability, the most frequent types of social interactions include gossiping, small talk and sharing humorous exchanges (Goldsmith & Baxter, 1996). It has been well documented that humorous interactions assist in developing relationships and that social closeness is enhanced when people share jokes and laugh together (Duck, 2007; Martin, 2007). For people with little or no formal communication skills, social interactions that are reliant on words, such as gossip, are

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problematic and it may be that other pleasurable nonverbal interactions predominate.

Finlay et al. (2008) demonstrated how the use of playful games between paid workers and residents with profound intellectual disabilities promoted pleasure and social interaction for the residents. However, whether similar social interactions occur between adults who have severe intellectual disability and the diversity of people with whom they interact, remains largely unexplored in the literature.

Hence, overall very little is known about the nature of social interactions that facilitate relationships with people with intellectual disability. Hastings (2010) emphasised that although support workers play a significant role in assisting people with intellectual disability to lead fulfilled lives, there has been little research focussed on theory development in relation to the formation of positive relationships between workers and people with intellectual disability. In-depth exploration of social interactions between people with severe intellectual disability and those with whom they have positive relationships offers the potential to provide insights into how such relationships develop and their importance. It may also shed some light on how paid workers can be encouraged to facilitate differing types of social interactions.

The data reported here are drawn from a larger study examining the role of communication within the social networks of adults with severe intellectual disability. The aim of this paper was to (a) identify social interactions between the people with severe intellectual disability and those with whom they have positive relationships, and (b) detail the nature of those interactions.

Method

Design and Ethical Approval

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The larger study was exploratory with the aim of gaining insights into interaction utilizing a constructivist grounded theory approach (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007). Ethical approval for the study was granted through the Human Research Ethics Committees of the two Universities and one non-government organisation with which the authors were affiliated.

Participants

Participants were six adults with intellectual disability (referred to as central participants) and others identified as people with whom they have a pleasurable relationship (see Table 1). Informed consent was obtained on behalf of all central participants with intellectual disability from their next-of-kin. All paid workers and family members provided their own consent. Peers with intellectual disability either consented themselves or consent was obtained on their behalf. All six central participants had intellectual disability and communicated at a symbolic, non-linguistic level. Only one of the central participants had a specified level of intellectual disability, identified as severe. Results from the Vineland Adaptive Behaviour Scales (Sparrow, Balla, & Cicchetti, 1984) indicated daily living skills were commensurate with extensive rather than pervasive support for all central participants. The term non-linguistic was used to describe communication in which conventional symbols were used (e.g., single spoken, signed or pictured words), but were not flexibly combined into novel utterances, thereby lacking “rule governed linguistic constructions” (Fischer & Corrigan, 1981,p.263). This level of communication skill is synonymous with people with severe intellectual disability, who need “extensive levels of support in multiple adaptive domains” (McLean et al., 1996). Hence, as a

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group, the central participants are described as adults with severe intellectual disability with symbolic but non-linguistic communication skills.

All central participants had multiple impairments that included, in addition to intellectual disability, one or more of epilepsy, autism spectrum disorder, cerebral palsy, scoliosis and visual impairments. They were aged from 20 to 44 years; three lived at home and three in group homes; all attended day services in Victoria, Australia. Convenience sampling was used to select the first central participant, followed by theoretical sampling for maximum variation to select successive central participants (Morse, 2007). Variation was sought by considering specific aspects, such as age, gender, vision, residential situation, family involvement, physical ability and peers as friends.

Other participants were those who had a positive relationship with a central participant. Positive relationships were defined as the central participant showing pleasure in interactions and/or seeking out that person. The positive relationships comprised 22 family members, six peers and 29 paid workers. The paid workers included day support workers (DSWs), home support workers who went into family or group homes (HSWs), day program coordinators (DOs) and group home coordinators (HOs).

Procedures

Data were collected for each central participant and those with whom they interacted by the first author over periods of 4 to 6 months through observation and interviews.

Observations occurred over 239 hours in a variety of settings, including family homes, group homes, day centres and community settings; each observation period varied in

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length from 0.5 to 3 hrs. The data were drawn from field notes taken during observations of the central participants, transcripts of interviews with those with whom they had positive relationships and, in one case, an email account. The first author predominantly utilized two participant observer roles: observer-as-participant and complete observer (Johnson, Douglas, Bigby & Iacono, in press). Conversations between the first author and participants sometimes occurred during observations in order to clarify the first author's understanding of interactions; these were recorded in field notes.

