Disclosure of Epilepsy to Potential Employers as a Function of Job Safety and Gender

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How much do you really know about your new employee?

Hypothesis 1
People with epilepsy will be less likely to divulge their condition to potential future employers if the job they want could be unsafe.

Hypothesis 2
Women with epilepsy will be less likely to disclose their condition than men when applying to a potentially dangerous job.

Research Background

What is Epilepsy?
Epilepsy is characterized as a disorder involving abnormal electrical discharges, called seizures, in the brain. It is one of the most frequently diagnosed, chronic neurological disorders in the United States (Mount, Johnstone, White, & Sherman, 2005). It is not just a medical disorder, it also carries a social stigma. Those with epilepsy are usually careful about who they inform and generally strive to conceal their condition (Troster, 1998). How they decide to share or conceal their disorder often depends on the circumstances in which they potentially could disclose.

Why would someone conceal his/her condition?
People with epilepsy tend to conceal their disorder especially when negative social consequences are anticipated (Troster, 1998). One negative consequence of disclosure is trouble with employment. It can up be to twice as difficult for people with epilepsy to find employment, often because of stereotypes and misunderstandings about the disorder (Jacoby, Gorry, & Baker, 2005). Disclosure of one’s condition could potentially lead to the inability for that person to get the job he/she desires.

One reason why disclosure can lead to a person not getting employment is because many employers think it is more likely that a person with epilepsy will have a work-related accident. In fact, over one-third of employers considered people with epilepsy not fit for the positions available (Jacoby et al, 2005).

Since employers are less likely to hire people with epilepsy because of potential risks, we are interested in whether a person is more or less likely to disclose his/her condition of epilepsy to an employer depending on the possibility of harm within the occupation that candidate desires.

Does gender play a part?
Research suggests that females are three times more likely to be employed than males (Bishop, 2004), and because people with epilepsy have difficulty finding jobs (Chaplin, 2005), we believe women with epilepsy will be less likely to disclose their condition than men when applying to a job.

Methods & Discussion

Scenarios

Hazardous
Perform tasks involving physical labor at building, highway, and heavy construction projects, tunnel and shaft excavations, and demolition sites. May operate hand and power tools of all types: air hammers, earth tampers, cement mixers, small mechanical hoists, surveying and measuring equipment, and a variety of other equipment and instruments. May clean and prepare sites, dig trenches, set braces to support the sides of excavations, erect scaffolding, clean up rubble and debris, and remove asbestos, lead, and other hazardous waste materials.

Innocuous
Planning work and supervising staff are key functions of this job. To do these effectively, the supervisor must know the strengths and weaknesses of each member of the staff, as well as the results required and time allotted to each job.

Supervisors must make allowances for unexpected staff absences and other disruptions by adjusting assignments or issuing deadlines, office and administrative support supervisors and managers oversee the work to ensure that it is proceeding on schedule and meeting established quality standards.

Hypothesis 1
Women with epilepsy will be less likely to disclose their condition to potential future employers if the job they want could be unsafe.

Hypothesis 2
Women with epilepsy will be less likely to disclose their condition than men when applying to a potentially dangerous job.

Methods
Participants will be persons with epilepsy recruited from the Service for Students with Disabilities organization and from the mailing list of the Epilepsy Foundation of Wisconsin. Data will be collected through a survey.

Participants randomly received a survey consisting of one of two job scenarios. One scenario will portray a job description which could be unsafe, and the other will portray a job description which has no potential risks. An 11-item questionnaire based on the scenario, which they will rate their level of agreement to each question (Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Agree, Strongly Agree) was followed by six questions regarding their demographics.

Discussion
Our findings will contribute to the ongoing study of the effects of the stigma of epilepsy on those with the condition, specifically in the realm of employment.

If the results support our hypotheses, the study may offer a textured assessment of how to address the unusually high rates of unemployment for the epileptic community. Furthermore, our research may have practical implications for understanding mechanisms which people with epilepsy use to overcome obstacles created by the negative social stigma associated with their condition.

References

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