Supported employment, job preferences, job tenure and satisfaction

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Abstract
The relationships between job preferences, job satisfaction and job tenure were examined in a sample of 204 unemployed clients with severe mental illness randomly assigned to one of three vocational rehabilitation programs and followed for 2 years. These were the Individual Placement and Support (IPS) model of supported employment, a psychiatric rehabilitation program (PSR) and standard services (Standard). For clients in the IPS program, those who obtained jobs that matched their pre-employment preferences for type of work desired reported higher levels of job satisfaction and had longer job tenures than clients who obtained jobs that did not match their preferences. For clients in the PSR or Standard programs, job preferences were not related to job tenure or satisfaction. The findings replicate previous research in this area, and suggest that helping clients obtain work that matches their job preferences is an important ingredient of success in supported employment programs.

Introduction
Supported employment programs, such as the Individual Placement and Support (IPS) model (Becker & Drake, 1993), emphasize the importance of attending to client preferences regarding type of job, setting, working hours, and disclosure of psychiatric disability (Anthony & Blanch, 1987). Such preferences, especially with respect to type of preferred work, may be critical for at least two reasons. First, the aspirations of mental health consumers are often thwarted by the onset of their psychiatric illness, which can prematurely limit their educational attainment (Kessler et al., 1995), discourage them from pursuing ambitious goals, and lead them to passively accept the status quo. The essence of recovery, as defined by the consumer movement, is getting on with one’s life despite a psychiatric illness (Anthony, 1993; Copeland, 1997), including the pursuit of personal goals such as work, school, and social relationships. Helping clients obtain work that is interesting, meaningful, and engaging is consistent with the core theme of recovery that emphasizes the possibility of rebuilding one’s life after the trauma of mental illness.

Secondly, despite the success of supported employment programs in improving competitive work outcomes (Bond et al., 1997),...
job tenure is often relatively brief, in many cases lasting for only several weeks or months (Drake et al., 1996, 1999; Fabian & Wiedefield, 1989; Gervey & Bedell, 1994; McDonald-Wilson et al., 1991; Shafer & Huang, 1995). Brief job tenure is problematic because it often reflects client dissatisfaction with work, and it prevents advancement and the potential to earn higher wages. Relatively few client or situational factors have been consistently correlated with job tenure, with the exception of work experience (e.g. Anthony & Jensen, 1984; Xie et al., 1997). However, the role of client job preferences has been examined in only a few studies. Two studies found that matching clients to jobs based on their preferences resulted in longer job tenure (Becker et al., 1996; Gervey & Bedell, 1994), with one study failing to replicate this (Becker et al., 1998). Matching clients to jobs based on their personal preferences may lengthen job tenures by increasing the satisfaction they get from working, and enhancing their motivation to remain on the job.

The purpose of this article is to examine the relationship between job preferences, job tenure and work satisfaction in a randomized controlled study comparing the effects of three different vocational rehabilitation programs on work outcomes of persons with severe mental illness: the IPS model, a psychiatric rehabilitation center, and standard services. The present report goes beyond prior research in this area by evaluating the relationship between job preferences and outcome separately for three different vocational programs, rather than limiting the analyses to supported employment programs, and by including a large sample of Latino clients. Our hypotheses were that clients who obtained jobs that matched their preferences would demonstrate longer tenure on the job and higher levels of work satisfaction, regardless of the program to which they were assigned.

Method

The study was conducted at the Capitol Region Mental Health Center (CRMHC) in Hartford, Connecticut. All clients were receiving standard care for severe mental illness, including medication, case management, housing assistance, and access to psychiatric rehabilitation programs.

Clients

The study participants were 204 clients with severe mental illness. Criteria for participation included: (1) not currently employed in competitive work (defined by US Department of Labor); (2) interest in competitive employment; (3) attendance at two research introduction groups (Drake et al., 1994) designed to inform clients about the study. Clients were an average of 37.6 (SD=9.1) years old and had spent an average of 18.6 (SD=37.2) months in psychiatric hospitals before participation in the study. Seventy-eight (38.2%) clients were women, 148 (72.5%) had never married and 97 (47.5%) had completed high school. Ninety-one (44.6%) clients were African American, 64 (31.4%) were Latino, 43 (21.1%) were White, three (1.5%) were American Indian and three (1.5%) were other race/ethnicity. Regarding primary psychiatric diagnosis, established with the Structured Clinical Interview for DSM-IV (First et al., 1996), 109 (53.4%) clients had schizophrenia, 43 (21.1%) schizoaffective disorder, 35 (17.2%) major depression, 10 (4.9%) bipolar disorder and seven (3.5%) had other diagnoses.

Vocational programs

Following completion of the baseline assessment, clients were randomly assigned to
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One of three vocational programs for two years: Individual Placement and Support \( (n=68) \), a psychiatric rehabilitation center \( (n=67) \), or standard services \( (n=69) \).