People who had positive relationships with a central participant were invited to be interviewed. The aim of the interviews was to supplement the information gained through the participant observations in order to understand more completely the social interactions with the central participant. Interview durations ranged from 30 to 75 min and followed an unstructured format. All interviews opened with the question "Could you tell me about your relationship with [name of central participant] and how communication in this relationship occurs?". Two people had follow-up interviews while the remainder participated in a single interview. The interviews were digitally recorded and later transcribed verbatim.

All 57 people, identified as having positive relationships with the central participant, were invited to be interviewed and 51 were formally interviewed. Of the remaining six, one spoke insufficient English and five had insufficient symbolic language to enable their participation in an interview. One interview participant, with an intellectual disability, had difficulty with the unstructured format of the interview. Consequently, pictures were used to clarify responses and assist him to maintain focus.

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Confidentiality was addressed by assigning pseudonyms to all named participants in reports or discussions. In addition certain identifying data have been withheld or changed.

Analysis

All of the transcripts were read independently by the second author prior to analysis. A journal was kept to record insights from the data and literature in a form of memo-writing (Charmaz, 2006). The data were entered into NVivo 8 (QSR International, 1999-2008), coded line-by-line, examined for in vivo codes (descriptive terms used by interviewees) and focussed codes developed. One of the key strategies applied during analysis was continued data comparison from the sources and across participants. Throughout the nonlinear analysis process, the first, second and third authors met fortnightly to discuss coding categories, relevant literature and further questions to ask the data. Questions were applied to the data, such as “how is this the same or different for other participants and why?” This process was followed until clear categories and sub-categories emerged and data saturation was reached.

Questions regarding credibility, originality, resonance and usefulness were applied to the interpretations as part of the iterative process (Charmaz, 2006). Credibility was established through discussions with the research group (all authors) during regular meetings and sharing these insights with people who had positive relationships with central participants. The insights provided by the rich descriptive data demonstrated originality and resonance, and were honed and verified after three feedback sessions with people who interacted with the central participant. In addition, resonance with other colleagues was confirmed at four conference presentations.

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Results

Social interaction with the central participants was situated in a shared moment (*Sharing the moment*) characterised by two processes: *having fun* together and *hanging out* (see Figure 1). Each category encapsulated subsets of interactions that supported the shared social experience. All central participants experienced aspects of having fun with paid workers, family and peers, while hanging out occurred mostly with family and peers. Mostly social interactions occurred within a dyad, but occasionally in a larger group.

Having fun

Having fun was short term convivial encounters resulting in mutual fun. Interactions with central participants were characterised by laughing, experiencing enjoyment and/or sharing a sense of humour that clearly were important in their relationships. Family members and paid workers created opportunities for merriment and could identify an individual's humour preference (e.g. general banter or slapstick). Diane would come home with "had a happy day" written in her diary; a family member explained it meant her daughter had enjoyed listening to the staffs' banter and gossip. Family members recognised the value of mirth and the impact on people when it was missing. For example, one family member repeatedly advocated for more fun in her son's group home environment, stating in an email "He needs more fun, more laughter, more jokes, more shared experiences, more sense of belonging to an active, fun, energetic, engaged community. He needs to talk and joke and laugh and share with others."(EF3)

Family and paid workers commented that they drew happiness from observing the central participant having fun: for example, "we get joy to see her happy" (DF12); "I have a lot of fun" (CHO1); and "when we have fun together it's great" (SHSW1). Fun

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interactions were often short and not demanding. One family member noted the central participant alerted her to the fun that can be experienced in everyday activities: “he’s got a tremendous ability to enjoy the moment and to laugh at the moment and to find intense .. well, fun and engagement in the moment” (EF3). Having fun consisted of different kinds of social interactions coded as *routines* and *comedy*. Routines were personalised and idiosyncratic interactions within dyads, while comedic interactions contained elements that could be identified as belonging to a broader comedic culture and were not restricted to dyads.

Routines.

Routines consisted of repeated physical and/or vocal interactions, usually in the form of *rhythmic play, games or songs* or *mimicry*, resulting in mirth for one or both participants. Differing forms of routines were demonstrated across all central participants’ interactions with family and paid workers. Each participant had a unique set of routines that were not necessarily shared with everybody. The origins of routines initiated by central participants had often been forgotten. Frequently, routines were people-specific, with the central participant requiring a particular response. Some participants added a twist that increased the variety of routines (e.g. changing words or altering expected motoric responses).

