

Research Article

Client Perceptions of Job Readiness and Recovery

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Abstract

Over 30 million Americans in the United States are impacted by a substance-related disorder, many of them, working adults. (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2011). Much of the literature has focused on the relationship between substance use and abuse and work related problems, however, few studies have focused on employment and perceptions of job readiness for those who are in recovery. The purpose of the study is to investigate perceptions of job readiness and barriers to employment for those in recovery. In the current study, a phenomenological approach of three focus groups, consisting of 30 participants were used to access: perceptions of job readiness, barriers to employment of those in recovery, and the support provided by the recovery center. Four overall themes emerged: having proper interview skills, the fear of rejection, criminal backgrounds, and having gaps in work histories; discussed in further detail. Recommendations were provided and conveyed that recovery programs should focus on the clients emotional, psychosocial, and physical needs in order to target their confidence, competencies, and skills needed to be successful in the employment search process.

Keywords: *Drug Recovery, Addiction, Job Readiness*

Introduction

Currently in the United States, over 30 million Americans are affected by a substance-related disorder. The majority of these adults in the U.S. are currently employed; however, a considerable amount of research has been done on the negative relationship between alcohol and drug use and related variables (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2011). The direct impact of substance abuse on workplace productivity (e.g. absenteeism, poor performance, and work site accidents) was estimated to be at least \$100 billion in the 1990s [1]. Alcohol and drug use have been found to be associated with work-related problems (Galaif, Newcombe, and Carmona, 2011). Although the literature has focused on the relationship between substance use and abuse and work-related problems, few studies have focused on employment and perceptions of job readiness for those who are in recovery. Each year, 40,000 individuals enter into treatment and recovery centers for two-week stays and stays as long as six months. Many may have been employed prior to their addiction and admittance into a treatment facility. As they negotiate the process of recovery, finding employment is a key indicator of their health and wellness. Previous studies have found employment to be associated with improvement-treatment outcomes [2], and employment training has been integrated into a number of recovery programs. Many researchers and substance abuse counselors suggest that it should be one of the outcomes of the recovery process. For those individuals with substance abuse problems who enter treatment, a variety of programs have been introduced in an attempt to address reentry into employment efforts, including motivational workshops, job readiness, and comprehensive training employment programs [3] (Freedman, 1978). Such programs are critical; however, assessments of their effectiveness have been overlooked by researchers and human service professionals. The literature on recovery suggests that substance abuse treatment, when accompanied with employment-related training, has been essential in post-treatment outcomes [1,4].

For example, H. A. Siegel et al. (1995) have used the case-based model of case management to improve employment-related outcomes for individuals in recovery and substance abuse employment programs [5]. In their study of 191 participants, using a two-group design of those in case management and those not in case management, the researchers found that case-management clients reported fewer days of employment related problems, less trouble about their employment status, and reported needing less employment counseling and assistance [6].

The literature on work and recovery has found employment as one of the outcomes of treatment; however, the differences in findings are impacted by differences across treatment, modality, patient drug of choice, and different research and sampling techniques (Mangura et al., 2004). Although a number of individuals who are addicted to drugs and alcohol are employed, substance abusers who have been in long-term addiction face several challenges as they try to seek employment [7]. Some in long-term addiction and recovery may have experienced changes in their appearance, and detachment from family an immediate community, all of which adversely affect their ability to seek employment. The current study seeks to investigate a perception regarding job readiness, barriers to seeking employment, and perceptions of current resources provided by recovery centers [8].

Methods

The purpose of this study was to investigate perceptions of job readiness and barriers to employment for those in recovery.

