

IMPACT OF MENTAL AND PHYSICAL ILLNESS IN THE HIRING PROCESS

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One of the most common experiences of adulthood is that of work. Arguably, the most challenging part of work is the hiring process, even for adults without a mental illness. However, for individuals with a history of mental illness, obtaining meaningful work can be even more challenging (Diska & Rogers 1996; Gouvier, Systma-Jordan, & Mayville 2003). This discrepancy in hiring practices is often due to the negative stigma that persons with mental illness face (Baert, De Visschere, Schoors, Vandenberghe, & Omey 2016; Feldman & Crandall, 2007; Link, Phelan, Bresnahan, Stueve, & Prescosolido 1999; Rüsche, Angermeyer, & Corrigan 2005). Stigma against mental health disorders deepens the struggle of such individuals in obtaining a job. In addition to individuals with mental illnesses having difficulty in obtaining a job, persons with a physical disability also report challenges in the hiring process (Bjelland, Bruyere, Von Schrader, Houtenville, Ruiz-Quintanilla, & Webber 2010; Gouvier, Sytisma-Jordan, & Mayville 2003). Clearly, the presence of an impairment negatively impacts such individuals in the hiring process. However, it is unclear if there is a difference between individuals with a mental disorder and physical disabilities in the hiring process when all factors are controlled. The present study aims to explore whether there is a difference in hiring rates for applicants with a physical disability, for applicants with a mental illness, and individuals with no disclosed impairment.

The literature shows that individuals with mental and physical disorders are viewed negatively in the hiring process. Diska and Rogers (1996) found that employers varied widely in their attitudes towards hiring people with a mental illness. Through developing the Employer Attitude Questionnaire, the study analyzed several factors that contributed to hesitations employers held in hiring employees with

psychiatric illnesses, including symptomology, work performance, administrative concerns, and work personality. Results indicated significant differences in attitudes of hiring applicants who disclosed a mental illness when compared to applicants with no illness disclosed, such that employers had more concerns with applicants who had a mental illness. They also found that employers who had existing employees with a mental illness had less concerns with hiring a new employee with a mental illness, indicating that familiarity aided the removal of the stigma of those with mental health concerns. However, Scheid (2005) found that often employers will hire individuals with mental illness for fear of legal repercussions rather than because they believe it is the right, moral thing to do.

Compared to mental illness, Gouvier, Sytsma-Jordan, & Mayville (2003) found that the presence of a disability also negatively impacted such individuals in the hiring process. However, when different disabilities were compared, applicants with a chronic mental illness were rated more negatively than applicants with a physical disability (developmental disability, back injury, or closed head injury) across all categories: interpersonal skills, job performance, negative evaluations, and employability rating summary score. This indicates that while applicants with any disability were viewed negatively in the hiring process, applicants with a mental illness were viewed even more negatively than their counterparts with a physical disability.

One of the reasons accounting for such a discrepancy in the hiring process is stigma against mental illness. Corrigan, Markowitz, Watson, Rowan, & Kubiak (2003) found that respondents viewed persons with mental illness with fear and anger, and blamed them for the onset of their mental illness. These reactions decreased helping responses and increased discriminatory actions towards individuals with a mental illness. A similar study conducted by Link, Bresnahan, Stueve, and Pescosolido (1999) showed that while the general public recognizes the presence of mental illness, stereotypes of dangerousness and a desire for social distance from such individuals exists. Stigma was found to be especially prominent in individuals who had also been incarcerated. A study by Batastini, Bolanos, and Morgan (2014) found that psychoeducation regarding mental illness and criminal history appeared to reduce stigma against individuals with a criminal history but not for those with a mental illness, indicating that the stigma against mental illness is rooted especially deeply. A study by Cook, Razzano, Straiton, and Ross (1994) found that while there are concerns in the hiring process when hiring individuals with a mental illness,

these concerns were not problematic in the long term after the individuals were hired. This indicates that some of the initial concerns of employers in the hiring process may not actually be cause for concern in the long-term. Nonetheless, this belief persists across employers and negatively affects applicants with a mental illness in the hiring process. However, this perception of dangerousness seems unlikely to affect applicants with a physical disability, as they may simply not be viewed as a threat.