Rhythmic play consisted of vocal repetition, either real or nonsense words, characterised by varied intonation and loudness. Rhythmic play occurred between central participants and family members and/or support workers. Enjoyment ensued when the partner provided the expected response. Three central participants incorporated rhythmic play into their interactions. An example of using repeated words with exaggerated pitch

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and tone changes occurred in a regular interaction between a bus driver and a central participant, which was usually but not always initiated by the central participant:

She'd say Paul, Paul, I'd say yes, yes all different tones, all different pitches ... every now and then she'd say Paul, Paul and it would go on and I'd yes Sandra, yes Sandra, what do you want Sandra and then she'd keep on Paul, Paul. And I'd say no and she'd burst into laughter. (SDSW4)

Some interactions needed to be initiated by the central participant, as indicated in the following quote from a HSW:

He tells us and says 'pest' and he's smiling. Then I'll say "big pest", and oh you've made his day there, you call him a "big pest". ... He knows doing that, ripping the paper, he knows that he's probably annoying ... and he wants to be "hey I'm a pest", "no you're a big pest" and he likes that. (BHSW5)

Two central participants initiated enjoyable nonsense word play with family members. One of Eric's family members commented on the way rhythmic word play provided a way of connecting:

The other day he was sitting in the chair and he looked at me and laughed "bam way mama" and I went "yam bad yamma" and we did that for four minutes both laughing ... he knew it was nonsense (EF4).

Games and songs, also routines, were complete interactions in themselves, with a set format of turn-taking and ordered event sequence. These interactions, initiated by central participants, often consisted of well rehearsed songs, rhymes or greetings, which were individualised by altering a word or action for further amusement. Sometimes

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greetings were exaggerated and turned into simple games, such as when Colin commenced attending the day centre and the following occurred:

The program coordinator enters the room and calls out to Colin “How are you”, waving across the room. Colin looks up and enthusiastically waves back and goes across to her. Then she does a high and low five with Colin. He joins in animatedly, with a beam spreading across his face (FN/C2¹).

Colin had a similar greeting with another DSW who had added a novel twist: “With the bus driver he does high five’s, low five’s and the bus driver sort of fakes every so often and pulls his hand away so then Colin starts laughing.” (CDSW12)

Action songs featured in two central participants’ repertoires. Brian was popular with paid workers and he had been recognised at his Day service’s annual general meeting for “his ability to put a smile on your face” (BDSW8). He enjoyed songs involving physical interaction. He would initiate a favourite song of “row, row, row your boat,” by pulling a person’s arms towards him in a rowing action. A staff member changed the last line of the song to “put him in the washing machine” because of Brian’s fascination with washing machines. Brian was delighted and waited with anticipation for the last line, sometimes inserting the word “machine” if the DSW left an expectant pause. He would then laugh and repeat the request for the song with a rowing gesture.

Mimicry, another routine, differed to rhythmic play, and games and songs in that facial expressions and body language were copied and/or vocalisations echoed. Although all central participants demonstrated mimicry, only four used it in humorous interaction. Sandra’s mimicry elicited amusement in others as demonstrated in the following quote:

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She does find it amusing mimicking people, which I love. I find it really good and she doesn't just mimic, she mimics certain things like a laugh or a stance.

The other day, like last Tuesday, her dad put his hands on his hips and I stretched and I went "Oooh" like that, so that was more exaggerated, and she went "Oooh" [laughs] yeah, I think its certain things she takes the quiriness out of people's personalities. (SHSW3)

Echoing vocalisations also provided the central participant with an entree into social interaction. Diane often vocalized loudly or mimicked a word she had heard. She appeared attracted to loud, high pitched or animated voices and she would echo one of the words, amusing the paid workers: for example, "One of the DSW's was talking and Diane started vocalising. When another DSW raised her voice and said 'no, no.' Diane also raised her voice too and said 'no, no.' One of the DSWs smiled across at her." (FN/5D)

Laughter was another vocalisation that was mimicked, but did not always indicate recognition of a humorous event. A family member commented "She used to laugh and they'd laugh but whether she understood what they were laughing at or whether she was just laughing because they laughed, I don't know." (DF13). Nevertheless, such laughter was bonding for the participants. A support worker commented on the positive effect of laughter on others, stating "He's got laughter and a personality that's very contagious" (BDSW7). Another summed up the effects of laughter on others in the immediate environment by saying "It's all about everyone is laughing and having a good time." (DDSW14)

Comedy.

