The Voices of Ethiopian Blind Immigrants and Their Families:
Facing the Challenges of Life in Canada

by

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M.S.W., University of Victoria, 2002

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ABSTRACT

When educated professionals with a disability immigrate to Canada with their families, they are full of hope. Because they were told that Canada is a land of opportunity, they expect to build on their past careers and become fully employed. Nevertheless, the experience of many immigrant families with an educated adult member with a disability has been long years of poverty and unemployment in Canada.

My phenomenological and heuristic study was designed to explore the central research question, "What is the lived experience of Ethiopian immigrant families in Canada in which one adult member is blind?" My study also examined several sub-questions: How does the fact that one family member has a disability affect the family as a whole, in their experience as immigrants in Canada? What are the social barriers that the blind immigrant and his or her family have encountered during the experience adapting to Canadian society? What are the strengths and coping mechanisms of the family members? What changes do immigrants suggest to improve the lives of immigrant families with a blind adult family member?

Using interviews, I gathered the family experiences of six blind participants, as well as two sighted participants whose partners were blind. All were adult immigrants from Ethiopia. I chose to use methodology that would give participants a "voice" and would allow their own words to be used when describing the findings. Transcripts went through a process of narrative analysis. Data was divided into categories and then separated into themes.

Twelve metathemes emerged from data analysis of 323 themes: Comparison of Ethiopia and Canada's treatment of blind people, High Achievement, Persistence and perseverance, Ethiopian expectations about a blind child or student, Social construction of disability, Importance of Advocacy, Unemployment in Canada, Desire to be independent and self-supporting, Personal and family strengths, Importance of social support network, Participants' experiences accessing help from CNIB and employment agencies, and Recommended Government Policy Improvement.

The emerging metathemes supported the view of scholars who hold that "disability" is a social construction and is merely a characteristic. Despite "disability", my six blind participants achieved academic education and entered fulfilling careers in one country. Afterward, they endured long years of poverty and unemployment in a second country. The sighted partners of educated blind professionals verified their partners' experiences of poverty and ableism since immigrating to their new country. The two contrasting experiences demonstrated that "disability" was framed either positively or negatively by the social environment in which the educated blind professionals lived and worked.

Participants' experiences revealed that Canadian employment agencies lack accountability. As well, employment agencies and organizations for the blind are providing ineffective help for blind people seeking employment. Several participants noted the need for "organizations *of* the blind, not *for* the blind" in order to improve the services of such organizations.

In contrast to the stereotype that successful blind people must be special or talented, the study revealed that blind people can become educated and employed in their careers when there is motivation, opportunity, and some small amount of social support. The participants all believe that employment is part of full citizenship.

The study revealed that certain personal and family strengths of sighted and blind participants have supported them to stay together as a family and to persist in seeking employment without losing hope. Despite hardships related to long term unemployment, participants continue to live fairly peaceably within their families. Their support for each other within the family, and their persistence and refusal to give up hope was striking. All participants called out for increased activism and advocacy for both Canadian-born and immigrant blind people, on the part of the Canadian government.

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To those of you who hurt my feelings, thank you.
Without you, I wouldn't have felt them.

To those of you who left me lonely, thank you.
Without you, I wouldn't have discovered myself.

But it is to those of you who thought I couldn't do it;
It is you I thank the most,
Because without you, I wouldn't have tried.

I have never been able to forget the social assistance worker who said to me, ten years ago, "Why are you wanting to go to college? You are entitled to a welfare cheque for life! Why don't you take it? Keep quiet, and don't bother us."

As well, I have encountered instructors who did not want to learn to adapt their teaching style because of having a blind person in their class. Those people's resistance to me - their ableism - has motivated me to persevere, to work hard, and to achieve as highly as I could.

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DEDICATION

First, I dedicate my work to my participants. It is my hope that the readers of this dissertation will realize what my participants and I myself have gone through during this study, in order to create social change for people with a disability and their families.

To my participants, I say, it was an honour to be allowed to learn about your experiences and I thank you for giving me the opportunity. You are the water and I am the pipeline. Together, I hope that your knowledge will be transmitted to people who needed to know about it. I thank you for sharing your knowledge with me and with the outside community. From the very day I met you, I was struck by the strengths and the dedication of yourselves and your families. Keep it up! One day, the darkness will give way to the dawn.

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To my father, although I can only speak to you in spirit, you used to call me "ewr" (a blind) to remove the sting of the words from me, and it did. And when I was nine and first became blind, you prophesied, "You will be a teacher; you will go to a "white" country; you will marry and have children." I have done all these things. You said, "You will come back home" and I wonder if one day I will do that? You were a visionary and everything has been fulfilled. Thank you for that vision, which kept returning to my mind when there were times to be discouraged or to quit. Your voice reminded me that I have a future. I persevered and was persistent. Because of this, I wish your spirit peace. *Selam!*

To my mother, I remember when I returned home from my first months at the school for the blind, you were proud of me, and you said, "You will be a lamp to your people". Those words have also sustained me during the challenges of my life. Your words help me remember to be an example and a role model for others. It is a big responsibility but I will vow to try to live up to your words as long as I am on Earth. *Selam!*

For my wife, Mebrat Kidanu, and for my daughter Semhal Teklu, my son Dawit Teklu, my daughter Luwam Teklu, and my son Alem Teklu, thank you, my family, for your support. In the Ethiopian way, a person does not take credit for his or her accomplishments. Instead, we thank our family and give the credit to them. For all of you children, your love inspired me to keep going. Especially, I thank you, my son, Dawit! When you were seven years old, I remember that you said, “I wish I could be blind, because I could be brilliant like Dad and I could do anything.” Without being blind, you are a hard worker and you are a brilliant child. Without your support, I would not have accomplished this work. As I and you have both said, “There is nothing impossible.” So, Dawit, here I am, reaching the top. I hope that you and your sisters and brother will follow in my steps in the future. Nothing is impossible. If there is a will, there is a way.

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

When I arrived in Canada as a blind immigrant in 1988, I was full of hope, because I had been told that blind people in Canada are trained in the latest technologies and they are all fully employed. Stepping off of the plane, I was immediately lost. I had to find my own way. Little did I know that finding my own way was going to be my future, just as it is the future of many other blind immigrants to Canada.

Now I am a Canadian citizen of Ethiopian origin. My close family includes four children, a wife, and a guide dog. Because of our family's experiences in the years that have passed since I arrived in Canada, I have become deeply interested in researching the topic of the family issues of Ethiopian immigrant families in which one adult member is blind. Specifically, how does the fact that one family member has a disability affect the family as a whole, in their experience as immigrants in Canada?

I have organized this chapter by first defining some of the terms I will utilize in the description of my research. I will also provide some background information, not only from my own experiences, but with some documentation on some of the issues relating to visually impaired people. Also, I will cover some cultural information of the population I intend to do my research with – Ethiopian immigrants to Canada. Finally, I will summarize the questions I will answer in my research.

List of Terms

Anti-oppressive:

A term used in social activism to describe a type of social work. Anti-oppressive practice supports social well-being for people of all races and ethnicities, classes, genders and sexual orientations, ages and abilities. It focuses on self-determinism, and empowerment. It incorporates the desire to recognize, address and resist all forms of oppression, while achieving practice objectives. Anti-oppressive practice embraces equality, integrity and activism.

Disability:

"Disability" is defined as "a physical or mental condition that limits a person's movements, senses, or activities (*The Concise Oxford English Dictionary*, 2004). Human Resources Development Canada states that: "a disability is a functional limitation or restriction of an individual's ability to perform an activity." They add that people are not conditions, and the word 'disabled' is to be used as an adjective, not a noun. Their definition is limited, although useful. Wendell (1996) further clarifies disability. Disability is "not a biological given; it is socially constructed from biological reality."

