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**THE PROCESS OF OBTAINING AND RETAINING EMPLOYMENT
AMONG THE VISION-RESTRICTED**

(Spine title: Employment Among the Vision-Restricted)

(Thesis format: Monograph)

by

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Graduate Program in

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Science

The School of Graduate and Postdoctoral
Studies
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ABSTRACT

National estimates indicate that only a small percentage of vision-restricted individuals are employed. Identified obstacles to employment include lack of access to assistive technology, inadequate transportation, and negative attitudes of potential employers. A constructivist Grounded Theory methodology was used to gain an in-depth understanding of what people with vision-restrictions, who perceived that they are successfully employed, considered to be fundamental in the search for employment. Three themes emerged from the analysis of their responses: facing and negotiating barriers, the cyclical process of seeking and keeping employment, and settling for second best. As a person with a vision-restriction, I am uniquely situated to relate to participants and to gain insight into their employment experiences. Such knowledge may enable service providers to assist clients in implementing successful strategies, may promote attitudinal changes among employers, and may inspire job seekers not to abandon their search.

Keywords: blindness, visual impairment, work, employment, occupation, barriers, and constructivist grounded theory.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Although paid employment is a central activity in the lives of many adults, individuals who are vision-restricted, that is those who are blind or have low vision, continue to be under-represented in competitive employment (Crudden & McBroom, 1999; Shaw & Gold, 2007). In addition, when employed, those who are visually-restricted tend to be under-employed, or employed in jobs that do not match their skill and knowledge levels (Shaw & Gold).

This thesis focuses on the issue of paid, competitive employment amongst adults with visual restrictions, framing this issue using the concept of occupational injustice. I draw on the concept of occupational injustice to argue that employment is an “occupational right” (Townsend & Wilcock, 2004b) that is currently not equitably available to persons with vision-restrictions. This thesis takes a strengths-based approach, exploring the employment seeking and keeping process among persons with vision-restrictions who are or have been competitively employed. More specifically, a constructivist grounded theory based study was conducted with seven participants who were visually-restricted and had been able to find and maintain paid employment.

This study’s main objective is to enhance understanding of the process of searching for and maintaining competitive employment, which is engaged in by persons who are vision-restricted. This objective also involves learning about barriers, facilitators and strategies from people who identified themselves as having been successful at attaining employment. In turn, this study aims to generate knowledge that can inform strategies and supports that can enhance opportunities for, and experiences of, paid employment for persons who are vision-restricted.

Definition of Key Terms

Two key terms embedded within the main objective of this thesis are vision-restriction and competitive employment. I will present the definitions of these terms as they are used in this thesis.

Vision Restriction

There is confusion surrounding the terminology used when defining vision and vision loss (Moore & LeJeune, 2011). The terms partially sighted, low vision, legally blind, and blind are often used interchangeably, though all of these visual terms have differing meanings.

There is no universal definition for the term “low vision” (Moore & LeJeune, 2011). Low vision is a significant reduction of visual function that cannot be corrected by glasses, contact lenses, medical treatment and/or surgery. Corn and Koenig (1996) define a person with low vision as "a person who has difficulty accomplishing visual tasks, even with prescribed corrective lenses, but who can enhance his or her ability to accomplish these tasks with the use of alternative visual strategies” (p. 4). The World Health Organization (WHO, 1992) describes a person with low vision as "one who has an impairment of visual functioning even after treatment and/or standard refractive correction, and has a visual acuity of less than 6/18” (p. 3). Low vision is not correctible with the use of glasses or other visual aids, and ranges from mild to severe vision loss, but excludes those individuals who have no usable vision (Moore & LeJeune, 2011).

People are considered partially sighted if their best-corrected visual acuity is 20/70 or less in the better eye (Center for the Partially Sighted, 2010). Visual acuity can be explained in the following way: an individual who has a visual acuity of 20/100 is able to see at 20 feet what an individual with 20/20 visual acuity sees at 100 feet (WHO 1992). Even when wearing regular corrective lenses, partially sighted people cannot read standard newsprint, or see facial expressions. The majority of legally blind people have usable vision and are partially sighted (Center for the Partially Sighted, 2010).

Legal blindness refers to individuals with central visual acuities of 20/200 or less in the better eye with the best possible correction, or with a field of view of 20 degrees or less (Moore & LeJeune, 2011). The field of view covers the angular range which is visible with the eye (Oxford English Dictionary, 2011), and a person with full vision generally has a field of view of 180 degrees. Blindness alone is typically used to refer to a person with very little or no functional use of vision, usually in the range of 20/200 or less.

Functional vision refers to how much usable vision an individual has that enables them to navigate their environment, and plan and execute tasks. An individual's level of functional vision may vary depending on the presence of glare, fatigue, and lighting conditions (Moore & LeJeune, 2011).

Vision restrictions can be caused by a variety of conditions. Cataracts, a clouding of the lens of the eye that impedes the passage of light, remain the leading cause of vision loss worldwide (WHO, 1992). Other common causes of vision loss include glaucoma, a condition resulting from an increase of pressure inside the eye, often from improper drainage of fluids, and age-related macular degeneration, which involves the loss of the central field of vision and is a

leading cause of visual impairment in older adults in industrialized countries (Moore & LeJeune, 2011; WHO, 2010). In most industrialized countries, uncorrectable low vision is also often caused by damage to the nerve layer inside the eye known as the retina (Moore & LeJeune), and until recently, very little could be done medically to improve vision once damage occurred in this nerve layer (Moore & LeJeune).

Although there are various terms to describe a person with vision loss and various conditions that can lead to vision loss, for the purposes of this study, the terms “vision-restriction” and “visually-restricted” will be used exclusively, as it encompasses both blindness and low vision in its definition. My participants refer to themselves as “visually-restricted”, and thus that is the term that will be used hereafter when describing vision loss.

Competitive Employment

Though there are various levels of employment, this thesis focuses solely on competitive employment and excludes employment that is supported or subsidized. Wehman, Revell, and Brooke (2003) define competitive employment as taking place in the integrated, mainstream labour market, where the worker is compensated with the same benefits and wages as those received by other workers in similar jobs. Competitive employment is also defined as any form of part-time, contractual, or full-time employment in which the individual receives a salary of minimum wage or better (Service Canada, 2009).

Employment where wage subsidies are provided by government or other institutions does not qualify as competitive employment (Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, 1998). The Ontario Disability Employment Support Program (ODESP), for example, subsidizes

the wages earned by individuals who find work through this program; a portion of the wage is paid by the employer and the remainder by the support program.

Position of the Researcher

As a vision-restricted individual, I have experienced several of the employment barriers, challenges, and stigmas that are presented in the literature. Upon applying for my first paid employment position, I implemented the strategy of managing disclosure, and waited until the time of the initial interview to disclose my visual restriction. Prior to the initial interview, the potential employer had no concerns regarding my qualifications; however, when I disclosed, immediate attitudinal barriers were apparent concerning my capability to complete the job for which I was applying. While the attitudinal barriers appeared the most challenging to overcome, I began to notice other barriers upon attainment of the position, including inaccessible technology, informational and communications barriers, and policy barriers. Through experiencing these barriers, I perceived the need to further explore why these barriers exist, what has, or is, being done to alleviate them, and what strategies other successfully employed vision-restricted individuals have implemented to overcome said barriers.

Understanding Competitive Employment

Within this thesis, an occupational science lens is used to understand competitive employment among persons with vision restrictions. The key construct within occupational science is occupation. Although the term “occupation” commonly refers to employment, in occupational science it refers to “all that people need, want, or are obliged to do; [and] what it means to them. It encapsulates doing, being, and becoming” (Wilcock & Townsend, 2000, p. 85). Thus, from an occupational science lens, competitive work is a form of productive

occupation, and is one in which most Canadian adults engage to support themselves and their families (Suto, 2009).

Several models that address occupation highlight that both personal and environmental factors influence the occupations a person needs, wants and is expected to do (Wilcock & Townsend, 2000). Enabling or constraining features of an environment either promote or place limitations on an individual's occupational choices. Thus an understanding of the employment rates and experiences of those who are vision-restricted requires going beyond consideration of their personal attributes, to examining external environmental factors.

Wilcock and Townsend (2000) employed the term occupational justice to refer to the "equitable opportunity and resources that enable people's engagement in meaningful occupations," (p. 85). This framework views participation in occupation as a human right; thus, the inequitable opportunities for persons with visual restrictions to obtain and retain competitive employment can be viewed as a matter of human rights and injustice.

Occupational Injustice and Occupational Rights

In a paper describing an international dialogue about the relationship between occupation, justice, and client-centred practice, Townsend and Wilcock (2004b) define occupational injustice as occurring when participation in occupations is restricted, alienated, marginalized, or otherwise constrained (Townsend & Wilcock). For the purposes of this thesis, "participation in occupations" refers to all the activities that an individual might want or need to do, or might be expected to do, and goes beyond simply referring to occupations as a job or career (Townsend & Wilcock, 2004b). Four manifestations of occupational injustice have thus far been identified in

the occupational science literature; specifically, occupational imbalance, occupational alienation, occupational deprivation, and occupational marginalization.

Occupational imbalance occurs when individuals are occupied too much or too little to experience meaning and empowerment, and is experienced by those who are under or over employed (Townsend & Wilcock, 2004b). These two groups can experience ill health, as they are less likely to engage in sufficient mental, physical and social exercise. Conversely, those that are over employed are likely to experience ill health, due to the fact they are too occupied to take care of themselves and their families. The term occupational imbalance will not be addressed in this thesis, as the study participants did not see their situation of under-employment as contributing to ill physical or mental health.

Occupational alienation describes a state in which individuals are not engaged in meaningful, enriching occupations (Townsend & Wilcock, 2004b). Alienation, according to these authors, also occurs when individuals experience daily occupations as meaningless or purposeless. Occupational alienation may be either an individual or a community or population experience of spiritual emptiness or lack of positive identity. Experiences of meaning and enrichment, enjoyment, health, identity, and quality of life within chosen places and routines appear to be derived from participation in one's occupation (Townsend & Wilcock). A lack of resources and opportunities to engage in occupations that are socially and culturally meaningful is then considered a form of occupational alienation. Occupational alienation can therefore be experienced by those with vision loss who either are not employed to their full potential (underemployed), or are not able to engage in meaningful employment. Persons with vision loss

are often under- or un-employed due to factors outside their control, which is a form of occupational injustice.

Occupational deprivation occurs when individuals are precluded from taking part in occupations which are meaningful due to factors beyond the individual's control (Whiteford, 2000). Occupational deprivation can be characterized by the influence of an external circumstance that keeps a person from acquiring, using, or enjoying employment (Whiteford). The prolonged nature of occupational deprivation distinguishes it from temporary occupational disruptions related to injuries, or moving to a new home. In some communities, the right to work may be a fundamental value and concept associated with social justice; however, in many cases, work may not necessarily support social inclusion (Townsend & Wilcock, 2004b). As an example, the concept of occupational deprivation can be applied to persons with a vision-restriction who cannot easily access employment opportunities, being hindered by transportation systems that are inaccessible to them.

Occupational marginalization can occur when "individuals lack the power to exercise occupational choice, which can occur when persons are stigmatized by illness or disability" (Wolf et al., 2010, p. 15). Discrimination may not be overt, but it exists nonetheless. Occupational marginalization operates invisibly, resulting from normative standards of how people should participate within society (Townsend & Wilcock, 2004b). An example of marginalization occurs when persons with vision restrictions are precluded from accepting certain employment due to stigmatization regarding their abilities, or the unwillingness or inability of employers to provide the technology that would enable persons with vision-restrictions to do the work.

The Significance of Competitive Employment

As indicated above, employment rates of those who are vision-restricted are unacceptably low throughout Canada (Shaw & Gold, 2007). For example, the unemployment rate among working age Canadians with vision loss was 68 percent in 2009, which stands in stark contrast to the unemployment rate of the general population whose rate of unemployment was a mere 8.01 percent as of August 2010 (Cost of Vision Loss in Canada, 2009; Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, 2010).

There are a number of reasons for addressing these disparities in employment. As stated in a 1999 Government of Canada report entitled “Toward a Healthy Future”, employment is one of the key social determinants of health. The social determinants are the social and economic conditions that shape the health of individuals and communities; under-employment or unemployment are associated with poor health and quality of life (Toward a Healthy Future). Individuals who have more control over their employment trajectory are healthier and often live longer than those in stressful or unpredictable work circumstances (WHO, 1992). Employment has a significant effect on a person's physical, mental and social health. Competitive work provides not only financial stability, but provides a sense of purpose, social contacts and opportunities for personal growth (WHO, 1992). Employment contributes to health by playing a large role in shaping a positive identity and sense of well-being (Cimarolli & Wang, 2006; Hammell, 2006). Being gainfully employed can also promote participation in a wide range of other activities that present the opportunity to develop and master new skills (Hammell, 2006).

Unemployment may be associated with higher levels of depression, a diminished sense of personal control, and feelings of disengagement (Pettifer, 1993). For those individuals who are

unemployed, their chances for developing and maintaining relationships are severely limited, as they lack the same opportunities to network with others (Golub, 2003).

Study Purpose

Notwithstanding the low rates of employment among the vision-restricted community, many individuals with vision loss have been successful in their search for employment (Leonard, 2002). One factor that previous research indicates can contribute to successful employment is a strong working knowledge of the public transportation system, and good orientation and mobility skills. It was noted by Leonard (2002), that those blind and low vision individuals who have the confidence and ability to travel independently to a job site have a greater chance to locate a variety of work opportunities. It has also been noted by Golub (2003) that familiarity with computer software and assistive technology will increase one's chances of seeking work.

Despite the contribution of these few studies, overall, there is a paucity of research exploring the employment seeking and keeping processes of blind and low vision individuals, and their proven strategies for overcoming barriers (Wolffe & Candela, 2002). The majority of research that has been conducted concerning barriers to employment has been quantitative in nature, and therefore there are few studies incorporating rich participant descriptions of the employment-seeking and keeping process (Crudden & McBroom, 1999; Crudden, Sansing & Butler, 2005; Leonard, 2002). The underrepresentation of vision-restricted individuals in the workforce demonstrates a need for research to address barriers to employment and to identify strategies implemented by those vision-restricted individuals who have been successfully employed (Crudden, 1999; Crudden et al., 2005; Shaw & Gold, 2007). A qualitative approach can explore the complex processes and strategies used to obtain and retain work. The primary

goal of the present research is to learn how people with vision-restriction who identify themselves as being successfully employed have overcome barriers to employment. A secondary goal is to take a critical perspective to identify macro-level environmental barriers that need to be addressed in order to create more equitable opportunities for employment.

Significance of the study

As will be detailed in the chapters that follow, this study contributes to the existing literature in several ways. First, because the majority of the current literature focuses on identified barriers to employment, this constructivist, in-depth study provide insight into specific strategies participants have employed during the various stages of the employment process to overcome barriers to work. Second, the findings of the current study contribute to the literature on seeking work by going beyond identifying perceived barriers to maintaining work to exploring the complex process of work retention. This research has the potential to identify innovative ways that vision-restricted individuals obtain and maintain employment. Such knowledge may enable service providers assisting vision-restricted clients to implement these strategies when seeking work. As well, employing an occupational justice framework, this study conceptualizes the issue of employment for persons with vision-restrictions in a novel way, shifting attention to the environmental conditions that create and sustain inequities in opportunities for paid employment, rather than seeing disparities as inevitable results of differences in personal abilities.

Summary

Given that work is a basic occupational right, and has shown to be connected to a variety of outcomes related to health, income, and sense of purpose, it is important to explore current

barriers to seeking and keeping work and to explore the methods of overcoming the personal, societal, and programmatic barriers faced when locating and retaining employment. The purpose of this study, therefore, is to explore the barriers and strategies that vision-restricted individuals who are successfully employed have respectively overcome and implemented in order to obtain and retain employment. In the chapter that follows, I will review the literature, where I outline the known barriers to employment, the impact employment has on shaping one's identity, and present the core skills necessary for maintaining successful employment. In the third chapter, the methodology and methods of this research are outlined. In the fourth chapter, I present the findings of this study, then conclude with a chapter providing a discussion and the implications of the findings.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

National estimates have indicated only 32% of working-aged vision-restricted individuals are employed, compared to 92% of individuals with no visual restriction (The Cost of Vision Loss in Canada, 2009). This literature review summarizes previous research that has addressed the obstacles to obtaining and retaining employment for persons with vision-restrictions. It explores the policy and service environment of employment in Ontario, explains the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA), discusses the core skills for successful employment, and delineates three overarching barriers highlighted by previous research. Gaps in the knowledge base regarding employment amongst persons with vision-restrictions will be highlighted, thereby demonstrating the significance of the current study.

Literature Search Strategy

The literature was retrieved from the CINAHL database, PsycINFO, and PubMed. The key words included in the search strategy to retrieve this literature were blindness, low vision, visual impairment, employment, occupation, work, workforce, barriers, and discrimination. All titles and abstracts relevant to the search were screened: relevancy being decided by Canadian content, specificity on barriers and strategies to maintaining employment, peer-reviewed articles, and peer-review. Articles were limited to journals, government reports and websites, and reports from the Canadian National Institute for the Blind (CNIB) reports. Search terms were entered for each database, and refined to include only those articles from scholarly sources. Academic databases were used to search for journal articles and published books, and the search engine Google Scholar was used to locate government reports. The CNIB website was searched

to gather reports published by the CNIB. The reference list of each article and report retrieved was examined for recent and relevant articles.