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Comedic interactions comprised several humorous forms in which all central participants engaged. Forms included *vulgarity*, *pranks*, *jests* and *banter*. Vulgarity arose from references to certain body parts or toilet humour. Pranks were more visual, such as practical jokes. Jests, a term coined by Freud (as cited in Bergen, 2003), have been described as an early form of joking, indicating some linguistic understanding. Banter has been defined as “playful teasing language” (Macquarie, 1981), and occurred usually between paid workers, but included central participants. Three central participants could initiate comedic interactions; the others were active respondents and joined in when other participants initiated a humorous interaction.

Five central participants found bodily functions, such as burping or farting, amusing, hence laughter ensued from saying the word related to a bodily noise (termed dirty words) or hearing the actual sound.. Vulgarity was always initiated by central participants or brought to their attention by another. Fayez had a long term relationship with a peer (Dean) in a group home. A house coordinator described Fayez’s response to an interaction that involved bodily noises:

Dean loves to burp and fart and that burping and farting, you know, Fayez finds incredibly ... and there’s a running joke that’s been going on for years anytime Fayez burps, anyone within earshot will blame Dean and she finds that uproariously amusing. (FHO2)

Although paid workers and family did not always encourage this type of humour, the central participants laughed after hearing bodily noises and paid workers reacted positively to the laughter. The coordinator continued in the above extract by saying “...

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maybe Dean will burp and then Fayeze will start laughing and that makes Dean laugh and ...I enjoy sharing those experiences with them” (FHO2)

Sandra liked to sit in the dining room of the day centre as there was a constant stream of people passing through. The following field notes describe the central participant’s reactions to bodily noises of other clients in the same room:

Sandra laughed out loud at the banter, particularly when one of the clients accidentally hit his knee on the table and farted. She also seemed more animated perhaps enjoying the cadence of their voices. (FN/S2)

Brian enjoyed using dirty words in a game with his family, such as in the following example that occurred when he was cuddling his father. Some of the time he vocalised saying ‘shit’ and ‘poo’ and trying to get Dad to say them back to him; when his father responded, Brian giggled. (FN/B14)

Not all comedic interactions were equally humorous for both participants in a dyad. In particular, the amusement generated by the use of dirty words was greater for the central participant than for the others. However, the laughter generated was enjoyed by everyone.

Pranks also resulted in humour. They relied more on visual than verbal humour, comprising practical jokes or slapstick. Practical jokes usually result in the recipient feeling foolish or embarrassed. Two central participants shared practical jokes with family members. Participation including initiating these jokes or laughing at the appropriate moment. These jokes focussed on common family activities and nurtured a sense of belonging. A family member recounted a practical joke that evolved from food stealing.

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But we do it, all of us; we'd do it to each other. Even Mum, when we're having a meal, we'd be sitting there and we'd be going "there's a spare potato over there, oh look". Colin would sit there and go "he, he, he". He'd giggle. It was just a family thing. (CF9)

Slapstick humour was enjoyed by four central participants. Television programs that included home videos of people getting hurt, were favourites. A HSW talked about the slapstick sense of humour shared between Fayeze and another HSW, stating "Like they have quite a similar humour, like they both like to laugh at other people's pain." (FHSW8)

Another HSW suggested that Fayeze's preference for slapstick may have been related to the content being visual humour and not relying on verbal skills. Referring to Fayeze, the HSW stated "She likes the slapstick humour, she seems to react to the slapstick kind of humour, like the really visual humour that doesn't require much verbal communication" (FHSW9).

Jests were a form of comedic interaction that were joke-like in that the content comprised verbal or visual humour in a story format. These jests were not in the traditional joke format - comprising an opening line that set up a humorous expectation, the main content of the joke and then finishing with a punch line (Martin, 2007). Jest were one-off occurrences, unlike teasing which was often a repeated activity. Jest involved the central participants sharing what they perceived to be amusing and relying on others to recognise incongruity in the story and perceive humour. Only Eric and Colin demonstrated they could attempt to construct or respond to a jest that incorporated incongruity, as exemplified by one of Colin's paid workers, in the context of he and Eric

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squeezing each other's biceps: "and said like, you know, look at that sort of, look at those guns ... and he looked at me ... and then looked at my gut and then patted my gut [laughs] ...and with a wry smile walked away in front of everyone." (CDSW13)

One of Eric's family recounted an example of Eric's awareness of verbal incongruity evoked during a meal at a restaurant with his family:

