

ABSTRACT

THESIS: The Impact of Employment Specialists in Helping Individuals with a Mental Illness Obtain Employment.

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Care for individuals with a severe mental illness has changed dramatically over the past 50 years. Deinstitutionalization gave patients the opportunity for independence and community reintegration, including employment. Employment specialists play an important role in assisting clients with obtaining employment but there has been limited research investigating employers' perceptions of employment specialists in the hiring process. 76 undergraduate and graduate students participated in a study in which referral source (employment specialist vs. friend) and criminal history (misdemeanor vs. felony) of an applicant recovering from schizophrenia were manipulated. Participants assumed the role of an employer, reviewed an application for a job (which included a brief video of the applicant and his employment specialist/friend), and made a hiring recommendation. Results showed no significant differences in hiring recommendations when the applicant was referred by his employment specialist than when he was referred by his friend, and criminal history of the applicant also did not play a significant role in hiring recommendations. There appeared to be a ceiling effect in that most participants were affirmative in hiring the applicant, although their prior attitudes toward people with mental illness also correlated with their hiring recommendation. Limitations of the study are discussed and directions for future research include: increasing the sample size, sampling professionals in the community and finding ways that are perhaps more ecologically valid and less susceptible to ceiling effects instead of using hypothetical case vignettes.