The Policy and Service Environment for Employment of Persons with Vision-Restrictions in Ontario

An environment can be conceptualized as comprised of multiple levels, with many frameworks including micro and macro levels (WHO, 2001). Drawing on the WHO's description of environmental levels, the micro level encompasses an individual's immediate surroundings; for example, an individual's home, workplace, and school. Also included at the micro level are the physical and social features of the environment with which an individual comes into direct contact, such as physical geography or assistive products and technology, as well as family, acquaintances, peers and strangers (WHO, 2001). The macro level includes formal and informal social structures, as well as formal and informal rules, laws, and regulations. This would include services such as housing, transportation and social security (WHO, 2001).

An environment may hinder performance by creating barriers (e.g., a building which is inaccessible for an individual with physical limitations), or by the lack of enforced government legislation and policies that ensure accessibility to all public buildings. An environment can also support participation, for example, an environment where informational and transport barriers have been removed can facilitate the participation of those who are vision-restricted in the job market, whereas an environment where these barriers exist works to restrict participation. Occupational science examines environment in relation to occupation, which is often explored at the micro level; thus, in order to gain an understanding of how broader environmental factors influence work retention, macro-level barriers (such as policy and government practices) must be further explored (Hammell, 2008).

Within the province of Ontario, concerted efforts are being made at various governmental levels to support employment of persons with disabilities through both service provision and policy development. Moreover, the CNIB includes provision of employment-related services within its mandate. As described below, many of the services provided are aimed at enhancing the environment at the micro level; that is, enhancing the abilities of individuals with disabilities and ensuring a fit within their individual work environments. As well, the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA) is described, as this is a recent macro-level policy change with potential implications for employment opportunities for Ontarians with vision-restrictions. The AODA can be examined from an occupational justice perspective which argues that all individuals should have full access to opportunities for employment, and the resources required to engage in meaningful occupations (Townsend & Wilcock, 2004).

Employment Support Services for Ontarians with Vision-Restrictions

The Canadian federal government's Office of Disability Issues (a branch organization of Human Resources and Social Development Canada) provides funding to provincial governments through the Multilateral Framework for Labour Market Agreements for Persons with Disabilities (Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, 2010). It is then the responsibility of provincial governments to allocate the funding for providing disability-related employment support programs to persons with vision restrictions. Within Ontario, the key employment supports provided via such funding are included in the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP). The employment-related supports provided through ODSP include employment planning, transportation support, mobility and employment skills training, and specialized assessments to determine career goals and employment readiness (Ministry of Community and

Social Services, 2011). These employment supports are available to all persons with disabilities, and can be accessed by anyone who is a recipient of ODSP. The ODSP also provides forms of payment and benefits to individuals with disabilities who have no other or limited income.

Policy Disincentives

Ontario Disability Support Program.

ODSP employment support program provides guidance and assistance to clients wishing to work. A report reviewing employment assistance programs detected major disincentives clients experience when attempting to locate work. This report was conducted in 2004 by Deb Matthews, the current minister of health and long-term care. Across Ontario, the same issues were consistently identified by recipients of social assistance and by healthcare providers as barriers and disincentives to employment. There was a broad consensus among recipients of ODSP and staff who administer the program that the loss of medical and dental benefits is a major factor that stands in the way of clients obtaining employment (Matthews). This is in addition to the predictable lack of job availability and lack of appropriate skills. The two key recommendations presented in this report were to educate clients regarding the rules concerning drug card eligibility, and to extend the ODSP benefits when a client commences employment until such time as employer benefits come into effect (Matthews).

The loss of medical and dental benefits, which occurs when clients of the program leave the program, is a major disincentive to locating work. Medical benefits provide an important source of security for recipients of ODSP. While some clients are very reluctant to give up their access to medical coverage which may be needed in the future, others already incur exorbitant drug expenses; thus, losing the benefits would negate any monetary gains earned by employment

(Matthews, 2004). One example of this difficulty involves clients of ODSP who are consumers of mental health services and those who require expensive drug therapies who are often employable provided they maintain their prescribed regimen. However, without sufficient medication these individuals are unable to continue sustained employment, and if they leave the program to obtain work, they are no longer eligible for medical benefits which cover the costs of the medication.

In an effort to remove some of the barriers faced by recipients of social assistance, the Ontario government has appointed the Social Assistance Review Advisory Council (SARAC) to complete a comprehensive review of available social assistance programs. It will provide the government with specific recommendations as to how to best reform the current social assistance structure (Ministry of Community and Social Services, 2012). The recommendations to be made by the SARAC will hopefully enable the Ontario government to establish an appropriate benefit structure that works to reduce barriers in the labour market, develop supports for recipients of social assistance entering the labour market, simplify income rules and regulations, and ensure the longevity of the social assistance system in Ontario (Ministry of Community and Social Services).

Though policy barriers have been mentioned in previous employment literature, there has been no research that specifically examines how programs like ODSP create disincentives to locating and retaining work in the context of persons with vision-restrictions. Neither have the strategies these individuals implement to overcome these policy barriers been studied. More specifically, using the ODSP as an example, the current policy for recipients states that proof of earnings must be provided to the ODSP, and forms detailing the hours worked and amount earned must be completed each month (Service Canada, 2009). This task is especially

challenging when a person has little usable vision or no vision at all. Currently, there is no accessible version of these forms available (Service Canada). A similar bureaucratic challenge exists for recipients of ODSP who locate work and discontinue receiving support from the program. Previous reports concerning ODSP have not specifically attended to the multiple barriers faced by those with vision-restrictions.

Similar challenges to maintaining work created by social assistance were explored in a 1999 study by O'Day. In this qualitative study with a sample of 20 visually-impaired adults, she examined the programmatic barriers produced by American social assistance programs, such as Supplemental Security Income and Social Security Disability Insurance, which create disincentives to locating and retaining work. The barriers described in her study include difficulty in navigating application forms that are not accessible, claw-backs to medical and dental costs while working and on social assistance, language that is complex and confusing, and a lack of willingness of staff who administer the assistance to provide information regarding available work incentives (O'Day). Not only was reporting income a challenge due to the inaccessible application process (due to printed forms and complex language), but if recipients worked fluctuating hours, or part-time, the social assistance benefit could vary each month depending on income level, making it difficult to predict monthly income (O'Day).

Additionally, recipients who earned in excess of the permitted amount allowed to claimants were required to make overpayments, sometimes extending over several years. Participants in O'Day's study also described the challenges they faced if they wished to accept a position that paid the same as or less than they would earn while on assistance (O'Day, 1999). For many of these recipients, the possible loss of medical coverage prevented them from accepting a paying job (O'Day).

Canadian National Institute for the Blind Employment Support.

In Canada, the CNIB provides career and employment supports to assist persons living with vision-restrictions in finding and maintaining employment. Employment counselors work directly with clients to develop and maintain skills required for successful employment and to provide support for clients seeking opportunities in the job market (CNIB, 2011). They also aid clients in obtaining government funding which can then be used to purchase work-related assistive technology. Once a client has located employment, a counselor can consult with the employer concerning appropriate recommendations for workplace accommodations (CNIB, 2011).

A common thread among the Ontario Disability Support Employment Program and the CNIB's disability-related employment support programs is that they focus primarily on employment barriers at the individual or micro level. These programs can be considered individualistic in that they focus primarily on work readiness, job search, and educational and individual assistive technology supports, which are rooted in supporting the individual without acknowledging how the macro environment places limitations on persons with vision-restrictions as a group.

Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act

The Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA) was legislated by the government of Ontario in 2005 (AODA, 2010). The Act proclaims that Ontario is obliged to be fully accessible by January 1st, 2025, and applies to every person or organization in the private and public sectors of Ontario (Lepofsky & Graham, 2009; AODA, 2010). This act seeks to achieve full accessibility for all Ontarians with disabilities, with respect to goods, services,

facilities, accommodations, employment, and structures. It also promotes the involvement of persons with disabilities in the development of accessibility standards across the province.

One of the Act's purposes is to remove all barriers to full accessibility. A barrier is anything that prevents a person with a disability from fully participating in all aspects of society because of his or her disability. This can include physical, architectural, informational, communicational, attitudinal, technological, policy or practice barriers (AODA, 2010). It is expected that efforts to enforce the removal of these barriers will facilitate accommodative practices and policies in the workplace and thereby address macro aspects of the environment; however, as the act is in the process of being implemented, its influence on the competitive employment opportunities and experiences of persons with vision restrictions remains to be seen.

Pre-Employment Skills and Career Preparation

While ODSP and CNIB provide employment related supports for working-aged individuals with vision-restrictions, it is also important to consider the skills and knowledge children with vision-restrictions need to develop. Based on a comprehensive literature review surrounding the employment of visually impaired adults, author Karen Wolffe claims that children who are vision-restricted share the same need as sighted children to develop career education skills; they need to be encouraged to develop and demonstrate good working habits (Wolffe, 1996). The goal of the literature review conducted by Wolffe (1996) is to identify the unique needs of blind and low vision students when exploring career opportunities. The rationale for integrating career education into the core curriculum for vision-restricted students is its fundamental relation to blind and low vision individuals obtaining and retaining work. To address the gap in career education, Wolffe identifies a list of competencies required by both young and high-school aged

children who take part in the career education curriculum (Wolffe, 1996). The list for young children includes the development of the concept of work, good work habits, incidental learning, and awareness of differing job responsibilities. The list of competencies for high school students includes the ability to set goals (personal and/or career related) and the ability to use time effectively; the development of strong academic skills and strong interpersonal skills; good organizational and problem-solving skills; creative thinking; flexibility; and self-reliance. For both young children and students in high-school, strong academic skills, the ability to acquire and use information, and strong oral and written communication skills are essential for future successful employment. In order to further advance career skills, it is of great import for young adults to obtain relevant work experience, remunerative if possible, and to attend post-secondary education.

Wolffe's 1999 book, entitled "Skills for Success: a Career Education Handbook for Children and Adolescents with Visual Impairments," outlines how important capabilities can be developed through meaningful learning experiences at different ages and draws on recommendations from subject experts in the field of low vision and career education. It was determined that career education is not simply about preparing for and securing employment—it is mainly about preparing for all the roles one plays over the course of one's lifetime (Wolffe).

According to Wolffe's 1996 literature review, children and youth who are vision-restricted require early and continued intervention concerning career education, even more than that received by their sighted counterparts. This is largely due to the inability of a vision-restricted child to capture information about work and involvement in the community incidentally through vision. Her 1999 book posits that working as a team, parents and teachers

can assist these children in learning career-related concepts that may help them find and retain satisfying jobs later in life.

A disability-specific curriculum developed in the United States, referred to in recent years as the expanded core curriculum (ECC), is designed to go beyond the core components of any given grade-level curriculum, and to address essential areas and experiences that are unique to students with vision-restrictions (Hatlen, 1996). The focus of the ECC involves skills that are typically learned incidentally by sighted children through observations (Wolffe, 1996).

In addition to acquiring career related skills, people in the lives of the vision-restricted must have high expectations; parents, the extended family, and teachers must realize that children with visual restrictions can grow up to establish families of their own, live independently in their communities, and work to support themselves and their families. The children should also be required to perform their responsibilities to the same standard as their sighted siblings or friends, and need to be assigned duties within the home and community that will aid them in understanding the relationship between work and monetary compensation (Wolffe, 1996).

Core Skills for Successful Employment: Research and Supports for Ontarians with Vision-Restrictions

One of the main ways that the issue of work access and opportunities for the vision-restricted in Canada has been recently studied is through examination of the core skills required for employment. As proposed by the Learning Services Network and further explored by a 2007 study conducted by Shaw and Gold, there are a range of core skills employers look for in a potential applicant, regardless of whether an applicant has a disability or not. These are referred to as employability skills, which are a set of attributes, skills, and knowledge that all labour

market participants should possess to ensure they have the capability of being effective in the workplace. These skills benefit the worker, their employer, and the wider economy (Learning Skills Network, n.d.).

The primary goal of Shaw and Gold's 2007 study was to develop an instrument that could be used to determine a vision-restricted individual's preparedness for work. A secondary goal was to learn more about what facilitates successful employment for persons who are vision-restricted (Shaw & Gold, 2007). This study was conducted in two phases. In the first phase, a list of employment success factors was developed based on existing literature. Based on a review of previous literature, Shaw and Gold found that the literature identifies several ways employment success for persons with vision-restrictions has been characterized. For example, success can be defined as the extent to which a vision-restricted individual is employed to his or her full potential (Shaw & Gold). Research by La Grow (2004) indicates that persons with a vision-restriction are not only employed at a rate lower than their sighted counter-parts, but are also less likely to be employed at a level that is consistent with their educational and professional qualifications. In addition, vision-restricted individuals are paid less and are not provided with the same opportunities for career advancement as their peers (La Grow). Employment success factors were identified through the use of focus groups conducted across Canada. Focus group participants included rehabilitation providers, employers, and successfully employed vision-restricted persons.

Participants in Shaw and Gold's study described three significant factors that contributed to their employment success: motivation, support from spouse or family, and a positive work ethic. Focus group findings both corroborated the list of factors identified in the literature review and added to the list. While there was some divergence in the perceived importance of each of

the factors during the focus groups (e.g., value of self-employment), there was much consensus that specific factors (e.g., communication skills) were critical both in the job search and on the job.

Employment success can also be determined by how satisfied a person is with their job, as well as the number of promotions received by that individual (Shaw & Gold, 2007). The findings in the Shaw and Gold study and La Grow's research are significant because they demonstrate that persons with vision-restrictions are either under employed or unemployed, and show that there is a gap in research that explores how persons who are vision-restricted develop strategies to maintain gainful employment (Shaw & Gold, 2007; La Grow, 2004).

Based on the literature review and focus groups, conducted by Shaw and Gold, the researchers proposed there are a set of transferable skills or competencies that are widely required by employers and that have changed little over the past three decades. These skills include communication, teamwork, problem-solving, numeracy, leadership, a positive attitude, self-confidence and willingness to learn (Shaw & Gold, 2007). Strong communication skills involve the ability to read, write, and synthesize information in a variety of formats (oral, written, graphs, charts, diagrams, etc). Working as part of a team requires three separate skill sets: the ability to understand and work within the dynamics of a group; to recognize the potential diversity within the group, by understanding individual perspectives; and to manage and resolve conflict. Problem-solving skills are determined by one's ability to assess situations and identify differing perspectives, and evaluate these views based on fact (Shaw & Gold, 2007; Employability Skills 2000+, 2010). Workers must be able to evaluate situations and recommend appropriate solutions. Numeracy skills are defined as the ability to use relevant scientific, technological, and mathematical knowledge and skills to explain or clarify ideas, and to observe

and record data using appropriate methods, tools and technology (Shaw & Gold). The above skills are a few examples of required skill sets an employer looks for in a potential applicant.

The list of core skills required for employment developed by Shaw and Gold overlaps with the skill sets discussed by DeMario (1992), pointing to an emphasis on particular skills and competencies required for work. In the early 1990s, the Government of Canada conducted the Essential Skills Research Project with an aim of identifying essential employment skills. In the project, nine such skills were identified: reading text, document use, numeracy, writing, oral communication, working with others, thinking skills, computer use, and continuous learning (Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, 2010). In a literature review conducted by DeMario (1992), the author concludes that employers also value attributes such as good work habits, good social skills, an ability to work well with others, a positive attitude, and numeracy and literacy skills. While both Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC) and DeMario provide a comprehensive listing of the skills most frequently required by employers, HRSDC discusses tangible work skills such as literacy and numeracy, while DeMario explores interpersonal skills such as the ability to work well with others. The literature surrounding employment for persons with disabilities other than restricted vision suggests that these core skills apply to everyone, regardless of whether or not they have a disability (Shaw & Gold, 2007). While a focus on employability skills is important, these findings seem to only address one side of the issue, shaping the individual to fit his or her environment, while not attending to environmental barriers at either the micro or macro level.

Research Addressing Obstacles to Employment for Persons with Vision-Restrictions

The employment literature surrounding vision-restrictions has identified pervasive macro-level barriers to obtaining competitive employment (Crudden & McBroom, 1999;

Crudden, Sansing, & Butler, 2005; Wolffe & Candela, 2002). Such barriers include attitudinal, mobility, programmatic, and technological obstacles (Crudden, McBroom, Skinner, & Moore, 1998; O'Day, 1999). Other challenges to locating work frequently cited in the literature included difficulty in receiving adequate and appropriate support to develop job-seeking skills, a lack of financial assistance to cover the high costs associated with assistive technology, and a lack of information concerning job openings (Crudden & McBroom, 1999). The findings of the research conducted by Crudden and McBroom were consistent with the results of an employment concerns questionnaire, completed by consumer members of the American Council of the Blind (Wolffe, Roessler, and Schriener, 1992).

Section two of the Ontarian's with Disabilities Act (AODA) provides a useful definition of barriers (Lepofsky & Graham, 2009). In this section, a barrier is defined as anything that prevents a person with a disability from participating in any aspect of society because of his or her disability (AODA, 2010).