Discrimination:

Discrimination is based in behaviour. It is the "restrictive treatment of a person or group based on prejudiced assumptions of group characteristics, rather than on individual judgment." Discrimination is "the denial of justice prompted by prejudice" (ADL, 2006).

Double jeopardy:

The term double jeopardy originated in law. It meant the prosecution or punishment of a person twice for the same offence (*The Concise Oxford English Dictionary*, 2004). Double jeopardy is also used as a social work term. That is the way it is used in my study. It describes the increased risk of disadvantage (e.g., poverty, racial discrimination, unemployment) faced by some persons who are members of two groups which in the larger society are socially-oppressed categories: e.g., in North American society, a person who is black and an immigrant faces double jeopardy. A blind, black immigrant person faces triple jeopardy.

Ethnic:

of or relating to large groups of people classed according to common racial, national, tribal, linguistic, religious or cultural origin or background (*The Concise Oxford English Dictionary*, 2004).

Family:

In Ethiopian culture, any family relations who live close to the parents or children are called family members, whether they are a cousin, uncle, aunt, or nephew. Sometimes a close friend is considered a family member. In this study, any family member who lives with or near the family being studied, and who is frequently involved in their lives and in important events, will be considered immediate family.

High achiever:

Teffera (1998) created a term for use in his research. He concluded that certain people with a disability were 'high achievers' because they were employed - "independently leading their livelihood" (p. 68-69), had the ability to marry and were considered successful by one of three organizations from which he drew his sample. For the purpose of my study, in my definition of "high achiever" I include Teferra's criteria as well as having achieved academic education at the post-secondary level.

Immigrant:

A person who comes to live permanently in a foreign country (*The Concise Oxford English Dictionary*, 2004). Immigrants are people who move and take up residence in another country usually for political or economic reasons. Immigrants have been granted legal permanent residence by their host countries.

Prejudice:

Prejudice is a "negative or hostile attitude toward a person or group formed without just or sufficient knowledge and based on negative stereotypes" (ADL, 2006). Prejudice means "prejudgment". Prejudice is an attitude which can lead to a behaviour: discrimination.

Racism:

The belief that each race or ethnic group possesses specific characteristics, abilities, or qualities that distinguish it as inferior or superior to another such group (*The*

Concise Oxford English Dictionary, 2004). "Institutional racism" is racial prejudice supported by institutional power and authority; institutional racism is used to the advantage of one race over other races (ADL. 2006).

Refugee:

Refugees are people who cross national boundaries in search of safety because they fear persecution (Kamya, 1997). The United Nations High Commission for Refugees defines refugees as people who have fled their country to find safety from war and repression (United Nations Refugee Agency, 2003, p. 15).

Self efficacy:

In the *Encyclopedia of Human Behaviour* (1994), Bandura defines self efficacy and summarizes its consequences as follows:

> "Perceived self-efficacy is concerned with people's beliefs in their capabilities to exercise control over their own functioning and over events that affect their lives. Beliefs in personal efficacy affect life choices, level of motivation, quality of functioning, resilience to adversity and vulnerability to stress and depression. People's beliefs in their efficacy are developed by four main sources of influence. They include mastery experiences, seeing people similar to oneself manage task demands successfully, social persuasion that one has the capabilities to succeed in given activities, and inferences from somatic and emotional states indicative of personal strengths and vulnerabilities. Ordinary realities are strewn with impediments, adversities, setbacks, frustrations and inequities. People must, therefore, have a robust sense of efficacy to sustain the perseverant effort needed to succeed. Succeeding periods of life present new types of competency demands requiring further development of personal efficacy for successful functioning. The nature and scope of perceived self-efficacy undergo changes throughout the course of the lifespan" (Bandura, 1994).

Self efficacy beliefs are important because they determine:

> "… how people feel, think, motivate themselves and behave … A strong sense of efficacy enhances human accomplishment and personal well-being in

> many ways. People with high assurance in their capabilities approach difficult tasks as challenges to be mastered rather than as threats to be avoided …. They set themselves challenging goals and maintain strong commitment to them. They heighten and sustain their efforts in the face of failure. They quickly recover their sense of efficacy after failures or setbacks. They attribute failure to insufficient effort or deficient knowledge and skills which are acquirable. They approach threatening situations with assurance that they can exercise control over them. Such an efficacious outlook produces personal accomplishments, reduces stress and lowers vulnerability to depression" (Bandura, 1994).

Self-esteem:

Self-esteem is a term from the field of psychology. Self-esteem reflects a measurement of a person's confidence and sense of self worth. Sedikides and Gregg write that self-esteem includes "a person's subjective appraisal of himself or herself as intrinsically positive or negative to some degree" (2003, in *Wikipedia Encyclopedia*, 2005). Self-esteem involves beliefs about the self, such as "I am likable/not likable", or "I am well educated/I am not well educated", and associated emotions, such as elation/despair, pride/shame. Self-esteem is expressed in behaviour, for example, it can be seen in confidence in one's speech, or uncertainty and caution. It can be construed as "an enduring personality characteristic (trait self-esteem) or as a temporary psychological condition (state self-esteem)" and it can be "specific to a particular dimension (e.g., "I believe I am a good writer, and feel proud of that in particular") or can be global (e.g., "I believe I am a good person, and feel proud of myself in general")" (*Wikipedia Encyclopedia*, 2005).

How I Came to Choose to Investigate This Research Topic

Researching this topic is close to my heart, and as an immigrant person with a disability (blindness) myself, if I don't do this research, who else can do it? As I shall explain in the rest of this section of my dissertation, the topic is important to myself and to the population whom I intend to research. To research my topic is important in order to add to the knowledge of Canadian educators, helping professionals, and policy-makers.

I first learned about the importance of my research topic because of my own life experience. I immigrated to Canada based on the fulfillment of the immigration criteria. Under Section 19(1)(a) of the Immigration Act, (1987), by law, a person with a disability was inadmissible (HRSDC, 2004; CCD, 2001).

I had to score high on a point system in order to come to Canada. A Canadian immigration officer interviewed me, and I did score high. I was hoping that I would be treated equally with the other immigrant peers in Canada, but when I came here, I found the situation to be to the contrary. Literally, after I arrived at the airport, at first it seemed like, "You have the highway; just go on your way!" But even beyond that, even though there is the highway, because of the many traffic barriers, I couldn't walk faster or I couldn't move as much as I was expecting and anticipating. Zigzags upon zigzags! That literal experience I had on the day of my arrival is just like a metaphor for what happened to me during my first year to Canada.

When I arrived, as an immigrant myself, I had heard that Canadians would treat people with a disability in a civilized manner. Canadians are well educated, and Canada is a country with advanced technology, so I was expecting to meet fewer challenges than the challenges I had back home. Instead, I found it was not what I expected.

To begin, the university education I had was discounted and held to be invalid. My culture was wrongly seen as invalid, even primitive. My language ability was not of very wide practical use, although I had knowledge of English. Now that I was living in a modern, technology-based country, my life style was disrespected for being based on an ancient way of life. Even, to my horror, I was asked to change my name. Immigration officials said, "It would be appropriate to change your name because no one will be able to pronounce it properly!"

