Supported-Employment Program Processes and Outcomes: Experiences of People With Schizophrenia

K. W. David Liu, Vivien Hollis, Sharon Warren, Deanna L. Williamson

OBJECTIVE. This qualitative study explored participants' experiences of a supported-employment program. Understanding participants' opinions of a supported-employment program may provide insights into what processes and outcomes are meaningful and important for participants and may enable an evaluation of such processes and outcomes for their congruence with occupational therapy practice.

METHOD. Supported-employment program participants with schizophrenia (N = 7) were recruited from an agency and interviewed individually with open-ended questions. Data were analyzed using a grounded-theory approach.

RESULTS. We developed a tentative grounded theory with three themes of supported-employment program outcomes: (a) removing barriers to job seeking, (b) improving psychological well-being, and (c) participating in work.

CONCLUSION. Supported-employment program participants can achieve meaningful personal outcomes even though they do not obtain competitive employment. These programs removed barriers to job seeking, but personal readiness and efforts in job seeking contributed most to obtaining employment.

Most people with severe and persistent mental illness would like to be gainfully employed (Mowbray, Bybee, Harris, & McCrohan, 1995) and see working as an important life goal (Bond & Jones, 2005). This phenomenon is a reminder that gainful employment remains a meaningful human occupation in modern Western societies regardless of health condition. However, persons with severe mental illness continue to experience a very high unemployment rate (Hall, Graf, Fitzpatrick, Lane, & Birkel, 2003).

The primary purpose of supported-employment programs is to improve the participation of persons with mental illness in the open employment market. Vocational rehabilitation in mental health entered a new era during the past two decades, as supported-employment programming acquired prominence. The development of these programs was a response to the beliefs that (a) gainful employment, based on free choice, is a basic human right (United Nations, 1998) and (b) given adequate support and appropriate interventions, some persons with severe mental illness are capable of working in the open labor market (Grove, Secker, & Seebohm, 2005). Most noteworthy is that supported employment represents a shift from psychopathology to social inclusion and active productive participation in everyday life for persons with mental illness, a vision that has long been embedded in the recovery model (Anthony, 2003; Mancini, Hardiman, & Lawson, 2005).

Work, identified as one aspect of productivity (Townsend et al., 2002), has been of prime importance to occupational therapy. Occupational therapists are dedicated to helping people with disability participate in meaningful work (Larson...
& Ellexson, 2005); however, occupational therapy has not developed unique occupational-based strategies to increase work participation for persons with severe mental illnesses. Some occupational therapists (Auerbach, 2001; Kirsh, Cockburn, & Gewurtz, 2005; Moll, Huff, & Detwiler, 2003) have recognized the compatibility between the principles of supported employment and core beliefs of occupational therapy (e.g., the supported-employment principle of respect for participants’ preferences and occupational therapy’s client-centered approach). Thus, incorporating principles of supported employment into occupational therapy work rehabilitation may be fruitful.

However, if occupational therapists are to incorporate principles of supported employment into their practice, they need missing pieces of information. For example, why are program dropout rates consistently high (40% or more; Bond, Drake, Mueser, & Becker, 1997)? Why are some persons willing to stay in the program despite not being successful in gaining employment for long periods (McGurk & Mueser, 2006)? With the exception of some studies that have examined select nonvocational outcomes, such as quality of life and self-esteem (e.g., Drake, McHugo, Becker, Anthony, & Clark, 1996), research has predominantly used quantitative study designs and employment-related outcome indicators (e.g., employment rate, employment earnings, job tenure; Chandler, Meisel, Hu, McGowen, & Madison, 1997; Drake, Becker, Biesanz, Wyzik, & Torrey, 1996). These studies provide little information that occupational therapists need to understand the factors affecting service users’ participation in both supported-employment programs and competitive employment.

