Perceptions and stereotypes about mental illness in a sample of Portuguese employers

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1. Introduction

Stigma on persons with mental illness experiences continues to prejudice social inclusion (Goffman, 1963). Despite society argues that all citizen have equal rights and equal opportunities, mentally ill individuals face discrimination, especially in the employment context, facing rejection and lack of opportunities to find a job. Research evidences the benefits of working and having a job, which facilitates playing social roles and feeling useful (Davidson et al., 2005; Wong et al., 2004). In the employment market, employers assume the crucial role, since it depends mainly on them the access of persons with mental illness experiences to work. Employers decisions affect these persons life course as well as the development (or not) within an entire enterprise of a stereotypes and stigma attitude (Corrigan, 2004; Dewa et al., 2007; Hand & Tryssenaar, 2006). Studies analyzing perceptions and stereotypes on mental illness in Portuguese employers are needed, as a start point to evidence the key role of employers in social inclusion of persons with mental illness experiences.

Key words: Social perceptions, Stereotypes, Employers, Mental illness, Social inclusion.

2. Aims

To analyse perceptions and stereotypes on mental illness in a sample of Portuguese employers from small enterprises.

3. Methods

- Participants: non-probabilistic sample of 50 employers from small (under 250 employees) metalurgic or textile enterprises (60% male, 40% female; mean age = 45.9 years).
- Instruments: Data was collected using a social-demographic questionnaire and a Attitude Scale for Mental Illness – Portuguese Version (Hahn, 2002; Madeira & Monteiro, 2007), evaluating dimensions such as separatism, stereotyping, restrictiveness, benevolence, pessimistic prediction and stigmatization.
- Procedure: Data was collected between July 2009 and July 2010, with a questionnaire fulfilled on-line anonymously. As email asking for the fulfilling of the questionnaire was send to 2.200 enterprises, with only 3.6% of responses.
- Data analysis: SPSS-17 was used to do descriptive analysis.

4. Results

- Results show that none of the enterprises have employees with mental illness, neither integration policies, suggesting a reality of little inclusion of persons with mental illness experiences in the employment context (Table 1). It seems that employers prefer to select for a job people with physical disabilities than people with mental illness experiences.
- Employers seem to have little contact with people with mental illness experiences. However, literature suggests that contact with mentally ill individuals seems to be a facilitator on hiring a worker with mental illness experiences, since it promotes the demystification of dangerousness and incompetence.
- In our sample, 96% of the employers evidenced not to having knowledge on governmental policies on job inclusion and only 54% would accept to participate in programs for hiring workers with mental illness. Despite this participation, only 48% would hire those workers.
- Benevolence, Pessimistic prediction, Stereotyping, and Separatism present the highest values on the Attitude Scale for Mental Illness (Table 2). Despite some positive attitudes, participants reveal benevolence and separatism, showing negative stereotypes and stigma to mental ill persons.

5. Conclusions

Employers should be more comprehensively informed on governmental policies concerning recruiting people with mental illness experiences. Serious work is needed to sensitize employers to integrate mental ill persons in their enterprises and to reduce stigma. Less is done in this dimension in Portugal, despite several studies emphasize job as a key area for social inclusion (Krupa, 2007; Ozawa & Yaedda, 2007). Training people with mental illness experiences for recruiting and selection processes is also important, empowering them to face negative attitudes of employers.

6. Bibliography