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Participants from a recovery center in the southeastern part of the United States were recruited. There were four focus groups consisting of 4-13 participants. Participants who agreed to participate in the focus group signed a consent form indicating that they gave the researcher permission to record their responses and participate in the focus groups. Once consent forms were completed, participants were instructed that they could not use names of individuals who worked or participated in the focus group at the recovery center. The demographic questionnaire asked participants their ethnicity, highest level of education, income, and length of participation at the recovery center. The majority of the participants in the study were African American. The mean age was 47.6 years ($M=47.6, SD=13.3$). The focus groups consisted of 60% males and 40% females. In regards to income, 70% indicated they made less than \$15,000 per year. Concerning education, 50% of participants were high school graduates. Average length of time at the recovery center was 7.3 months. A series of questions regarding employment and recovery were given to participants and asked throughout the focus groups. The responses in the focus groups were recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Data Reduction: To better understand the experiences of individuals in recovery and their perceptions of employment, a phenomenological approach was employed. The phenomenological approach seeks to understand the meaning of the lived experiences of a group of people. This process was done to capture those in recovery perceptions of job readiness, the support provided by the recovery center, and specific challenges or barriers they experience in securing employment. According to Vann Manning (1982), the phenomenological approach lays out the framework of the lived experience so that it becomes accessible and meaningful to the researcher and reader [9]. To assess perceptions of job readiness and employment for those in recovery, a series of questions were asked of focus group participants. Questions included, “*What are your clients’ perceptions of job readiness? What does it look like to them,*” “*What are your perceptions of support provided by the recovery center for those in recovery looking for employment,*” “*What are the skills and competencies those in recovery need to be successful in securing employment,*” “*What are the most significant challenges for your clients as they transition to employment,*” “*What are the major barriers to securing employment for your clients,*” and “*How successful has the recovery center been in aiding individuals in securing employment?*” Responses to these questions and probes (e.g. Can you explain? Or, tell me more) Thematic content analysis was employed to assess consistent and salient themes across focus group data. Once data was transcribed by the researcher, salient themes were derived. Participant responses were compared to assess any consistent themes among participants.

Findings

Results

Table 1

Main Themes Emerging from Focus Group Questions

Question 1: *What are your clients’ perceptions of job readiness? What does it look like to them?*

1. *Being confident and having high self-esteem*
2. *Interviewing skills*

Question 2: *What are your perceptions of support provided by Sunrise for those in recovery looking for employment?*

1. *Adequate support*
2. *Referrals for employment*
3. *Computer access*

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4. *Encouragement and life skills training*

Question 3: *What are the skills and competencies those in recovery need to be successful in securing employment?*

1. *How to deal with adversity*
2. *Overcoming fears*
3. *Interviewing skills*
4. *Proper attire*

Question 4: *What are the most significant challenges and barriers for your clients as they transition to employment?*

1. *Background check*
2. *Fear*
3. *Patience*
4. *Transportation*

Question 5: *What do you think is needed to aid Sunrise in improving services offered for those in recovery seeking employment?*

1. *Classes in interviewing skills*
2. *Referral services to employers*
3. *Aid with job search process*

1. *What are your clients’ perceptions of job readiness? What does it look like to them?*

Many of the participants indicated that their perceptions of job readiness included having the confidence and self-esteem needed to handle an interview. Having proper attire and great self-esteem were also consistently mentioned across the focus groups. The salient overarching theme consistently mentioned by participants in regards to job readiness was having the interview skills. One participant indicated that being job-ready meant that you were “*dressed appropriately,*” had the “*proper resume,*” “*were prepared,*” “*know how to perform in an interview.*” Another participant indicated that “*being there early*” was important.

2. *What are your perceptions of support provided by Sunrise for those in recovery looking for employment?*

In response to the question of the support that Sunrise provides regarding employment, focus group participants consistently indicated that Sunrise provided adequate support. They indicated that Sunrise not only provided food and computer skills, but they would provide people in recovery with encouragement. One participant indicated, “*They have programs that can help people as far as sharpening their vocabulary skills, teaching them how to read, better communication skills. Essentially, they let you know what the employer is looking for before you look for the job.*” Another participant indicated, “*They got a lot of resources here. I can tell you the support they give here is never-ending. They help people who are homeless, whether they are employed, people who don’t have jobs. This place here actually represents what it says it does.*” Additionally, a participant indicated, “*The resources provided by Sunrise inspires people to be better than who they think they are. It gives them the resources to help them be a better person, a better person than they think they are.*”

3. *What are the skills and competencies those in recovery need to be successful in securing employment?*

Participants in the focus group indicated that the skills and competency needed to be successful in securing employment were centered around having integrity, accountability, and a positive outlook. Moreover, they also indicated that while going through

recovery, individuals have to be able to deal with the anxiety when going to a new place.

Many discussed that because of addiction, they suffered from low self-esteem. Many are afraid because they may get turned down for a job: **"It's like, you get tired of being shot down,"** and, **"Rejection is the main thing that most of the clients let bring them down."**

4. *What are the most significant challenges and barriers for your clients as they transition to employment?*

As indicated, securing employment while one is negotiating the addiction-to-recovery continuum is quite a difficult task. When participants were asked, what were the most significant challenges and barriers to employment, participants consistently indicated that their past and background checks presented a unique obstacle in trying to secure employment. Many participants spoke of racial discrimination, fear, the gaps in work history and not being able to explain the gaps. More senior participants in recovery discussed the physical barriers they have now due to long-term drug use.

