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The Experience of a Middle-aged Person with Schizophrenia who Continues to Work: A Case Report

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Abstract

This qualitative case study examined the employment and experience of a middle-aged man with schizophrenia. Based on a semi-structured interview, the analysis focused on the meaning the man assigned to employment and how he perceived his life. A qualitative content analysis was conducted on the interview transcripts. The findings showed that the participant found meaning in life through work and, having achieving a stable life and sustained employment, was reexamining his identity in middle age. The findings highlight the importance of supporting the process involved in this reexamination of one's identity.

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Introduction

Employment affects an individual's sense of well-being, fosters autonomy, and supports recovery from various health-related challenges [1]. In Japan, 46% of private companies have achieved the government's statutory employment rate of 2.5%. The number of employed persons with disabilities has steadily increased in Japan. Specifically, to show the latest employment situation for people with disabilities, 373,914 employees have physical disabilities (actual employment rate: 1.3% increase from the previous year), 162,153 employees have intellectual disabilities (2.8% increase), and 168,542 employees have mental disabilities (11.8% increase). In 2025, the number of employed persons with disabilities and the actual employment rate both reached record highs in Japan, with a particularly large rate of increase among persons with mental disabilities [2]. According to data on job placements for persons with disabilities through Hello Work, the number of new job-seeker applications from persons with mental disabilities has continued to rise since 2020. In fiscal year 2025, the number reached 165, 316, which was more than twice that of the other two disability categories, and the employment placement rates were 40.3% for persons with mental disabilities, 36.3% for persons with physical disabilities, and 56.5% for persons with intellectual disabilities [3]. Thus, the number of persons with mental disabilities seeking employment is increasing. Furthermore, the average length of employment among persons with schizophrenia is 4.7 years, approximately 2.5 years shorter than that among persons with mood disorders or epilepsy [4].

Young persons with schizophrenia face major barriers to entering the labor market, even if they are strongly motivated to work, because of their mental illness and the associated social stigma [5]. Given the pathology and behavioral characteristics of schizophrenia, obtaining employment and continuing in a job are not easy for persons with that condition.

This paper presents the case of Mr. A from the research project "Proposals for Japanese-style Employment Support for People with Mental Disabilities Based on a Comparison with Other Countries," which was conducted from April 2018 to March 2023. This project conducted interviews with persons with mental disabilities, employers, and mental health and welfare professionals in order to clarify, from each of their perspectives, what is necessary to enable persons with mental disabilities to remain in employment. The results have been published [6, 7]. Drawing from that research, this paper examines the employment and experience of a person with schizophrenia.

Methods

Study design

This study used a qualitative case study design.

Participant and data collection

In July 2019, a semi-structured interview was conducted in a meeting room at the company where Mr. A was employed. The interview lasted 73 minutes. The information it collected included basic demographic data, such as age, sex, age at onset, marital status, highest level of education, and history of hospitalization.

Interview procedure

A single semi-structured interview was conducted. An interview guide was used, with questions addressing what work meant to the participant, barriers to employment for persons with mental disabilities, the joys and difficulties of work, and the future outlook. The interview was recorded using a digital voice recorder and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Data analysis

The verbatim transcript of Mr. A's interview was reread, and content analysis not based on any specific theory was conducted, focusing on the meaning he assigned to employment and how he perceived his life.

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Ethical consideration

This study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the College of Nursing and Nutrition, Shukutoku University (Approval Number: N19-06, E.M's former university). Mr. A provided informed consent prior to the interview. No conflicts of interest were identified among individuals or organizations involved in this study.

Case Introduction

Mr. A was a 49-year-old man.

Developmental history: He was born to a father who was a company employee and a mother who was a homemaker, and he had one younger brother. He had no particular problems during elementary, junior high, or high school and was admitted directly after high school to the faculty of science and engineering at O University. After graduating, he entered graduate school, where he conducted research in electronic engineering.