Attitudinal Barriers

Research suggests that persons who are vision-restricted continue to face discriminatory attitudes when attempting to locate work. They are often the subject of stereotypes so that they are less able to fully participate in society than persons with no visual disabilities (Lepofsky & Graham, 2009). Lepofsky and Graham outlined the principles of the Universal Design Movement to educate and inform those who develop and review legislation. They argued that employers are hesitant to hire an individual with a visual disability, assuming that this individual will be less productive than their sighted colleagues. Such assumptions stem from stereotypes that equate disability with inability, and that view individuals with a vision-restriction as more suited for charity than productivity (Lepofsky & Graham). The goal of this article was to provide

those who create and implement legislation with the tools they need to ensure that legislation is free of “accessibility barriers” (i.e. obstacles that prevent persons with disabilities from availing themselves of the benefits created by legislation or participating in legislated programs) (Lepofsky & Graham).

In a qualitative analysis of employer’s experiences hiring vision-restricted workers that was aimed at educating and changing attitudes of potential employers, Wolffe and Candela (2002) interviewed employers who had positive experiences hiring, training, and accommodating individuals with a vision-restriction. Nine employers, whose companies had hired approximately 35 visually impaired workers, agreed to participate. The individuals who were interviewed for this study all represented large for-profit companies in the United States (Wolffe & Candela).

The authors describe a proposed model for enhancing the employment rate of vision-restricted job seekers. The purpose of the model is to develop a network of employers with an affirmative history of hiring visually impaired workers and who are willing to act as mentors and role models to prospective employers (Wolffe & Candela, 2002). Based on the nine interviews with employers, a number of recommendations were made. One such recommendation was that employers who have had experience hiring and training individuals with a vision-restriction could act as mentors for those employers with no experience hiring an individual with this disability.

Another recommendation for overcoming attitudinal barriers of employers posited by Wolffe and Candela was for the vision-restricted applicant to be proactive during the interview and hiring process (Wolffe & Candela, 2002). Methods of being proactive are to share information surrounding types of accommodations available, to suggest methods of

implementing said accommodations, and to be prepared to address a potential employer's questions (Wolffe & Candela).

The above recommendations and strategies notwithstanding, potential employers continue to express concerns regarding the complexity and expenses associated with required accommodations, and whether a vision-restricted applicant can and will reach full productivity. Based on a review of the literature, the authors concluded that logistical questions concerning guide-dogs, safety issues in the workplace, and the impact on insurance rates of hiring such workers continue to thwart the efforts of many job seekers with vision-restriction and contribute to high rates of unemployment among the vision-restricted (Wolffe & Candela, 2002).

Access to Information

Although few studies other than O'Day's have specifically focused on whether or not access to information is a barrier to employment for persons with vision restriction, it is known that printed and electronic forms of information are often not available in accessible formats. The current number of persons who are vision-restricted who are able to read Braille is estimated to be about 10 percent of the population of people with vision-restrictions (Strobel, Fossa, Arthanat, & Brace, 2006). Limited access to printed material is cited as a major barrier to maintaining work (O'Day, 1999; Crudden & McBroom, 1999). As persons who are vision-restricted cannot access and read regular printed information, information is required in an alternate format.

Existing collections of accessible resources in Canada are presently small and inadequate, and less than 5 percent of printed materials are available in an alternative format (CNIB, 2004). 'Alternate format' refers to print material that has undergone a translation process resulting in an

audio, Braille or electronic text version of the print material (CNIB). Currently, CNIB maintains primary responsibility for the provision of an integrated alternate format library service. While there is public library legislation in place to provide library services to all Canadians, services in alternate format for those who are vision-restricted are provided in public libraries on a discretionary, non-standard and therefore inconsistent basis (CNIB). This may present informational barriers for vision-restricted individuals who are relying on this limited source of information to develop and maintain literacy skills that will enable them to remain competitive in the job market.

As another example of inadequate attention to the specific needs of persons with vision-restrictions, an initiative recently implemented by the Ontario Government to improve literacy skills amongst adults does not currently provide supports for vision-restricted persons who are seeking to improve their literacy skills. The International Adult Literacy and Skills survey found that 16% of adults in the province do not possess basic literacy skills, and 26% could benefit from literacy upgrading (Government of Ontario, 2009). One program that has been established by the Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities is The Literacy and Basic Skills Program (LBSP). The LBSP is offered at over 300 sites across Ontario, and is available to more than 46,000 adults (Government of Ontario). This program is designed to assist adults in developing and maintaining their literacy skills, and recognizes the close link between literacy and employability. It should be noted that this program reflects diversity by supporting Anglophone, Francophone, Native learners, and those who are developmentally challenged or hard of hearing; however, there is nothing stated in the program's mandate about supporting the diverse needs of learners with restricted vision (Employment Ontario, 2009).

Community Mobility Barriers

In a study conducted in the United States by Crudden et al. (2005) a lack of access to public transportation was cited by rehabilitation providers as a major hindrance in obtaining successful employment for persons with a vision-restriction. The goal of the study by Crudden et al. was to identify what barriers to employment need to be addressed by rehabilitation providers in order to increase the employment rates of persons with a vision-restriction. Focus groups of rehabilitation providers were convened with the aim of sharing successful employment strategies with colleagues and policy makers (Crudden et al.).

This study also sought to identify strategies implemented by these service providers to alleviate the transportation barriers. Some of these transportation barriers included a lack of frequent and reliable public transportation, high costs associated with utilizing public transportation, and a lack of audible pedestrian signals at busy intersections. The strategies identified in this study can be grouped into two categories: those that are directed at targeting specific users of transportation and those that are directed at changing the transportation system (Crudden et al., 2005).

User-specific strategies, which can be seen as addressing the micro level of the environment, include relocation, either to an area closer to the site of employment or where public transportation is more prevalent, and networking with community agencies that provide transportation services. Another cited strategy was for users to network with co-workers and colleagues to arrange for car-pooling or ride sharing.

At the macro-level, an approach was recommended that targets changes in the system for a large number of people with transportation providers and their funding sources (Crudden et al., 2005). It was suggested rehabilitation providers and employers of vision-restricted individuals

work together to advocate for the creation or expansion of transportation services (Crudden et al.). It was noted that employers of vision-restricted individuals had greater success than rehabilitation providers in achieving political change and action from community leaders. One challenge that was identified by Crudden et al. is that studies have not yet determined how many individuals cannot work due to lack of access to transportation, and which transportation options would be most useful in assisting individuals to travel independently.

O'Day (1999) also found mobility barriers to be an important influence on finding and keeping work. The study explored the perceived barriers to locating employment. Twenty legally blind adults who were unemployed were interviewed, and were recruited through local consumer organizations. The results highlighted personal, societal, and programmatic obstacles to locating work, and found that some participants were seeking work, others resigned their search, and still others were looking for employment but losing hope. Traveling to the job was mentioned as a major barrier to finding and keeping a job. In order to insure that participants had access to the most work opportunities possible, the participants in O'Day's study chose to live in large urban areas where frequent and accessible transit was available (O'Day, 1999).

Despite this, these participants stated that certain jobs were 'out of bounds' because frequently jobs are beyond the range of public transportation. Another related obstacle was the length of time it took to travel to jobs via public transportation. In some cases, jobs were turned down because of the lengthy commute each way. Other participants mentioned that they could not accept positions that required shift work because of the limited transportation at night. Still others lacked the travel skills and self-confidence to use public transportation or negotiate busy intersections.

Though the studies by Crudden, Sansing and Butler (2005) and O'Day (1999) were both conducted in the United States, similar findings concerning barriers to accessing public transit were cited in a 2005 study conducted by the CNIB, which examined the needs of Canadians living with vision loss. In this study, access to, and frequency of, transportation was listed as a prevalent barrier. The clients overcame the transport barrier by either relying on friends and family, moving to a large city (where affordable), or car-pooling with co-workers.

Lack of Access to Assistive Technology

Persons with visual disabilities have been one of the most challenging populations to accommodate in the area of assistive technology (Butler, Crudden, Sansing, & LeJeune, 2002). Assistive technology (AT) is defined as “any item, piece of equipment, or product system, whether acquired commercially off the shelf, modified, or customized, that is used to increase, maintain, or improve functional capabilities of individuals with disabilities” (as cited in Butler et al.; p. 1). In a practice report written by the above-mentioned authors, it was reported that the lack of knowledge of how to effectively utilize AT and funding are two of the greatest limiting factors on the use of AT to increase the employability of individuals with vision-restrictions. The most noted technological barriers found by Butler et al. included the lack of a universal design in the development and dissemination of AT, the time it takes to receive required equipment, and lack of comprehensive and coordinated funding as a result of gaps in laws and policies (Butler et al.).

According to Strobel, Fossa, Arthanat, and Brace (2006), computer-specific AT is an area of concern for persons with a visual impairment seeking employment. Funding for technology and knowledge of where to obtain funding are two areas that significantly limit employability (Strobel et al.). Employment is often hindered as persons with a vision-restriction are not aware

of the assistive technology that can be utilized to overcome the functional limitations in the workplace. As a result, these individuals cannot effectively advise a potential employer about what technology is required, where to obtain said technology, and the associated costs. Without this critical information, employers are unaware of how tasks could be completed and are therefore reluctant to hire an individual with a vision-restriction. By possessing an awareness of how assistive technology can be used in the workplace, potential employers can be advised on how it will be used by the individual to perform the responsibilities of the position (Strobel et al.). Consumers have reported that delays in acquiring AT have had an adverse impact on employment (Strobel et al.). Other concerns cited by rehabilitation providers include the lack of expertise in the area of training consumers who use assistive technology, and the timeliness of receipt of required assistive technology in the workplace.

Summary

Although previous research has explored several barriers to maintaining employment, much of it occurred outside of a Canadian context. The majority of this research has done this from the perspective of rehabilitation providers and not the vision-restricted job-seeker. Other than the study by Wolffe and Candela, which interviewed employers who had hired vision-restricted individuals to get their recommendations, the focus of much of the literature seems to be on barriers to seeking and keeping work, rather than supports and specific strategies to maintaining work. Literature by Shaw and Gold identifies core skills essential to obtaining employment; however, the literature does not go beyond these core skills to explore specific strategies and processes for attaining successful employment (Shaw & Gold, 2007).

As noted by Wolffe and Candela (2002), Crudden and McBroom (1999), and Crudden et al. (2005), strategies have been suggested for potential employers of vision-restricted individuals

and rehabilitation providers to facilitate successful employment, but there is still further research required surrounding the strategies vision-restricted individuals use to overcome employment barriers and the workplace processes that may contribute to overcoming these barriers. Thus, there is an identified need for research that addresses strategies that have been used by vision-restricted individuals, as well as their workplaces, to overcome barriers in the employment-seeking and keeping process. After considering the gaps in the research on the specific strategies vision-restricted individuals use and the lack of attention to some aspects of macro environments, such as policy, I pursued a study exploring the process of obtaining and retaining employment. In the next chapter, I provide a detailed description of the Constructivist Paradigm, my own world view, and Constructivist Grounded Theory methodology.

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

The purpose of this Constructivist Grounded Theory study was to explore the process of obtaining and retaining employment amongst persons with vision-restrictions. In this chapter, I will discuss the constructivist paradigm, examine the applicability of critical theory to the current study, and define and describe grounded theory. Additionally, I will discuss the techniques I employed to collect and analyse the data, and describe the measures taken to insure rigor. Finally, I will discuss the challenges experienced in completing this study as a graduate student with a vision-restriction.

Positioning of the Study

The Constructivist Paradigm

Human beings do not discover knowledge as much as we construct or make it (Mills, Bonner, & Francis, 2006). Our history, personal life experiences, and cultural context inform our view of the world. However, our own personal experiences are not created in isolation, but through co-created experiences with others (Charmaz, 2006). In acknowledgment of this world view, I explored my research topic using the constructivist paradigm, which asserts that there is no singular, objective version of social reality, and that the world consists of multiple, individual realities (Mills et al., 2006). Many of these constructions will be shared among individuals with similar experiences within shared contexts (Mills et al.). Thus, in relation to my research topic, I assumed that individuals with vision restrictions construct their lived realities through their various experiences, including interactions with others. I also assumed that as my participants had navigated the employment process within similar contexts, and they shared the experience of having a vision restriction, there would be aspects of their realities that might be held in common.

Constructivism emphasizes the subjective relationship between researcher and participant, and promotes the co-creation of knowledge between researcher and participant (Mills et al., 2006). I am a part of the research being created, and am therefore not an objective observer. As a vision-restricted researcher who has personal experience searching for work, I must acknowledge my own values, and remain open to challenging my view of the “reality” of the process of obtaining and maintaining employment for persons with vision-restrictions. I also believe that knowledge is mutually created between the researcher and the participant and that experiences are co-constructed (Charmaz, 2006).

Since the aim of this study was to explore the employment seeking and keeping process among the vision-restricted, constructivist grounded theory methodology was chosen for its applicability to the study aims and questions. The constructivist paradigm was chosen as it permits me to integrate my own story and voice into the research, leading to a co-construction of meaning from the combined personal experiences of both myself and the participants. Through the use of constructivism, my story and the participants’ stories concerning the process of seeking and keeping work can be investigated, as this paradigm permits multiple realities to be explored.

Researcher position

My belief that further research is required in the area of employment among the vision-restricted stems from my own personal experiences attempting to locate work, and the obstacles which I have faced. Due to my previous experiences, I am therefore uniquely situated to relate to my participants, and I hold an insider perspective. As a result of my challenges in navigating employment barriers, I perceive a need to further explore the strategies that others have implemented to be successful in searching for and obtaining employment. While each

experience is unique, I believe there are many commonalities throughout the process of seeking employment that contribute to a shared experience among me and participants. My values and experiences seeking work cannot be bracketed or separated from the research because they inform what questions I will ask and how I will approach my study. My values are part of the research, and therefore contribute directly to the research process.

While the constructivist paradigm can be used to explain my choice in methodology, I also see myself as being informed by a critical paradigm. Critical thought involves standing apart from the prevailing world view, to reflect on how this view came to be and to understand the social, political, and institutional forces that shape the dominant world view. Examining work through a critical paradigm allows for a focus upon marginalized or oppressed populations, seeks to enhance awareness of how such marginalization and oppression has been socially created, and challenges institutionalized power relations (Budd, 2008; Fontana, 2004). Critically informed approaches to research involve the problematization of knowledge. Knowledge is not simply a matter of defining and explaining reality, but rather a social phenomenon having social, personal, and institutional relations (Budd, 2008). Critical theory critiques dominant ideology and promotes change brought about by education and praxis, and rejects positivism and the belief in a single reality (Fontana, 2004). Like constructivism, a critical paradigm assumes that realities are socially constructed; however, critical theory advocates the deconstruction of reality to expose conflicting realities and social injustices. For example, critical research investigates the impact policy decisions have on differing segments of society. A decision that benefits one group may be disadvantageous to another. For example, a policy that advocates the cutback of public transportation services may benefit those groups

within society who are strictly concerned with taxation; however, this same policy will hinder the mobility of individuals who rely solely on the public transportation service (Budd, 2008).

Methodology: Constructivist Grounded Theory

Grounded theory is a specific qualitative methodology that involves generation of a theory from data, rather than developing a hypothesis prior to data collection (Charmaz, 2006). This methodology uses a method of data collection that is inductive in nature; this means the researcher has no *a priori* theories, or ideas to prove or disprove (Mills et al., 2006). Issues of importance emerge from the knowledge that participants share about an area of interest they have in common with the researcher (Mills et al.). The theory is generated by the researcher from the data based on an iterative, systematic process of continual analysis of the data. Charmaz opposes the Glaserian notion of theory “emerging” from the data, as it is assumed in postpositivism that theory exists in the data apart from the researcher (Charmaz, 2006). Data is analyzed by the constant comparative method. The constant comparative method involves exploring the different views, actions, situations, and accounts of participants, comparing data from the same individual at different points of time, and comparing data with categories that have been developed based on emerging themes (Charmaz, 2005). Through using Charmaz’s approach to the constant comparative method the similarities and differences in participant accounts can emerge and contribute to the developing theory.

Several departures of traditional grounded theory have evolved through the development of grounded theory (Mills et al., 2006). The epistemological roots of grounded theory can be traced to its originators—Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss. Both researchers’ training contributed to the development of grounded theory; Glaser was trained in rigorous quantitative methods at Columbia University, while Strauss received training at the Chicago School in Field

Research (Charmaz, 2006). Glaser and Strauss collaborated to write a book, “The Discovery of Grounded Theory” which served as a new approach to scientific research (Charmaz). In this framework, traditional positivist social science research was rejected, and a new approach to scientific inquiry based on systematic inductive guidelines was introduced (Charmaz). This method was designed to generate theory while maintaining the rigor associated with quantitative research (Charmaz). Corbin and Strauss extended this work by moving into post-positivism as they advocate giving voice to their respondents, and discovering how respondents’ views conflict with that of the researcher (Charmaz, 2005).

Charmaz has evolved grounded theory to incorporate a constructivist approach, which places emphasis on the phenomena of study, and reflects a shared experience between the researcher and participant. Constructivist research focuses on how individuals construct meaning of their experiences through interaction and engagement with their environment (Charmaz, 2006). Constructivists study how and why participants construct meanings and actions in specific situations. This approach sees analysis as contextually situated within place and time (Charmaz). Charmaz argues that grounded theory strategies need not be “rigid and prescriptive,” and advocates for the use of flexible guidelines. The constructivist approach redirects qualitative research away from post-positivism and into the interpretive paradigm (Charmaz, 2005). Constructivism recognizes the mutual creation of knowledge between the researcher and participant, and aims towards an interpretive understanding of participants’ meanings (Charmaz). Because I shared experiences with my participants and because my experiences prompted my exploration of the employment seeking and keeping process, the knowledge gained from this study is co-constructed by myself and the participants.