The recovery movement has played a major role in making service users’ experiences a high priority and, as a result, program participants’ perspectives are increasingly valued in program evaluation (Blankertz & Cook, 1998; Cone, 2001). Attending to program participants’ experiences might shed light on the worth of a program from participants’ perspectives. Some recent studies showed that a qualitative approach yields very different but useful information about supported employment. For example, program participants have reported the importance of keeping a positive outlook, avoiding substance abuse, and using diverse support networks to secure employment (Alverson, Becker, & Drake, 1995). In another study, after a day treatment program was converted into a supported-employment program, participants reported increased staff availability and increased participation in community activities but a reduced sense of safety (Torrey, Becker, & Drake, 1995). Quimby, Drake, and Becker (2001) found that some supported-employment program participants put a higher priority on maintaining their health and safety over obtaining employment. Although the volume of literature reporting participants’ perceptions continues to grow, participants’ views on the relevance of targeted outcomes in vocational programs is still underrepresented (Honey, 2000).

In summary, supported employment is more effective than any other documented model in assisting people with mental illness to acquire competitive employment. Nevertheless, knowledge about supported employment continues to be limited in terms of recognizing its efficacy from the perspective of persons with severe mental illness and in terms of understanding strategies for maximizing meaningful work participation. We used qualitative methods in this study to try to understand participants’ views of supported employment. Our research questions were as follows: What do participants think are (a) the important processes and outcomes of supported employment and (b) the conditions that influence those program processes and outcomes?

Methodology and Method

Theoretical Design

This qualitative study was based on the grounded-theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Several assumptions about human experiences and the mechanism of supported-employment programs informed this selection. First, we believe that human experiences are constructed by individuals assigning meanings to their interactions with the environment and that no single objective reality exists (Creswell, 1998). Second, experiencing all elements in the supported-employment program setting results in changes in participants’ knowledge and understanding; thus, the program is essentially a process of change. Last, because little is known about how participants construe supported-employment program experiences, their lived experiences will enhance understanding of key outcome factors.

Setting and Study Participants

The authors reviewed program descriptions of several community vocational agencies in a large metropolitan Canadian city. Only one agency adopted almost all the supported-employment program principles described by Bond (1998)—competitive employment as the goal, job searches that were initiated readily without mandatory pre-vocational or work skills training, comprehensive evaluation, respect of program participants’ job preferences, and ongoing support—and was chosen as the study setting. Unlike Bond’s model, however, the supported-employment program offered by the chosen agency was not directly associated with any local mental health services.
Criterion sampling (Patton, 1990) ensured that individuals with rich personal experiences of supported-employment program outcomes were selected to be participants in our study. Recruitment of participants began after we obtained ethics approval from the university and the local health research ethics board. At the time of this study, three case managers provided the supported-employment program to 30 participants with mental illness. Fourteen program participants at the agency met the inclusion criteria. The participants (a) were ages 20 to 65 years, (b) had participated or were participating in the supported-employment program, and (c) had been diagnosed with schizophrenia according to the *DSM-IV-TR* (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). The case manager made initial contact with eligible program participants on behalf of the study investigators. During a 3-month period, 8 of the 14 agreed to meet with the principal investigator, and 7 of them participated in this study (see Table 1 for participants’ demographic information).

**Data Collection**

Data were collected through individual interviews lasting about 1 hr. All interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim. Open-ended and semistructured probe questions had been developed from a pilot study involving program participants of similar characteristics from the same agency.

The small pool of suitable potential participants available for this study made it impractical to carry out the traditional theoretical sampling of grounded theory (i.e., selecting participants with discrete characteristics or with particular expertise to fill in missing elements in the emerging concepts as the study progressed). To manage this challenge, all available participants were interviewed (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). After each interview, new questions were developed and were used in the subsequent interviews, based on the information needed to complete the building of concepts.

All interviews started with a key open-ended statement: “Tell me about your experience of participating in this supported-employment program.” When the participants finished responding, probe questions were used to encourage elaboration or to further clarify the information provided. We soon encountered situations in which participants had difficulties in expanding ideas in response to broad open-ended questions. To overcome this difficulty, the primary investigator continued to ask probe questions (e.g., “Why do you think they’re good? Would you please explain it to me?” and “What do you mean by . . . ?”) to help participants elaborate points (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Field notes were made immediately after each interview and were used in data analysis.