In fact, although my education was discounted, I was highly educated, with a college degree for teaching. My culture was not primitive. It was highly civilized and had a history that reaches back thousands of years, to the time of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. I spoke six languages, and that ability was respected in my homeland, but was not counted for much when I came to Canada. As I said above, I was horrified and angry about the prospect of changing my name, and I persistently refused. I felt unwelcome and unrespected. My name, "Abebe" means "bloomed flower" and my middle name, "Abay", means "the Nile river." Each of these names has a metaphorical meaning (e.g., "Abay", the Nile, is a river that brings life and wealth to millions of people throughout the centuries). My father and grandfather's name are contained in my middle name and surname. With this cultural heritage and family history contained in my name, why would I want to change my name?

That was how I felt as an immigrant, in the first year that I first encountered Canada. In the years that passed, step by step, I had to repeat my high school education. Then I obtained a certificate and a diploma and finally a social work bachelor's degree (BSW). That BSW did not get me a job, because I was a blind, disabled immigrant. All of my classmates have found good employment. After a year of job search and several interviews, I had no employment. I achieved the Masters degree in Social Work (MSW) and now I am in a doctoral program in Education. I am concerned as to whether I will find employment even after I obtain the doctorate, because of the beliefs of mainstream Canadian employers about hiring an immigrant person with a disability such as blindness.

Because I was an immigrant with a disability, I was told to wait five years before I was allowed to apply for Landed Immigrant status. It was a mistake. After much trouble, eventually I had an interview with Minister of Justice Kim Campbell (later Prime Minister). She intervened, and the problem was resolved in a day. Then, when I received my citizenship in 1994, I was called to an immigration office where they asked me a few preliminary questions, and then I swore an oath of loyalty. There was no ceremony or celebration afterward, such as most new Canadians receive. It was just, "Congratulations, here is your certificate … goodbye!" It was a horrible experience. I believed that because I was a new Canadian with a disability, I was not treated with the same respect as others.

During the years that passed, I married, and started a family. The financial burden is heavier on my wife, who is also an immigrant. She has had to work outside the home for more hours than she would have preferred. Our original culture taught my wife the belief that the man is the breadwinner. Now, as a mother of young children, she has to work hard, for a minimum wage. She doesn't really have time to continue to go to the English as a Second Language program, because of having young children and working so hard at her paid job. When my wife and I realized that in Canada I would not be able to be the breadwinner for a number of years, that realization became one of the main places where the issues and challenges to our family arose. The situation conflicts with our values, even today. As the educated one, I still expect to be the main breadwinner.

At present, our children are young, but if the issues and challenges continue (such as myself being unemployed), I do not know how it will affect them. My main concern is that I may continue to be unemployed or underemployed. As they grow up, will we be able to fulfill their needs? My children are not challenging us financially now; their needs are met. There is sacrifice and struggle to do so. My wife and I meet their needs before our own. But when they are fourteen or sixteen and their needs are more, what will happen if we cannot fulfill their needs? And what happens to other immigrant families with older children when this occurs?

What I see among other Ethiopian immigrant families is that although they are well-educated back home, here in Canada the family member with a disability (blindness) experiences long-term unemployment. They are different than Canadian-born families with one unemployed parent because of the immigrant status and the permanent disability of one parent. Even though some of the blind immigrant people have obtained Canadian education since arriving here, still they remain unemployed. Even if they have a Masters degree or law degree or other prestigious credentials, the blind disabled immigrants cannot use their skill or knowledge in practice in this country. Similarly, when their children grow to be teenagers, what kind of role model do they have when one parent is unemployed and the family is stressed by conflicting values and financial problems? The family themselves, how do they manage to survive on a daily basis? What kind of future do they expect to experience? Indeed, I came to realize that it is valuable to clearly understand the problems of families of disabled (blind) immigrants. Then, we can discern what can be done about it.

Background for Blind Ethiopian Immigrants

1. Life and Environment for Blind People in Ethiopia

I am beginning to think about the experience of blind people in my original culture. Many of the rural blind people have the opportunity to become a *deftera*, a spiritual wise man. Sadly, this calling is reserved for only males. The cultural view is that blind people are physically blind, but spiritually they are far-seeing and visionary. If they are from Christian families, they will go to the priests of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church to be educated, and will memorize the entire Bible and vast other amounts of holy spiritual writings that are revered in Ethiopia among Orthodox Christians. They will be highly educated in spiritual matters; even the priests will turn to them for help at times. The Muslims have the *fukura,* which means "beyond the *shek*". "*Shek"* means the Muslim cleric. A *fukura* is beyond the cleric in analyzing the scripture of the *Khoran*. The male blind person who is becoming a *fukura*, similarly to the *deftera*, has to memorize vast amounts of holy writings and he is educated by the *shek*, the clerical leader. Nevertheless, some blind people can still become beggars, also.

There are two ways of education. First, "*zemenawi*" in the Amharic language, or "*asqualla*" in Italian, which means a Euro-centric education system, where you go from grade one to grade twelve. Second, there is the cultural and traditional way, which involves the spiritual leaders. The *deftera* is similar to someone having a doctorate and is respected for having an extensive education. More than that, the *deftera* is viewed as having a vast amount of wisdom. There is similar respect for the *fukura*.

As I remember, this was my experience of the cultures of Ethiopia, when I was living there. The foregoing cultural terms are very different from the cultural construction of blindness in Canada and North America. The term "disabled" puts a negative light on the individual and his or her abilities. "*Deftera*" and "*fukura*" are positive terms, implying attributes such as wisdom and education. They imply ability. In contrast, to be "disabled" implies a person has less ability than the able-bodied.

My own experience as a blind person was not different than that of the ordinary able-bodied educated Ethiopian. Once you were educated, you were certain to be employed, and that happened to me. I was educated successfully, and I became employed, just like the other sighted people in Ethiopia. I was a teacher. There was no difference.

Because of the lack of resources and lack of space, I believe that the majority of blind people in Ethiopia did not get the chance that I and some others had in the early 1960s. Once you get the chance to go to school, your future is bright, even when you enter the school setting in Grade One. At that time, I remember that there were only two institutions for blind children, one in the north and one in the central part of Ethiopia. Children went to grade six. I know that my former country's government could not meet the needs of all blind people at the time, but once you had the chance, then you went to high school, college and university with the sighted people, and you had to prove yourself, that you could pass the same exams.

I am one of the blind people who had a chance to go to school. Virtually all of us became successful at achieving our goals. Some became lawyers and government administrators, and I became a teacher.

2. The Current Academic Situation for People Growing up Blind in Ethiopia

A good way to describe the academic situation of those growing up blind in Ethiopia is to describe the work of Tirussew Teferra, who is a professor in the Faculty of Education at Addis Ababa University in Ethiopia. Some of the people with disabilities whom he has studied include university students, and high achievers among the blind in and outside of university environments. He advocates specialized help for blind and deaf students from preschool age onward. Teferra (1994) advocates that effective support services be provided during academic education for students with a disability, and he states that without effective support service there can be no academic success.

Teferra cites Stahl's (1985) statistic that although about 1.5 million Ethiopian people suffer various degrees of disability, only a few in 1994 were receiving governmental and nongovernmental forms of assistance (Teferra, 1994, p.44). In the nineties, he estimated that only 0.1% of the school-aged children with disability have the opportunity to attend school; the vast majority are "begging, vegetating at home, are non-productive and are the poorest of the poor in society" (Teferra, 1994, p. 44).

Teferra (1989) reported that twelve primary schools were set up for the visually handicapped and the deaf children in Ethiopia, and that students left when they had completed grade six (p. 743). Among other problems, Teferra noticed a "risk of educational adjustment problems" when the students with a disability entered junior secondary schools, where most classes are taught in English (p. 744). He suggested that special schools should go to grade eight. In a recent study, Teferra found support for his suggestion that the quality of early familial psychosocial support for students with a disability "plays a vital role for their subsequent achievement and success in life" (p. 195). The "conducive environment" was described as containing "mutual understanding, affection, acceptance, and back-up support" (Teferra, 1999, p. 195).