History of present illness: At age 22, during the first semester of his first year of graduate school, Mr. A strongly felt that, because the other graduate students were highly capable, he had to concentrate on his research more intensely than anyone else. He became increasingly absorbed in his research, spending long hours in the laboratory. He did not take a summer vacation and regularly had insufficient sleep. One day in October, during the second semester of his first year, he became angry over a minor incident, verbally abused another graduate student, and muttered, "I am being watched by the camera in the laboratory. That is why I cannot go home." At the recommendation of his academic advisor, he visited a psychiatric clinic and was diagnosed with schizophrenia. He said, "I know that I am too exhausted and that my brain is not functioning normally," and was voluntarily admitted to the hospital. He was hospitalized for three months. After discharge, he continued outpatient treatment but lived in social withdrawal for six years. He currently attends outpatient appointments once every four weeks and continues to take medication.

Life history (Table 1): At age 30, Mr. A attended a vocational school for three years to study programming. He subsequently worked for two years at a Type B continuous employment support facility; one year at a Type A continuous employment support facility; two years at Company W, where he performed clerical work; two and a half years at Company X, where he performed clerical work; and three years at Company Y, where he also performed clerical work. At age 45, he joined his current employer, Company Z, where he has been involved in system development work. At the time of the interview, he had been working there for four years and five months. He was employed at all of these companies under the disability employment quota system.

Family: Mr. A lived with his wife and parents-in-law. At age 36, he married a woman who was using a Type A continuous employment support facility. His wife, age 45, also had schizophrenia. Because his wife also worked, his parents-in-law were responsible for the housework. Mr. A stated, "I did not formally marry into my wife's family, but her parents have helped me in many ways."

Presentation during the interview: Throughout the interview, Mr. A spoke slowly and politely, occasionally pausing to reflect before responding.

Results and Discussion

Mr. A's employment and experiences

An analysis of Mr. A's narrative revealed 10 themes related to his past inner experiences, the emergence and realization of his desire to work, his work experiences and thoughts, and his approach to life (Table 2).

After discharge from the psychiatric hospital, Mr. A lived in prolonged social withdrawal. Although he wanted to break free from this life, he did not know how to change it. It is unclear what triggered the change, but he realized that, having been born as a human being, there must be meaning in life, and he shifted to a life of learning. His strong desire to change his circumstances motivated him to take action. Furthermore, he came to understand work as the meaning of life and, after using a Type B continuous employment support facility and a Type A continuous employment support facility, actively sought competitive employment. He then worked at Company W, Company X, and Company Y and is currently in his fifth year at his present company. Compared with the mean number of previous jobs among workers with schizophrenia, which is 1.9, Mr. A had held a greater number of previous jobs. His employment at the welfare facilities and first three companies lasted two to three years, which was shorter than the mean length of employment in a previous job among this group, which is three and a half years [8]. In addition, in the same survey, the reasons for leaving previous jobs were all negative, such as poor interpersonal relationships in the workplace or job duties that were not a good fit [9]. In Mr. A's case, however, the length of employment at each company was relatively short because he had the goal of stepping up while improving the quality of his work duties. This can be considered a strategy to progressively develop his vocational skills. However, those around him did not understand his intention and evaluated him as someone who was unable to remain in employment. Mr. A experienced this discrepancy as painful and frustrating.

Mr. A positioned himself as an unsung source of support and gained a sense that he was useful to someone, thereby confirming the meaning of his own existence. This suggests that his self-esteem and self-efficacy were being restored through work. He also understood

Table 1: Mr. A's employment history.

23 years old	24	30	33	35	37	39	42	45	49 curt.
3 months hospitalization	Withdrawal	Vocational School	Type B CESP	Type A CESP	Company W CW	Company X CW	Company Y CW	Company Z System development	
Duration		three years	two years	one year	two years	two and a half years	three years	four years and five months	

CESP: continuous employment support facility, CW: clerical work

Table 2: What Mr. A's narrative.