Eric ordered, thought he'd have death by chocolate, it was one of the desserts, and so we started joking about what a great way it would be to die, eating chocolate and he thought that was absolutely hilarious. (EF7)

The last type of comedic interaction was banter or *jocular talk* (Croser, 1959). Although banter could be directed at one person, it often included others. Banter was initiated by paid staff and family members with five central participants. It was characterised by different vocal tones and inflections, and often exaggerated facial expressions, including winks or nods. Banter also included light-hearted teasing. Nevertheless, teasing, when initiated by central participants with peers, was not always enjoyed by both partners. Family members and paid workers never used teasing with Sandra. On the one occasion, Sandra was observed being teased by a peer and she became visibly upset.

An example of teasing/ banter was described by a central participant's family member. The interviewee reflected how her husband was a more preferred communication partner because of the way he "mucks around":

They [her husband and Diane] do walk; go for walks of a night time, so it's always about that. Look probably silly things like I might say to her, you know,

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“do you want a cup of tea?” and she might not answer me, and I’ll say “if you’re not listening to me I’m not going to make you the cup of tea”, and my husband might say “don’t give her a cup of tea, give her a beer”. See she finds that really funny ... Also “oh tell her (me) to shut up”, she’d finds that funny. (DF11)

Looking happy was valued by staff members and attempts were made to increase mirth through banter. One paid staff member described her banter with a central participant, stating “I can be in there at times and she’s got this little sour look on her face and I’ll say ‘why have you got your cheeky bum face on for?’ And then she’ll start to laugh.”(DD03).

Teasing was most common among family members, and also seen between people with intellectual disability. Teasing often included acts of trickery and sometimes resulted in the receiver feeling irritated. Teasing, unlike slapstick, rarely resulted in pain or physical discomfort for the recipient. At home, Diane liked objects to be in a particular place, noticing if anything had been moved. Her father teased her by rearranging her medicines into an untidy line on the bench; she would react by vocalizing in annoyance at her father and pointing at the medicines. He would laugh, but she did not always find his actions amusing. One family member perceived the central participant spent all night planning a tease and gave an example of his teasing behavior: “Well he might put out his hand and I’ll take it thinking he might want to get up and he’ll pull me over and that’s a joke.”(EF4)

Colin enjoyed teasing other people at his day centre. An example was the use of slapstick, whereby he would take away a chair just before a peer sat down. A DSW talked about how Colin liked to take a magazine away from a client, merely to get a

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reaction: “He knows how far he can go. He knows the reactions he can get and he, because she screams and squeals and squeals and you know, and he just absolutely loves that.”(CDSW12).

In summary, having fun was an integral part of social interaction. Routine and comedic interactions were enjoyable ways to spend brief periods of time together.

Hanging out

Although having fun was one way of spending time together, another valued activity was sharing quieter time, termed hanging out. This major category included activities that required spending non-demanding, pleasurable time together, involving varying degrees of physical closeness; these were subdivided into *contact* and *presence*. Sharing time was not about words (interactions were mostly nonverbal), complex interactions or elaborate activities, but had a spatial dimension involving different ways of communicating social closeness. The hanging out relationship was usually expressed in social interactions between central participants, family and friends. Only with Diane were paid workers included. All central participants initiated some physical contact when hanging out with family members, and Brian and Eric demonstrated the importance of close contact in peer relationships. For other central participants, physical closeness did not seem any more desirable than sharing the same space and/or a simple activity, such as watching television. The central participants actively chose to spend time with certain people, with some paid workers commenting that they chose activities according to the staff member that would be involved. Sandra, Eric and Fayez also had peers with whom they spent time in social interaction. Only Eric had peer relationships with whom

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socialisation occurred across contexts: for example, at the day centre, going out for dinner and in his home.

