



## Attitudes toward hiring applicants with mental illness and criminal justice involvement: The impact of education and experience



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### ARTICLE INFO

Available online 13 March 2014

#### Keywords:

Stigma  
Mental illness  
Criminal justice  
Employment

### ABSTRACT

Individuals with mental health diagnoses, as well as those involved in the criminal justice system, experience a number of barriers in the recovery and reintegration progress, including access to stable, prosocial employment opportunities. Employment for these populations is important for establishing financial security, reducing unstructured leisure time, increasing self-worth, and improving interpersonal skills. However, research has demonstrated that individuals with psychiatric and/or criminal backgrounds may experience stigmatizing attitudes from employers that impede their ability to find adequate work. This study aimed to evaluate stigmatizing beliefs toward hypothetical applicants who indicated a mental health history, a criminal history, or both, as well as the effectiveness of psychoeducation in reducing stigma. Participants consisted of 465 individuals recruited from a large university who completed a series of online questions about a given applicant. Results of this study varied somewhat across measures of employability, but were largely consistent with extant research suggesting that mental illness and criminal justice involvement serve as deterrents when making hiring decisions. Overall, psychoeducation appeared to reduce stigma for hiring decisions when the applicant presented with a criminal history. Unfortunately, similar findings were not revealed when applicants presented with a psychiatric or a psychiatric and criminal history. Implications and limitations of these findings are presented, along with suggestions for future research.

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### 1. Introduction

A recent National Comorbidity Survey (NCS) examining lifetime prevalence rates for DSM-IV disorders found that about half of Americans will meet the criteria for a mental disorder at some point in their life (Kessler et al., 2005). Persons with a serious mental illness not only struggle to cope with the symptoms of their disorder, but they must also overcome societal misconceptions regarding their mental status (Corrigan & Watson, 2002; Rüsçh, Angermeyer, & Corrigan, 2005). These interrelated problems make it difficult for someone with a mental illness to live a satisfactory quality of life (Corrigan & Watson, 2002; Rüsçh et al., 2005). Preexisting beliefs about individuals labeled as having a mental illness can have the potential to negatively inform society's outlook on that individual for the rest of his or her life (Link, Cullen, Frank, & Wozniak, 1987; Link & Phelan, 2001). Stigmatization against persons with mental health problems can present major barriers in relationships, work, and accommodations (Hayward & Bright, 1997; Overton & Medina, 2008).

The negative impact of stigma is also seen in persons who are involved in the criminal justice system. Currently, about 1 in every 32 adults in the United States is incarcerated or sanctioned under community supervision requirements (i.e., parole or probation; Glaze, 2011). Discrimination may occur towards these individuals, in large part, as a result of their criminal convictions. In turn, a criminal record can create long-term stigma toward those who have broken the law over the course of their life (Homant & Kennedy, 1982; Pager, 2003). Stigma towards this population can cause barriers to successful community reentry, including the ability to acquire job and financial security (Graffam, Shinkfield, Lavelle, & Hardcastle, 2004; Rakis, 2005; Shivy et al., 2007; Varghese, Hardin, Bauer, & Morgan, 2009).

Generally, stigma refers to the negative effects from a label placed on a group of individuals (Hayward & Bright, 1997). Link and Phelan (2001) suggest that stigma exists when “elements of labeling, stereotyping, separating, status loss, or discrimination occur within a power situation” (p. 377). Stigma can manifest in two common ways: (1) public stigma, which speaks to the general public's outlook on persons with mental illness or those with criminal behaviors, and (2) self-stigma, which can be perpetuated by the individual's outlook on himself or herself (Corrigan, 2004; Corrigan & Shapiro, 2010). Both of these types of stigma can be formed through a combination of stereotyping, prejudice, or discrimination. Such attitudes, whether

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public or private, have the potential to rob these individuals of certain life opportunities when compared to the general population, specifically those with a mental illness or criminal justice involvement (Corrigan, 2004; Corrigan & Shapiro, 2010; Corrigan & Watson, 2002; Overton & Medina, 2008). Overall, the full effects of stigma are often underestimated by social scientists within this field of research (Link & Phelan, 2001); however, studies have continued to show that stigmatization can have a significant detrimental impact on the social and psychological functioning of an individual (Alexander & Link, 2003; Corrigan & Shapiro, 2010; Couture & Penn, 2003; Rüsçh et al., 2005).

Another problem faced by these populations is the blurring line between the mental health and the criminal justice systems. It is commonly accepted that persons with a mental illness are over-represented in the criminal justice system, and in one nationwide survey, Torrey, Kennard, Eslinger, Lamb, and Pavle (2010) found that 40% of individuals with a serious mental illness were incarcerated at some point in their lives. Persons exhibiting symptoms and signs of serious mental illness are more likely to be arrested by law enforcement (Teplin, 1984; White, Chafetz, Collins-Bride, & Nickens, 2006). Consequently, offenders with a mental illness likely experience compounded stigmatizing attitudes stemming from the fact that they have both psychiatric and criminogenic needs (Teplin, 1984). These factors combined likely further impede access to employment, healthcare, and housing.