Teferra's participants in the 1999 study reported the coping strategies they used to overcome problems in the school environment during their education. They withstood adversity and succeeded in becoming high achievers because of their personal strengths and social protective factors. Coping strategies included "accepting one's disability, being tolerant, exerting effort to learn and develop one's potential, showing one's own potential through creativity and innovation, trying to be accepted by others, creating close relationships with students, and efficient time management" (p. 201-202). Social protective factors included relying on support of family members and peers during crisis periods (p. 202). A conducive (e.g., affectionate, accepting) early childhood experience at home was highly correlated with and might have influenced the high achievement of many participants (p. 195, 203). Similarly, there was high correlation between the quality of early social support within their family and their current home interaction (p. 199, 202-3).

3. Stereotypes and Disability

Teferra stated that,

> "The hardest burden to bear for the person with disability is not merely the disability itself but the stereotypes and the negative attitudes society attaches to

> disability as well as environmental limitations which undermine the capabilities of the person concerned. A major feature of the current trend of rehabilitation is the change in the conceptualization of handicap. Handicap is no longer considered as a factor of "within the individual" but as the effect of the interaction of both biological deficits and environmental resources" (Teferra, 1994, p. 43).

Therefore, one person might be blind within a social environment that has the resources to educate him as a *deftera* and to allow him a social role afterward. That person is not as "blind" as the person within a society with no social resources or social role for the person. They are not as "disabled"; disability includes the environment. The stereotypes, anywhere in the world, including North America, construct the limits on a person with a disability. As Teferra said, "How handicapping a disability is depends to a great extent upon the characteristics of the person's environment" (1994, p. 43).

4. Statistics Regarding Ethiopian Immigrants in Canada

It is difficult to find statistics describing the numbers of Ethiopian immigrants and refugees who have arrived in Canada and who have settled in various regions. Immigration Canada provides figures that combine immigrants from Africa and the Middle East. Statistics Canada (2001) provides information derived from the 2001 census (file no. 97F0010XCB01001.ivt). According to the census, 15,725 Ethiopian people resided in Canada in 2001. The census shows that 1,265 resided in British Columbia, with 1,060 in Vancouver and 115 in Victoria.

The Culture, Community and Health Studies (CCHS) Research Section of the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) is an integrated research, training and consultation unit that seeks to understand cultural and social determinants of population health, and it focuses on immigrant and refugee populations (CAMH, 2003). The team includes scholars from many diverse academic disciplines.

The ongoing research of the CCHS includes a Canadian longitudinal study of the health and development of immigrant and refugee families; epidemiological studies in Toronto's Ethiopian communities; how immigrant children acquire cultural identity; the mental health effects of discrimination; effects of stress; long-term mental health impact of exposure to traumatic stress; and multicultural meanings of social support. CAMH reports that recent CCHS research highlights include,

> "(1) Although immigrant families are three times more likely to have low income than non-immigrant families, immigrant children have fewer mental health and behavioural problems than their non-immigrant counterparts;
> (2) The prevalence of depression among Ethiopians in Toronto roughly equals that found among the general population of Ontario, but it is three times higher than the rates in Ethiopia.
> (3) Approximately one-quarter of people who are visible minority immigrants experience discrimination, and those experiences jeopardize mental health" (CAMH, 2003).

Before beginning my study, I was reviewing the foregoing statistic that revealed that Ethiopian people report a three times higher rate of depression when in Canada. I thought it would be valuable to discover why that is the situation, and whether the higher rate of depression is the result of a more stressful existence as an immigrant in Canada because of the stresses of the search for employment.

5. Double Jeopardy in the Social Environment in Canada

When newcomers come to Canada, they face many challenges, such as employment issues, acculturation, education, and language barriers (CAMH, 2003). The immigrant with a disability undoubtedly could face a larger number of challenges than an able-bodied newcomer. They have severe challenges to meet and overcome. They face "double jeopardy", and even "triple jeopardy".

"Double jeopardy" is a term that describes the increased risk of disadvantage, poverty and unemployment which some people encounter when they belong to two social groups which in the larger society are socially-oppressed categories (Ho-Fatt, 1998). For example, in North American society, a person who is black and an immigrant faces double jeopardy, a double risk of social disadvantage. In this issue again, an immigrant person of colour who has a disability could face much larger problems or challenges than the immigrant person of colour who is able-bodied. The risk is really quite high.

Statement of Purpose of the Study

The main research question and several exploratory questions that guided the study are as follows. The overarching question to be explored was: what is the lived experience of Ethiopian immigrant families in Canada in which one adult member is blind?

I interviewed families who came to Canada after the adult members were already married, whether or not children were born in Ethiopia or here. The exploratory questions in regard to the family include: How does the fact that one family member has a disability affect the family as a whole, in their experience as immigrants in Canada? If married, what keeps the spouses together despite the stresses and challenges to their marriage - what are the strengths and coping mechanisms of the family members? What is the experience of staying together in a challenging situation like for them? What are the social barriers that the blind immigrant and his or her family have encountered during the experience adapting to Canadian society? What has supported the family? What can we learn from their lived experience? For example, what can they tell us would improve their lives and the lives of others like them?

For example, many highly-educated immigrants cannot use their law degrees or Masters degrees in employment in Canada. What has been the result of that experience? And in comparison, what was the experience of the less-educated immigrant? How does that experience affect the family as a whole? Does it make a difference if the family member who is blind is a man or a woman? And what are the family's strengths that have sustained them to the present?

I explored how they are managing to sustain carrying on life from day to day without giving up, while living in a new social environment that is not supportive but instead is individualistic. What does their experience look like, and is there anything helpful we can learn from their experience? To get a complete and clear description, I investigated the family's experience with two sighted adult members of the family who were willing to participate in interviews.

Rationale and Significance: Why This Topic is Worth Studying

Blind immigrants from Ethiopia with or without Canadian education and with varying ability in the English language often face severe problems in regard to employment. As a result, their families encounter many stressors (e.g., poverty, stigma). Often, their prospects are bleak. The family problems are severe. Undoubtedly, there are family arguments, and despair. There is risk of family breakup. It is amazing, sometimes, that families have managed to stay together for so long. I was curious to discover the reasons behind that, in my research. I was interested in exploring their experience living in Canada. As educators and helping professionals, what can we learn from their experiences?

I believed I had an obligation to discover the experiences of the families in this study. We are in a new land; how can I, as a blind person, help my other blind brothers and sisters and their families? How can we, as a society, help them? I believe that we cannot afford to simply leave them where they are. Because of their accomplishments in education and their career in their homeland, we need to act to make a change so that they have the opportunity to contribute to society here. They deserve to have independence and full citizenship, as all human beings would wish to have. When I began the study, I believed that it would be valuable to discover what society at large can learn from the families' experiences, and what changes can be made to improve matters for immigrants with a disability and their families.

I remain very interested in exploring the social and cultural barriers this population faces and the common family issues that emerge. As a person with a disability, here in Canada, what are the issues? The knowledge gained from my study will be a valuable contribution to the knowledge about how immigrant families with a blind adult member cope in Canada.