Theme	Narrative
Inner experience during the period of social withdrawal Misery, A sense of having fallen in life, Fear, Distress, Conflict, Anger, Confusion	"Because I was in a state of social withdrawal for so long, it took me a very long time to become connected with support services. After graduating from university, I went straight on to graduate school, but things fell apart for me there, and I was admitted to a psychiatric hospital. I felt miserable and was filled with a sense that I had fallen in life. I could not see what lay ahead, and I was afraid. I was attending outpatient appointments, but I just ate, slept, read manga, and played games. I was like a zombie. Looking back now, I wonder how I could have lived that way for six years, and I remember that it was extremely painful. I wanted to change that life, but I did not know what to do. I was carrying conflict, anger, and confusion."
Emerging from social withdrawal Recognizing oneself not as an animal but as a human being, Seeking meaning in life	"When I turned 30, it was as if I woke up and thought, I am not an animal; I was born as a human being, and as long as I am human, there must be meaning in life. To go outside, I enrolled in a vocational school to study programming, which I had always liked. I felt energy welling up in me for learning."
Impetus for employment To live is to work, Wanting to be useful to someone	"In my third year at vocational school, I began to think about what the meaning of my life was, and work came to mind. I wanted to do something that would be useful to someone. Then, on the recommendation of my attending psychiatrist, I entered a Type B continuous employment support facility. I quietly worked on tasks such as assembling decorative boxes for confectioneries and attaching labels to jam jars."
Proactive job-seeking Gathering information and taking action	"After two years, I left the Type B facility and moved to a Type A facility. While attending the Type A facility, I eventually wanted to work at a regular company, so I contacted companies with job postings I found online and went to employment information sessions for persons with disabilities. I attended many job interviews and received several rejection notices. I consulted with someone at Hello Work, went for an interview at Company W, which they recommended, and was hired."
Intentional workplace changes Stepwise progression, Distress caused by the gap between his intentions and how he was evaluated	"The facility staff and my attending psychiatrist did not view very favorably the fact that my time at the Type B facility, the Type A facility, Company W, Company X, and Company Y was short. They thought I was someone who could not settle into a job. From my perspective, I was trying hard to step up while increasing the intensity of the work duties, so it was painful and frustrating to be seen as someone who kept changing jobs and could not continue working. I felt that if I stayed at the Type B facility for a long time, I would become someone who could not be accepted by society. I wanted them to understand why I changed workplaces over short periods of time."
Experiences through work Being useful to someone, Being an unsung source of support, Confirming the significance of his existence, Accumulating small feelings of achievement	"When I work, I am happy when I feel that I am being useful to someone. Sometimes I do miscellaneous tasks, but if doing those tasks allows other people to concentrate on their work, then I feel that I am an unsung source of support. Sometimes my colleagues and supervisors thank me or acknowledge my efforts, and that motivates me and allows me to confirm the significance of my existence." "I think it is good to steadily work on the tasks I need to do, one step at a time, and build up small moments of joy when I accomplish them. It is similar to the sense of achievement you get with an elementary school arithmetic workbook, when you move forward one page a day and think, 'I finished one chapter!'"
Attitude toward work Sense of security from disclosing his disability, Competitive employment is not easy	"In both my previous companies and my current company, I was employed under the disability employment quota system, so I have been open about my situation from the beginning. I feel more secure when people at the company know about it. Employment is not easy for persons with mental disabilities."
Requests for employers Having an image of capable persons with mental disabilities	"I think human resources personnel study psychiatric disorders carefully. For that very reason, I wonder whether they have an image of persons with disabilities that is just like what is written in textbooks. They do not start out by seeing a person with a mental disability as someone who is capable. Among persons with depression and persons with schizophrenia, there are people who are good with computers, people who have strong communication skills, people who are very observant, and people who are highly capable. It would be good if companies, and their employees, could view people from the perspective that, even though this person has a disability, they are actually quite capable."
Future lifestyle Living with unresolved feelings, Living as a human being, Reconsideration of identity	"My work and life are fulfilling. Fortunately, I have not been absent from work because of physical or mental health problems. At the same time, there is something vague and unsettled inside me that I cannot put into words. It is not the same as longing...I do not know what it is. Perhaps it is because of a sentimental feeling that I can never return to the faint traces of who I was before I became ill. I have worked at several companies up to now, and I think all of those experiences form the foundation of who I am today. Next year, I will reach the milestone of turning 50, so from my 50s onward, while valuing my life with my wife even more, I find myself wondering whether there is something else I can do. Maybe that is the unsettled feeling. Maybe I want a slightly stronger sense that I am alive. But perhaps living while carrying those unresolved feelings is what it means to live as a human being."
Social stigma Awareness of being stigmatized, Comparison with other disabilities	"I am very aware that schizophrenia is an illness that is accompanied by stigma. I feel that society looks differently at persons with physical disabilities and persons with mental disabilities. People support the Paralympics, but they do not support persons with mental disabilities working, do they? [laughs]"