Study Methods

Study Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this constructivist grounded theory study is to explore the processes through which persons with blindness and low vision have successfully obtained and maintained competitive employment. The research questions that guided this study were: (a) Are there workplace or individual processes and strategies that support the employment of blind and low vision individuals? (b) If so, what are these strategies and processes? (c) What issues or factors present continuing challenges to maintaining employment and or moving upward in the workplace?

Ethics

Ethics approval was sought from the Non-Medical Review Ethics Board (NMREB) at the University of Western Ontario (See Appendix B). In addition, I sought ethics approval from the Canadian National Institute for the Blind, as clients were recruited from CNIB for the study. To recruit CNIB clients for the study, a form detailing the purpose of the study, recruitment procedures and methods of data collection had to be filled out by myself and my advisor and then sent to the CNIB Director of Research for approval. On receiving permission from the Director of Research, recruitment of CNIB clients commenced. Participants were also recruited from the Canadian Council of the Blind (CCB), but there CCB has no additional ethical approval process.

In accordance with ethical review guidelines (Office of Research Ethics, 2010), consent was obtained from all participants, and participants were informed they could withdraw from the study at any time. To insure that confidentiality and anonymity were respected, all data and transcripts were kept on a password protected computer at all times; the only individuals having

access to said data were the researcher, advisor, and research assistant when necessary. Any reports, presentations or publications will use no identifying details about participants. All participants were asked to sign an electronic copy of the consent form, which outlined the study procedure, risks, and benefits.

Sampling and Recruitment

I employed a purposive, voluntary sample by selecting participants with paid work experience who were vision-restricted (Morse, 1999). This is a process used in grounded theory methodology whereby characteristics of participants are sought out by the researcher in order to contribute to the emerging theory (Charmaz 2006). In particular, I sought out participants registered with the CNIB or the CCB. One must be legally blind in order to be registered with the CNIB or the CCB. All participants who took part in this study were able to speak English proficiently, as funding for an English language interpreter was not available. To identify those participants who are or who were competitively employed, I sought out participants who were searching for work but had held prior employment, those who were currently working, and those who had worked in the past but are no longer employed (e.g. individuals who have retired from the workforce). For the purposes of this study, those participants who engaged in volunteer or unpaid work as their only form of employment were not asked to take part. I refrained from interviewing persons with whom I am well acquainted. People who had multiple disabilities or whose command of the English language was not sufficient enough to answer interview questions were not able to take part in the study.

I recruited participants for this study by sending letters of introduction and information to the CNIB and the CCB in southwestern Ontario. These agencies distributed these letters to clients who utilize their services. Participants who were willing to take part in the study were

asked to contact the researcher, and I screened the potential participants for eligibility for the study. With the guidance of an employment counselor at the CNIB, I purposefully sought out participants who had varied work experience, ranging from just having located work to retiring from the work force. Some of the accepted study participants provided additional contacts for me to interview if they knew of persons who fit the study criteria and had relevant experiences. This is known as snowball sampling (MacDougall & Fudge, 2001).

I originally foresaw conducting interviews with ten to twelve participants. However, the number of participants was capped at seven, as no new categories and codes emerged from analysis of interview content.

Data Collection Strategies

In accordance with constructivist grounded theory, I alternated between collecting and analyzing data which contributes to theoretical sampling (Charmaz, 2006). Theoretical sampling is used to develop emerging categories and refine ideas. The aim of theoretical sampling is to identify and refine relevant categories and identify conceptual boundaries. This furthers verification of hypotheses while they are being developed.

First interview.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in person, in order to optimize rapport with the interviewer. Participants were invited to meet for an interview which lasted approximately one hour; the interviews took place in the Qualitative Research Lab at the University of Western Ontario or at a location convenient for the participant. The majority of the participants opted to meet at the Central Branch of the London Public Library as this location was most accessible by public transit. Every effort was made to meet in a quiet space, so as to avoid any external environmental distractions which might have compromised the quality of the interview (Easton,

McComish, & Greenberg, 2000), and in an environment that respects confidentiality. All interviews were audio-recorded.

Participants were asked to discuss their previous experiences surrounding successfully obtaining and retaining employment (see Appendix A for the initial interview guide). They were also asked about barriers and supports they encountered while seeking and attempting to retain employment, factors which contributed to their ability to acquire work, and some of the personal and workplace strategies that contributed to successful employment. In accordance with the iterative nature of grounded theory and theoretical sampling, interview questions changed as the research progressed, based on interview content provided by participants. For example, during early interviews, I inquired generally into obstacles and strategies to locating work. However, there seemed to be many commonalities among barriers described by participants (e.g. challenges presented to locating work while on ODSP); thus in the latter interviews with other participants, I formulated specific questions and probes to gain further insight into these specific obstacles.

Attempts were made to conduct interviews in ways that fostered participants' ability to freely share their thoughts and experiences. During the interview, participants were asked to recall specific experiences, for example, experiences searching for employment, as well as describe in detail strategies they developed to find and retain employment. Although grand tour questions were established within the interview guide to prompt discussion of specific topics, participants were encouraged to elaborate on their work experiences and discuss topics relating to employment not presented in the interview questions. One advantage to the semi-structured interview is that respondents are afforded the opportunity to bring forward issues and themes that

may not have been apparent to the researcher (Patton, 2002). This type of interview has some structure, but is not so rigid that the discussion does not permit new themes to emerge.

Due to my own vision restriction, I required another individual present during the interviews to make note of any body language or visual cues given by participants, in accordance with accepted credibility standards for qualitative research (Creswell, 2003). The role of the person accompanying me to interviews was strictly to assist in recording visual information displayed by the participant, and to dictate that information to me directly after the completion of each interview. In addition, I also recorded notes on a laptop during the interview process. I transcribed all of my own notes so as to minimize the risk of mis-transcribed information. All transcripts were checked for accuracy, ensuring that transcript content exactly matched that of the content provided by participants when the interview was recorded (Easton et al., 2000).

During the interview, participants' age, level of education, gender, and time spent looking for employment were noted on a separate demographic sheet. Immediately after each interview, the data was transcribed and an initial analysis was conducted to inform interview two. This initial analysis entailed a line by line analysis of the transcripts, where each line of data was analyzed to record what was "happening", and for ideas to pursue in the second interview (Charmaz, 2006).

Second interview.

During the second interview, which occurred via telephone, themes emerging from the on-going analysis of the data were discussed and participant feedback was obtained. For example, in the initial interview, several participants described a layering of barriers, such as attitudinal, policy, and transport issues, that created further disincentives to locate work. In the

second, follow-up interview, I inquired into specific strategies participants implemented to overcome each of these obstacles. As well, gaps in data existing from the first interview were explored, and clarifications were sought as needed. Consistent with the iterative, inductive nature of grounded theory, the specific questions to be asked in interview two depended on on-going analysis, and thus were not specified at the beginning of the study.

Data analysis process and methods

According to Charmaz (2006), there are two phases in the coding process. These consist of an initial and a focused phase. In this study, consistent with Charmaz's guidelines, the initial phase involved naming each word, line, or segment of data. During this initial phase, I looked for analytic ideas to examine in further data collection. Initial coding involved a close examination of the data, and the aim of initial coding was to remain open to all theoretical directions. Initial coding prompted me to examine gaps in my data. This was followed by a focused, selective phase which used the most frequent or significant initial codes to sort, synthesize, integrate, and organize large amounts of data. Focused coding was then used to highlight and develop the most significant categories (Charmaz).

NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software, was not used to code and synthesize data, as at the time of initial data collection, my committee and I shared concerns surrounding how well the program would operate with speech output software. Although this could have been investigated, my committee and I were aware of the time implications of a two-year Master's degree, and decided to avoid NVivo.

The method of analysis adhered to the coding techniques posited by Charmaz (2006). I coded and synthesised the data directly in my interview transcripts. This consisted of two levels of coding—the initial coding was used to make note of what participants were telling me or

describing about their employment experiences. This initial coding was inserted after every line of data, and was placed as notes directly in the interview transcript. The second level of coding (focused coding) was used to portray the meanings, actions, and processes participants described during the interview process (Charmaz). During this phase of coding, the codes were kept “short and analytic”, and gerunds were used in order to remain as close to the participant’s perspective as possible (Charmaz). For an example of this stage in the coding process, see Figure 3.1.

<p>I find it hard to apply seeing as so many jobs either have paper applications you can’t read because they’re in small print or online and the websites are so cluttered and hard to navigate.</p>	<p>Level one codes: barrier = difficulty navigating application process and inaccessible job postings</p>
<p>If an application’s only available in paper, you have to ask for it, and that means telling the company before you even apply you are blind. And, same goes for the websites. So, it’s like do you want to risk sharing you can’t see prior to the interview or before you even apply?</p>	<p>Level two codes: managing disclosure; risking sharing blindness; weighing costs and benefits of disclosure</p>

Figure 3.1. Excerpt from the Initial Interview with Participant 6.

Analysis also employed the constant comparative method. Similarities and differences were explored in memos and in a library of codes which was developed to begin to illustrate the process and strategies participants implemented to obtain and retain work. The literature was also reviewed to learn more about the challenges and strategies participants shared. The review of the literature enhanced theoretical sensitivity (Charmaz, 2006), to inform some of the questions and themes I would explore with participants in the follow-up interviews.

Given there is little research in the literature focusing on specific strategies from the perspective of the vision-restricted individual, I framed my questions to inquire into specific processes and strategies developed by these individuals. I also engaged in analytic memo writing, where I recorded my thoughts, feelings, and questions about the current data, and made links between the empirical world and theoretical ideas (Charmaz, 2006). I used my memos not only as a place to record my questions about the stories I was hearing, but as a place to refine and develop my thoughts and ideas (Charmaz). Throughout my memo-writing, I kept track of re-occurring codes, categories, and used my memos as a place to explore and compare codes.

My memos also served as a place I could identify and explore my own values and personal assumptions concerning my research, and how these influenced the study. Through recording my own personal values, interests, and employment experiences, I came to understand how my own positions and interests influenced the questions I asked, the participants I chose, and the phenomena studied. Through reflecting on my own personal experiences, I came to ask myself why I chose to study the employment-seeking and keeping process from the perspective of a vision-restricted individual, rather than from the perspective of employers who have hired vision-restricted employees.

Approaches to ensure trustworthiness.

Morrow (2005) proposes that criteria for evaluating the trustworthiness or “goodness” of qualitative research are closely tied to the specific paradigm in which a particular investigation is conducted. In addition, a number of techniques have been developed to be used to enhance the trustworthiness of grounded theory research.

Quality criteria.

Consistent with the methodology chosen, I used the criteria posited by Charmaz (2006) as guidelines for this study. These criteria include: credibility, resonance, originality, and usefulness. Credibility is achieved if the study provides enough evidence for the reader to make an independent assessment and agree with the researcher’s claims, and when sufficient data has been gathered to support the researcher’s claims. Thus, within the subsequent findings chapter, I attempt to provide sufficient data for the reader to understand my interpretations and to support my claims. Resonance refers to whether theories and ideas asserted by the researcher make sense to the participants of the study. Resonance was addressed by conducting a second interview with participants, in which they were asked to discuss the concepts and ideas emerging from the researcher’s analysis.

There are many terms and concepts that are commonly used by persons with vision-restrictions that may not be in common usage (e.g. audible pedestrian signals). As I have an insider perspective, I challenged myself to examine my transcripts for any assumptions that I may have made surrounding specific terms participants have shared (Finlay, 2002). Upon exploring these assumptions, with my advisor, I requested that participants address these assumptions in the follow up interview.

Usefulness addresses whether the research will contribute to knowledge in the field. This thesis aimed to generate knowledge to inform recommendations to enhance the complex process of seeking and keeping work for persons with vision restrictions. As will be argued in the final chapter of this thesis, new findings did emerge from this study and are of relevance to future action strategies. Charmaz states that, “When born from reasoned reflections and principled convictions, a grounded theory that conceptualizes and conveys what is meaningful about a substantive area can make a valuable contribution” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 183).

Originality refers to whether the study challenges, extends, or refines current ideas and concepts. The findings presented in the following chapter offer new contributions and insights into the process implemented by vision-restricted individuals to obtain and retain work, and the specific strategies that have been adopted in order to insure employment maintenance (Charmaz, 2006).

Techniques to enhance trustworthiness.

In addition to outlining criteria to guide constructivist grounded theory, Charmaz (2006), drawing on the broader grounded theory literature, has suggested employing a number of strategies so as to enhance trustworthiness. A number of these strategies were employed in this research, including peer debriefing, simultaneous data collection and analysis, memo writing, and member checking.

Peer debriefing involved consulting with my primary advisor and committee members to discuss my interpretations of the data and to expose myself to alternative perspectives. I engaged in weekly consultations with my advisor where interview transcripts were reviewed, and themes and categories were discussed. Throughout the data collection and analysis process, I shared

transcripts with my committee members, who provided consultation surrounding category and theory development.

In order to achieve simultaneous data collection and analysis, I began to code each transcript after the completion of the corresponding interview. First, I made notes in my transcripts exploring the initial codes. I used this initial phase to describe and explain what was 'going on' in my data. This initial coding enabled me to examine broad concepts or ideas presented by my participants. Prior to the second interview, I used focused coding to refine and develop my codes.

Upon completion of each interview, I wrote memos detailing my thoughts, feelings, and any questions that arose either during the interview or as I was analysing the transcript. I used my memos as a place to document questions I could further explore during my follow-up interview with participants. My memos were a place I could 'react' to my data and to what was said by my participants.

Upon completing and coding each interview, I conducted a second, follow-up interview with participants to fill in any gaps of information that may have been apparent on a review of the transcript, known as member checking. I also used this as an opportunity to clarify and enhance what my participants told me in the initial interview. After speaking with participants, I was able to compare transcripts for similarities and anomalies. Through member checking, I was able to verify that the information participants provide to me is congruent with their stories surrounding locating work (Morrow, 2005).

Completing a Constructivist Grounded Theory Study with a Visual Restriction

As someone with a vision restriction, I faced several inherent challenges in completing my Master's research. These included, but were not limited to, navigating the ethics process,

conducting and completing interviews, coding and analysing my data, and obtaining current literature for my study.

The non-medical ethics application involved completing a lengthy form outlining the study aims, methods of gathering data, obtaining consent of participants, and strategies for recruiting participants. One of the major barriers throughout the ethics process was the inaccessible application form. The ethics application was not accessible with screen reading software and therefore I was required to obtain assistance from a research assistant in order to complete the ethics process in a timely manner. All of the formal instructions were available in a portable document file (PDF). This form of document is a scanned image of a printed page, and cannot be read by adaptive software, as the current screen reading software strictly reads plain text and not images. While it was possible to request the application form in an alternate format, the time this may have taken could have significantly delayed the research process.

In addition to the application form not being provided in an accessible format, there was no process for electronic submission of research proposals to the Non-Medical Research Ethics Board. In order to accurately complete the ethics process, I was required to pay for assistance to gather and collate the required number of copies of the research proposal to submit to the ethics board; it is important to note that one cannot proceed to the recruitment, data collection and analysis stages without first gaining ethics approval. I provided feedback to the Board detailing the current barriers to completing the application as a student with a vision-restriction, and suggested methods of how they could change current forms, documents, and policies to better facilitate this process.

As to my method of data collection, I conducted semi-structured interviews with seven vision-restricted participants in the London area. Prior to conducting my first interview, my

advisor and I discussed how a researcher with a visual restriction would be able to gather information on the non-verbal language displayed by participants in the interviews. By not including this non-verbal data, I would be missing valuable information that would significantly contribute to the data gathered from participants (Charmaz, 2006).

One of the ways proposed to resolve this issue was to have a research assistant accompany me to the interview site, to make note of any body language or non-verbal communication displayed by participants. Requiring an additional person to attend interviews and take field notes had to be cleared through the Non-Medical Research Ethics Board, the Faculty of Health Sciences administration (to obtain funding), and my participants. By having an additional person present during the interviews, I incurred costs in addition to those typically associated with a Master's research project, as the research assistant required monetary compensation for her time, both traveling to the interview site and for time during the interviews.

Locating funding to cover these costs proved to be a challenge, as funding for such specific and unique services was not readily available. A proposal was submitted to the Faculty of Health Sciences to help offset the costs of a research assistant. These unique circumstances were new to the Faculty of Health Sciences, therefore bureaucratic and programmatic barriers were discovered that had to be overcome. It took a considerable amount of time for the proposal to first be approved, funding to be released, this information to be communicated to my supervisor, and the funding to become accessible. As the process of obtaining funding was time consuming and required navigating several institutional barriers, I provided my own funding to cover the additional costs of the research until such time when the additional funding became available. Another obstacle experienced by both myself and my advisor was not knowing who to contact to make specific inquiries regarding the status of the funding.

As previously mentioned, NVivo software is designed to store, shape, manage, and sort data. While this software would no doubt make the management of data easier, I was concerned with how accessible this data management tool would be for those who utilize screen reading software. While there was the possibility of testing the NVivo software and working with the providers of that software to strategize ways of using NVivo with screen readers, this would have been time consuming given the two year window for the completion of a Master's thesis. One challenge I encountered as a result of not using NVivo was how to organize and manage the interview transcripts and data. To resolve this issue, a system of naming and dating transcripts prior to, and after each level of coding was implemented.