**Data Analysis**

Data analysis, which was done manually, began once the first interview data were transcribed. The analysis process involved the three grounded-theory steps—open, axial, and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998)—and these processes were performed simultaneously in a flexible manner. Initially, significant events and descriptions that represented a similar phenomenon were grouped, and a total of 160 emerging concepts were identified. Forty-six of those concepts related to outcomes, effects, change, and results of attending supported employment programs. Memos were made throughout the analysis process to aid theme development. The emerging concepts were compared continuously with all available data and with other emerging concepts. Eventually, concepts that stood for similar phenomena were grouped to form three program outcome themes. Other themes that were not program outcomes but were conceptually related to program outcomes also were examined with reference to the 6 Cs of coding (“causes, contexts, contingencies, consequences, covariances, and conditions” as proposed by Glaser, 1978, p. 74). As a result, two additional intervening conditions were identified. All of these concepts were grouped, ordered, and continually rearranged as they were compared to and verified by the data and, in this article, are developed and presented as a tentative theory (see Figure 1).

Two checks were conducted on the trustworthiness of findings. First, the dependability of the analysis was checked for its ability to provide accurate findings. A graduate-level research assistant, who had no previous involvement in the study, rematched randomly presented raw data with the identified themes. The percentage of agreement of each of the 6 subcategories under the identified program outcome

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Participants (N = 7)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Employment status (at time of study)</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Employed</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Previous psychiatric hospitalization</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>6</td>
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<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Characteristic</strong></td>
<td>Range</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>20–60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Estimated length of illness</td>
<td>2.5 to 22 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time in chosen supported-employment agency</td>
<td>4–17 months</td>
</tr>
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themes ranged from 22% to 80%. The categories were reviewed, and we found that important contextual information in the complete transcriptions, not made available to the research assistant, accounted for the categories with lower agreement rates.

Second, to satisfy the standards for credibility of findings, the identified program outcomes were presented to a group of program participants at the agency (some of whom were participants in our study) and separately to the case managers. Both parties agreed that the study findings were
good representations of program participants’ experiences in the program.

Findings

Grounded in the available data, a tentative theory was developed to explain the process and outcomes of a supported-employment program based on the program participants’ perspective. The three supported-employment program outcome themes were (a) removing barriers to job seeking, (b) improving psychological well-being, and (c) participating in work. At least two intervening conditions mediated the outcome themes (see Figure 1). To maintain anonymity, participants have been given pseudonyms, and all case managers are referred to with female pronouns.  

1. Removing Barriers to Job Seeking

Before beginning the supported-employment program, participants faced various illness-related challenges of seeking employment. The program removed barriers to job seeking by (a) supporting effective job seeking, (b) improving work-related skills and knowledge, and (c) encouraging a partnership between case managers and participants. As a result, employment became an attainable choice for program participants.

Supporting effective job seeking. Participants spoke of being able to perform job searches more effectively because of the essential job-seeking resources and equipment available to them at the supported-employment agency. Participants did not tend to have access to such resources and equipment outside of the agency:

And then they have the [news]paper [at the supported employment agency] . . . I can’t afford to buy the paper every day because I’m on low income. [Desmond]

I do have access, actually, to their resources [at the agency], like the computer, fax machine, printer. So I can also print up copies of my résumé here send them off. I can apply for jobs over the Internet as well. [Brant]

Transportation was described as another valuable resource at the job-seeking stage. Case managers’ willingness to drive program participants to drop off résumés made the job application process more effective:

[My case manager] drove [me] around different parts of the city and dropped off résumés, and that was really, really helpful . . . You can’t expect a case worker to drive you around all over the place. You don’t expect them to have that kind of time. But ideally, they should be doing that, because it’s really critical to the clients . . . because if they don’t get [that support], they’re not going to get a job. [Gena]

Improving work-related skills and knowledge. Most participants appreciated the opportunities to learn effective job

application preparation and job interview techniques and to gain work-related skills at the supported-employment agency while looking for employment:

[We learn] about job stress, and what to do if you don’t get along with your boss, or stuff like that. That’s good to find out what you can do. And . . . we find out about services that are available to us. . . . [Cecelia]

One unique work skills training component was the “work experience program.” Program participants reported the value of taking part in a real employment position for 1 week:

It was called a “work experience” . . . I worked for a week for free, and the employer could then decide if [she] wanted to hire me on or not. If the employer didn’t, it would be no loss to [her]; [she]’d have free labor for a week, and if [she] did [want to employ me], then I would start working for [her] . . . [Brant]

I found [the work experience program] very good. It was training on the job, and you get experience. [Desmond]

Encouraging a partnership between case managers and participants. Once a participant was registered at the supported-employment agency, a staff member was assigned as his or her case manager. The working relationship was described as a partnership and was sustained even after program participants acquired competitive employment (see Figures 2a and 2b).