that competitive employment is not easy for persons with mental disabilities and considered his will to steadily carry out his duties as a valuable attitude. Mr. A desired work as a source of meaning in life, and, through continuing to work, he gained a sense of fulfillment in both life and work. This indicates that, for persons with schizophrenia, employment served purposes beyond financial independence.

Furthermore, given that he stated, "I felt that if I stayed at the Type B [continuous employment support] facility for a long time, I would become someone who could not be accepted by society," Mr. A may perceive being employed and working for a company as evidence of meaningful participation in society.

Mr. A's reconsideration of identity

Mr. A was in a process of identity restructuring in middle adulthood. Specifically, he was in the second of the four stages of restructuring, the stage of reexamining the self and exploring reorientation [10]. Mr. A was aware of the milestone of turning 50, and it is thought that he expressed, as "a vague, unsettled feeling that I cannot put into words," his sense that his future lifestyle could become more meaningful and provide opportunities to take on something new. The crisis of middle age involves instability and a reconstruction of identity [11]. Mr. A can be said to be seeking a definite sense of being alive while questioning himself about his way of being and how he should live in the future.

Stigma in employment

Persons with schizophrenia often experience employment-related stigma, and some members of the general public may have concerns about working with them or may underestimate their ability to work [12]. Mr. A recognized that he had an illness associated with stigma, and he wanted employers and others to view persons with mental disabilities not through a stereotypical image of disability but as individuals with unique strengths and capabilities. He also sensed that society looks differently at persons with other types of disability.

Employment is one form of social participation, and it can be an important factor in reducing the stigma felt by persons with schizophrenia [13]. Support is needed to enable them to achieve recovery while working.

Employment and personal recovery

Employment is a key factor in promoting "personal recovery" [14]- the process of achieving the life and lifestyle one desires. It can be said that Mr. A is on a path to personal recovery through his work. Although Mr. A did not mention it, there is a growing body of evidence showing that Individual and Placement Support (IPS) [15] is effective in helping people with mental illness secure competitive employment. Along with IPS, Supported Employment (SE) [16] has been reported to be an effective approach for securing and maintaining employment. Recent findings have shown that expanded SE, which incorporates cognitive behavioral therapy and social skills training, leads to higher employment rates, improved quality of life, and a reduction in psychiatric hospitalizations [17]. In addition to the implementation of IPS and SE, recovery-oriented [18, 19, 20] support, which promotes an individual's autonomy, the reconstruction of their identity, hope, connections, and meaningful social participation is important. This suggests the need to refine a recovery-oriented mental health approach that can support people, such as Mr. A who are grappling with a reevaluation of their identity.

Conclusion

Not all persons with mental disabilities seek competitive employment. Many have given up on employment or have lost confidence and choose not to take on the challenge [21]. The types of employment people want and the things they seek from it are diverse, and uniform employment support has limitations. Employment selection support, established through the 2022 amendment to the Act on Comprehensive Support for Persons with Disabilities [22], is likely to help realize the form of work desired by each person.

In the present case, Mr. A found meaning in life through work, voluntarily took on challenges, achieved a stable life and employment, and was experiencing a reconsideration of identity in middle age, which may contribute to a more meaningful and fulfilling life. The findings highlight the importance of supporting individuals as they reconstruct their identities during recovery.

Competing Interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Author Contributions

EM designed and conceptualized the study. EM and IS contributed to the data analysis. EM drafted the manuscript with intellectual input and revisions from IS. All authors approved the final version of the manuscript and agree to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

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