One of the most frequent challenges I encountered when searching for and obtaining literature was that it was not in an accessible format. The information was either available as a portable document file (PDF), or as a printed book or article. I could not limit my literature search to only those articles that were accessible, as many of the textbooks detailing constructivist methodology were only available in printed format. Through working with the Western Libraries and the research assistant, strategies were implemented to convert these inaccessible materials into an accessible format; however, with limited resources available, this process is time consuming and mired in delay. For example, the conversion of a printed reference book can take several weeks, depending on staff availability and size of the material being converted.

Overcoming Challenges in the Research Process

Given the barriers discussed in the proceeding paragraphs, it is important to describe the support systems that were put into place to insure successful completion of the research project. My advisor was not only instrumental in assisting in locating funding to provide a research

assistant, but provided support by assisting in the conversion of application forms for funding grants when the forms were not provided by the funding agency in an accessible format. As well, my advisor was available and willing to assist in addressing informational barriers to accessing literature required for the study. Library supports were provided in the form of converting printed or inaccessible literature into a readable format for screen-reading software. The supports provided by the library services also extended to locating books and other resources which could not be searched via electronic databases. The Faculty of Health Sciences also supported this research by providing funds to cover the cost of a research assistant as well as providing a computer and assistive technology in the form of JAWS® (Job Access With Speech) screen reading software.

Summary

In this study, I used the constructivist grounded theory methodology to explore the employment seeking and keeping process among the vision-restricted. I used purposive and voluntary sampling to select seven participants who each took part in two interviews. Semi-structured interviews were used as the method of data collection, and follow-up interviews were conducted over the telephone to fill in any gaps resulting from the initial interview. I analyzed the data for major themes to illustrate the participants' experiences when obtaining and retaining work. In the following chapter, I provide a description of the findings from this study. I examine specific strategies participants have employed to successfully maintain work, and explore the employment seeking and keeping process as it has been described by my participants.

CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS

In this chapter, I present the findings that evolved through the data collection and analysis phases. I begin by describing the study's participants, and the barriers (institutional, societal, programmatic, and personal) that interact within a complex system to create obstacles and disincentives to obtaining and retaining work. Next, I illustrate the cyclical process of searching for employment, as well as how various factors and strategies interact within this process. Overall, I present three major themes which evolved through analysis of the data, and explore how each theme relates to the process of maintaining employment. These themes are: facing and negotiating barriers in the employment arena, the cyclical process of seeking and keeping employment, and facilitators to finding and keeping work. Within each theme, sub-themes are also discussed. Where applicable, the strategies employed by the various participants to overcome specific barriers are revealed.

Participant Demographics

As this study is intended for the vision-restricted community in addition to rehabilitation providers, I have not displayed the participants' demographic information in a tabular format, as this presents challenges for a vision-restricted reader. To protect the identity of all participants, a number was assigned to each participant, and will be used when citing comments or presenting participant-specific information. Identification numbers have been arranged to indicate the order in which participants were interviewed (e.g., P-1; P-2, etc.).

For the purposes of this study, I interviewed seven vision-restricted participants who reside in the London, Ontario area. Of these seven participants, five were male and two were female, and their age ranged from 35 to 57 years. All the participants in this study acquired their visual

disability through natural causes, rather than due to accidental injuries; the level of self-reported functional vision ranged from ‘no usable vision’ to ‘able to read print at size 14 font’.

Of the seven participants, three were not employed at the time of the interviews. Participant P-2 had retired early from the workplace with an employer-funded pension. The other two participants indicated that they were in a period of seeking employment or upgrading skills. P-6 had been searching for paid employment for almost four years at the time of the interview. P-4 had returned to school after two years of fruitless searching, in the hopes of improving his employability. Of the remaining four participants who were employed at the time of the study, participants worked in the following fields: the media industry, healthcare, service provider for the vision-restricted, and the service industry.

All of the participants had completed formal post-secondary education – three participants attended university and four received training at a community college. The achieved education level ranged from a two year college diploma to a graduate degree in education. Five of the participants received their elementary and high school education in an integrated setting, whereas two attended a specialized school for the blind.

Facing and Negotiating Barriers to Finding and Keeping Work

Environmental obstacles that participants described presented multiple layers of barriers both in searching for, and in retaining employment. Environmental barriers addressed by participants included informational, policy and procedural, attitudinal and technological issues. In addition to describing such barriers, participants also shared how they had attempted to overcome such barriers.

Informational Barriers

A commonly cited barrier among participants was the challenges in discovering job openings for which to apply when so many job postings were not available in an accessible format. An accessible format was described as one where postings were printed in both regular and large print, and available electronically to be read with screen readers or magnification software. Participants noted that even postings provided at employment agencies charged with the responsibility of aiding those with disabilities to locate work were printed in small print, and were posted on bulletin boards—making it difficult for an individual with limited vision to locate. As P-6 explained:

And of course, even to find work, how do you do it when so many job ads are put up on bill boards in small print. Like, even in employment centers that serve the disabled, the ads are up high on bulletin boards someone with a vision restriction can't see.”

P-2 discussed barriers pertaining to websites, saying “so many of the websites use PDF's which are either scanned images, or fillable [sic], so you have to print them off to complete the application.”

Other informational challenges included the distribution of inaccessible application forms by some employment agencies, and websites detailing job listings not compatible with screen reading and magnification software. As P-6 stated: “Well, back to the application and finding jobs, I find it hard to apply seeing as so many jobs either have paper applications you can't read because they're in small print, or online and the websites are so cluttered and hard to navigate.” This participant chose not to request an accessible application form from the place of employment to which he was applying, as he, and the others, described feeling fearful of

disclosing their visual disability prior to an initial interview. Through disclosure, participants noted they risked losing their opportunity to receive an initial interview. As P-6 summarized:

Well, just that if an application's only available in paper, you have to ask for it, and that means telling the company before you even apply you are blind. And, same goes for the websites. So, it's like do you want to risk sharing you can't see prior to the interview or before you even apply?

Requesting assistance to complete job applications from friends, family, or an employment agency was the only strategy described by participants to circumvent the informational and communication barriers experienced throughout the employment process. P-6 describes: "Well, at the employment assistance centre I use I make a point of asking every time I go into the centre what jobs are posted and how to contact the potential employer."

P-4 further explained: "Well, I'm fortunate to have family and friends that are willing to assist me in completing the applications if I need [help]. Otherwise, so many jobs would be off limits."

Attitudinal Barriers

Most of the participants pointed to negative public attitudes and stereotypes as a significant environmental barrier. While they noted that this is a constant for a vision-restricted individual, these attitudes and stereotypes were amplified during both the employment seeking and keeping process. A lack of accommodations and discrimination were common experiences described by participants. For example, during both job interviews and after being hired, participants described facing overt and covert forms of discrimination. As described by P-1, who works in the media industry:

I allowed that (attitudinal barriers) to get in the way. When I was going to work at a local media outlet in [Anytown], the manager of the media outlet also had his own issues as to what I could do—people would ask me questions they would never ever ask another candidate. I would say that generally, knowing what I know of vision impaired people, all that in and of itself would be enough to make a lot of people quit.

P-4 adds to this explanation by stating: “Well, the management of the call centre for which I worked, because they had me shadowing calls for six weeks. They didn’t know what to do with me. After my six weeks of shadowing calls were over, I was let go. They didn’t think I could handle the volume of calls you know.”

Participants described several strategies they used to mitigate such attitudinal barriers, adopting specific strategies depending on the form and severity of discrimination occurring in the workplace. For some participants, educating employers and colleagues about the challenges one deals with on a daily basis when faced with a vision-restriction, and how to overcome these challenges, succeeded in diminishing the discriminatory barriers. For example, P-4 educated his employers regarding the adaptive software he would require to complete the job requirements, and arranged training sessions to demonstrate challenges using adaptive software with the company’s current programs.

I have had to take part in education sessions where I educate IBM and JAWS® as to what programs and software will or will not work on the computers at the call centre where I worked. I have had guys sitting with me the whole day asking me questions about whether I am able to do this or that on the computer until they find a way to make the software the call centre uses accessible.

Despite attempts to educate and explain, other participants found that doubts surrounding their capabilities were still present. Participants described a need to continually prove their abilities and competencies to not only their employer but to other colleagues at their place of employment. P-1 explains: “But there’s a lot of anger about always having to prove. No matter what, we have to prove, and I know myself I don’t want to take a new job because I’d have to start over and prove to my new employer I could do the job and am just as capable.”

Managing disclosure was cited by participants as another specific strategy to ameliorate the attitudinal barriers associated with locating employment. Participants often chose not to reveal information regarding the nature of their visual disability until the time of the initial interview. At this time, participants would come to the interview prepared to not only address employer concerns and questions surrounding the impact their visual restriction would have on job performance, but had also composed specific strategies based on the job description of how they could still meet the job requirements by adapting tasks in the workplace. Participants cited the importance of being proactive when it came to disclosing a visual disability as central to breaking the communication barriers often present when an employer is first faced with meeting a vision-restricted individual. The employer may not choose to initiate conversation surrounding the visual restriction as a result of either not knowing what to ask, or how best to inquire into how job tasks can still be performed. For this reason, participants described the need to be able to clearly and concisely explain the visual challenges, what equipment is required as a result, and where to purchase said equipment. P-5, who has coached the vision-restricted on job interview preparation, described the communication barrier created when persons cannot or will not disclose:

Well, knowing how to disclose your blindness. It's about making it seem like right off the top you will be able to do the job, explaining what you'll need, explaining why you need certain things. I think it's coming right out and talking about it. So many blind people can't or won't do that. They are afraid to discuss the issue of their blindness, and guess what, the employer sure isn't going to feel any less afraid, so you have to be the one to disclose. If you are uneasy, the employer will for sure pick up on that. You have to answer the employer's questions before they even ask. Talk about how you use the computer, how you get to and from work, etc. I think not discussing it just makes the employer more uneasy and will possibly raise more questions about what you can't do and decreases your chances of getting hired.

The rationale provided by participants for waiting until the time of the initial interview to discuss their visual challenges was that if disclosure occurred prior to the initial interview, the interview, in the case of many participants, did not go forward, and participants were informed the position had already been filled. P-3 explains:

I mean, it did not say I was blind on my teaching resume, but I had a lot of blindness-related experience. I mean, I wait 'till the time of the interview to discuss my blindness, I mean otherwise they have time to get nervous and they'll often decide to go with someone else and tell you the job's filled.

Policy and Procedural Barriers

The participants stated that social assistance programs, particularly the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) present another layer of barriers that must be overcome. At a broad level, some participants discussed how ODSP, as it is currently structured and provided, creates

financial and motivational disincentives to locate work. As one participant suggested, “when one is on a secure, fixed income, why bother to work if it seems like impossibility. I think so many feel that they don’t need to because they’re getting support anyway, so why try” (P-5).

A more specific challenge described was the bureaucratic challenges associated with returning to ODSP if an individual has previously discontinued support to accept employment. As stated by P-6,

I think another thing is the difficulty you have getting back on to ODSP if you go off it for a job. So, people are almost afraid to look for work, because if they are let go, they will have such a struggle getting back on assistance. I mean, it’s at least a six month process to get on to ODSP the first time. If you go off, they will want to know why you want to get back on because you apparently don’t need it.”

If participants were not successful in maintaining employment, they experienced multiple barriers in returning to disability support. One common obstacle was the length of time it took participants to regain the disability support income.

Many of the forms required for reapplication to ODSP were not provided in an accessible format, adding additional informational and communication barriers. For example, P-6, who had to return to the program, recalled having to solicit assistance from a family member to complete the lengthy print application, which is not accessible to those with a vision restriction.

For participants who had part time work, but did not receive enough income on which to live, their disability support was decreased and in some cases discontinued. For example, P-3 was able to obtain some part-time work teaching and tutoring; however, she was required to submit her earnings each month, which affected how much income support (if any) she would

receive. She commented: “And you never knew each month how much you’d receive from them (ODSP) because they’d calculate your earnings based on what you sent in.”

Another significant barrier created by the ODSP is the complex language and terminology used in their letters and documentation. For example, much of the documentation provided to clients contains legal and medical terminology, which is not easily understandable to most recipients. As P-6 summarizes: “And of course, even when you do want to reapply, the letters and other stuff they send are so hard to understand. It’s like, how do you even know what they’re asking”.

A third barrier posed to employment is the loss of health and dental benefits to persons who earn more than the limit permitted by the disability support program. Dental and medical coverage are withdrawn if the Disability Support Program determined that a recipient earned over a certain threshold. If an individual is employed in a position where benefits are not provided and benefits are discontinued from the disability support program, this can be a significant problem. This is especially difficult for someone who is not able to find a full-time position. As P-3 explains: “On top of that, the part-time stuff had no medical benefits, which is pretty tough. And, ODSP didn’t give me coverage, so, it’s like do I just return and get the coverage.”

Barriers related to assistive technology

The limited availability, combined with the high cost, of adaptive technology was something participants described as heavily influencing their ability to accept a paid position. Several participants cited the high costs associated with purchasing and updating these technological aids. As P-4 states:

Well, I loved and missed [the company], but I was grateful to have any job that paid the bills. I had no adaptations at the call centre, other than that I could change the colour on the computer screen to high contrast black, as [the employer] said it was too costly. . . I required speech software as reading off the screen gave me a headache. However, it's always a cost issue; that software is expensive.

Convincing employers to provide funding for such accommodations was difficult for some participants, and, as a result, they were let go or retired from their positions. P-4 continues, "I could not deal with the negative responses I got from the staff there when I'd ask for assistance." P-2 adds to this explanation by discussing how complications with keeping assistive technology up to date in the workplace prompted an early retirement.

I worked for a major phone company for 25 years. In 1997, they outsourced operator services out to another company. I decided at this time to leave, as I'd no longer be working directly for this company, and I felt the computer technology was moving much too quickly, and wasn't accessible."

P-1 describes the challenges in keeping assistive technology up to date during his work in the media industry:

"Well, so much of the technology is so visual in this [radio broadcasting] field, and there either isn't the screen readers available, or they're too costly, or the technology changes too quickly."

Community Mobility Barriers

Traveling to the job site was mentioned as a significant barrier; participants described the challenges not only in maintaining their current job but in locating new employment when public transit either did not offer frequent service, or when service was discontinued after a specific time of day. P-7 was required to request shifts that corresponded with the hours of the public transit system; however, as her requests often were not granted, she was required to provide her own private transit to and from her place of employment. This involved drawing on the help of a family member, and the participant using her own funds to pay for transport to and from work when public buses were not running. Another aspect of public transportation was introduced by P-4, who described the excessive amount of time needed to travel by public means,

Well, the fact I don't drive. I mean, if I drove, my work would be about twenty minutes by car. As I take the bus, it's about an hour and fifteenish [sic], give or take. I take two buses, and I have to wait in-between. That's why I'm hoping to transfer. I mean, I thought of getting Paratransit, but I'm not sure. When she can, my daughter will drive me.

P-7 also mentioned that public transit systems frequently do not provide service to all areas of a municipality. Therefore, if an individual receives an opportunity for work in a location where transit is not available, the individual either has to decline the employment offer or make alternate arrangements as was demonstrated by participants who used their own private transportation (friends and family members). Consequently, the lack of transit service affects employment opportunities, which are already scarce, adding another layer of barriers to accessing employment.

The Cyclical Process of Seeking and Keeping Employment

Participants described facing numerous types of barriers which they attempted to negotiate in order to obtain and retain employment. Overall, in addition to the continuous negotiation of such barriers, participants described the process of obtaining and retaining employment as an ever-changing, cyclical process of events which occur over time. While seeking employment may not be a simple linear process for most people, the study's participants found the experience to be particularly complex. For example, several of the participants described their experience as one in which they would look for work, locate a job, then be let go from that job, spend a period of time volunteering, leave the volunteering position behind to seek work again, then return to volunteering after no success in getting hired, and so forth.

The experience of P-6 is typical. While still seeking work, he accepted several temporary jobs in the hopes that one might lead to full time employment. When none of these "temp" jobs provided steady employment, P-6 sought further education in the hopes that upgrading his skills might increase work opportunities. When this was unsuccessful, he volunteered at several local organizations in the London area to gain valuable work experience and contacts with potential employers. At this time, none of the volunteer opportunities P-6 has pursued has led to a stable career, either in his chosen field of study or otherwise. As P-6 summarizes:

Then, it became harder and harder to find work. I mean, my work is so visual, and most people aren't interested in investing in a blind person making the modifications to allow me to use my expertise. I mean, I even tried to apply to work at a store here in town to make their computer programs for doing debit, cash out and all that accessible, and nothing. So, I ended up really just wanting something, so I took a job at a local

grocery store in 2006 as a stock boy for minimum wage. At the end of my trial period, I was told I was not fast enough and that I would be dismissed. . . So, my last working job was in 2006 at a local grocery store. But, I do lots of different volunteer jobs.

Often participants discussed locating work as a process that took place over months or years, even with the assistance of a local employment agency. As P-7 describes:

And, you know, it [finding a job when you are vision-restricted] takes time, you just have to find the right employer for the right person. I mean, finding this job at this specific fast food restaurant took me two years and two months.