This research topic has not been explored, and researchers have neglected this portion of the population. It is worthwhile therefore to investigate this matter and to educate our communities and mainstream society, as well as to add to the research knowledge. The contribution of such immigrant families to the at-large society is not yet well explored or acknowledged. Yet, despite disability and sometimes being unemployed or underemployed, the person with a disability frequently is making valuable contributions to their particular ethnic community. For example, they may be providing valuable child care and at the same time passing on cultural heritage. Despite disability, they may be in school or university and be a role model to the community as to what is possible for an immigrant to achieve.

When we hurt or limit persons with a disability, we are hurting their families as well, including their children, who are the future generation. One of the presidents of Ethiopia in the past was the child of a blind person. His father was blind, and he educated the child in Braille. The child grew up to become a professor, teaching at Hamburg University. Later, he returned to Ethiopia and eventually became the president. The child of a blind person may become a scientist or a leader. We should not discount this. If we Canadians believe we are educated, and are seeing and treating people equally, then there shouldn't be discrimination because of disabilities or being an immigrant. It is my hope to encourage and empower immigrants with a disability and their families to take positive action for themselves, and to change their lives.

As I describe and situate myself, I believe I am obligated to do research with the goal of educating and creating social change. I would like to dismantle the social barriers that we immigrant people with a disability are facing every day. When doing research, I believe I must be careful to do no harm to others, because to harm others would be to harm myself. When other blind immigrant people and their families see my accomplishment with this research, it is my hope that it will encourage them to fulfill their own desires and goals. When a person with a disability reads this research, this is *our* life and experience! In a way, to read this account will be like therapy, because it will spell out all the issues systematically, while continuing to protect confidentiality.

Conclusion

When people who do not have a disability read my research, they will more fully understand the challenges for educated blind immigrants and their families. By educating the public, we persons with a disability will be making allies. Making allies and educating for change might improve the prospects for immigrant people with a disability and their families in years to come. Canadian policy makers might be encouraged to make positive changes, and to draft laws concerning access to full employment for immigrant people with a disability. Whether they are immigrants or not, the Canadian constitution at present does not meet the needs of people with disabilities.

CHAPTER 2

Review of Research and Theory

Introduction

In my literature review, I present and discuss literature that has explored factors that might have an impact on the effective functioning of people with a disability in Canadian and Ethiopian society - in particular, people who are blind. Oliver (1990) pointed out that almost all studies of disability have a "grand theory" underpinning them, and that is the "personal tragedy" theory of disability (p.1). He notes that people with a disability have themselves taken up the challenge of critiquing the "personal tragedy" theory. They have begun to construct their own alternative studies based on philosophy that points out social oppression (Oliver, 1990, p. 1). I have chosen to review studies by researchers who, first, base their work on an anti-oppressive perspective, noting environmental challenges which the person with a disability must overcome, and second, who seek to find coping strategies, strengths and successes, rather than evidence of "personal tragedy".

The number of available studies in Canada is limited because for many decades the immigration to Canada of persons with a disability has been restricted. Section 19(1)(a) of the Immigration Act (1987, 1988, and 1993) states:

> "No person shall be granted admission who is a member of any of the following classes: (a) persons who are suffering from any disease, disorder, disability or other health impairment as a result of the nature, severity or probable duration of which, in the opinion of the medical officer concurred in by at least one other medical officer… would cause or might reasonably be expected to cause excessive demands on health or social services".

In the regulation, "excessive demands" was defined to mean costs that would exceed five times the average annual per capita costs in Canada of health and social services. This regulation has been used for many decades to bar people with a disability from immigrating to Canada (HRSDC, 2004; CCD, 2001). The assumptions underlying the discriminatory regulation have devalued and dehumanized people with disabilities, whether or not they were immigrants to Canada or born here. The policy-makers assumed that in general immigrants with a disability would never be able to work or function in society and that they would be a substantial burden (CCD, 2001).

As a result of the restrictive criteria in the Immigration Act (1987, 1988, and 1993), there were few immigrants with a disability to Canada and therefore there is not much research literature concerning that population. The topic of family coping with visual impairment has not been given much research attention, nor has the topic of social relationships involved in coping (Nixon, 1994, p. 329), nor adulthood experiences with blindness (Kelley & Moore, 2000, p. 156).

In the first part of my literature review, I present and discuss research concerning the experiences of blind Ethiopian youth in general as they overcame the challenges of obtaining education and successfully obtaining their degrees in Ethiopia. These studies demonstrate the strengths of the blind students. In the second part, I present and discuss research concerning the influence of disability (blindness) and employment issues on family dynamics of families in Western countries who have a blind adult member. In part three of my literature review, I review articles and studies which discuss political issues involved in the ableist social environment and the oppressive construction of disability in some Western countries.

Throughout my study, I have been investigating the experiences of people whose life experience took place in two vastly different countries. Therefore, I have included literature in Chapter Two and in the final chapters that describes social situations for people with a disability and their families in many parts of the world. Before I begin the literature review, I want to address the issue of "comparing apples to oranges". Am I comparing two things that are so different that a comparison cannot be validly made? Are the social environment and resources too different between Canada and a struggling third world country for a comparison to be made?

When I compare these two countries in particular, Canada and Ethiopia, it does not mean that I do not love my new homeland. I do not want any critiques of Canadian policies that might emerge from my research to be taken as harsh and condemning. Instead, I hope for enlightenment to arise from the telling of my participants' stories and for constructive social change to result.

To answer my own foregoing question concerning "apples and oranges", yes, the two social environments do have some aspects that obviously make them very different - for example, the wealth of the countries, the philosophical and spiritual beliefs of the people in the nations, and the political philosophies and histories of the governments involved. Nevertheless, I firmly believe that the comparison can be made.

First, educating some of the blind people in Ethiopia and creating policy that results in employment for them was a policy that worked successfully in Ethiopia, and it can work here. It doesn't matter about the comparison of the nations' wealth, because a poor country was able to do it with some of its blind people, so no doubt Canada could successfully do the same thing or better. Second, the social environment, resources, and people's beliefs and political policies may be very different in North American and other Western countries cited in my literature review, as compared to in Ethiopia. Nevertheless, I believe that the common factor is that disability is a construction, as my literature review shall demonstrate. The construction of disability can have positive or negative results no matter where you reside in the world. For that reason, I believe it will be valuable in this chapter to look at what researchers have to say about the lives of people with a disability, both in Ethiopia and in the countries of the Western World.

Part One: Research literature concerning the educational background, strengths and challenges that were overcome by students from Ethiopia who faced barriers to their education

Dr. Tirussew Teferra is the leading scholar writing about disability issues in Ethiopia from the 1980s to the present. Teferra, a member of the Faculty of Education at the University of Addis Ababa, works to educate society in order to overcome misconceptions and ignorance about the abilities of persons who have a disability (1992, 1994, 1998, 1999). I shall review several of his research articles.

A. "Self esteem, coping styles and social dimensions of disabled persons with high achievement in Ethiopia" (Teferra, 1998)

The purpose of the 1998 study was to identify 'high achievers' (p. 68-69) among the people with a disability in Ethiopia who were deemed to be successful in life, and to explore resilience qualities (e.g., self-esteem, coping styles). Teferra studied visually impaired people as well as others with two other categories of disability. In his research, Teferra applied both quantitative and qualitative methods of gathering data and analysis.

Teferra's research examined the participants' self esteem and self efficacy, and their coping styles. He looked at common coping strategies, personal resilient qualities, and social protective factors. Teferra gathered data in two ways. He used a questionnaire with structured and semi-structured questions, and he used focus group discussions.

