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Race differentials in employment effects of psychological distress: A study of non-Hispanic Whites and African-Americans in the United States

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Abstract

This study used two sub-samples of African-Americans and non-Hispanic Whites from the 2002–2003 U.S. National Survey on Drug Use and Health to examine differential effects of psychological distress (PD) on employment. Failing to reject exogeneity of PD in the employment specifications, we estimated standard probit of employment. We found that PD significantly reduced employment probability regardless of race; but the reduction was 7.4% for African-Americans, compared to 5.3% for Whites. Using individuals with PD only, we estimated the Oaxaca–Blinder decomposition and found endowments explained 61% of employment differences between Whites with PDs and African-Americans with PDs while 39% of these differences were due to unexplained factors. These findings suggest that targeted policies for prevention and effective treatment of PD might yield higher employment benefits for minorities.

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1. Introduction

Psychiatric disorders affect more than 25% of the US population in any given year and may adversely impact labor market outcomes (Department of Health and Human Services [DHHS], 1999). The indirect costs of mental disorders to the US economy amounted to an estimated \$79 billion in 1990, with loss of productivity due to illness representing 80% of these costs (Rice & Miller, 1998). Bartel and Taubman (1979) in one of the first studies indicated that individuals diagnosed as either psychotic or neurotic had a lower probability of being in the labor force, received lower wages, and worked fewer weekly hours. Most recently, using national surveys such as the Epidemiologic Catchment Area (ECA) study and the National Comorbidity Survey (NCS), researchers found that mental illness negatively affected labor force participation, employment as well as workers' annual income (Ettner, Frank, & Kessler, 1997; Frank & Gertler, 1991; Mitchell & Anderson, 1989). A study by Alexandre and French (2001) conducted in Miami-Dade County, Florida, found that depression significantly decreased the probability of employment as well as the number of weeks worked in the past year. Mental illness was also linked to a variety of negative functional outcomes, including longer disability periods and greater functional limitations (Conti & Burton, 1994). Evidence indicates that work outcomes were consistently better for patients whose mental illness has remitted (Berndt et al., 1998).

Ethnic and racial minorities face socio-economic conditions that may influence aspects of both mental illness and labor markets differentially. Almost one-quarter of African-Americans are poor; about twice as many African-Americans do not have health insurance as compared to Whites (U.S. Bureau of Census, 2005). Epidemiologic data suggest little difference in the onset of psychiatric disorders by race/ethnicity; however, minority groups are more likely to experience cumulative negative health consequences (NIDA, 2003). Hypothesizing that psychological distress affects employment and that its effects vary by race, the present study seeks to estimate the differential effects of psychological distress on employment for subsamples of African-Americans and non-Hispanic Whites.

2. Analytical framework

The starting point of the empirical work is a reduced-form specification of employment written as follows (see Mullahy & Sindelar, 1996):

$$E_i = E_i(\text{PD}_i, X_i, \mu_i) \quad (1)$$

where E is employment; PD represents psychological distress; X is a vector of exogenous variables that include standard human capital labor supply covariates (e.g., age, gender education, marital status, household composition), health conditions, and geographic controls; μ is unobserved characteristics and preferences. The subscript i refer to the individuals.

The effect of PD on E ($\partial E/\partial \text{PD} = E_{\text{PD}}$) estimated from standard regressions of Eq. (1) will be $\partial E/\partial \text{PD} = E_{\text{PD}} + E_\varepsilon \partial \varepsilon/\partial \text{PD}$ if $\partial \varepsilon/\partial \text{PD}$ is non-zero and such estimate will be biased. Indeed, M will be endogenously determined ($\partial \varepsilon/\partial \text{PD} \neq 0$) if unmeasured individual-level factors are correlated with psychological distress and employment (Staiger & Stock, 1997). In fact, psychological distressed and non-psychological distressed individuals may differ in unobserved

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