As P-1 continues: “Much of what I did was contract, or volunteer, to get in the field. It was a while before a fulltime opening came up at the company I’m at now.”

Participants discussed being let go from one or more employment agencies before a job that met the needs of the participant was located. As P-7 states: “I eventually had to leave my last job because the paperwork and forms were such small print, then, I started looking for something that was less visual.”

In addition to spending an inordinate amount of time seeking work, several participants were employed in a variety of positions before finally settling into a long-term career, or volunteer work. They considered these rapidly exchanged jobs to be temporary placements. P-3 exemplifies the notion of unpredictable work opportunities by explaining:

I did some long term occasional [work] at the school for the blind, and I did a bit of tutoring privately and supply work. I did a grade three long term occasional, and another one in grade three modified. But, I just wasn’t getting steady work, and I was getting

tired of it. Just tired of the waiting for the next phone call for the next job. I'd on average get two or three calls in a month.

P-6 adds to this explanation by stating:

“I ended up getting some work at a computer store, and was let go because of the problems with the register not being accessible. Then went to work at a local grocery store, and was let go after my three month probation. Now, I'm still looking for work and am volunteering at two different places.”

Settling for Less

Notwithstanding the inconsistent and unpredictable employment opportunities described through the cyclical employment process, several of these individuals were able to 'settle' into a steady job. In order to accept some form of gainful employment, the participants 'settled for second best' as a result of the false starts and unpredictable work opportunities. This way out of the cycle of continuous searching for and engaging in false starts appears to occur when participants either could not receive the required accommodations in their chosen career, or when they were not able to locate employment in their career of choice. Some participants described situations where the employer was not willing to discuss modifications and accommodations, and/or purchase the adaptive equipment required for the job. For example, P-3 applied for a position as an elementary teacher. She shared that she was not hired due to the fact that the school administration determined she could not supervise children as a result of her vision-restriction. When she proposed suggestions, such as having an educational assistant present in the classroom while she was teaching, this support was deemed not available. As P-3 states:

“And you know, the administration was so concerned about having a blind teacher—I’d like, try to talk about ways around the challenges but...”

The only school that would consider allowing her to instruct students was a residential school for the blind. As there was no full-time work in this setting, P-3 could not locate steady employment. In order to find steady employment, P-3, like others, has had to change careers to a line of work that may not have been the participant’s first choice but that provided consistent support and accommodations. In describing the participant’s current job in the health care field, P-3 said: “Frankly, this job was NOT my first choice—teaching was. But, the school and my current clinic accommodates me and understands my needs. So, I do a job I don’t like as much but don’t have to fight for accommodations.”

P-3 and 6’s stories highlight how a downward spiral of employment opportunities is created when employment-seekers experience multiple “false starts,” ending in the acceptance of any form of paid work to avoid returning to unemployment and disability pension. P-6 spent over two years seeking work, and finally accepted temporary employment, working at several small companies. In most of these cases, he was let go or had to leave, due to lack of funds for accommodations. As a result of this downward employment trajectory, P-6 ended up accepting a position volunteering, in order to remain active in the workforce. As P-6 states: “you know, it (not having a job) got to the point I’d just take anything to pay the bills.”

In many cases, this downward spiral results in the vision-restricted employee ‘settling for second best’. P-7, who also experienced a downward spiral of employment, stated:

I wasn’t sure what I could do that wouldn’t have so many barriers it’d be stressful. So, I contacted employment centres specializing in finding work for people with disabilities,

and asked for help in finding a job. So, I went in, and met with someone, and they set me up with a job at a fast food restaurant. I mean, I had a background in medical secretary, so that's not really what I wanted; I wanted something a little more challenging. But, I was not going to turn down work. I had lots of friends unemployed, and I wasn't going there.

Another way participants settled for less was to pursue volunteer work in a field relevant to his/her field, in order to remain active in the employment arena. P-6, who applied for a position at a local library after several years of volunteering, was never hired on as a paid staff but was informed he was able to remain volunteering for the library. This participant recalled inquiring why he was permitted to remain at the library as a volunteer, but was not able to become a paid staff; the response provided was that as a 'paid staff' the library would be required to provide adaptive equipment which was a large cost to the library. This same participant has experience and education in this field, but, as illustrated above, was unsuccessful in locating work in this area, so he took an opportunity volunteering at a local library to insure he could still develop professional networks and contacts.

Sure, I am volunteering with the local library where I am currently working on a history of London project where I am looking at the history of specific areas of interest within the London community. It's interesting, I get to do public talks at the local libraries, and I get to network and be exposed to new people. So, now I am writing a book, and am hoping some of my volunteer research will turn into a paying job.

Strategies for Coping with Settling for Less

P-5 described the importance of self confidence and motivation as central to locating work. P-5 discussed self-confidence, explained how many vision-restricted persons lack confidence due to being rejected from the employment arena multiple times; however, a potential employer perceives a lack of confidence as uncertainty regarding whether the applicant can perform the job requirements. He explained:

Well, confidence. When you have it, others see that and are willing to be more confident in you. When you lack that, people note that and aren't going to put much trust in you. I mean too it's a lot of self-motivation and positive attitude and thinking. I mean, if you go into an interview, and you appear positive, confident, and sure of yourself and your role in the new job, don't you think an employer will see that?

Some participants viewed personal motivation as sorely lacking in the blind community, perhaps due to insufficient familial support and inadequate approaches to raising a child with a vision restriction. In discussing their own sources of motivation for engaging in the challenging process of finding and keeping employment, several participants discussed their personal motivation as stemming from the type and amount of familial support received in their youth. In particular, participants discussed the ways in which their families and significant others had raised them in ways that encouraged independence, or developed strong life skills. For example, P-1 shared,

[I am] very lucky. It stems to the people in our lives—our parents, siblings, friends, who push and make us, be the best we can be. I've been lucky in my life because a lot of the people I've been around are not satisfied with just my half-best. I had an incredible

mentor as well who lived here in town when I was growing up. . . He was a huge advocate of having me learn my surroundings and my way around. . . He'd make me take the bus and find my own way from a young age. He pushed me even when I did not want to be pushed.

This same participant continued:

I also find myself more independent because of my father—another huge advocate for my independence. . . I think sometimes parents believe they are doing their blind kid a favor by doing things for them—grocery shopping, banking, whatever—but they are actually crippling them and making it harder for their kid later in life.

P-3 expands on the importance of familial support by stating:

Nobody ever said I wouldn't get a job. People in my world are very supportive; I've never had an issue getting support. Like, people don't think of me as visually impaired, there's just no lack of expectation to get out and do things. Whereas I think a lot of families just say "oh, you may not get a job." So, you give up.

P-4 found that the familial support he received provided the motivation to continue to search for work until paid employment was maintained. He summarizes:

My friends and family were a big pressure on me to get and keep work. I mean, my family would support me if I was looking for a job and in between jobs, but not indefinitely. It was an expectation I work, and find a way to support myself. I mean, when people aren't enabling you to not work, you need to find ways to work and support yourself, you know. If you get financial support from your family instead of money from

working, and they don't encourage you to stop using that support, many people won't look for work. But, I think it's a guilt thing—I think many families feel guilty that their vision-restricted family member is on fixed income and keep giving and giving, instead of motivating.

Some participants talked about the challenge of remaining motivated due to the significant barriers finding employment opportunities—so many of the job notices and application forms are posted in a format that is not accessible for the vision-restricted job seeker. For other participants, challenges with remaining motivated stemmed from repeated defeats in locating employment. Repeated rejections experienced as a result of multiple job interviews created disincentives to continue searching for work—especially when a job search continued over a period of years with no resulting employment. For vision-restricted individuals who face multiple layers of barriers, continuing to remain motivated to search for work can sometimes be overwhelming. P-5 summarizes this by stating: “They either don't feel they can (locate work) or they think they'll be rejected if they try. It's hard for some people to keep going and applying after time and time again being let down.” P-1 continues: “You know, I think it's just hard for some, you know, if you're not motivated, how can you face all those barriers that take so much out of you to get over.”

When shifting to a discussion of the situation for other persons with vision-restrictions, one informant referred to a lack of motivation in the vision-restricted community, extending upon discussion of family supports and attributing lack of motivation to an inability to challenge one's self, to seek work, due to repeated rejections. However, given the personal and societal barriers faced by those with visual disabilities, what appears to be a lack of motivation may actually be a lack of self-confidence and discouragement after repeated rejections from the job

market. P-5, who has experience working with others with vision-restrictions, describes the challenge of remaining motivated to continue seeking employment as follows:

Well, they're [the client] so let down, time and time they've been rejected, told they can't do the job or can't do whatever it is they want to do. So, it gets to be discouraging after a while. I try to convince clients if they can't find work to volunteer. I mean, so many leads are found through volunteering. And, it gets you out and noticed in the community. And, it allows that client to see that they DO have the skills they believe they don't have. It's all about boosting the client's confidence.

P-5 explained that many of the vision-restricted clients who use employment services lack practical job experience and marketable job skills, which serve as personal barriers to locating work. During childhood and early adulthood, many individuals with vision restriction receive insufficient guidance from family or educators and have far fewer opportunities to obtain part-time work or pursue co-op placements in a community setting in comparison to young people who are sighted. Thus, they miss out on the opportunity to gain employment experiences which are the foundation for future work. In addition, they also experience periods of unemployment, with the result that these individuals experienced challenges entering into the competitive job market because their skills, level of training, and work history were not commensurate with their sighted peers (P-5). The resulting lack of skill development presents additional challenges.

P-5 summarized this problem:

We really need this early career prep stuff happening in the high schools. But then again, the curriculum is not designed to meet the unique needs of students with disabilities. Any

career planning that does happen is very mainstreamed. I mean, the preparation by the education system, or lack thereof, really does contribute to employment. What you learn in school and those skills are so important, and if they're not developed, that can be crucial to getting work. It's about developing good work habits, independent work habits, and learning how to advocate for what you need.

P-3 adds to the explanation of the importance of early work experience by stating: "I mean, I think a lot of kids either don't or won't work when they're young, and on top of that, schools don't know how to handle a blind student in coop and stuff, so where do they get the experience."

Separation of self from others in the vision-restricted community.

Those individuals who have been able to remain motivated to pursue employment clearly make a distinction between themselves and others in the vision-restricted community who they perceived as not possessing such motivation. The concept of separating one's self from others illustrates the need for persons with a vision-restriction who are 'othered' by the stigma and stereotypes present in society to demonstrate how they are not like the majority of the vision-restricted community. Some participants I interviewed perceive they are not like others with a visual restriction and begin to believe the commonly-held stereotypes espoused about the rest of the vision-restricted community. For example, one of the participants (P-1), who was currently employed at the time of the study, stated that he perceived a lack of motivation as a major impediment to seeking and keeping employment in the vision-restricted community. This participant, and others, identified a lack of motivation and a disinclination to persist as personal barriers that "tremendously hurt the vision-restricted community" (P-1). As P-1 describes:

A lot of them stay home and say “I don’t need to go through that.” The one thing about us is that our world is ever changing—whether it’s walking down a street and somebody leaving a sandwich board in the middle of the sidewalk path, and I have heard so many blind folks say “I don’t need that; I will just stay home—it’s easier.” . . . and I gather that comes from an inherent thing in the vision impaired community of responsibility and commitment—they don’t seem to like it . . . They don’t want to be called a quitter and that kind of thing, but it’s easier just not to start than to quit.

When he talked about the personal barriers created by a lack of perseverance and motivation and a fear of commitment, this participant clearly separated himself from others in the vision-restricted community. This is evident in this participant’s choice of words; he separates himself from the vision-restricted community by referring to ‘them’ or ‘they,’ as opposed to ‘we’, which would denote his membership in the community.

P-7 spoke of the vision-restricted community in the same manner: “Well, I am not like the others—I can do things, get out, go places, work in a normal job, use normal transit, you know. Well, so many rely on others, stay home, don’t work or even volunteer, you know . . . I’m not like that; I get out and am active.”

Facilitators to Finding and Keeping Work

Participants described two facilitators that enabled them to cope with the various interacting obstacles that they had to deal with to find and keep work. One such strategy was to draw on foundational supports and earlier opportunities to negotiate the barriers faced during the employment search in order to remain motivated and committed to the job search. This involved drawing on skills and strengths developed as a consequence of parental attitudes and

expectations emphasizing independence or as a result of positive experiences with strong mentors during childhood and/or adolescence. A second strategy, as these participants were successful in locating work, was to see themselves as “different” from others in the vision-restricted community who were either unsuccessful in locating work, or who had lost their motivation to locate work.

Summary

As described above, the employment seeking and keeping process experienced by those with vision-restrictions is complex, nonlinear, and cyclical in nature. Many strategies were implemented throughout the employment finding and maintenance process. At the commencement of the employment seeking process, strategies were implemented to navigate the inaccessible application process, to manage disclosure of the visual restriction at the time of the initial interview, and continued as new employment opportunities were presented. Participants ‘settled for second best’ as the final ‘compromise’ or the way out of the cycle of seeking employment. They coped with their situation by drawing on foundational supports to frame themselves as ‘lucky’ and motivated, and by separating themselves from others in the blind community who they framed as lacking skills, motivation and supports. In the following chapter, I will discuss the findings in relation to the literature on employment seeking and keeping for persons with vision-restrictions, and explore these findings from an occupational justice perspective.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

In this chapter, I will begin by exploring the questions I posed at the commencement of the study, as it became evident that those questions did not have simple answers. Next, the barriers that were presented in the findings chapter are discussed in relation to the existing literature, and new contributions are discussed. These obstacles include informational barriers, public attitudes and stereotypes, government policies that create disincentives to obtaining employment, the lack of access to technology, and mobility barriers. The specific strategies (where applicable) that participants employed to circumvent each barrier are discussed. The chapter describes the findings in relation to the literature on employment seeking and keeping, and how these findings are relevant to occupational science and issues such as occupational injustice. To further illustrate this complex process, I draw on the concept of occupational injustice. I discuss my findings using three manifestations of occupational injustice—occupational deprivation, occupational marginalization, and occupational alienation. I discuss how these manifestations capture the various factors that work to create obstacles for persons with vision-restrictions to locate work. I will then describe the strengths and limitations of this study. Finally, a section outlining the implications for future research concerning strategies to maintaining work will be presented.

As stated in previous chapters, the purpose of this study was to explore the employment seeking and keeping process among the vision-restricted, and what strategies these individuals implemented to obtain and retain work. The questions proposed at the beginning of the study were: (a) Are there workplace or individual processes and strategies that support the employment of blind and low vision individuals? (b) If so, what are these strategies and

processes? (c) What issues or factors present continuing challenges to maintaining employment and/or moving upward in the workplace?

Through my interviews with participants, review of the literature, engagement in the iterative process of data collection and analysis, and discussions with professionals in the field, I came to understand that these questions were not truly contextually relevant to the situation or lived experiences of study participants. For instance, these questions fall short of encapsulating the complex, lengthy, and barrier-laden process individuals with a visual restriction must move through to maintain work. Through interviews with my participants, I began to understand that the process of work retention is not as simple and linear as the preceding questions may have indicated.

One of the initial study questions was focused on the upward mobility of participants in their place of employment; I learned that it was quite uncommon for people with vision restrictions to experience upward mobility in the workplace. Instead, participants would frequently receive employment, be let go, seek new work, be let go, volunteer, and eventually settle into employment. Participants discussed the need to accept any form of paid employment, (settling for second best) even if this job was below their current educational credentials and qualifications. It became clear that the chances for upward mobility were often not present as many participants did not find themselves in one place of employment long enough.

One of the complex challenges experienced throughout the process of maintaining stable employment was the intermittent and unpredictable opportunities for work. It was not uncommon for participants to accept a job and then be let go, as the resources (technological, environmental, or transport) were too costly to continue to provide for the purposes of full-time work. Participants described these occupational disruptions as “false starts,” whereby the

individual was only in a specific job for a short period of time before being let go. This mirrors the findings of O'Day's 1999 study, where participants discuss obtaining, and being let go from, several short-term jobs prior to settling into a stable career. The challenges associated with securing the accommodations to remain in a specific job were identified in the United States by O'Day; my findings suggest that the same issues are relevant in Ontario, and still continue to present challenges to remaining employed.

Based on the notion of occupational rights, all persons have the right to participate in a range of occupations that are socially and culturally meaningful (Wilcock & Townsend, 2000). Additionally, the concept of occupational rights asserts that all individuals should have equal opportunity to participate in a diverse range of occupations. However, for persons who are vision-restricted, barriers in the physical and social environment work to limit, rather than enable this participation. As discussed above, some of the barriers that work to restrict occupations for persons who are vision-restricted are: informational, mobility, and societal. Given the obstacles to accessing information and accessible transport discussed by participants, the occupations are largely determined by what resources are accessible to the vision-restricted job seeker, and not necessarily by the choice to participate in occupations that are enriching and meaningful to the individual (Townsend & Wilcock, 2004). The concept of occupational alienation can be drawn upon to illustrate how participants who are either unemployed, or employed in jobs that have been taken as a result of facing multiple barriers when attempting to locate work in one's chosen field, and do not experience the occupational rights associated with work.