One participant indicated, **"How can I tell someone that I work on _____ Street selling my body? Who can put that on their resume?"** Another participant indicated, **"Sometimes your past resurfaces. For example, a friend of mine was on his job working good. Then his boss found out about his past, and he was let go."** Another participant indicated that, **"Sometimes even when you get the job, people at the job know what you did while you were in the streets. Sometimes they may put you down."**

5. *What do you think is needed to aid Sunrise in improving services offered for those in recovery seeking employment?*

Although participants in the focus group spoke highly of Sunrise, when asked about ways to improve Sunrise, participants indicated that more programming and resource advocacy would be key. Participants indicated having more classes on interpersonal and computer skills would be key in improving services offered by Sunrise. They also indicated that they wanted classes in etiquette, how to dress for success, as well as in Spanish and English literacy. One participant indicated, **"We need a GED program. And start-up funds for college."** Another participant indicated, **"After going through addiction, some of us need recreation, a personal trainer, as well as temporary housing."** Additionally, a participant stated, **"We need transportation, like a van, or a bus."** Another indicated, **"Medical staff would be good, like a dentist, so this becomes a one-stop place."**

Discussion

Although participants' perceptions of the services provided by Sunrise were deemed adequate, participants also indicated many ways to improve the services provided. The overarching theme of the services needed to improve Sunrise suggests that those in recovery seeking employment want a comprehensive system of recovery care. Given the challenges those face in negotiating the addiction-to-recovery continuum, providing services which address the social, familial, physical, and emotional needs of this population is of key concern.

In summarizing participants' perceptions of job readiness, barriers, and competencies needed to secure employment, three overarching themes emerged. In regards to their perceptions of job readiness, participants consistently indicated that having proper interview skills was a key component of job readiness. Knowing which questions employers were going to ask, what to ask, and having appropriate appearance were consistently mentioned throughout the focus groups.

The second theme indicted that in regards to skills and

competencies needed to be successful in securing employment, the fear of rejection dominated much of the discussion. Although some participants discussed issues of accountability and integrity, the need to overcome the anxiety associated with rejection was a dominant theme. Many participants indicated that throughout the process of recovery, their confidence in themselves had dissipated. For many, looking for a job, filling out an application, sitting through an interview, and waiting for an employer's response was quite an emotional challenge. Thus, the need to develop a positive outlook and patience were consistently mentioned as one of the skills and competencies needed to be successful in securing employment for those in addiction recovery.

The third overarching theme centered around the challenges and barriers that those in recovery deal with as they seek employment indicated that although many were quite contrite regarding their criminal past and the behavior they engaged in while they were in addition, many felt that their past should not define them as they now were in recovery and moving toward health and wellness.

Another key theme was that of how to explain gaps in work history to employers. Many of the participants in the focus groups indicated that this was quite a challenge given the stigma and negative stereotypes associated with addiction and having a criminal background.

Limitations: Although the current study is in its initial phases and provides a wealth of information to counselors, human service professionals, as well as researchers investigating addiction and recovery, there were limitations. Only three focus groups were conducted and they consisted of less than eight participants each. Thus, findings from the focus groups may not be generalizable to the total population of those in recovery. Also, the current study did not ask participants about their drug or substance choice. Given the differential impact and differences in treatment and recovery outcomes across various drugs and substances, future studies may need to separate focus groups based upon drug of choice.

Conclusions and Recommendations

According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, nearly 23.5 million Americans over the age of 12 are in need of treatment for drug and alcohol abuse (2011). A key component of the recovery process is helping those in recovery find a job [10-12]. Although some treatment programs have begun to move toward employment services, it is imperative that they assess participants' perceptions of job readiness and the unique psychosocial and physical challenges those in recovery face. Therefore, to improve such efforts, the following recommendations are provided: 1) Recovery programs will need to continue to collect both qualitative and quantitative data on the experiences of those who are in recovery seeking employment. 2) Recovery centers, if they are to address the needs of clients, must move their thinking and funding programmatically toward a **comprehensive system of recovery care** that addresses clients' emotional, psychosocial, as well as physical needs. 3) Recovery centers will have to begin to see employment not as an outcome of recovery, but as an iterative process wherein the client, through target programs, are given the confidence, competencies, and skills needed to be successful in the employment search process.

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