**Individual Placement and Support (IPS).** IPS (Becker & Drake, 1993) is a model of supported employment that de-emphasizes extensive prevocational assessment and focuses on helping clients find competitive jobs based on their own preferences in integrated work settings. Once a client has found a job, the employment specialist provides support to help him or her succeed on the job, either off-site or on-site, and is available to the employer (if the client has consented) to address work-related issues. In the IPS model each client is assigned one employment specialist. Employment specialists function as members of client’s treatment teams in order to integrate psychiatric and vocational services. The IPS program was created at CRMHC for this study.

**Psychiatric Rehabilitation Center (PSR).** Clients assigned to PSR received vocational services at a local psychiatric rehabilitation center separate from the mental health center. The PSR provided a range of different services, including a vocational program based on the transitional employment model, groups aimed at developing better skills for interpersonal relationships and coping with mental illness, scheduled recreational activities, and informal socialization opportunities at the center, where all services were provided. Clients first became ‘members’ of the center and participated in work training crews there (e.g. janitorial, computer training). Then, clients worked in transitional jobs in the community to gain work experience (i.e. jobs secured and owned by the PSR, but filled by clients for temporary periods of time). Last, with the help and support of PSR staff, clients secured their own jobs.

**Standard Services (Standard).** Clients in Standard were provided access to any other of the vocational rehabilitation programs available to clients receiving services at CRMHC. Almost all clients in Standard received services from one of two different programs, both of which were provided at a different location than CRMHC. The first program provided supported employment services in a manner similar to IPS, except that employment specialists did not function as ‘members’ of clients’ treatment teams and had infrequent contact with the team. The second program obtained contracts to provide services for companies (e.g. janitorial), and then employed clients to fulfill these contracts, while providing ongoing job training and supervision.

**Measures**

At baseline prior work history was reviewed, including the number of paid jobs the client worked and the number of months worked over the past 2 years. During this interview, clients were asked to identify specific job preferences for the type of work they preferred, with no limit as to the number of preferences listed. Throughout the 2 years of the study information on work, including the type of job, wages, and hours worked, was obtained weekly through brief interviews with clients and vocational staff. In addition, job satisfaction was rated using the Indiana Job Satisfaction Scale (Resnick & Bond, 2001) 2 weeks after beginning a new job and bi-monthly thereafter as long as clients remained on the job.

The procedures for coding job preferences and job match were the same as in the prior two IPS studies (Becker et al., 1996, 1998). All job preferences stated by clients and all jobs obtained were coded with the three-digit occupational group’s code of the Dictionary of Occupational Titles (DOT) (US Depart-
The first digit of the code refers to occupational category. The second digit further classifies the job into occupational divisions, while the third digit refers to the occupational group’s code. For example, data entry clerk is coded 203. The first digit indicates the occupational category of clerical and sales occupations, the second digit indicates the occupational division of stenography, typing, filing, and related occupations, and the third digit indicates the occupational group of typists and typewriting-machine operators. A job was considered a ‘match’ if the first digit was the same as the first digit of one of the jobs specified as a preference by the client during the baseline interview. We also examined job preferences further by evaluating the match between the second and third digits of the DOT code. Each job preference was evaluated for whether it was a realistic job choice. Realistic job choices included entry level jobs or jobs that required skills the person possessed or some training for the individual to qualify for the job.

Results

We first compared work outcomes across the three different vocational programs. Secondly, we examined the number of job preferences given by clients at the baseline interview, and evaluated how many of these preferences were unrealistic. Thirdly, we examined the relationship between job preference match and job tenure within each of the three programs. Fourthly and last, we explored the relationship between job preference match and job satisfaction within each program.

There were significant differences in the percentage of clients who obtained employment at the three different vocational programs. Clients in IPS were most likely to obtain competitive work or any paid work (75.0% for both), followed by clients in Standard (27.5%, 53.6%, respectively), followed by clients in PSR (17.9%, 34.4%, respectively) (chi-squares (df=2) = 52.71, 22.53 respectively, p<0.0001).

Among the 204 clients, only five clients (2%) expressed no job preferences at the baseline interview. Among the 199 clients with job preferences, 67 (34%) had one job preference, 71 (36%) had two job preferences, 43 (22%) had three job preferences and 18 (9%) had four job preferences.

Clients identified a total of 410 job preferences. None of the job preferences was deemed unrealistic. Clients did not express preferences that were grandiose or inconsistent with their work histories. The job preferences were consistent with the types of jobs that people obtained, mostly entry level and consistent with the skill and educational levels of the sample.

Most of the jobs obtained were in service occupations (n=64, 58%), followed by clerical and sales jobs (n=26, 23%). Comparatively small numbers of clients obtained jobs in other categories, including agricultural (n=2), professional (n=2), processing (n=1), bench work (n=1), structural work (n=1), and miscellaneous (n=14).