Occupational alienation was described across my participants, as they were required to settle for less, by entering to a career that was not their first choice. This was not due to level of skills or academic qualifications, but rather to an inability on the part of employers to provide the

necessary accommodations. These ranged from being able to access computer speech software, to providing funding to purchase assistive devices, to being open to the modifications needed for a blind teacher to successfully teach in a classroom. Participants discussed having to ‘fight’ for change and the accommodations they required. When not successful in securing these accommodations, participants chose to enter into a career that was not their first choice, but that provided the necessary accommodations and supports.

Barriers to Maintaining Employment

Most of the barriers to obtaining and retaining employment and potential supports cited in the literature exploring barriers to work are considered to be within the individual, such as deficits in personal skills and attributes, and personal motivation (Crudden, Sansing and Butler, 2005; Shaw & Gold, 2007). Only a few authors have discussed societal and policy barriers and specific strategies to overcome these obstacles (Crudden et al., 2005; Wolffe & Candela, 2002). The participants interviewed in my study, however, perceived the majority of their employment-related barriers to be outside themselves—in society or within public programs and policies. The informational, societal, and programmatic barriers that these participants faced are discussed next, followed by specific strategies implemented to overcome each obstacle.

Informational Barriers

Of the seven participants, five pointed to informational and communications barriers as hindrances to independently locating employment. One commonly cited informational obstacle was the lack of accessible job application forms and postings for available jobs. Where participants used websites as their major source of information to learn about job openings, the web sites were cluttered and challenging to navigate with screen reading or magnification software. Participants who relied on web sites for job openings and/or to post their resume and

cover letter discovered that the preponderance of forms on the job sites were uploaded in PDF, which are often not accessible to those using screen readers (Alliance for Equality of Blind Canadians, 2011).

In order to circumvent this obstacle, participants opted to contact a company directly to request an application form in an accessible format. However, those who adopted this strategy noted that there was a risk of disclosing one's vision-restriction when asking for an accessible application. In some cases, participants believed this early disclosure resulted in their not being invited for an interview. One strategy offered to avoid disclosing one's vision-restriction was for a friend or family member of the applicant to assist in creating and compiling the application. This strategy corroborated the findings of O'Day's 1999 study that explored how persons with vision loss overcame barriers to locating work. It should be noted that although this study was conducted over a decade previous, little has changed with regards to the challenges vision-restricted job seekers experience in accessing job-related information.

None of the participants in O'Day's 1999 study cited using local employment agencies as a source of assistance to locate job-related information. My participants, however, did take advantage of the assistance of local employment agencies. Participants described one drawback to relying on these agencies, whereby even within these agencies (designed to assist persons with disabilities in their employment search) job notices were provided in a small print format and were not available in alternative formats. The only strategy cited by participants to view these job notices was to continually consult with the employment agent to learn of any new employment openings. Similar findings concerning informational obstacles were presented in a 1999 study by Crudden and McBroom looking at challenges to locating work. The authors discussed how participants who were seeking employment had difficulty locating job postings,

and for those who were employed, processing printed material not presented in an alternative format prevented them from either moving upward in their current place of work, or locating new work (Crudden & McBroom). Although the challenges concerning a lack of access to printed materials and assistive technology were described more than a dozen years ago, these same barriers to accessing employment continue to be prevalent. Informational barriers marginalize those with a vision restriction, limiting their ability to participate fully in the realm of employment.

The challenges related to information and communication described by my participants parallel the findings of a recent report published by the Alliance for Equality of Blind Canadians (AEBC) in 2011. This report discusses a lawsuit brought against the government of Canada by a vision-restricted applicant who found the federal employment website to be inaccessible. In the suit, the applicant cited the inability to create a job profile on the website, which is the point of access for all federal government job opportunities. The Government of Canada, under the Charter of Human Rights is obligated to have an accessible website (AEBC, 2011). Like the participants of my study, the applicant was required to seek assistance from a sighted colleague, but was unable to review or revise her application. In addition to the issues faced with job applications, concerns surrounding privacy of personal information were cited as a violation of personal privacy. This suit has been forwarded to the Human Rights Tribunal and is a matter of public record.

Attitudinal Barriers

Several of the participants pointed to negative public attitudes toward blindness as a major barrier to finding and keeping jobs. Such attitudinal barriers include limited expectations, stereotypes, and misunderstandings. These findings are consistent with the

literature by O'Day (1999) and Crudden and McBroom (1999). However, O'Day adds to the findings on attitudinal barriers by discussing how the negative attitudes and perceptions held by employers are experienced more frequently by a vision-restricted job applicant during the job search and interview process. Participants in her study describe being asked a host of disability-related questions, which were not relevant to the job for which they were applying, and being asked how they would manage traveling to and from work. Additionally, participants recall being thwarted in their efforts to gain a position, as the employer was not able to perceive how an individual with a vision-restriction could complete the job requirements.

Similar to the findings of my own study, O'Day's (1999) participants discussed the discrimination they experienced when employers either were not willing to make modifications/purchase accommodations for the job, or regarded accommodations as too costly. An example of such discrimination found in my study occurred when P-6 applied for a position at a local library after several years of volunteering there. He was never hired on as a paid staff, but was informed he could remain a volunteer. Upon inquiry, he was informed that in officially hiring him, the library would be required to provide adaptive equipment which they deemed to be too costly.

Through an exploration of the existing literature, a review of the findings from my study, and my own personal experience, it is clear that a strategy is needed to alleviate employers' concerns surrounding the capabilities of vision-restricted workers. Wolffe and Candela (2002) proposed a model whereby employers who are considering hiring vision-restricted workers may speak with employers who have already successfully employed someone with a vision-restriction. Experienced employers, acting as mentors for those who have never hired a person who is vision-restricted, may positively influence their peers. Implementing a similar model in

Canada may serve not only to educate employers but to improve the low employment rate for those who are vision-restricted.

Managing Disclosure

Though all participants recalled being thwarted in their job search by the negative public attitudes and stereotypes they experienced, some pointed to ‘managing disclosure’ as a strategy to gaining an interview for a position. Participants described the importance of the timing of when they ‘disclose’ their visual restriction as key to being given an equal opportunity to be interviewed for a position. Many waited until the time of the interview to reveal their visual restriction. All participants discussed how they approached the interview prepared to address how they could perform the requirements of the job, and what modifications and accommodations were required. Additionally, the participants assembled information concerning how and where to purchase assistive technology, and the costs of said technology.

One participant who works with vision-restricted clients stated the importance of not waiting until the potential employer asks questions concerning the applicant’s visual restriction, as many employers may feel hesitant or be unsure of how to approach this topic. This participant discussed how many clients with whom he had worked failed to bring up the subject of accommodations needed for the potential job, as the applicant presumed the employer already possessed knowledge of how to accommodate someone who was vision-restricted.

In the United States, despite the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990, Wolffe and Candela (2002) indicates there has been little change in the attitudes of employers in hiring persons with disabilities before and after the act was passed. In a study by Greenwood & Johnson (1987), it was revealed that while employers expressed increasingly favorable attitudes toward people with disabilities, their willingness to hire them did not similarly increase. In fact,

the portion of employers who actually hired people with disabilities only increased from 62 percent in 1986 to 64 percent in 1995 (as cited in Wolffe & Candela, 2002). The findings of Greenwood and Johnson are consistent with the literature by Crudden and McBroom (1999), Crudden, Sansing, and Butler (2005), and O'Day (1999) which all point to negative public attitudes as a major barrier to the hiring of vision-restricted workers. The negative public attitudes and stereotypes work to further marginalize an already stigmatized group by perpetuating the notion that this group does not possess the skills necessary to be employable.

Government Policies That Create Disincentives to Locating Work

The participants of my study stated that social assistance programs such as the ODSP present another layer of barriers that must be overcome. All the participants applied for ODSP and those who were no longer employed described the challenges of returning to ODSP after leaving to obtain work. Those who were currently working discussed the disincentives created when programs either remove clients as soon as they start working, with no option to remain receiving medical coverage, or the claw back of earnings as soon as a client begins working. The participants who returned to ODSP after several years of attempting to locate work with no success strongly disliked having to reapply for benefits. One participant who applied for assistance explained how it may take up to a year to return to ODSP after leaving the program. In this participant's experience, staff of the program were hesitant to permit this participant to receive benefits after being able to support himself. These findings are consistent with the report by Matthews (2004) and the study by O'Day (1999). Although the study by O'Day was conducted in the United States, similar barriers to leaving social assistance to work were discussed. Both Matthews and O'Day discuss the challenges clients experience when seeking work that is part-time, when funding from social assistance is "clawed back" to meet the

system's requirements, or when medical coverage is withdrawn (O'Day, 1999; Matthews, 2004). Their findings also point to the difficulty clients have returning to social assistance if they choose to leave to seek employment. My findings were similar, attesting to their veracity.

One difference between the findings of my research and those of Matthews (2004) and O'Day (1999) is that the literature on social assistance points to a lack of follow up and explanation of the supports and services available to clients. For example, Matthews discussed how clients were not informed that they could receive medical coverage until benefits at the client's place of employment took effect.

Though my participants did not cite a lack of follow up as a challenge to seeking work while on social assistance, I have personally experienced the lack of follow up and explanation of services that is described by Matthews (2004) and O'Day (1999). One instance of this lack of follow up occurred when I was not informed I could receive medical and dental benefits while working if my employer did not provide these. This has been a recent change to the benefit structure of ODSP (Ministry of Community and Social Services, 2011); and follow up and a review of changes to the services and structure ought to be implemented when such significant structural changes are made. Occupational injustice occurs when individuals are not informed of changes that ultimately remove a significant barrier to maintaining work.

The participants who had worked while on ODSP encountered tremendous difficulties with reporting earnings and still receiving benefits from the program to cover drug and dental costs. These participants were required to send their pay stubs to the ODSP as proof of their earnings and had to complete forms to estimate any work-related or disability expenses. This requirement was especially difficult for workers who did not work the same number of hours per week, or

who could not obtain assistance to complete the printed earnings reports. Participants who tried to work while on ODSP explained that it was difficult to give up medical benefits to accept a job—especially if this job did not provide any or enough medical coverage. This form of occupational marginalization works to create disincentives to maintaining work, by penalizing clients for attempting to leave the program and become financially independent. Additionally, due to the claw backs to earnings deducted while working, clients actually made less money while working than simply receiving a cheque from ODSP. The often insurmountable policy barriers these individuals faced either kept them out of the workforce or restricted their work efforts.

Lack of Access to Assistive Technology

Obtaining assistive technology, such as voice-output screen readers and magnification equipment, presented challenges for participants who were considering accepting a position or who already were working. The high cost of this technology coupled with a lack of compatibility between the assistive technology and the technology utilized in the workplace caused one participant to resign from his position as a call centre representative and another to retire from his job at a telephone company. Several participants mentioned the high cost of technology and difficulty getting training. Some had difficulty convincing potential employers, even large companies, to purchase specialized equipment. The participants commonly said that jobs were inaccessible because screen-reader and Braille-output technology has not kept up with the rapidly changing graphical-user-interface platforms.

These findings are similar to research conducted by O'Day (1999) and Strobel, Fossa, Arthanat, and Brace (2006). These authors conclude that a lack of knowledge regarding how to

utilize technology (assistive or mainstream) and the cost of assistive technology has adversely impacted the hiring rates of the vision-restricted. O'Day discovered the challenges in navigating state and agency policies surrounding how to obtain assistive technology (O'Day, 1999), which was not encountered during my research. One such agency only permitted clients to purchase or obtain funding for technology after they had received a job. This creates two problems: clients do not have an opportunity to train themselves or receive training prior to entering an employment setting, and clients cannot utilize this technology to aid them in their job search.

Another similar policy challenge discussed by O'Day (1999) was the delay clients experience when purchasing equipment. Similar to the participants of my research having to leave their place of employment due to the fact their assistive technology was not compatible with the technology utilized by their workplace, participants in the O'Day study described having to leave the workforce if assistive technology took too long to acquire (O'Day, 1999).

Whiteford (2000) describes how the advancement of technology further highlights social inequalities, rather than creating "better societies". Whiteford discusses how the advancement and development of new technology has eliminated the need for jobs once performed by humans, as new technologies have replaced many of these jobs. This phenomenon of inequality is also evident in the findings of my study. My participants discuss how, as a result of advancements in technology in the workplace, they have either had to give up their job, or change jobs, as the technology utilized in the workplace was not compatible with assistive computer technology. In some cases, participants were precluded from choosing specific occupations (e.g. working in the media industry) because no resolution to achieve compatibility between workplace technology and assistive technology could be determined.

Mobility Barriers

In the context of this research, mobility refers to the ability of a vision-restricted individual to independently navigate his or her community, using techniques and mobility devices designed for those with vision restrictions. Throughout the process of maintaining employment, possibilities for work retention were shaped by broader macro-environmental forces, and created limited choice and uncertainty. For example, participants who relied on public transportation described the limitations this system placed on where one could work, when, and the length of time required to travel to work. Despite the fact that transportation is well-recognized as a major barrier to maintaining work for people with impairments, little has been done at a macro level to improve the adequacy and accessibility of public transportation (Crudden & McBroom, 1999; Crudden et al., 2005). Transportation appears to be a straight forward issue around which persons who are visually impaired and others with transportation difficulties (such as those with other health impairments or who are elderly) could advocate for changes in policy (Crudden & McBroom, 1999). In order to overcome barriers to transportation, the participants in my study, such as P-1, all resided in a major urban centre, where public transportation and/or a separate accessible transportation service were frequent, affordable, and reliable. In addition to using public transit, participants solicited the assistance of family members or friends to provide transportation to and from work. If a place of employment was situated outside the boundaries of the public transit system, participants described either having to “give up” that opportunity for employment, or pay out of pocket for transit to and from work.

A lack of accessible and affordable transportation serves both to exclude persons with disabilities from participating in the labour market, and to reinforce their marginal status (Hammell, 2008). This further creates and perpetuates dependency of persons with disabilities,

and limits their ability to participate in a range of occupations by restricting access to resources and opportunities (Hammell). Traveling to a place of employment requires reliable and accessible transportation. If jobs are either outside the bounds of the public transportation service area, or require frequent travel as part of the job, job acquisition may not be possible. Another barrier associated with transport is the length of time one spends traveling in order to get to a specific job site. In addition, taking jobs where shift work is required may not be possible, when the shift occurs outside the normal operating hours of transit service.

Still another transport barrier is poor mobility skills, where individuals lack the confidence to utilize public transportation and/or navigate busy intersections (Golub, 2003; O'Day, 1999). This finding, as described by P-5, is consistent with Golub's 2003 practice report, which states the importance of travel in developing independence. One contributor to her report felt the ability to master mobility skills boded well for learning the skills particular to a job (Golub, 2003). Currently, independent travel instruction is available in Canada through CNIB (CNIB, 2011). This one-on-one training involves orienting a client to his or her community, and teaching him or her the skills needed to navigate complex intersections, bus routes and buildings floor plans. This service is free of charge to clients of CNIB; however, the service can be intermittent and the process of learning unnecessarily drawn out. Despite any shortcomings belonging to this program, it is of no benefit at all if an individual does not use it. Reasons for not accessing this service are often a fear of travelling and a lack of motivation (Golub, 2003). Unlike other mobility barriers, this barrier is a combination of personal and programmatic challenges; training may be available, but it must be sought out.

Settling for Less

Notwithstanding the informational, attitudinal, and policy barriers, my participants developed strategies which enabled them to become employed. However, in the case of some of the participants, they chose to settle into a career that was not their first choice or the career for which they had trained. This strategy of “settling for second best” was adopted when participants either were not able to secure the necessary workplace accommodations in their chosen field, or were not given an opportunity to be hired for positions for which they had applied. For example, one participant spoke of having to accept a job much below her educational credentials and qualifications solely because this job provided her with the accommodations she required, not because she wished to choose this career path or believed she would have opportunities to steadily advance within the accepted career.

Similar findings were highlighted in a study conducted by Suto (2009) which explored the downward occupational mobility of migrant women, despite education, credentials, and qualifications. In this article, the theme “career compromise” was used to describe the changed employment trajectories experienced by migrant women after resettling in Canada. Suto’s findings examine how institutional barriers, federal policies, and the lack of relevant Canadian work experience impede efforts to seek gainful employment. The findings concerning policy and institutional barriers to work, and “proving one’s capabilities to an employer” discussed in the 2009 study by Suto, parallel those explored in my own research. Suto examines the layering of barriers (hiring prejudice, attitudinal, institutional) that were contributing factors to her research participants working below their capacity. These women experienced delays and sometimes insurmountable obstacles in the process of finding work in their fields (Suto, 2009).

Discrimination based on the way the women speak English was identified as an employment barrier, in the negative responses women received from others (Suto).

Suto describes how, despite efforts to “prove one’s worth” in the job market, many migrants “prove their worth” only to accept a job not in their chosen field as a result of non-recognition of credentials and a lack of Canadian work experience (Suto, 2009). Though the specific institutional barriers differed between Suto’s study and my own study, the concept of “layering of barriers” (programmatic, attitudinal, financial), and the disincentives created by government policies resounded in interviews with the participants in both studies. The strategy of “settling for second best” or “career compromise” was explored across the two studies as a method of obtaining paid employment.

Separation of Self from Others

As was presented in the findings chapter, some of the participants coped with the adversities of being vision-restricted by a means of separating themselves from others in the vision-restricted community. This was apparent in two ways: first, the participants’ choice of wording and language when speaking about others in the vision-restricted community, and second, appraisal of their situation as being somehow better or less difficult than their vision-restricted counter parts. Not only did these participants favourably compare themselves to others who were “worse off” but they took on commonly held stereotypes and assumptions that are held about the competencies of blind persons.