Contact

Contact consisted of different physical forms and was demonstrated between each of the central participants and their families. Physical contact consisted of hugs and kisses, although this type was initiated only by Sandra. For Sandra, Brian and Eric, contact was extended to peers, varying from a whole body experience to simply holding hands. Sandra initiated holding hands with two male peers, but seemed equally satisfied to sit beside them without touching. Brian liked to hit people as a way of saying “hello” and also spent time being physically close to others. A staff member commented “he’s a very tiny person but would just squish right in there and he’d be just in his element squished against people.” (BDO1)

Sometimes close physical contact was achieved through activity. Eric had a close relationship with a peer, John, characterised by playfully hitting each other as they passed by, holding hands and swinging them vigorously, and chasing each other but rarely exchanging gazes. Their physical interaction indicated their liking for each other and the recognition of the importance of each other. It seemed they had no need for words as evidenced in the following field note:

Eric moved to sit on a chair between the two main rooms and John went and sat beside him. Eric did not turn to look at John. John looked at him from time to time smiling but Eric did not return the gaze. After a few minutes John got up and left. Eric continued to sit there. A few minutes later, John returned and sat down. He put his hands on Eric’s knee and vigorously shook his knee from side

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to side. Eric had a half smile on his face as if he was enjoying this interaction, but did not acknowledge John. (FN/E5)

At other times, Eric was actively playful with John, swinging arms together or hitting him on the head with an empty plastic bottle. It seemed to be a way of saying “hello”: Eric picked up an empty drink bottle and banged it playfully on John’s head. John laughed and Eric repeated this several times. (FN/E17)

Presence

All central participants sought out preferred company at certain times. Exuberant physical contact was not always necessary, but many interactions contained some forms of touch. Merely having a reassuring presence increased pleasure in hanging out. Sandra sat for most of the daytime in the dining room of a day centre. This vantage point enabled her to see people moving around the centre and opportunities to hang out with them. Brian would occasionally visit another room in the day centre just to sit near (but not beside) a young woman. Eric spent hours in close proximity with Betty, staring adoringly at her, while she pulled his nose, stroked his face and kissed him. In contrast, at other times, they both just needed to quietly spend time together and found comfort in each other’s company as illustrated in the following situation, in which Eric was agitated waiting for Betty to arrive.

Eric sees a bus arrive and stands by the door. Betty comes in, but somehow he’s looking up too high and she just passes by his knees and neither of them see each other. He comes back into the room and looks at me as if to say “where is she?” and I point to where she is and he turns around and doesn’t see her immediately. She’s standing there and she’s looking really sad. As he walked over to her she

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put her arms around his waist. They stand there for some time just holding each other. (FN/ E5)

Eric also enjoyed hanging out with John and often moved to be near him. John needed personal space and usually sat by himself at the movies. However, once their relationship had developed, they sat side by side in the movies.

Fayez's peer relationships did not involve physical contact. Hanging out together was just sitting quietly. For Fayez, time spent with Susan at the day centre was often in companionable silence, although Susan had good communication skills. At home Fayez often sat separately from Dean but her acknowledgement of him was reported by one of the paid workers, who stated "if she's coming down to the bathroom and goes past Dean, she'll stop and Dean will come and give her a little sniff or something and I can tell that she, yeah, I think they have a special relationship."(FHSW8)

Similarly, formal communication was not a feature of Sandra's relationship with two peers. In fact, for one peer, Sandra's lack of speech might have been considered a bonus. When the peer was asked what he liked about the relationship, he replied "just talking" (SP1) as he seemed to enjoy talking when not being interrupted. Colin also seemed to like to be with others but did not necessarily seek out the opportunity to spend companionable time with people with whom he had positive interactions, as illustrated in the following anecdote from a DSW about attending a football match in which Colin moved from where he was sitting and sat next to a couple who was unknown to him: "and the bloke's like, you know, and we went over and spoke to this bloke ...He said it wasn't a problem, it's Ok, and Colin sat there and watched the football with them for the day." (CDSW13)

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Diane had no peer relationships, but liked to be around people. She appeared to be happy to sit with her sister looking out of the windows for hours or watching TV with her. She also followed staff members on their tea breaks and sat quietly beside them.

Sharing time together by hanging out was a way of social interaction that did not rely on any formal communication skills but was an important aspect of family and peer relationships.

Discussion

Spending time together was illustrated through the process of sharing the moment. This process consisted of examples that illustrate the diversity of social interactions between adults with limited symbolic communication and those with whom they have positive relationships. Although the data presented relate to a few adults with limited communication, the implications may be considered in relation to a broader group of adults who have limited formal and/or ambiguous communication, many of whom currently attend adult day services.

