

The role of cognition and adaptive behavior in employment of people with mental retardation

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Received 27 November 2006; received in revised form 1 December 2006; accepted 5 December 2006

Abstract

Few studies have specifically investigated the cognitive correlates of employment for persons with mental retardation. To evaluate the relationship of cognitive and adaptive functioning to work status, 56 competitively employed and 55 unemployed individuals with mental retardation underwent a comprehensive neuropsychological and adaptive behavioral evaluation. Results of multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) revealed significant group differences in cognitive and adaptive behavioral domains controlling for gender and severity of mental retardation. Follow-up ANCOVAs showed that the employed group performed significantly better than the unemployed group on measures of attention, memory, verbal comprehension, visual perception, and adaptive behavior. Using discriminant function analysis, 73.2 percent of the employed and 76.4 percent of the unemployed people were predicted correctly. These results suggest that adaptive behavior and specific aspects of cognitive functioning are significant predictors of successful employment for persons with mental retardation.

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Keywords: Mental retardation; Supported employment; Cognition; Adaptive behavior

1. Introduction

Extensive research has demonstrated that gainful employment often leads to better quality of life and community integration in individuals with mental retardation, as evinced by significantly

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higher levels for self-perceived control, overall life satisfaction, social participation, adaptive skills, and self-perceived productivity (Kober & Eggleton, 2005; Kraemer, McIntyre, & Blacher, 2003; Salkever, 2000; Stephens, Collins, & Dodder, 2005; Wehman, Revell, & Kregel, 1998; Wehmeyer, 1994). As a result, competitive employment has become an important outcome measure in vocational rehabilitation for people with mental retardation.

Supported employment, in which rehabilitation specialists work simultaneously with clients and employers to facilitate rapid job placement with ongoing support, has been demonstrated to be an effective service for individuals with a wide range of severe disabilities, including mental retardation (Goldberg, McLean, LaVigne, Fratolillo, & Sullivan, 1990; Wehman & Kregel, 1985). However, despite the overall success of supported employment programs, the employment rate of youth who had mental retardation remained lower than youth with most other disabilities and those without disabilities (Olney & Kennedy, 2001; Taanila, Rantakallio, Koironen, von Wendt, & Jarvelin, 2005). Among people who work, unsuccessful job endings are also common (Chen, 2002b). Various factors contribute to unemployment or short job tenure for people with mental retardation, in which the two principal elements are the person and the person's environment (Hershenson & Szymanski, 1992). Weaker person-environment correspondence results in shorter tenure (Lofquist & Dawis, 1991; Martin, 1986). Thus, the placement process in supported employment should include the examination of many sources of data (i.e., a person's vocational competence and work environment) to enhance the job-worker match, plan interventions, and individualize jobs through planning the use of job restructuring or assistive technology (Hanley-Maxwell & Bordieri, 1989).

One potentially important focus of assessment and intervention for improving the outcomes of supported employment is cognitive and adaptive functioning. There are several reasons to suggest that cognitive and adaptive behavioral deficits can interfere with the ability of people with mental retardation to achieve their employment goals. First, cognitive and adaptive deficits are central and debilitating aspects of mental retardation. Cognitive competence is one of the salient factors of adaptive behavior (Sparrow & Cicchetti, 1984; Widaman, Gibbs, & Geary, 1987). People with mental retardation who scored lower on measures of cognition also tended to perform poorly on several adaptive behavior domains that are cognition-related, such as economic, domestic activity, vocational activity, numbers and time, and responsibility (Kay et al., 2003). A higher level of adaptive behavior has been found to be significantly associated with success in occupational outcome for persons with mental retardation (Bolton, Bellini, & Brookings, 2000; Martin, Rusch, Lagomarcino, & Chadsey-Rusch, 1986; McDermott, Martic, & Butkus, 1999), suggesting that a higher level of cognitive functioning would also contribute to successful employment. In fact, the individual's level of intellectual impairment has proven to be an important determinant of competitive employment, as persons with mild mental retardation were closed into competitive jobs at a significantly higher rate than those with severe/profound or moderate mental retardation (McDermott et al., 1999; Moore, Harley, & Gamble, 2004). However, this information offers limited value to the employment specialists because an overall IQ score does not reveal strengths and weaknesses in cognitive functioning, based upon which an efficient and effective supported employment service can be provided to capitalize on the person's cognitive strengths and compensate for the deficits.

Second, for persons with mental retardation, disturbances have been documented in essentially all aspects of cognition, including measures of attention, memory, visual perception, language, and executive function (Bergen & Mosley, 1994; Fidler, Most, & Guiberson, 2005; Haxby, 1989; Palmer, 2006; Purser & Jarrold, 2005; Vicari, 2004). Brain imaging studies have also identified structural abnormalities associated with the observed cognitive deficits, such as

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