

Future Directions in Employment, Occupational Rehabilitation, and Disability: Introduction to the Special Section

Peter Blanck¹ · Meera Adya¹

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Abstract *Purpose* From an array of disciplinary perspectives, the articles in this special section examine opportunities and challenges in the economic, social, and civic participation of individuals across the spectrum of disabilities. *Methods* At multiple levels of analysis, the contributors consider employment law and policy frameworks, occupational and vocational rehabilitation strategies, and corporate practices in support of the full and equal inclusion of people with disabilities in society. *Results and Conclusions* The implications for policymakers, public and private sector stakeholders, and occupational rehabilitation professional are presented to help inform future policies, practices, and strategies to improve employment outcomes for people with disabilities.

Keywords Disability · Civil and human rights · Employment · Stigma · Decision-making

Introduction

The articles in this special section examine, from multiple disciplinary perspectives, current and future opportunities and challenges in the economic, social, and civic participation of individuals across the spectrum of disabilities. At multiple levels of analysis, the contributors consider employment law and policy frameworks, occupational and vocational rehabilitation strategies, and corporate practices in support of the full and equal inclusion of people with

disabilities into society. The implications for policymakers, public and private sector stakeholders, and occupational rehabilitation professionals are presented to help inform future policies, practices, and strategies to improve employment outcomes for people with disabilities.

During the past 25 years, people with disabilities have experienced marked improvements in economic, social, and community participation [1]. In part, these advancements are due to improving policy frameworks and laws, occupational and vocational rehabilitation strategies, and corporate practices in support of a more diverse and inclusive workforce. In the United States, for instance, employment rates of people with disabilities continue to rise and presently are experiencing the longest continuous stretch of month over month increases [2].

Community participation research similarly documents increasingly positive experiences, resulting from increases in physical accessibility [3] to access to the Internet [4]. Public and private policies aimed at inclusion also have made a difference, such as through governmental implementation of disability antidiscrimination laws [5] and private sector efforts related to inclusive corporate cultures [6]. Occupational rehabilitation professionals' contributions to improving inclusion likewise include advances in on-the-ground and micro-level programs, such as return-to-work and workplace injury-prevention programs [7, 8].

Despite this positive momentum, research continues to show that such advances have not eliminated the significant disparities in economic and community participation between people with and without disabilities; for example, in the United States, labor force participation rates for people with disabilities still stand at 21% as compared to 69% for people without disabilities [9], and essential avenues to community engagement and civic participation lag [10].

✉ Peter Blanck
pblanck@syr.edu

¹ Burton Blatt Institute, Syracuse University, 900 South Crouse Avenue, Suite 300, Syracuse, NY 13244, USA

This special section presents three articles from varying disciplines that use empirical and policy analyses to shed new light on the employment and community participation experiences of people with disabilities. They also employ different, but complementary, perspectives; that is, at a micro-level by analyzing datasets with individual-level data (Kruse et al.), at a meso-level by describing innovative self-empowering decision-making programs (Uyanik et al.), and at the macro-level by legal and policy analyses highlighting disparate impacts across disability type (Harpur et al.).

Taken together, the present contributions highlight the need and opportunity for coordination and innovation at varying levels of analysis. Thus, across the articles there is evidence showing the ongoing need to reduce stigma-based perceptions of people with disabilities and of their capacity for work and community participation. There are additional indications for the need to implement employment and community-based programs and trainings that build upon and improve education and vocational skills, and to reframe political and legal discourse that may fuel disadvantage and discrimination. One common thread across this collection of work, however, is the profound disadvantage and discrimination experienced by individuals with mental and cognitive disabilities, as compared to individuals with sensory or physical disabilities.

Contributions to this Special Section

In the first article, Schur et al. analyze a unique, nationally representative dataset, using validated measures to assess attitudes, experiences, and perceptions of the population across a variety of employment-related domains. Comporting with prior research, Schur et al. find people with disabilities experience lower levels of pay, job security, and job flexibility, which in part is mediated by the attitudes of supervisors and co-workers. Nonetheless, the findings demonstrate positive lessons; for instance, disability alone does not predict lower job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and turnover intention. Aligned with the findings of the other contributions in this special section, the results point towards a deeply embedded stereotype-driven model of disability discrimination in action.

Uyanik et al. next assess the evidence-base for existing theory as well as programs and interventions to address decision-making skill enhancements aimed at improving general well-being, community participation, and employment outcomes for individuals with disabilities. While the body of literature in decision-making skill is evolving, particularly for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities who traditionally experience segregating approaches, it is apparent that newer models fostering individual self-directed and supported decision-making are emerging. These more

recent developments demonstrate improved life outcomes and align with international developments in law and policy favoring increased recognition of the legal capacity of people with disabilities. Rehabilitation professionals will play an increasingly important role in validating and supporting the efficacy of these developing interventions.

Using a comparative analysis, Harpur et al. then examine workers' compensation and negligence laws, policies, and concomitant organizational cultures in Australia and Ireland. They show significant variability in treatment and outcomes between workers with physical and sensory impairments as compared to workers with mental injuries and impairments, with the latter group receiving less support and more discriminatory outcomes. The differing treatments do not comport with the reality of the disabilities under consideration, but rather with stereotypes of the possible etiologies of mental disabilities and the abilities of those who have them. Again, occupational rehabilitation and medical professionals are uniquely situated to spur the reframing of these artificially created "hierarchies of impairment" by informing legal actors, policymakers, and employers who misconstrue mental injuries and impairments as somehow less valid than physical and sensory impairments.

Closing

Although the articles in this special section use different methods, datasets, and analytical modes of inquiry, they each find basic discrimination against people with disabilities in employment, occupational rehabilitation programs, and other areas central to daily life. Discrimination is an ongoing and daily reality for millions of individuals solely on the basis of their disability status. Nonetheless, the articles in this special section identify promising new interventions that policymakers, corporations, and occupational rehabilitation professionals may use to mitigate the pervasive effects of disability discrimination.

It will take concerted efforts, by many stakeholders, to remove longstanding and systemic barriers that separate people with and without disabilities at work and in their communities. Policymakers, public and private sector stakeholders, and occupational rehabilitation professionals must work together to help inform and spur future proactive policies, practices, and strategies to improve employment outcomes for people across the spectrum of disability.

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Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of interest The authors Peter Blanck and Meera Adya declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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