Findings of the 1998 study: The findings showed that some of the participants were able to enter a wide range of fields of study at Addis Ababa University, while other did not have university education (1998, p. 69). The study revealed that limitations to students' access to fields of study were based on the attitudes of policy-makers, university officials and staff, the nature of the learning and teaching process, and the type and degree of impairment. Challenges that faced students with a disability were: "being undermined and ridiculed by teachers and non-disabled students, lack of disability-specific educational support and inaccessibility of instructional materials and other school facilities" (1998, p. 70). They faced barriers such as distorted understanding and misrepresentation of people with a disability (e.g., belief they are "cursed", "dependent", "special creatures", or are "incapable of learning"). Even those who did not go to university faced the same stereotypes in their workplace.

Level of education was not the only factor affecting the participants' success in life. 31 per cent of participants were educated, but they were all considered successful and high achievers. Among the 27 blind participants, there were many more university-educated successful high achievers than among the other two disability groups; 18 of the 27 blind people had university degrees (1998, p. 71). The majority of the blind people were employed in government.

Findings regarding the participants' own perceptions of their self-esteem and self-efficacy and their personal strengths and coping strategies are as follows.

Self-esteem and self-efficacy: A Likert Scale was used. According to Dr. Teferra's findings, all participants but one had a positive feeling of self-confidence and an inferiority complex (low self esteem) was absent. Further, over 94 per cent of the participants reported having a positive feeling of self-efficacy. 94.7 per cent of the participants believed they have the potential for learning and promoting themselves. A t-test showed no difference among the three categories of disability in the study (1998, p. 72-73).

Teferra discusses Bandura's theory about self-efficacy (1998, p. 75). Regarding the finding of high self-efficacy in this group of high achievers, it implies that high self efficacy is a factor that leads to their success. According to Bandura's theory about self-efficacy, successful functioning requires a sense of self-efficacy, the belief that one can perform effectively (Bandura, 1982, p. 123). In a similar study to Teferra's 1998 study, Obiakor (1987) compared visually impaired and normally sighted students in regard to self-concept, and found that differences in the self-concept scores were small.

Strengths: Strengths were divided into two categories, the personal or internal strengths, and the external or social factors in the environment of each participant. Personal strengths of highly-achieving people with a disability were found to be: "strong desire and devotion to learn and work and (having) patience; spiritual strength, special ability to communicate with people; accepting oneself and one's limitations and working hard to compensate; exerting effort not to be a burden to others" (1998, p. 76-77).

Social factors that were frequently mentioned by the participants included: family support, affiliating with a peer group, community support, and acquaintance (advice or mentorship) with successful people who have a disability (1998, p.77).

Coping strategies: Participants were asked how they overcame challenges when they obtained their education and sought employment. Participants reported the following coping strategies regarding education: "accepting one's disability; being patient; exerting effort to learn and develop one's potential; acquiring knowledge and skills through education/training; demonstrating one's potential to gain acceptance and recognition; steadily seeking to establish close relationship or friendship with others, and efficient utilization of time" (Teferra, 1998, p. 77-78). Many participants disclosed that in times of crisis they consulted parents and their peers.

Participants reported the following coping strategies regarding overcoming the challenges of finding employment: "seeking further education; convincing employers to change their attitude; using national associations as pressure-imposing force to influence policy; developing creative thinking and self-employment strategy; demonstrating one's ability with patience and diligence; making certain concessions (such as signing an agreement like accepting low fixed salaries) as well as appealing to higher authorities" (Teffera, 1998, p. 78).

Social dimensions: Teferra's study found that marital status was important. Two-thirds of the blind participants were married, which was much higher than for the other two categories of disability in the study. Marriage is seen as being a supportive factor in the lives of people with a disability. The average family size was surprisingly large to the researcher (p.79). Teferra stated that the large size of families meant the person with a disability was economically responsible for a large number of family members, and that this shows evidence for the degree of potential and competency of persons with a disability. (Note: the large families include extended family members). If people with a disability can access education and employment and their resources are properly used, said Teffera, then they "cannot only help themselves, but also help others. The so-called "dependency syndrome" will no more be acceptable" (1998, p.80).

Emotional climate in the homes of participants: The fact that many participants had a marriage and a large family is not as important as the quality of the interactions in the homes. A Likert scale was used to assess the emotional climate at home. Among all the participants, 66.2 per cent strongly agreed that their family relationships were characterized by mutual understanding and respect. This figure was 81.4 per cent for the visually-impaired participants (1998, p.80). The study revealed that 88.2 per cent of participants confirmed that there was love, acceptance and tolerance in their family relationships, and 85.6 per cent reported a prevalence of sharing and co-operation among family members. A t-test revealed there was no significant difference among the results for the three categories of disability (1998, p. 80-81).

Community participation: In order to judge how well the participants were integrated into the community, the researcher inquired as to the rate of participation in local organizations. Equb, Eder, Mahber, and Senbete are examples of local community organizations. Equb is for organizing community savings and Eder is a community-based burial service, and the last two are religious organizations. Among all the participants, there were 88.2 per cent who were members of one or more of the organizations. A surprising number of the visually-impaired participants were involved at a high rate in community organizations (seven were members of three organizations, and six were members of two organizations, out of twenty-seven participants). In general, the study showed that the high achievers in all three disability categories had participated to a great extent in community organizations (1998, p. 81-83).

Personal experience and reaction to the 1998 Teferra study

Having read the findings, I agree with Teffera's findings regarding factors that support people who have a disability to achieve success and employment, based on my life experience. I believe his 1998 study was valuable.

In regard to Teferra's finding that accepting one's disability is an important coping strategy, my own experience leads me to agree with that finding. If you accept it, you can move on and progress with your life. I became blind when I was nine. I remember when I was about ten or eleven years old, my father started to call me "a blind". "Ewr", the word for blind, means dumb, incapable, lazy, or vegetative. However, it is a noun. The use of this word is similar to someone in North America being called "a cripple" – a noun, with a negative connotation. My mother and other relatives were angry when he began to call me that name.

I remember clearly that my father responded, "If I don't call him "a blind" myself, then when other people call him "ewr" he will feel bad. He will feel angry. He will feel discouraged. Indeed, he is "ewr", "a blind". So there is nothing to be ashamed of about who he is. Whether we know or not, there must be a reason why he became a blind. So let him be used to it." He meant, let me *accept* it.

My father wanted to take the sting out of that word "ewr" when I would hear prejudiced people use it in the future. I think that was very wise of him. He was an uneducated but visionary and insightful man. He continued on to tell me and my mother about his vision, "And now, I know my son Abebe will go to school. He will become a teacher. He will go to a white (foreign) country. He will educate himself. He will marry. He will have his own family, and then he will move back home." This is exactly what he said. He said this when I was ten or eleven years old, and my father passed away when I was fourteen years old, in grade three or four. Based on my father's encouragement, I did not recognize myself as being limited throughout my whole childhood and adolescence. I never felt limited until around Grade Twelve. I believe that his actions and my acceptance led to high achievements then, and even today. Society may believe I have limitations, but really, I don't. That is why, all the time I tell my children, "everything is possible. If there is a will, there is a way." They believe me to the extent that one day my seven year old son said to me, "I wish I was blind. Then, I could do anything!"

After this event with my father, I went away to a school for the blind. I returned home in the summer with a teacher, and when my mother and the villagers heard me having a conversation with the teacher in English, they were amazed. My mother was very proud of me and the village people respected that I was in school, and learning English. They didn't have English instruction in the village. Therefore, I received community and family respect and support as a child and teenager. My mother said that I was going to be "a lamp that shines for our people".

My experience fits with Teferra's finding that such social support enhances the resilience of a child with a disability, and leads to high achievement. It also fits with the finding of the Mulugeta study, described immediately following the review of Teferra's studies in this section of Chapter Two.