Because most of the participants had been out of the workforce for some time, the direct support and assistance from the case managers seemed to be essential for instilling much-needed confidence. Brant spoke of the importance of having such a partnership to keep him on track:

[It’s an important point that if I go off and do something by myself, I can speak to [my case manager] about it. I can say, “This is what I’ve done and how I’m going about this. What do you think?” . . . Because, one, I could be going about things in not a good way, so they sort of help me keep on track. [Brant]

Participants were impressed with how their job searches became more organized with assistance from their case manager. The case manager also would advocate for jobs for the program participants if an opportunity arose:

[My case manager] seemed to go more for what they call the hidden job market, type of thing. [She]’d just drive to a specific area and we’d look around each individual business, and if that looked good, drop off a résumé there. [She]’d go in and talk to them, and basically sort of promote me, I guess. [Gena]

When participants entered the employment phase, the support provided by the case managers was less direct but remained proactive (as represented by the dotted-line arrows in Figure 2b). The focus was on helping program participants sustain their employment. One such example was planning for future problems. In Eric’s situation, his

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case manager suggested contingency plans to ease Eric’s anxiety:

That’s what I talked to [my case manager] about this Wednesday. Like, what would happen if I’m going into the hospital, I won’t be able to work for 2 months? [My case manager] told me, “Then what you do is you phone your employer immediately, set up an appointment, and I’ll go with you. I can either come with you or just drive you there, whatever.” [Eric]

In addition, the case managers visited participants at the job site to assess their work performance and to provide whatever support or assistance was necessary. In some cases, it was inappropriate for case managers to be physically present at the program participants’ job site. Nevertheless, participants kept in contact with the case manager outside of work hours and away from the job site.

Then after I got the job, [my case manager]—I’d been going out for coffee with [my case manager] once in a while—and [she] didn’t come do training on the job with me or anything like that, because where I’m working, they trained you. . . . [My employer] wouldn’t have been too open to having [my case manager] in any of their things due to confidentiality reasons. So that wasn’t even an option with where I’m working. [Eric]

Not all participants saw this degree of support from their case manager as advantageous. Brant was ambivalent about having his case manager in his job interview. He was concerned that the potential employer might perceive such an arrangement as accommodation for incompetent job applicants:

But . . . when you’re sitting there with somebody from an agency at an interview, the employer is wondering, I think, “Why is this person here with them?” Normally, a person would be there on their own. Do you know what I mean? . . . Ideally, it would be best if I was there alone with the employer. That would be the ideal, but sometimes, it is helpful because I’m not at my best, and [she] can point out things and speak to things that the employer asks. So I mean it’s nice that [she]’s willing to do that, but it’s not good in that it makes me look a little bad, you know. [Brant]
2. Improving Psychological Well-Being

We identified two distinct phenomena related to sustained positive changes in participants’ psychological well-being: (a) becoming reassured and (b) achieving a better self-image. Data suggest that those improvements were attributed to two elements of the supported-employment social setting—the participants’ case manager and the other program participants—and were independent of employment status.

**Becoming reassured.** Whether employed or not, all participants believed in their case manager’s competency and expressed reassurance that, with their case manager’s assistance, they would eventually obtain employment (see Figure 3).

[My case manager]’s a professional [at] looking for work, I’m not. I’m not a professional job-seeker. . . . [She]’s been doing it for years and years, and [she] seems to know what [she]’s doing, and [she] seems to know where not to apply and where to apply, and I don’t. I’m just going there randomly and just guessing. I have no idea what the workplace is like, and [she] knows what the workplace and stuff is like in a lot of places. . . . [She]’s quite knowledgeable. [Gena]

Participants reported that they did not necessarily need to obtain employment to feel reassured. From time to time they saw other program participants obtain competitive employment, which prompted our participants to realize that it was possible to get a job despite having schizophrenia:

But I know that when I come back, I’ll get a job. I know that, ’cause they’re good at that, and they will get you a job. [Cecelia]

Because of this reassurance, some participants continued to pursue their vocational goals. Others temporarily put off their vocational plans to focus on education and training upgrading, hoping that in the near future, when they recommenced the supported-employment program, they would have more vocational options.

