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Square pegs into round holes, or, creating square holes? Employment of persons with serious mental illness in northern places.

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Introduction: Employment is an important determinant of social and mental health. The Individual place and train (IPS) model of supported employment demonstrates significantly improved employment outcomes. Yet, persons with serious mental illness (SMI) continue to experience limited employment success, typically between 15- 20%, and in northern Ontario less than 5%. A qualitative study was conducted to explore why northerners with SMI continue to experience limited employment success despite the availability of proven models. Square pegs forced into round holes metaphorically conceptualizes experiences of employment across northern communities and helps to explain limited success. The creation of square holes is offered as a potential solution.

Objectives: This presentation will share the preliminary results of a qualitative, multi-method research study which examined access to employment for persons with SMI across two large, northern geographic regions.

Methods: In-depth interviews, focus groups, and questionnaires were used to collect data from decision makers, mental health and vocational service providers, as well as individuals with a SMI interested in work. Data were thematically analyzed to examine the influence of place.

Results: The study highlights a variety of economic, social, and cultural issues which challenge access to employment. A lack of conceptual clarity to the employment of persons with SMI within northern communities and an unwillingness to create flexible work opportunities that accommodate difference were identified to limit access. Social and cultural attitudes about the mentally ill further contribute to their exclusion from society and marginalization from the workforce. The idea of creating square holes is introduced to encourage thinking about community development as another means to employment success.

Conclusions: Services in northern and rural places which experience limited resources, depressed economies or resource-specific employment may encourage fuller participation in employment for persons with SMI through the creation of square holes. Integrated, collaborative and client-centred approaches to build community capacity and to offer a range of occupational opportunities and choices which better accommodate difference is suggested.

Contributions to the practice/evidence base of occupational therapy: Occupational therapists are encouraged to focus on community development and the creation of occupational opportunity in order to foster greater participation in employment in regions which are resource poor and employment limited.