The social interactions comprising having fun produced mirth. Laughter, an outcome of having fun, has been recognized for encouraging people to bond (Martin, 2007), thus encouraging social interaction. The types of mirthful encounters, comprised of routines and comedic interactions, appear to resemble the humorous interactions that emerge in early childhood (Bergen, 2003; Tamashiro, 1979). These interactions in the first year of life include games and mimicry; with wrestling, jostling and slapstick appearing around 2 to 3 years-of-age; and scatology, nonsense words and simple jests being produced by 4 years-of-age (Bergen, 2003; McGhee, 1979). Although all humour seems to originate within playful interactions, the growth of language skills allows

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endless permutations of humour including witticisms, irony, and sarcasm (Bergen, 2006; Martin, 2007). As language skills are limited in adults with severe intellectual disability, the range of humorous forms are restricted. Nonetheless, the central participants in the study demonstrated creativity and variety in their attempts at humorous social interaction.

There is some evidence that children and adults with mild /moderate intellectual disability may prefer physical or visual humour rather than verbal humour, possibly because of the degree of language comprehension skills required for the latter (Brown, 1994; Degabriele & Walsh, 2010). However, there appears to be no research on humour experienced by adults with severe intellectual disability. Wyer and Collins (1992) suggested that humour might be the “fundamental ingredient of social communication” (p.663). If this is so, and sharing laughter and a sense of humour results in increasing a person’s likeability and possibilities for social interactions with others, then this aspect of social interaction merits further research.

The use of humour was not as prevalent in interactions between peers and central participants as it was in their interactions with family or staff members. Three of the six central participants had positive relationships with other peers. A characteristic of these relationships was hanging out together. Although most peers in the current study could engage in spoken conversations, their communicative exchanges with central participants were predominantly informal, involving facial expressions, body language and touch. Interactions were brief but repeated, and, overall, central participants spent longer periods with peers than with paid workers - a finding reflecting that of Landesman -Dwyer et al. (1979). However, most peer relationships were limited by location, with paid staff and families not encouraging or supporting them across locations. All but one of the central

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participants demonstrated an interest in connecting with other people with intellectual disability through physical contact or companionship. Given that peer relationships can cross locations without a confusion of role boundaries (unlike for paid workers), there is scope for future research to explore reasons for peer interactions not being actively encouraged. Such research could reveal strategies to support and extend opportunities for these relationships.

In recent years, there has been a focus on providing increased participation for adults with disabilities. One of the ways of achieving such participation has been the use of active support to influence staff practices to enable engagement, and ensure staff provide enough help to enable successful participation in meaningful activities and relationships by people with intellectual disabilities (Mansell, Beadle-Brown; Whelton, Beckett & Hutchinson, 2008; Stancliffe, Harman, Toogood & McVilly, 2007). Active support has been demonstrated as particularly effective for people with severe intellectual disability (Stancliffe, Jones, Mansell & Lowe, 2008). As adults with severe intellectual disability currently spend most of their time supported by paid staff, introducing a greater focus on social interaction into active support s may increase social inclusion. Staff members need to understand how to support people to not only be more active and independent, but also to participate in social interactions in order to maintain and develop relationships.

In the current study, all paid workers who had positive relationships with the central participants were involved in repeated social interactions that were brief and mutually enjoyable. Rarely were these interactions the explicit focus of an activity; rather the focus was on a specific programmed activity (e.g. bowling, shopping). Social

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interaction may need to be seen as not only integral to many activities, but also as a meaningful activity or goal in itself. The consequence could be the legitimization of social interaction as an activity in which paid workers might engage with their clients with disabilities, and implementation of strategies to extend such interactions. Finlay et al. (2008) discussed how “playing a game” provided opportunities for paid workers to socially interact in a manner that met the institutionally mandated imperative of staff being seen as involved partners. The authors discussed how the staff’s perceived need to be visibly active may result in routine games being repeated even when the person with intellectual disability appeared disinterested. Thus hanging out, an activity in which people spend companionable time together in a mode directed by the person with an intellectual disability and on their own terms, may need to be similarly validated.

Since the research literature lacks examples of how social interaction with people who have limited formal communication skills occurs, the categories revealed in this paper are suggested as a basis for further investigation.

For paid workers, one of the outcomes of positive social interaction was increased enjoyment at work. Although having fun is rarely an explicit requirement in the workplace, having fun and developing relationships have been identified as important life areas in the Victorian Quality Framework for Disability Services (Department of Human Services, n.d.). This framework requires services to demonstrate outcomes for service users in the areas including life enjoyment and wellbeing. Thus, within Victoria, there are not only ethical imperatives to ensure people have fun and develop relationships, but also practice ones. Nonetheless, standards and quality requirement outcomes do not ensure that all service providers develop strategies that provide individuals with intellectual

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disability opportunities for positive engagement. In fact, the absence of fun in one of the group home environments was poignantly expressed by a family member who repeatedly struggled to develop opportunities for positive engagement for the family member. The family focussed on supporting the staff to increase the range of activities, spend time interacting with residents, facilitate interactions between peers, and utilize appropriate communication modes. However, this facilitator role remains ongoing for the family.