**Achieving a better self-image.** Participants described positive changes in how they viewed themselves since they had started attending the supported-employment program. Data suggest that four experiences, which operated collectively, contributed to achieving a better self-image (see Figure 4).

Having a case manager to assist in job seeking was a unique experience to most participants. The case managers’ dedication made participants feel worthy.

Yeah. Important that I’m worth something, that people would take the time. It’s just like when I feel down, I’ll call a friend and they’ll make me feel better. ’Cause sometimes you feel alone, and you feel like you’re just worthless, and it’s good to know that people care. [Cecelia]

See, the thing that I think is important here is that the people in this program, [the staff members], haven’t dubbed me as somebody with a mental illness or a disability. They treat me as another competent person . . . that they can assist. That’s really helpful; that’s really nice. I think that’s the one thing I appreciate the most. . . . [Brant]

Participants emphasized the need to be productive. Although attendance at the supported-employment program was not seen as equivalent to being employed, participants (whether employed or not) expressed the opinion that attending the supported-employment program made them feel more productive than not having any daily structure, or attending day programs of a recreational nature:

[The supported-employment program] structures the day and gives me something to do during the day, versus going to a day program that you sit around all day and play cards. [Eric]

[The supported-employment program] is good. It’s also good to get out every day and get you in the mode to work, if you have something to do. [Cecelia]

Some comments underscored participants’ confidence in the process of acquiring employment through skills training and practicing at the agency:

![Figure 3. Causal conditions and participants’ responses of “becoming reassured” at the job search stage.](http://ajot.aota.org/ on 07/20/2018 Terms of Use: http://AOTA.org/terms)
I got all the materials from the workshop, so I would go through my information and read it, so it’s helped me through it. I don’t feel insecure about myself any more. [Desmond]

Another important factor was that at the agency, participants noticed other persons with disabilities who had been trying hard to acquire employment despite having no guarantee of success. The participants recognized that they were not the only ones struggling with the social consequences of having a mental illness.

I find other people looking for work, some of them in the same field as me, others in different fields who have had disabilities, either a nervous breakdown, or some mental or physical illness. So we’re all sort of limited in our capacities. We get together, and we sort of, I guess, support one another . . . psychological support. Confidence, psychological support. You feel like you’re not the only one in the world coping with a handicap. [Alice]

I learned that I’m not the only one in the same boat. Everybody’s in the same boat. They’re all trying to look for work. We all have one goal: “to find work.” [Fiona]

Interestingly, the level of readiness for job seeking operated as an intervening condition of this outcome theme. Simply put, only the program participants who believed that they were ready to look for work experienced improvement in psychological well-being. In other cases, the experience was different. Cecelia was stressed out when she first came to the program:

You have to call people and ask if they’re hiring. At first, when I came into this program, I was caught off-guard, ’cause I didn’t want to work right away, I wanted to prepare to work, and I had to do that, but I didn’t tell them, and I was getting stressed out.

3. Participating in Work

Participating in work was identified as a meaningful program outcome for participants. Fiona, who was employed at the time of study, explained how important it was for her to attend the supported-employment program:

Well, I think I’d probably still be looking for a job if I wasn’t coming here . . . . Because of my education, like I say, I don’t really have any skills, really. [Fiona]

Data suggest that “participating in work” is not a direct consequence of supported-employment outputs; rather, it is a product of combining one outcome theme (“removing barriers to job seeking”) and two intervening conditions (“readiness for job seeking” and “participants’ effort in job seeking”).

You have to be really ready [to look for job], because you actually have to do some calls. [Cecelia]

Some participants successfully obtained competitive employment soon after they started attending the supported-employment program, although some did not necessarily show very high regard for their first job. Alice was planning on seeking more challenging employment soon:

[My current job is] a nothing job after—I used to be a Steno 3 [stenographer], and now I’m doing a very low level job. That’s about it . . . but it’s a job that I don’t have to worry about. . . . Now I’m asking [my case manager], now that I’ve developed my confidence, to help me get a better job with a little bit more responsibility to it and more involvement. [Alice]

Participating in paid work allowed program participants to learn more employment-related skills, which served as feedback to further improve participants’ readiness for work and their psychological well-being.