The aim of the present study was to examine what role mental illness plays in the hiring process. The impact of mental illness was compared to the presence of a physical illness to further investigate whether this difference in hiring decisions extended to individuals with physical illness. Furthermore, it was predicted that individuals with a mental illness would have a significantly lower rate of hiring compared to individuals with a physical illness due to the stigma surrounding the presence of mental illness.

Method

Participants

Participants were 75 undergraduate students of both sexes from a private Midwestern university. One participant failed to complete the manipulation check, bringing the final sample size to 74. Participants received partial course credit in their Introductory Psychology class.

Procedure

After being seated in the laboratory in the Psychology Department, participants read the consent form and basic instructions. Participants were asked to assume the role of a hiring manager and were given job application materials, including a job description, resume, and job application. The job selected was in human resources because this job requires working with other people and technical skills. Participants were randomly assigned to one of three experimental conditions: evaluating a job applicant with a disclosed physical disability (epilepsy), evaluating an applicant with a disclosed mental illness (Bipolar disorder), or to a control condition in which no physical or mental illness was disclosed in the application. Bipolar disorder was chosen as the mental illness condition because Bipolar disorder is often considered one of the more serious mental illnesses with which most participants may be familiar. Epilepsy was chosen because it is a

neurological condition that most participants would be familiar with. In each condition, participants received the same generic job description along with a job application and resume. The applicant was made to look highly qualified for the job. All factors were held constant across conditions except for the disclosure of the physical or mental disability at the bottom of the job application for the corresponding experimental conditions. After participants reviewed the materials for 10 minutes, all materials were collected. Next, participants completed an adapted form of the Employer Satisfaction Questionnaire (Diska & Rogers 1996) and asked if they would hire this applicant. There were 39 items in the original study, but only 20 items of most interest to the researchers and relevance to the study were used in this study. On a scale from 1 (not a concern) to 5 (great concern) for an employer when hiring an employee, subjects assessed multiple items in the areas of symptomology, work personality, administrative concerns, and work performance. Sample items include “maintaining emotional stability,” “getting along with coworkers and supervisors,” “being accepted by the public or customers,” and “possessing adequate problem-solving skills.” Finally, all participants were given a manipulation check to ensure the disclosure was seen. This check asked participants to recall if the applicant disclosed a disability and if one was disclosed, if the disability was mental or physical.

Results

Employer Attitudes Assessment

The means and standard deviations for employer attitudes are shown in Figure 1. To test the hypothesis that individuals with a mental or physical illness will be negatively affected in the hiring process, a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted. One participant failed the manipulation check and was thus excluded from all analyses. All results replicated regardless of whether or not this participant was included in the analyses. Results indicated that there is a significant difference in employer attitudes towards applicants who disclosed having a mental illness ($M = 3.73$) when compared to employer attitudes toward individuals with a physical disorder ($M = 4.09$) and the applicants who did not disclose a disability ($M = 4.06$; $F(2, 71) = 4.467$, $p = 0.02$). Post-hoc analyses revealed that employer attitudes towards subjects in the mental illness condition significantly negatively differed from employer attitudes towards subjects in the physical illness condition ($p = 0.009$), and that employer attitudes

towards subjects in the mental illness condition significantly differed from employer attitudes towards subjects in the control condition, ($p = 0.018$). Thus, results of the present study lend support for the hypothesis that individuals with mental illnesses are negatively affected in the hiring process.

Subscales of the Employer Attitude Questionnaire

The Employer Attitude Questionnaire assessed attitudes toward symptomology, work personality, administrative concerns, and work personality. Further analyses were conducted to determine if there was a significant difference between mental illness, physical disability and the control on these subscales. The means and standard deviations for the subscales are shown in Table 1. Least significant difference (LSD) tests were conducted for the mental illness condition within the subcategories of the Employer Attitude Questionnaire. For the Symptomology category, results from the mental illness condition indicated significant differences between the physical condition ($p < 0.001$) and the control condition ($p = 0.002$). In the Work Personality category, the results from the mental illness condition differed significantly from the physical illness condition ($p < 0.001$). In the administrative concerns subcategory of the Employer Attitude Questionnaire, results from the mental illness category differed significantly from the control condition ($p = 0.003$). For the Work Performance category, there was no significant difference between the conditions.