Overall, support workers have an increasing set of responsibilities for which many receive little training (Iacono, 2010), and social interaction is not always seen as a priority. Nevertheless, as social inclusion is a broad goal for the disability sectors in the developed world, the employment of workers who can generate an enjoyable and companionable atmosphere for adults with severe intellectual disability is warranted. Maintaining and increasing positive interactions may be achieved by ensuring attention is paid to the types of social interactions a person with severe intellectual disability prefers, ensuring that the workers involved are comfortable providing a specific type of interaction, and that there are opportunities for interaction within a chosen activity.

Some paid workers experienced enjoyment from interacting through playful humour that matched the needs of the person with a severe intellectual disability. One observed trait among those with positive relationships was an ability to engage in a light hearted manner, sometimes displayed as banter or joking. Similar to Newton et al.'s (1995) findings from studying relationships between community members and people with severe intellectual disability, some paid workers stated they related to the central participants just as they would to other friends. Although family and paid workers in the current study were not always sure whether the content of words used were understood

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by the people with severe intellectual disability, the laughter that ensued promoted similar, repeated interactions. The laughter also signalled a relaxed environment, which may have been an enabling factor in encouraging interaction. Bergen (2006) discussed how playfulness between children and adults may provide a safe environment in which to explore interaction and suggested that "it is also likely that there are some personality variables that make both "playfulness" and "sense of humor" more prevalent in some children and adults" (p. 153).

As the current study focussed only on positive relationships, it is not known whether staff who were less preferred would have been willing to adapt their style of interaction given instruction or mentoring. Observing interactions with less preferred others and studying the difference between the two groups could lead to a deeper understanding of positive social interactions and the discovery of additional ways to increase social interactions for people with limited communication skills.

Given the aging workforce in Australia and a projected shortage of available disability support workers, emphasising and supporting the opportunities for workplace satisfaction may assist in recruitment (Infohrm Consulting Services, 2008; National Disability Service, 2007). When recruiting new employees to provide individual support, specific social interaction skills may be sought that match the needs of the person with intellectual disability. However, as most support workers will support individuals with varying degrees of intellectual disability, training or mentoring in social interaction may need to be considered. Mentoring could be provided by those workers who already demonstrate positive social interaction skills, thus recognising and acknowledging their skills. The promotion of having fun in social interactions as being as important as the

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broader activity may give permission to paid staff to spend companionable time with the people they support. For some support workers, the ability to have fun while at work was appreciated. The expectation that participating in social interactions is a rewarding part of a support worker's role may make the role a more attractive career choice. That possibility is suggested by a comment made by a paid worker after she was observed dancing as she interacted with clients: "they pay me to be a *dag*ⁱⁱ". (FN/D6)

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Table 1 Characteristics of central participants and positive participant roles

Central Participants	Age	Participants	Family members	Roles of Paid Workers
Sandra	20	Family members 4	Mother	Home support workers 3
		Paid workers 8	Father	Day support workers 5
		Peers 2	Sibling	
		Total 14	Sibling's partner	
Brian	23	Family members 4	Mother	Home support workers 3
		Paid workers 8	Father	Day support workers 4
		Total 12	Sibling	Day program coordinator 1
Colin	27	Family members 4	Grandmother Grandmother	House coordinator 1
		Paid workers 3	Grandfather	Day support workers 2
		Total 7	Aunts 2	
Diane	44	Family members 4	Mother	Day support worker 1
		Paid workers 2	Father	Day program coordinator 1
		Total 6	Aunts 2	
Eric	24	Family members 5	Mother	Home support worker 1
		Paid workers 3	Father	Day support worker 1
		Peers 2	Stepfather	Day program coordinator 1
		Total 10	Grandmother Sibling	
Fayez	38	Family member 1	Sibling	Home coordinator 1
		Paid workers 5		Home support workers 3
		Peers 2		Day program coordinator 1
		Total 8		

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Footnotes

ⁱ FN represents the field notes; C the first letter of the central participant's name and 2 for the 2nd observation session

ⁱⁱ Dag is Australian slang for an "odd, eccentric or amusing person" (The Macquarie dictionary, 1981)