The present study examined the negative effects of stigma that can ultimately lead to barriers in job attainment and maintenance (see Graffam, Shinkfield, & Hardcastle, 2008; Varghese et al., 2009) – both of which are considered vital components of recovery and/or successful community reentry for individuals who have a mental illness, prior criminal justice involvement, or both (Bonta & Andrews, 2007; Dunn, Wewiorski, & Rogers, 2008; Graffam et al., 2004; Stuart, 2006). Research has shown that those labeled as “mentally ill” are underemployed and earn less income (Alexander & Link, 2003; Link, 1982; Link & Phelan, 2001; Overton & Medina, 2008). It should be noted that difficulty in securing employment can be attributed to other factors beyond stigma, such as impairments related to psychiatric symptomology, underdeveloped interpersonal skills, diminished cognitive capacity, and education level – all of which can be regarded as liabilities when entering the labor force (Baron & Salzer, 2002). However, even those who are able to successfully cope with their mental health symptoms in order to maintain employment may still be faced with discrimination from employers when seeking or maintaining job opportunities (Corrigan, 2004; Rüsçh et al., 2005). McAlpine and Warner (2002) reported that approximately 36% of individuals between the ages of 18 to 55 who presented with some form of psychiatric illness indicated discrimination at their place of employment within the past five years.

The chance for ex-offenders to secure employment seems equally difficult. Although the direct relationship between employment and recidivism is not completely understood, it is generally accepted that stable, prosocial employment increases the likelihood that ex-offenders will pursue law-abiding, productive lives within the community (Bonta & Andrews, 2007; Rakis, 2005). For example, Uggen (2000) found that older offenders who were provided with minimal employment opportunities (i.e., minimum wage jobs within the service industry or construction) were less likely to reoffend compared to their same-age counterparts who were not afforded the same employment opportunities. Furthermore, society will likely benefit from increased employment of these individuals in the form of enhanced public safety (Graffam et al., 2004).

In recent years, however, it has become apparent that post-release offenders experience a difficult transition back into society (Rakis, 2005). After a year of release from incarceration, nearly 60% of ex-offenders in the U.S. remain unemployed (Petersilia, 2001). In a study examining employers' attitudes towards hiring ex-offenders, Holzer, Raphael, and Stoll (2004) found that over 60% of employers indicated that they would “probably not” or “definitely not” hire an individual with a criminal record (p. 7). A similar study (Varghese et al., 2009)

revealed a significant bias among employers when making hiring decisions about applicants with prior criminal charges versus applicants with no prior charges. Other research examining perceived employability (Graffam et al., 2008) found that individuals with intellectual or psychiatric disabilities and those with prior criminal justice involvement were rated the least likely to secure a job compared to those job candidates who either had a chronic illness or a physical/sensory disability. Another study (Homant & Kennedy, 1982) found that ex-offenders were more stigmatized than ex-mental patients by students majoring in criminal justice rather than students in business, science, or helping professions.

Former inmates also tend to have inadequate employment histories and a limited range of skills. When coupled with a criminal record, these deficits can lead to exponential challenges in finding or keeping a job (Holzer, Raphael, & Stoll, 2003; Pager, 2003; Visher, Winterfield, & Coggeshall, 2005). In fact, Giguere and Dundes (2002) found that 82% of employers were concerned that ex-offenders would not possess the appropriate interpersonal skills when interacting with customers and 81% indicated discomfort at the thought of having an ex-offender working in their business. It appears that the indication of a previous criminal record is a major obstacle when seeking employment (Pager, 2003).

Given the frequency of psychiatric and criminal involvement, as well as the growing number of persons at the intersection of the mental health and criminal justice systems, it is necessary to investigate how employment biases can be reduced. Existing research suggests that general stigma can be minimized through personal contact and experience (Alexander & Link, 2003; Rüsçh et al., 2005). For example, Alexander and Link (2003) demonstrated that contact with the mentally ill could alleviate stereotyped fears and concerns about safety by providing more accurate, real world experiences with these individuals. Likewise, education can be used to reverse socially driven, false perceptions by instructing the public about the true potential and capabilities of stigmatized populations (Corrigan & Shapiro, 2010).

Therefore, the purposes of this study were (1) to evaluate the possible cumulative effects associated with the labels “offender” and “mentally ill” in hypothetical hiring decisions made by a college sample, and (2) to test the effects of psychoeducation and personal experience on the likelihood that a hypothetical job applicant with a mental illness and/or prior criminal justice involvement will be considered for hire. Although there is a need to examine the existence of relevant biases towards hiring individuals with mental illnesses and/or criminal justice involvement among employers, using a college sample to examine general attitudes towards hiring these individuals may be informative given that participants may be involved in the hiring process in their future careers. Furthermore, results obtained from this sample could be representative of general public perceptions towards hiring individuals who have psychiatric or criminal histories. Therefore, these general perceptions may also parallel some aspects of actual perceptions held by employers.

In general, we hypothesized that, regardless of education or experience, the job applicant with a history of both mental illness and criminal involvement will be rated the least desirable candidate for the job (as measured by multiple indicators of employability described below), followed by the applicant with only criminal justice involvement (see Holzer et al., 2004), then the applicant with only mental illness. We further hypothesized that, with the addition of brief psychoeducation, the desirability of the applicant will increase across all conditions. Lastly, we hypothesized that prior experience with a mentally ill or criminal justice involved person would be associated with less stigmatized attitudes toward the respective job applicant. Understanding the nature of employment bias may provide insight regarding general support for re-integrating these populations into the workplace, as well as the mechanisms underlying hiring decisions. Ultimately, this study hopes to bring awareness to the negative impact that public stigma can have on persons with mental illness and/or criminal justice involvement.

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