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Table 1
Means and Standard Deviations for Subcategories of the Employer Attitude Questionnaire across Conditions

	Physical	Mental	Control
Symptomology	3.93 (0.56)	3.30 (0.53)	3.81 (0.55)
Work Personality	4.53 (0.44)	4.01 (0.59)	4.20 (0.43)
Administrative Concerns	3.76 (0.58)	3.54 (0.61)	4.03 (0.46)
Work Performance	4.15 (0.60)	4.01 (0.59)	4.21 (0.65)

Note: Main effect of mental condition, $p = .05$. Lower scores indicate more negative attitudes on the Employer Attitude Questionnaire.

Overall Hirability

A Chi-Square Test of Independence was conducted to test whether hirability decisions varied as a function of conditions. The relationship between variables was nonsignificant, $\chi^2(2, N = 76) = 0.47$, $p = 0.788$. These results indicate that subjects across all conditions were biased towards hiring the applicant, indicating no difference in hiring decision patterns across conditions.

Discussion

The findings of this study present evidence that the presence of a mental illness negatively affects applicants in the hiring process if such an illness is disclosed. Results indicated significant differences in employer attitudes when comparing applicants with a mental illness to those with a physical disability or none indicated, such that applicants with a mental illness were viewed more negatively than other applicants. Further analysis of the subscales of the Employer Attitude Questionnaire (EAQ; Diska & Rogers 1996) revealed significant negative differences in the categories of symptomology, work personality, and administrative concerns. While there was no significant difference in the hirability of an applicant with a mental illness compared to an applicant with a physical disability or no disability indicated, the results of the overall EAQ and its subscales indicate that there are significant negative attitudes that exist when employers are evaluating job applicants with a mental illness. This indicates that while employers are not outwardly discriminating against individuals with a mental illness, they still hold negative attitudes of such applicants. These attitudes could impact the rankings of applicants in the review process and indirectly impact hiring. However, these negative attitude toward applicants did not extend to applicants with a physical disability. There was no significant difference between applicants in the physical disability condition and the control condition, yet there was still a significant difference between applicants with a mental illness and applicants with a physical disability. These findings indicate that it is not simply any impairment that hinders an applicant in the hiring process, but specifically a mental illness.

The present findings are consistent with previous research on the hirability of individuals with a mental illness (Diska & Rogers 1996; Gouvier, Systma-Jordan, & Mayville 2003) that demonstrate that such individuals have difficulty obtaining meaningful work. This particular

study fills an important gap in the literature by directly contrasting the presence of a mental illness with both a physical illness and a control condition. This additional element clarifies that the presence of a mental illness greatly negatively impacts applicants with a mental illness far more than other applicants without a mental illness.

Limitations and Future Research

While significant effects were obtained in this study, there were a few limitations. The main limitation of this study was the small sample size. While significant effects were still obtained with the limited sample size, future research would certainly benefit from a larger sample size from which results could be more generalizable to the population. Another limitation of the study was that there was no demographic information obtained from participants. A breakdown of age and gender would clarify if the results obtained varied as a function of such demographic information. A final limitation of the present study is that since the sample was obtained with undergraduate students, it is unlikely that significant number of them had experience hiring employees, thereby limiting the study's generalizability.

Future lines of research could explore whether the hirability of persons with a mental or physical illness varies depending on the illness disclosed. It is unclear with our data if the results obtained reflect the hirability of persons with any mental illness or physical disorder or only Bipolar disorder or epilepsy. With the large range of both mental and physical illnesses that exist, there could be a range of responses from employers in hiring applicants with such disorders. This study could also be replicated with employers who have experience with the hiring process, which would generalize the study to the wider population.

While the stigma against mental illnesses seems to be shrinking in recent years, the results obtained in this study indicate that individuals with a mental illness remain at a clear disadvantage in the hiring process. While employers are not outwardly discriminatory in that they will not hire the applicant, they still hold prejudicial attitudes toward such individuals. Changes are needed at the cultural level to mitigate such attitudes from negatively influencing applicants in the hiring process in still subtle ways.

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