In his discussion of the findings, Teferra states that if people who are disabled can achieve their education, it leads them to become high achievers. He agrees that society is a factor in achieving success. Achievement depends on building self esteem when disabled people are children. He advises building training programs so that young people with a disability can draw on the resources of family, and friends. He also wants to create a welcoming and inclusive community (Teferra, 1998, p. 86). He stresses that for people who have a disability, intervention against harmful social stereotypes and prejudices is long overdue (1998, P.87).

I agree with Teferra's conclusions in the 1998 study, and I know that society can help the young people who have disabilities to fulfill their goals. At the same time, society needs to be educated to accept us as who we are, whether or not the person with a disability is a "high achiever". I believe every person has his own potential, and every person is of value.

Critique of the Teferra (1998) study

Teferra's methodology was comprehensive because he used both quantitative and qualitative methods. He was able to do statistical analysis of some of the data, and he was able to leave the opportunity for unexpected findings to emerge by using open questions in focus group meetings. He included people of a variety of academic and employment backgrounds. He did extensive research so that he would have increased validity and reliability as well.

Ethiopia is a multi-ethnic country. I noticed that Dr. Teferra did not discuss whether his group was drawn from many cultures. Interestingly, he categorized his participants according to the disability type, the educational level and many other categories, but he never stated the sex of his participants during the article. When I look at it, I then assume his participants were all male, but I don't know for certain and it could make a difference in their experiences.

As a feminist and anti-oppressive practitioner, I would be more comfortable to see Teferra state the participants' sex, and also to use both male and female participants in his research. Restricting his research to males means that his research only applies to males in his country, and yet he fails to state that limitation. Women with disabilities have become high achievers, and in my experience, I know they do exist in Ethiopia.

Teferra did not allow the opportunity for family, friends or classmates of the participants to have a voice and to express what factors they thought supported the high achievers. He did not design his study so that family members could quantify how respectful and loving is the family, in the questions about the emotional climate of the home. I wonder about the validity of the high positive results concerning the emotional climate in the home. Would the participants with a disability give a genuine answer to this question on the survey? Might cultural values or pride interfere with giving a genuine answer? If he had obtained information and opinion from other family members, the responses could be checked to some extent.

Teferra defined 'high achievers' (1998, p. 68-69). He concluded that certain people were 'high achievers' because they were working and were considered successful by the three organizations that he drew his sample from. What would happen to those high achievers, if they become unemployed? How would the organization that they belong to view them then? They are still the same person as they were in the past, but are no longer termed "high achievers" according to the Teffera criteria. The study thus eliminated all the people who had been employed but currently were unemployed, suffering the resulting stress upon their family dynamics and their self esteem and self efficacy.

How would their family react to a situation of unemployment when a family member with a disability is the breadwinner? I doubt that the emotional climate would still be as positive as was reported in the study. And yet they are the same people who earlier, when employed, were termed "high achievers." If Teferra's study had included this group, the findings might have been more valid.

Further, it would be valuable information if his survey had included a question such as, "After you had been employed with your current employer for a certain amount of time and proved you could fulfill the job requirements, did your employer and co-workers gain a positive attitude toward working with people who have a disability?" That question would have taken the research about barriers to employment - such as negative stereotypes - a step farther. These questions all need to be answered. In my research, I have investigated some of them, going a step beyond Dr. Teffera's 1998 study.

B. "Retrospective study of early childhood experience among persons with disabilities of high achievement and resilient personality qualities" (Teferra, 1999)

In his 1999 article, Dr. Teferra described his retrospective study. His goal was to examine the early home and school environment of persons with disabilities who have high achievement profiles and resilient personality qualities. As in the previous (1998) study, the participants were drawn from members of three organizations for people with disabilities and they were seen as high achievers, following the same criteria as in the previous study (1998, p. 68-69). Again, Teferra used structured and semi-structured questionnaires and focus group discussions to collect data.

Teferra reported that over 82 per cent of his participants had a home environment in their childhood that was conducive to positive achievement during their lives. Again, he found no significant difference across the three disability groups (1999, p. 198-199).

There was high correlation between participants' early psychosocial experiences at their childhood home and school and their current interactions at home in adulthood. He found that over 80 per cent of participants described their family of origin as "understanding" and 42 per cent of that group expressed strong feeling about their parents being understanding of their issues and challenges (1999, p. 198-199). From making the findings, Teferra suggests that "the quality of early family psychosocial support for children with disabilities plays a vital role for their subsequent achievement and success in life" (1999, p. 195).

Disability does not prevent achievement.

Teferra (1999) continues to base his research and educational work on the underlying assumption that disability alone does not prevent achievement. He states, "The greater the environmental resources, the less the individual's disability is likely to result in a handicap" (1999, p. 195). Teferra has previously discussed famous high-achieving blind people such as Helen Keller, who became deaf and blind by nineteen monthes old, yet completed a university degree and became a writer and lecturer, and Louis Braille, the blind man who invented the Braille writing system (1998, p. 66). He wrote that misconceptions and ignorance of blind people's abilities "brings about much graver obstacles than the limitation caused by the disability" (Teferra, 1998, p. 66). Poverty, scarce social resources, and lack of access to education are factors that can prevent achievement for Ethiopian people with disabilities.

From seeing the young "high achievers" in the Teferra 1998 study, previously discussed, and in the 1999 study, we learn that "having certain sensory or motor impairment does not limit a person from actively participating in society and leading a successful life like any other fellow citizens in the country" (Teferra, 1998, p. 68). I hope that professionals and academics who read Teferra's work will realize the potential of youth with disabilities, rather than losing hope and focusing on the limitations of their disabilities.

Disability alone does not create a handicap.

Although some take the view that achievement is a result of heredity, Teferra takes the standpoint that the social environment influences the development of a child with a disability, and influences his or her opportunity to succeed at education and employment later in life (1999, p. 195). People sometimes have the viewpoint that heredity and genetics label a baby born with a disability as "handicapped". They believe that the child's physical disability, alone, will limit and define the person's being. "Disability" can mean a physical condition such as visual impairment. "Handicap", on the other hand, means that a person with a disability cannot do something, or cannot do it to the level of achievement of an able person (Teferra, 1999, p. 195). This label is not always accurate.

Alternatively to the genetic viewpoint, Teferra holds the viewpoint that "disability constitutes a necessary but not a sufficient condition for a handicap" (1999, p. 195). The more social resources there are, the less the person's disability results in a "handicap". Oliver (1990) stresses that the definition of disability is important. It can be defined many ways. "Disability" might mean a lack of ability, such as not being able to do certain things, such as to see or hear or walk. However, in his "Disability definitions: The politics of meaning" Oliver pointed out that if social oppression was considered as part of the definition of disability, then rather than being victims of circumstance, people with a disability are actually viewed as being restricted from fulfilling their needs or aspirations by a vastly uneducated and somewhat uncaring society (Oliver, 1990, p. 2). As Teferra has pointed out many times, the environment is the real challenge for people with a disability. The environment contains resources, opportunities, and harmful social stereotypes. I believe people are very unaware of the capability of persons with a disability and of the resources – often inexpensive – which can be provided to help people with a disability to be fully functional in society.

Personal experience and reaction to the findings of the 1999 Teferra study

Until grade twelve, I was not even recognizing myself as a "person with a disability", as I stated earlier. However, when I later entered society at the end of high school and started dating, I felt I was not equal with the peer group. They had the opportunity for eye contact, and they went to parties frequently. Then, when I went to university, I felt that I was disabled, even "strange", but not in regard to education, just on social factors. People seemed to backbite me a lot, "he's blind", and they seemed to speak a lot with hand gestures that I sensed but couldn't see.