The above findings on coping with vision loss are similar to those of Ben-Zur and Zoharit (2005). The goal of this study was to examine the association between optimism, social comparisons, and coping strategies with the well-being of persons who are legally blind. This

study sampled 90 participants age 55-80 who became legally blind during adulthood. The results show that optimism and positive social comparisons play an important role in the development of motivation to cope adaptively with vision loss, and that enhancing optimism and social comparisons may facilitate the successful integration of persons who are legally blind. Ben-Zur and Zoharit concluded that the well-being of adults with vision loss is related to social comparisons and positive coping strategies. Adults who remain optimistic about their situation or adversity have an easier time adapting to vision loss. However, while social comparisons may improve a person's mood or outlook, they do not impact the limiting environmental circumstances (i.e., mobility barriers). The effectiveness of this coping strategy is therefore debatable as it does not address external environmental barriers that persist despite an individual's perceptions.

Strengths and Limitations of the Study

This study contributes to the literature in the field of low vision and employment by incorporating the lived experience of vision-restricted job seekers. As someone who is also vision-restricted, I was situated to relate to the experiences shared by my participants because I hold an "insider perspective" to the topic of study (Charmaz, 2006). Being able to draw from my own personal experience coping with and overcoming the barriers associated with work retention, I was able to use my own personal experience to inform the study questions. Given that this is a constructivist grounded theory study, I was able to use my own knowledge and experiences to contribute to the theory explaining the process persons with vision-restrictions experience to maintain work.

However, having an insider perspective has some inherent limitations. Because the participants and I often had a common understanding of a specific term or concept, when reviewing the results I had to consciously locate these assumptions and deconstruct them so that the data would be understandable to an outsider. I also had to bracket any biases that I may have held due to my own personal experiences. This was achieved through continual discussions with my thesis advisor.

In order to achieve credibility and trustworthiness, I was careful to employ the member-checking process, which is a means for the researcher to collaborate with the participants to co-create the data for this study. Participants were invited to take part in a second interview that was conducted after the first interview transcript had been analyzed, and the advisor had reviewed the analysis. Participants were not only provided with an opportunity to clarify any of their previous statements and answer any questions that I had concerning the data, but were encouraged to elaborate on the themes that emerged during the initial analysis. For example, one participant spoke about the barriers posed by assistive technology that was not compatible with his employer's technology. He was asked to provide a further explanation of how this impacted his ability to remain employed in that field. His clarification provided the impetus to expand on the study of this aspect of the data. Therefore, member checking enriched the data and raised issues that were not originally considered.

One of the major limitations to this study was that participants were only recruited from the London, Ontario area. Due to this factor, some of the findings are specific to conditions within this city. There are certain employment supports which may not be found in other cities, and challenges with public transportation may differ in other communities.

Another limitation is that the participants interviewed for this study had all completed some form of post-secondary education. This further education grouped them in a cohort which improved their employability. Therefore, their experiences might be quite different from other individuals who have a visual-restriction.

Implications for Practice

The results of this study are consistent with those of previous research in that informational obstacles, negative public attitudes, lack of access to affordable technology and public transportation were identified as the major barriers to employment for persons who are vision-restricted (Crudden & McBroom, 1999; O'Day, 1999; Wolffe and Candela, 2002). Although these barriers continue to be discussed in the literature, it is evident from the persistent nature of these barriers that little is being done to address them from a macro or policy basis. The informational barrier mentioned most frequently by participants in this study was the lack of information about job openings as a result of inaccessible websites or job notices posted in small print. Agencies charged with aiding those with disabilities to maintain employment could work with employers and companies to advise these parties on how best to create job notices and applications that are accessible. This might take the form of training provided directly to companies, or, should companies not have the man power to create an accessible application, a third party such as CNIB or the Canadian Council on Rehabilitation and Work could be brought in to create an accessible version of the job postings.

Funds could be provided for job seekers who are blind to hire readers to read printed job listings and complete application forms, and assistance from employment agencies could also be provided to persons who are unable to use computers. As the computer technology required for

a vision-restricted individual is costly, there are many vision-restricted job seekers who cannot afford it. Employment agencies could also provide up-to-date computers that can be utilized for job search purposes. Where clients cannot afford training for assistive technology, this could be provided as a part of the services offered by these agencies.

Negative public attitudes towards persons with vision-restrictions remain a major obstacle to gaining employment. To educate and inform the public (specifically employers), a tool kit of brochures, videos, and web sites describing how visually impaired people gain access to and retain printed information, use computer technology, and handle routine office procedures could be available through organizations such as CNIB and CCB. Similar initiatives, according to Wolffe and Candela (2002), have been developed in the United States by the American Foundation for the Blind, in an effort to address some of the concerns employers are likely to have when employing a vision-restricted employee. Furthermore, continued contact and networking among employers and agencies charged with aiding those with disabilities to locate work will broaden the scope and type of employers willing to hire someone with a vision-restriction (O'Day, 1999).

As discussed in the literature on employment challenges for those who are vision-restricted and described by participants of this study, there are a set of skills and attributes one must possess in order to be employable. These can range from having strong technology and mobility skills, to possessing a strong work ethic. As noted in both the literature and in the findings of this study, these essential skills are often formed in early childhood and are developed throughout one's life. Given this, perhaps a program or service ought to be implemented that targets families of children with vision loss, which could provide resources and instruction to children, parents, and teachers of vision-restricted children. Perhaps something similar to the

Expanded Core Curriculum developed in the United States may benefit families with vision-restricted children in Canada.

Another implication for practice could be to explore whether implementing a trial period where clients can return to disability support if employment is not successful works to increase the number of persons leaving social assistance to locate work. This way, if clients are not successful in their employment position, there is not a waiting period to return to the program. Additionally, for clients work part time and/or do not have medical benefits, a system could be instituted whereby ODSP provides the missing benefits, or, where applicable, subsidizes medical costs not covered by the client's work benefits.

Implications for Future Research

A critical barrier that emerged during interviews with participants was the challenge the ODSP poses to those who either wish to leave this program and work full time or remain on the program so they can still receive medical benefits and work part time. The major challenge to leaving ODSP to seek full time employment is that if the employment opportunity falls through (the client is let go, or is required to leave because accommodations cannot be provided) there is usually a six to twelve month waiting period to return to the program. The challenge inherent with this, of course, is that persons with vision-restrictions often do not possess a lot of disposable income, so the client may not have the financial means to support themselves while waiting to return to ODSP.

Another related concern as cited by one participant was the attitude held by staff of the program that if you can leave the support program to work, than you do not need to return. In these cases, clients are forced to either live off whatever savings they possess, rely on family, or

use the welfare system (which provides much less financial and medical coverage than does ODSP (Ministry of Community and Social Services, 2012).

All the participants interviewed for this study concurred that negative public attitudes, lack of access to assistive technology, and mobility and programmatic barriers continue to thwart the efforts of vision-restricted job seekers. Because the nature of these barriers is well documented in the literature (Crudden & McBroom, 1999; Crudden et al, 1998; Crudden et al., 2005; O'Day, 1999; Shaw & Gold, 2007), future research ought to be directed toward determining how these barriers are currently being overcome and identify specific strategies to overcome these obstacles. It also needs to be determined why these barriers persist despite the fact that they are well-known and despite the existence of legislation such as the ODA and AODA.

Additionally, future research needs to focus on specific social assistance policies that work to limit the type and duration of work obtained by persons relying on this support. It might also be fruitful to conduct interviews with employers to determine why certain barriers still persist; what exactly is preventing the removal of these obstacles?

Only one method of data collection (semi-structured interviews) was used in this study. A second method of data collection such as the use of focus groups could obtain a diverse view of the employment maintenance process, gather greater breadth and depth of data, and enhance the experience of participants. Through focus groups, participants could have the opportunity to interact with each other, and explore topics brought up in a group setting that may not have been addressed by a participant in a one-on-one interview.

All of the participants interviewed for this study had previous work experience prior to their interview. It may be beneficial for future studies to interview participants who are holding

their first job to determine whether a newly employed individual implements the same strategies to overcoming barriers as those who have been employed for some time. Given that this study was qualitative in nature, generalizations to other persons who are vision-restricted, both employed and unemployed, cannot be made beyond the context of this study.

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Appendix A

Interview Guide

1) Tell me a little bit about yourself, and your work related experiences.

Probes if not addressed by participant:

- type of work; duration of current job; past work experience
- demographics (see attached sheet)
- satisfaction with work obtained

2) How would you describe your experience when seeking and keeping employment?

Probes if not addressed by participant:

- what happened along the way

Barriers to work

- facilitators to work
- importance of transportation and assistive technology
- role of computer and other assistive devices

3) How did supports contribute to obtaining and retaining work?

Probes if not addressed by participant:

- familial
- friends/social networks
- educational supports
- how supports impacted/influenced type/ability to obtain/retain work

4) Can you tell me about any other factors you feel that have contributed to your ability to seek and keep a job?

Probe if not addressed by participants:

(a) Did you use any particular strategies that you believe contributed to success in getting a job?

b) Are there any particular strategies that you use or have used to keep employment?

5) Is there anything I missed . . . or anything more you wish to add to your responses?

N.B. Questions will be added, removed, and changed as necessary for each individual participant. Data analysis will provide information about which questions should be retained, removed, or changed for subsequent interviews.

Demographics Sheet

This sheet will be completed by the research assistant during each interview.

1) Name of participant

2) Age

3) Gender

4) City in which participant resides

5) Number of years employed

6) Education: level, duration

Appendix B

Letter of Information

The Process of Obtaining and Retaining Employment among the Visually Impaired

Dear Participant:

You are invited to take part in a research study. Before agreeing to participate in this study, it is important that you read and understand the following explanation of the proposed study procedures. The following information describes the purpose, procedures, risks, and benefits associated with this study. It also describes your right to refuse to participate in this research study. You should understand enough about the risks and benefits to be able to make an informed decision. This is known as the informed consent process. Please ask the researcher to explain any words you don't understand before signing this consent form. Make sure all of your questions have been answered to your satisfaction before signing this document. You may keep this letter of information for your records.

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to explore the processes through which persons with blindness and low vision have successfully obtained and retained competitive employment in Southwestern Ontario. At present, there is limited research conducted concerning the employment seeking and keeping process of blind and low vision individuals. One of the primary goals of this research is to identify the methods used to overcome barriers by people who identify themselves as being successfully employed.

In order to take part in this study, participants must be legally blind, registered with The Canadian National Institute for the Blind (CNIB) or The Canadian Council for the Blind (CCB). The participant must also be searching for work but have held prior employment, be currently working, or have worked in the past but are no longer employed (e.g. individuals who have retired from the workforce). To ensure participants are eligible to work, participants must be over the age of 18 to take part in the study. As the researcher is only fluent in the English

language, participants must have a good command of the English language. Individuals who have multiple disabilities will not be able to take part in the study. Because one of the researchers is herself registered with CNIB and CCB, in order to prevent undue influence over participants or the appearance of undue influence, we will refrain from interviewing persons with whom this researcher has a close working or social relationship.

Procedure

If you agree to take part in this study, you will be asked to participate in two interviews. The first interview will last about one hour, and will be held in a qualitative research lab at The University of Western Ontario or at a location convenient to you. If you do request the interview to take place at a location that is more convenient for you, the researcher will want to discuss this with you to be certain that it is a location that will allow the interview to take place in an environment that respects confidentiality. The researcher will be asking you to talk about your previous experiences surrounding successfully obtaining and retaining employment. You will be asked about your experiences surrounding some of the barriers you encountered while seeking employment, factors which contributed to your ability to obtain and retain employment, and some of the strategies you believe contributed to successful employment.

During the interview, there will be a research assistant present in addition to the researcher. As the researcher herself is visually impaired, the purpose of this is to record visual observations, such as body language, that cannot be detected by the researcher. The research assistant will also be assisting the researcher by making note of demographic information that is discussed during the interview. The second interview will occur by telephone, and will involve obtaining your feedback about the emerging results of the study and clarifying information provided in the first interview.

The interviews will be tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

The researcher will answer any questions you may have concerning your participation in this study at any time.

Confidentiality

All information shared during the interview will be kept confidential. The tape-recorded interviews and/or any field notes made during the interviews will only be shared among the principal investigator, researcher, and research assistant. To ensure confidentiality, the research assistant will be required to sign a contract stating she will keep all information disclosed by

participants confidential. Transcripts will be coded by number and will not include any identifying information. Any identifying information will be stored separately from transcripts so that it cannot be linked to the transcripts. Information such as: names, employers, or workplaces will be replaced by pseudonyms, and these will be used instead of the real names of participants in the final report of this study. Upon completion of each interview, the recorded interview will be immediately transferred onto a password protected computer, and the interview will be deleted off of the recording device. The interview transcripts will be kept on a password protected computer at all times, and the hard copies will be kept in a locked cabinet, to which only the principle investigator and the researcher have access.

Compensation

You will not be compensated for participating in this study. If you require parking at the University of Western Ontario, a parking pass will be provided for you.

Risks

You may experience some mild emotional discomfort (sadness, anger, etc., while participating in this study. We will make every possible attempt to minimize these risks. There are no other known risks.

Benefits

You may feel an increase in pride and self-confidence after speaking about your employment experiences.

When completed, this research has the potential to identify innovative ways that blind and low vision individuals successfully seek employment. Such knowledge may enable service providers assisting clients to implement these strategies. Identifying strategies may also change attitudes both of employers and of job seekers who may be discouraged in their search for gainful employment.

Staying in or Leaving the Study

You may decline to participate in this study. If you decide to participate, you may withdraw at any time; simply let the principal investigator or the researcher know.

This study is not affiliated in any way with the CNIB or CCB. By withdrawing from this study, the services you receive, your membership, and or your ability to participate in activities sponsored by the CNIB and CCB will NOT be affected.

Questions

If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, or the conduct of this study, you may contact The Office of Research Ethics at (519) 661-3036, or by email at ethics@uwo.ca.

If you have any general questions about the study, please contact the principal investigator, Lisa Klinger, or the researcher, Chelsea Mohler.

Contact information is provided below:

Chelsea E. Mohler, (MSC Student)

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CURRICULUM VITAE

ACADEMIC PREPARATION

2009 – Present Masters of Science, University of Western Ontario, London, ON
Concentration: Health and Rehabilitation Sciences, Occupational Science

Thesis: The Process of obtaining and retaining employment among the
vision restricted

Advisor: Lisa Klinger

2005 – 2009 Honours Bachelor of Arts, Wilfrid Laurier University, Brantford, ON
Concentration: Health Studies and Contemporary Studies

PEER REVIEWED PRESENTATIONS

Mohler, C. “The Process of obtaining and retaining employment among the visually impaired”. Paper presented at the Association for Education and Rehabilitation (AER) Regional Conference in Cleveland, Ohio. October 28, 2011.

Mohler, C., Klinger, L., & Laliberte Rudman, D. “The process of obtaining and retaining employment among the visually impaired”. Poster presented at the Canadian Association of Occupational Therapists Conference, Occupational Science Stream. in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. June 15-18, 2011

Mohler, C. “The process of obtaining and retaining employment among the visually impaired”. Paper presented at the Canadian Disability Studies Association (CDSA), Congress 2011. June 1-2, 2011. St. Thomas University, New Brunswick.

Mohler, C. “The process of obtaining and retaining employment among the visually impaired”. Paper presented at the 13th Annual Rehabilitation Colloquium at Queens University. May 20, 2011. Kingston, Ontario.

Mohler, C. “The process of obtaining and retaining employment among the visually impaired”. Paper presented at the CNIB, 2010 Now I Know My A, B, C’s (Access, Braille, and Communication) conference. October, 2010. Toronto, Ontario.

Mohler, C., & Klinger, L. (2010). “The process of obtaining and retaining employment among the visually impaired”. Poster presented at the Faculty of Health Sciences Research Day. February, 2010. The University of Western Ontario, London, Ontario.

Mohler, C., & Klinger, L. (2010). “The influence blindness and low vision have on obtaining and maintaining competitive employment”. 3rd Annual Health and Rehabilitation Sciences Graduate Research Forum, The University of Western Ontario, London, Ontario.

MANUSCRIPT UNDER REVIEW

Mohler, C., & Klinger, L. Completing a Research Master's with a Vision Restriction.

Related Work Experience

2011 Research Assistant

Canadian National Institute for the Blind, Toronto, ON

2011 Reviewer for The Canadian Journal on Aging

2010-2011 Research Assistant

Canadian National Institute for the Blind, Toronto, ON

2009-present Commissionaire for Graduate Students with Disabilities

Society of Graduate Students, The University of Western Ontario

Committee Memberships

2010-2011 Member, Health and Rehabilitation Sciences Graduate Research Forum Planning Committee

The University of Western Ontario

2010-present Chair, Equity Committee

The University of Western Ontario

2010-present National Advisory Committee, Study Title: Pre-employment skills for children with vision loss: An early start to career education. Canadian National Institute for the Blind

2009-present Member, Western Ontarians with Disabilities Act Committee (WODAC)

The University of Western Ontario

2009-present Member, Campus Accessibility Review and Enhancement Committee (CARE)

The University of Western Ontario