Oh, yeah. Any experience [gained from a paid job] that you have, whether it’s negative or positive, is valuable. It prepares you for your next job. [Gena]

Yes, [having a job] gives me more confidence to intercommunicate with other people. Then I find my handicap isn’t maybe quite as bad as some other people have. I figured that I could pull my socks up. You sometimes get into a low, a depression, and you get out of it, and you function in the world, you’ve got a job, you do it well, you feel confident. People then react to you and treat you with confidence. [Alice]
Discussion

Interplay Between Preparedness and Supported-Employment Outputs

One interesting finding of this study is that obtaining employment is not perceived as a direct outcome of participating in supported-employment programs but is affected by the interplay between personal preparedness (i.e., program participants’ readiness and efforts in job seeking) and supported-employment program outputs (i.e., what the supported-employment program provides, such as educational workshops and one-on-one consultation between participants and their case managers). Findings indicate that the supported-employment outputs removed important barriers to job seeking but that the participants’ readiness and efforts in job seeking contributed most to obtaining employment. In other words, despite excellent education and training offered by the supported-employment program, participants who did not feel ready for job seeking and who did not put much effort into it were less successful in obtaining employment.

This finding has two implications for the implementation of supported employment. First, participants’ readiness and their effort toward job seeking should be part of ongoing work evaluation, particularly for program participants who have not successfully obtained employment. Second, because our data suggest that a low level of readiness was associated with having negative experiences in the supported-employment program, a question arises about what to do when program participants display low readiness for job seeking and employment. Becker and Drake (2003) suggested that supported-employment programs should be made accessible to mental health service users who desire employment, and Bond (2004) agreed that no one should be excluded from supported-employment programs based on work readiness. We concur that these aspects should not determine program exclusion; however, personal preparedness factors, such as readiness, could guide occupational therapists and vocational specialists in adjusting program strategies for the different needs of program participants and as a means of ultimately achieving better program outcomes. A similar idea can be found in the Boston’s model of psychiatric rehabilitation (Cohen, Anthony, & Farkas, 1997), which emphasizes the importance of implementing psychiatric rehabilitation based on clients’ level of rehabilitation readiness.

Program participants who do not put effort into job seeking are not necessarily lazy or dependent. They just may not be ready for job seeking at that particular time. Finding out whether they have a different work or education plan or have placed work as a lower priority would help occupational therapists understand the degree of individuals’ personal preparedness for work. Personal preparedness may be something over which the program has little or no control but is likely to change with different circumstances.

Our findings point to the importance of individuals’ readiness as an intervening factor in work participation, and we suggest that personal preparedness may have implications for occupation-based theory. Baum and Christiansen (2005) described the person—environment—occupation—performance (PEOP) model. As part of the Person component of the PEOP model, they identified psychological factors such as personality traits, motivation, and self-efficacy that influence what people do, how events are interpreted, and the consequent sense of self. We suggest that “readiness” needs to be considered in the PEOP model because it may be influenced by these psychological factors or indeed influence them.

The working relationship between program participants and their case managers was portrayed as a partnership. Although data from our study do not directly link partnership to long-term vocational success, two recent studies provided more favorable evidence. Gervey and Kowal (2005) reviewed supported employment service logs and concluded that supported-employment program participants with psychiatric disabilities were three times more likely to obtain competitive employment if their case manager was also in the job interview. In Henry and Lucca’s (2004) study, participants considered that the partnership with their case manager was a facilitating factor to employment. In contrast to these findings, some participants in our study believed that too much assistance was a detriment in certain work-related situations; for example, the presence of a case manager in the job interview or at the job site could cast doubt on a program participant’s competency. Merely believing that this situation could happen might diminish a program participant’s overall confidence and performance.

Inconsistent findings about the benefits of case manager involvement highlight the problems with a broadbrush application of hands-on assistance. The primary focus for program funders may be for supported-employment participants to obtain employment as quickly as possible. However, if we adopt recovery principles, which emphasize “discovering and fostering self-empowerment” (Young & Ensing, 1999), it would be wise for us to encourage program participants to take their time to rebuild their sense of competency and self-efficacy in various aspects of job seeking (e.g., job interview skills). Occupational therapists must be sensitive to clients’ interpretation of assistance and needs. As in any true partnership, clients should be encouraged to communicate their preferred level of assistance with service providers. To empower clients in obtaining...
employment, it is essential to listen to what is important and meaningful to them.

