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Predictors of sustainable work participation of young adults with developmental disorders



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ABSTRACT

For individuals with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) work participation is a challenge, as shown by their low employment rates. The aim of this study was to investigate which factors predict work participation, finding work as well as maintaining employment, of young adults with ASD as well as ADD. We obtained data on 563 individuals with ASD and/or ADD, aged 15–27 years. The follow-up period ranged from 1.25 to 2.75 years. Being male (for ADD), living independently (for ASD), expecting to be able to work fulltime (for ASD and ADD), high perceived support from parents and perceived positive attitude of parents regarding work (for ASD and ADD) and perceived positive attitude of social environment (for ADD) predicted finding work by the young adult, while being male (for ADD) and higher age (for ASD and ADD) and positive attitude of social environment regarding work (for ASD) predicted maintaining employment. Both personal and social factors predict work outcome and should be taken into account when supporting individuals with DD in their transition to work.

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1. Introduction

Developmental disorders (DD) are common and increasing, with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) and attention deficit hyperactivity disorders (ADHD) showing the most significant and successive increases over time (Boyle et al., 2011). In the last decade, the prevalence rate of ASD has increased considerably to 11% (Manning-Courtney et al., 2013; Tchaconas & Adesman, 2013); for ADHD prevalence rates of 3% to 12% are reported, with a 33% increase in prevalence from 1997–1999 to 2006–2008 (Al-Yagon et al., 2013; Boyle et al., 2011; De Graaf et al., 2008; Willcutt, 2012). Moreover, ASD and ADHD seem to be the two most disabling conditions among developmental disorders. However, in the past decade a discussion has risen whether ASD and ADHD are two different disorders, as in the DSM-IV, or whether they are two different dimensions of the same developmental disorder. Several studies reported a considerable prevalence of ADHD symptoms, i.e. inattention and hyperactivity, in individuals with ASD (Fombonne, Simmons, Ford, Meltzer, & Goodman, 2001; Gillberg & Billstedt, 2000; Lecavalier, 2006; Sverd, 2003). Furthermore, many individuals with ADHD share autistic traits and experience difficulty in social interaction, considered a significant element of ASD (Gjervan, Torgersen, Nordahl, & Rasmussen, 2012; Reiersen, Constantino, Grimmer, Martin, & Todd, 2008; Ronald, Edelson, Asherson, & Saudino, 2010).

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It is well-established that individuals diagnosed with ASD as well as ADHD suffer from problems in daily life functioning and that this hampers their work participation (Barkley, Fischer, Smallish, & Fletcher, 2006; Boeltzig, Timmons, & Butterworth, 2008; Burke, Andersen, Bowen, Howard, & Allen, 2010; Cimera & Cowan, 2009; De Graaf et al., 2008; Frazier, Youngstrom, Glutting, & Watkins, 2007; Gjervan et al., 2012; Halmoy, Fasmer, Gillberg, & Haavik, 2009; Kuriyan et al., 2013).

1.1. Autism spectrum disorders and employment

Individuals with ASD experience impairments in social and communicative skills that limit their work functioning, leading to underutilization of skills and a limited range of work experiences (Burke et al., 2010; Cimera & Cowan, 2009). Among people with ASD, research showed employment rates from less than 10% to 50% (Billstedt, Gillberg, & Gillberg, 2005; Engstrom, Ekstrom, & Emilsson, 2003; Shattuck et al., 2012; Wagner, Newman, Cameto, Garza, & Levine, 2005). These employment rates are considerably lower than the employment rate in the general population which exceeds 65% in most developed countries (Lysaght, Ouellette-Kuntz, & Lin, 2012). Furthermore, individuals with ASD represent a significant percentage of the young adults claiming disability benefits; data of the Dutch Social Security Institute suggest that about 15% of the young disabled applying for a social security benefit has ASD (UWV, 2011). Moreover, individuals with ASD experienced unemployment and underemployment more often, worked far fewer hours than most of the other disability groups and the majority of jobs were unskilled and poorly paid (Burke et al., 2010; Cimera & Cowan, 2009; Eaves & Ho, 2008; Howlin, Alcock, & Burkin, 2005; Taylor & Seltzer, 2011). When studying results of studies which examined variables related to employment among persons with autism, personal as well as social factors were reported. Limited cognitive ability, lack of drive, limited functional independence, low parental support and institutionalization were found to hinder individuals with autism in their work outcomes (Holwerda, van der Klink, Groothoff, & Brouwer, 2012). However, limited cognitive ability was the only strong personal predictor consistently found for work outcome for individuals with ASD.

1.2. Attention deficit disorders and employment

For people with ADHD employment rate estimates ranged between 22 and 54% (Barkley et al., 2006; Gjervan et al., 2012; Halmoy et al., 2009). Individuals with ADHD also represent a significant percentage of the young adults claiming disability benefits (Gjervan et al., 2012; Halmoy et al., 2009). The Dutch Social Security Institute reported that 8% of the young disabled applying for a social security benefit was diagnosed with ADHD (UWV, 2011). Moreover, young adults with ADHD, who are employed, often attain lower status employment, earn lower wages, work part-time more often and experience more unstable employment situations compared to those without (Barkley et al., 2006; Gjervan et al., 2012; Halmoy et al., 2009; Kuriyan et al., 2013).

Prospective longitudinal studies regarding ADHD and employment identified mostly factors related to diagnosis and treatment (Barkley et al., 2006; Gjervan et al., 2012; Halmoy et al., 2009; Hechtman, 1999; Kuriyan et al., 2013; Paternite, Loney, Salisbury, & Whaley, 1999). Few studies took personal factors, as education (Kuriyan et al., 2013) and IQ (Hechtman, 1999), and social factors, as parental involvement in school (Liptak, Kennedy, & Dosa, 2011), socioeconomic status and family adversity (Hechtman, 1999) into account. However, personal and social factors are frequently mentioned by professionals working with these individuals as important predictors for work outcome.

1.3. Sustainable employment

Despite the poor employment outcomes noted above and the high and increasing number of disability claimants in different countries, part of these young adults diagnosed with ASD or ADHD are able to participate in work. As work participation is considered to be an increasingly important health outcome (WHO, 2001) and is associated with benefits which include learning of new skills, development of social relationships and being able to contribute to society (Carter & Lunsford, 2005; Stephens, Collins, & Dodder, 2005), it is important to stimulate young people with disabilities to be active in work. To be able to increase the work participation among individuals with DD, it is important to know which factors influence work outcome in this group and whether these factors are comparable for individuals with ASD and those with ADHD.

Moreover, these prospective longitudinal studies mentioned above, assessed occupational outcomes as unemployment status (Paternite et al., 1999), number of jobs held (Barkley et al., 2006), percentage of job loss (Barkley et al., 2006) or occupational status (Hansen, Weiss, & Last, 1999; Kuriyan et al., 2013; Liptak et al., 2011; Taylor & Seltzer, 2011). None of these focused on sustainable work participation. Sustainable work participation includes finding and maintaining employment over a period of time. As those working with ASD or ADHD often have difficulty maintaining employment (Biederman et al., 2008; Kuriyan et al., 2013; Shattuck et al., 2012) and factors predicting finding work may differ from factors influencing maintaining employment, it is important to take sustainable work participation into account as well.

Therefore, the aim of this study was to investigate which personal and social factors predict work participation, finding work as well as maintaining employment, of young adults with DD, and to examine whether the results for the subgroups of ASD and ADD converge or diverge.

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