To explore how successful clients were in obtaining work that matched their job preferences we classified clients into four groups, depending on the degree of match between their preference and the first job they obtained: exact match (all three digits of DOT code match), close match (first two digits match), rough match (first digit matches), and mismatched (first digit does not match). Among the 108 jobs obtained by clients who expressed a job preference at baseline, 31 (29%) had an exact match, seven (6%) had a close match, 38 (35%) had a rough match and 32 (30%) were mismatched.
The relationship between job match and job tenure was examined by comparing the job tenure of clients who obtained employment in their preferred area of work (‘matched’ jobs, including exact, close and rough matches) with clients who obtained employment in jobs in other areas (‘mismatched’ jobs), separately for each of the three vocational programs. Between groups t-tests were computed to compare the tenure of matched and mismatched groups. As we hypothesized that the clients in matched jobs would have longer job tenures than clients in mismatched jobs, one-tailed significance tests were employed.

Clients in IPS who obtained work that matched their area of interest had significantly longer job tenures than clients in mismatched jobs (means=28.94, 15.12 weeks, SD=35.00, 20.60, n=31, 17, respectively, t(46) = 1.72, p<0.05). In contrast, the relationship between job match and job tenure was not significant for clients in the Standard group (means=31.92 and 28.46 weeks, SD=33.17, 36.94, n=25, 13, respectively, ns). In the PSR group, only two clients obtained jobs that did not match their baseline job preference (mean=4.50 weeks working, SD=4.95), compared to 22 clients who obtained work that matched their preference (mean=22.25 weeks working, SD=22.04).

To evaluate differences in job satisfaction ratings between clients in matched compared to mismatched jobs, one-tailed t-tests were computed within each program, as above. For clients in the IPS program, there was a trend for those in matched jobs to report higher overall satisfaction on the Indiana Job Satisfaction Questionnaire than those in mismatched jobs (means=3.11, 2.88, SD=0.43, 0.40, respectively, t (22) =0.10). No such trend was present for the Standard program (means = 2.92, 2.82, SD=0.29, 0.08, respectively, ns). No job satisfaction ratings were available for clients in mismatched jobs at PSR program.

Discussion

Similar to our two previous studies of job preferences of clients participating in IPS (Becker et al., 1996, 1998), the vast majority of clients in this study (98%) expressed preferences for specific types of work, with the average client identifying two different preferences. Furthermore, all clients identified realistic job preferences. Thus, all clients with severe mental illness were able to articulate clear preferences in terms of the jobs they were interested in obtaining.

Clients in the IPS program who obtained work that matched their job preferences had significantly longer job tenures, almost twice as long, as the clients whose work did not match their baseline preference. Furthermore, as expected, there was a trend for the clients in matched jobs to indicate higher levels of work satisfaction than the clients in mismatched jobs. Both of these findings are in line with our first IPS study in New Hampshire (Becker et al., 1996), but not our second study in Washington, D.C. (Becker et al., 1998). However, the Washington, DC study was underpowered to detect differences in job tenure or satisfaction between matched and mismatched clients because relatively few clients obtained jobs that did not match their preferences (six of 146 clients). The higher rate of job match to client preferences in the PSR group than the IPS group, combined with the lower rate of work in PSR than IPS, suggests that clients in PSR who were not interested in the limited work options available in that program may have dropped out before obtaining work.

Client preferences play a critical role in supported employment programs, such as the IPS model (Becker & Drake, 1993) and pref-
ference for type of work appears important. Although work may be valued because of the increased income, the structure, and the social approval associated with work, these factors alone may be insufficient to sustain enduring periods of employment. The longer job tenure for clients who obtained work in their preferred area could reflect the importance of two critical factors: the meaning of work and the enjoyment derived from it. Much of the recovery movement is centered around getting beyond the label of mental illness and pursuing and developing meaning in one’s life (Carling, 1995; Deegan, 1988). Work that clients choose themselves, and that reflects their specific interests, may be more meaningful and fulfilling and may engender a greater sense of commitment and willingness to persist through difficult periods on the job. While work that is meaningful may also be more enjoyable, at least some types of work can be enjoyable without necessarily being meaningful. How much pleasure clients get from work may be as important or more than the secondary benefits, such as pay and structure, especially for clients with severe mental illness who often have a paucity of enjoyable activities in their lives.

Job preferences were related to job satisfaction and tenure for clients in the IPS program, but not in the Standard program, despite adequate numbers of clients in both matched and mismatched jobs in the latter program. The lack of an association between job match and either job tenure or satisfaction for the Standard program could be due to the program obtaining jobs only for clients with a stronger interest in working who were more easily engaged in the vocational process (possibly due to less ambivalence about working, or lower levels of psychiatric impairment), decreasing the importance of the match/mismatch distinction. If this interpretation is correct, it would suggest that job matching is especially important for clients who are more ambivalent about working or who have greater impairment.

In summary, the results underscore the importance of trying to find work that matches clients’ preferences in supported employment programs. A satisfactory fit between client job preferences and obtained work may make employment both more meaningful and more enjoyable, increasing motivation to remain on the job and to deal with any conflicts and obstacles that may arise. This increased motivation may permit more time to help clients develop the necessary supports and skills to deal with problems encountered on the job, thereby facilitating longer tenure and increased benefits of work, including relationships on the job, more income, and greater meaning of work.

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