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Guest Editorial: Social Relationships in the Workplace

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Social Relationships in the Workplace

Social relationships are important for quality of life. The published literature establishes the powerful effect social relationships have on our health [8], happiness, and overall sense of well-being [3,15]. The interpersonal relationships and supportive social networks that we may take for granted, however, are often elusive for members of our society who have intellectual disabilities [13] or mental illness [4]. Even those who live in the community may experience social isolation and limited access to socially valued roles [4,5]. Therefore, supporting individuals to build relationships and attain socially valued roles are central to creating truly inclusive communities.

Work provides access to the socially valued role of “employee” for individuals who historically have been denied full citizenship. Because society places a high value on work and those who work, people who are employed are considered to be valuable, contributing members of society. Moreover, existing research documents a link between employment and larger social networks for people with disabilities [2,9], which, in turn, are associated with superior quality-of-life outcomes [10,16].

Why is it that employees with intellectual disabilities and mental illness are often socially isolated at work? And how can we increase the likelihood that employees will be included in the social fabric of a workplace, be accepted and valued as equal peers, and experience feelings of belong and support from coworkers? These questions served as the impetus for this special issue. The articles that follow build on the extant literature (for reviews, see Chadsey, 2007 [6]; Chadsey and Beyer, 2001 [7]; and, Storey and Lengyel, 1992 [17]) and reflect current and promising directions in understanding and advancing interpersonal relationships between employees with disabilities and their coworkers.

This issue begins with an article by Tyree and colleagues [19] in which the authors call for the alignment of supported employment with the principles of Social Role Valorization. The article underscores the potential of supported employment to serve as a vehicle through which those who were once excluded from meaningful employment can obtain valued roles in everyday workplaces. The authors recommend ways of assisting individuals with intellectual disabilities assume the socially valued role of “employee” while cautioning against perpetuation of the role of “human services client.”

An article by Novak and her co-authors [11] further investigates how individuals with intellectual disabilities can achieve socially valued roles in the workplace. The authors present findings from a study that sought to answer the question, “Can the design of a job influence the likelihood that an employee with a disability will be accepted as a peer by coworkers?” Interview and observation data were interpreted using intergroup contact theory, a longstanding theory from the intergroup relations literature that specifies conditions of the contact situation that can be expected to reduce prejudice toward members of a negatively stereotyped group. Based on study findings, the authors suggest strategies for designing jobs in ways that set the stage for coworker interactions and workplace inclusion.

Russinova and his associates [14] provide an article that explores the wide range of prejudicial and discriminatory practices experienced by persons with mental illness in the contemporary workplace. An examination of these practices uncovered both blatant acts of discrimination and more subtle expressions of prejudice that can act as barriers to employment and integration into the social fabric of a workplace. The authors introduce a conceptual framework of psychiatric prejudice and discrimination that they have used to develop materials for training employers, mental health and rehabilitation practitioners, and individuals with

mental illness to combat discriminatory practices and support the inclusion of employees with psychiatric disabilities at work.

As with the preceding article, Rollins and her co-authors [12] explore the social experiences of employees with mental illness in the workplace. While the results of their study on the relationships between workplace network characteristics and job characteristics were mixed, a notable finding was that employees with severe mental illness generally reported feeling supported by their supervisors and coworkers, reporting low levels of criticism and stress and high levels of emotional and instrumental support from these relationships. In addition, support from colleagues at the worksite was robustly correlated with overall job satisfaction. Taken together, these studies highlight the potential for workplace interactions and relationships to have both negative and positive effects on employment outcomes for persons with mental illness.

Several themes run through the articles in this special issue. While the authors are consistent in noting the challenges presented by workplace prejudice and discrimination and the frequent social isolation of employees with disabilities, they are equally consistent in emphasizing the promise of strategies for helping individuals acquire valued social roles through employment. Several authors recommend facilitating employment supports that naturally occur in the workplace and are carried out in ways that are typical for the setting. For example, Rollins et al. [12] highlight how tapping the natural support of coworkers and supervisors can enhance employment outcomes such as job satisfaction. Tyree et al. [19] and Novak et al. [11] discuss the benefits of encouraging employers to hire people with disabilities for their abilities and expected contributions and also ensuring that these employees have similar work roles, responsibilities, and benefits as other employees.

The articles gathered here are aligned with an emerging trend in the research literature to investigate environmental and attitudinal factors that influence the integration of individuals with disabilities into the world of work. Early explanations for the social isolation of workers with intellectual disabilities and mental illness focused primarily on limitations inherent in the person. This led to efforts to facilitate social interactions by remediating the individual's social skills deficits [17,18]. Today, while social skill development continues to be emphasized, increased research attention is being given to explanations that reveal barriers within the environment. The targets of intervention strategies informed by this perspective, then, rely on changing the environment and attitudes rather than changing people with disabilities to fit the environment. For Russinova et al., [14] this involves combating not only obvious workplace discrimination but also more subtle prejudicial practices that individuals with mental illness may encounter at work such as insensitive or derogatory comments about the population of people with mental illnesses. For Novak et al., [11] this involves setting the stage for inclusion by selecting workplaces in which the employer supports equality and acceptance. It also means designing jobs that provide ample opportunities for interactions that counter prevailing negative stereotypes about persons with disabilities and promote equal status and interdependent working relationships.

A final theme of the articles in this issue is the connection of research and practice to relevant theory. The authors present theoretical frameworks for understanding and organizing workplace phenomena that many of us have observed through years of implementing supported employment. For example, Tyree et al. [19] frame their discussion of supported employment practices using Wolfensberger's [20] Social Role Valorization theory while Novak et al. [11] link their research findings to Allport's [1] intergroup contact theory. Alternatively, Russinova et al. [14] developed a conceptual model of prejudice and discrimination in the workplace intended

to guide future research and efforts to improve workplace inclusion for persons with mental illness. Underpinning research with relevant theory is valuable insofar as it generates questions to be asked or answers questions that have been posed, all in a coherent schema.

This set of articles, as a whole, makes an important contribution to the body of literature concerning the social integration of employees with disabilities in community workplaces. In the articles that follow, readers will find practical strategies for promoting relationships with coworkers that can be applied immediately as well as conceptual models and questions to guide future research, policy, and practice in this area.

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