**Supported Employment and Psychological Well-Being**

The impact of employment on the psychological well-being of persons with severe mental illness is well documented. Studies have shown that being employed has positive effects on self-esteem (Bond et al., 2001; Honey, 2004; Salyers, Becker, Drake, Torrey, & Wyzik, 2004) and on self-actualization and an individual's recovery process (Marwaha & Johnson, 2005; Provencher, Gregg, Mead, & Mueser, 2002). Nonetheless, the effect of supported-employment programs on psychological well-being is less clear (Mueser et al., 2004). Previous studies have not shown any definite and consistent psychological benefits related to attending supported-employment programs. One noteworthy discovery of our study, therefore, was the perceived impact of the supported-employment program on participants' psychological well-being (i.e., self-image and sense of reassurance).

In the supported-employment literature, studies on changes in program participants' self-image are rare, with researchers tending to focus on other general domains (e.g., participants' satisfaction, hospitalization rate, psychiatric symptoms, self-esteem; Drake, McHugo, Becker, Anthony, & Clark, 1996). Drake and colleagues (1999) found that attending supported-employment programs had a mild positive impact on participants' self-esteem, but it occurred only in the first few months of the program. The concept of self-image, as found in our study, is different from that of self-esteem. Simmermacher (1989, p. 9) defined self-image as “how people feel and think of themselves as persons” and Rosenberg (1989, p. 30) defined self-esteem as “a positive and negative attitude toward . . . the self,” based on “reflected appraisals” (i.e., perceived judgment from others) and “social comparison” (i.e., comparing self to others in his or her close social environment). Our findings suggest that self-image is perceived as a more relevant supported-employment program outcome indicator than self-esteem.

“Becoming reassured” has not been recognized previously in the supported-employment literature. The three unemployed program participants in this study reported feeling reassured that they would eventually obtain competitive employment if they continued to access the program. “Becoming reassured” could either facilitate or impede participants’ efforts in job seeking and likely depended on participants’ perceptions about the meaningfulness of being employed. Furthermore, the expectations of employed program participants and their perception of job matches changed over time as their confidence and competency continued to improve, and a job that was previously acceptable became less so later on. These findings highlight how the assignment of meaning to human occupations affects individuals' occupational participation and choices. Understanding the complexity of human motivation and action is never easy but occupation-based theories, such as the PEOP model (Christiansen & Baum, 2005) and the Person–Environment–Occupation (PEO) model (Law et al., 1996), have the potential to guide occupational therapists in formulating research questions to provide insight into these multifaceted issues.

**Limitations**

This study presented the perspectives of participants attending one program. Transferability of the study findings is limited to populations of similar characteristics and contexts. Seven of 14 available supported employment program participants did not participate in this study: 2 could not be contacted by telephone, 4 were contacted but declined to take part, and 1 had agreed to participate in the study but had a change in health condition and so for ethical reasons was not included in the study. The effect of these refusals and exclusion on the representativeness of the results is not known; consequently, we do not claim saturation of data. The proposed theory is tentative and will serve as a working model for developing further studies against which to examine findings.

**Conclusion**

The findings presented in this article contribute to the expanding knowledge of supported employment and vocational rehabilitation for persons with severe mental illness. Our study demonstrates that listening to participants' views of the supported-employment processes and outcomes provides a different but important perspective on supported-employment programs. The experiences of participants in these programs highlight the importance of participation in meaningful occupations as both a therapeutic process and a desired rehabilitation outcome. Participants in supported-employment programs can achieve meaningful outcomes even though they do not obtain employment immediately. Although participating in work was cited as important, it is evident from our study that obtaining employment alone is a limiting indicator of the supported-employment program’s effectiveness. This grounded theory provides new insights for selecting relevant and meaningful outcome indicators in supported-employment program evaluation. Occupational therapists...
should continue to conduct research on the enabling factors that have an impact on persons with severe mental illness participating fully in work. ▲

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