When I came to Canada, I left my country walking on foot to Sudan, and I had the self confidence that I could walk two thousand miles, passing the Rift valleys, mountains and rugged places. Then, even in Sudan, I became successful, and I was running a school and being an administrator. When I came to Canada, I was achieving highly in my education with the help of technological advancements, but still most people in society here continue to view me as unequal, or "handicapped". There is a lot of hindrance in regard to becoming employed. You are treated as second class. In developed countries, the people seem to divide you into a strange, 'disabled' class. I also am black. The inequality is triple jeopardy. It is worse than what a healthy black immigrant would face, for men and women. You can be disadvantaged by everybody – the black and white discriminate against you and the men and women discriminate against you. It is all based on social attitudes, because in fact I am a high achiever and have accomplished much. What makes me unequal, or, in their view "handicapped", is their negative attitude.

On the other hand, there are a lot of people who are willing to change their attitude and they are practicing their new beliefs. They see me as equal, and I feel I am equal when I am working with them. I feel that I regain my sight when I am treated justly and not labeled "handicapped". Although I have accomplished much, I do not have genetic traits to achieve - what has happened has been based on determination, persistence, and working hard. A person with a disability has to work three or four times or more as hard as the able-bodied person, at least if they are in my situation.

I agree with the viewpoint that social attitudes are vitally important. If society has the right understanding and attitude and if children who have a disability are raised with care and access to medical and educational resources, they will achieve a life that is as fulfilling and successful as for any of their fellow citizens (Teferra, 1999, p. 195). Opening social opportunities for people with a disability depends on creating a conducive social environment.

C. Psychosocial and educational profile of students with disabilities in Addis Ababa University (Teferra, 1994)

The purpose of Teferra's 1994 study was to examine educational and psychosocial adjustment in a university setting. I include the study because all my participants will be people with university degrees. Teferra sought to discover strategies that promote adjustment to university. The participants were 51 students with either visual (n = 34) or motor (n = 17) disabilities. The 34 students who were visually-disabled were completely blind. Only 9 per cent were females. He used a questionnaire and was able to use percentage and a chi square test for analysis.

Results for students with visual disability.

Among the participants, 85 per cent had been able to attend special schools in their youth. The participants were involved in diverse faculties within the university. Fifty-four per cent of the students had been able to enter a faculty of their own choice, and forty-six per cent were not. Some departments are not yet open to blind students. It is interesting that Teferra reported that the reason why some faculties were not open to blind students was not known or clear to the students (1994, p.46). That finding implies to me that the students felt they should have been admitted to the closed faculty and believed they could have done the work required.

Based on all the articles that I obtained, Teferra consistently reports that stereotypes and prejudices are the most challenging barriers encountered by students with a disability. In fact, he opened the introduction to his 1994 article with this statement:

> "The hardest burden to bear for the person with a disability is not merely the disability itself but the stereotypes and negative attitudes society attaches to disability as well as environmental limitations which undermine capabilities of the person concerned" (Teferra, 1994, p. 43).

Similarly, in "Trends and Research Directions in Special Education" (1995), Teferra wrote that it is essential when designing support to remember to consider both personal factors and environmental factors. In particular, Teferra stresses that the environment "can enormously increase or reduce the magnitude of the handicap" (1995, p. 277).

A further finding was that 65 per cent of the visually-impaired students reported that they had experienced "labelling" and disability-based stigmatization from the students who did not have any disability (1994, p. 49).

Despite the barriers encountered during departmental placement and other barriers that affected their psychosocial adjustment, Teferra found that the visually-impaired students' academic status was "encouraging" (1994, p. 46). Their academic success partly depends on the availability of an effective support service. Teferra noted that education is the most important prerequisite for self-determination for people even without disability, and it is especially so for disabled people. I agree that, in Ethiopia and around the world, education opens the door for increased choices and options in life, particularly for people who have a visual impairment.

The 1994 study found that 56 per cent of the students with visual impairment had to achieve their degree despite encountering lack of courtesy and respect from their professors (p. 48), and they were not satisfied with the support and accommodation provided by the university (p. 48) and the amount of contact they had with their professors. My impression is that the blind students showed persistence and internal strength to achieve their degree despite this challenge.

In the end, Teferra's findings showed there were some similarities and some significant differences between the students with motor disabilities and those who were visually impaired. In general, the students with visual impairment encountered more significant social and environmental challenges than the students with motor impairment (for example, regarding satisfaction, p. 47, labelling, p. 49, and isolation, p. 49). For the purposes of my literature review, I have focused above on the results for the students who had visual impairment. Teferra identified the main challenges in adjustment for each group, and suggested the university adapt their policies to more effectively meet the needs of students with a disability (p. 51).

Personal experience and reaction to the 1994 Teferra study.

In my experience at university in Ethiopia, like the students in the study I encountered both helpful professors and those who were not respectful of students with a disability. In general, my university education was a good and enjoyable experience. The other students with a disability and I, as well, knew life in Ethiopia would be less challenging once we accomplished our achievements at university. Like myself, the disabled students in Teferra's studies were aware that they were fortunate to be in university in Ethiopia. They knew that once they graduated they would be employed and have a good chance for a fulfilling, independent life. There was strong motivation to overcome the barriers, because at university they had an opportunity for success in life.

Comparing Teffera's 1994 study to Beaty's 1994 study of psychosocial adjustment and self esteem.

In a similar study, Beaty (1994), working for the American Foundation for the Blind, assessed the psychosocial and academic adjustment of university students with visual impairments and the adjustment of able-bodied university students. He used the Coopersmith Self Esteem Inventory and a questionnaire. Validity was checked by using a chi square test which revealed no significant differences between the two groups' demographic variables such as age and parents' education level (Beaty, 1994, p. 132). Beaty used correlational analyses and statistical tests of group differences. He found no inter-group differences in psychosocial adjustment between the students with visual impairment and those who were able-bodied. Beaty reported that students with blindness or low-vision scored higher than sighted students on the measures used to estimate self esteem (Beaty, 1994, p. 131).

When the Teferra (1994) study and the Beaty (1994) study are compared, one sees that the students with visual impairment had a more challenging time in Ethiopian universities than the students who were motor-impaired. On the other hand, North American students with visual impairment had no difference in psycho-social adjustments compared to students who were able-bodied, and had equivalent self esteem. I assume the Ethiopian students who were able-bodied (whom Teferra didn't test) had a level of psycho-social adjustment equal to or greater than the level of the students who were motor-impaired. Then, it follows that in North America, the visually-impaired are achieving a better level of psychosocial adjustment than the Ethiopian university students who are visually-impaired. The different environment from birth to adulthood has an impact on adjustment.

Based on my own experience, I was aware before beginning my study that the blind Ethiopian immigrants who were to be part of my study had likely faced and overcome similar obstacles in the social and university environment, which Teferra has described in his 1994 study. Students with a disability need strength, persistence and courage to complete their university education. The North American blind students whom Beaty studied in 1994 had faced many obstacles, and their adjustment was found to be equal to students who were able-bodied. Based on the work of Beaty and Teferra, it is likely that a university-educated Ethiopian blind immigrant who arrives in Canada has already demonstrated that he or she has many strengths.

D. "A cruel wastage of human potential"

To conclude my review of the research by Teferra, I quote his statement in which he echoes the "Charter for the 80's"(*Rehabilitation International*, 1981, in Teferra, 1992, p. 1). Teferra emphasizes that, "Any society which fails to respond effectively to disability takes not only a huge loss of human resources but also a cruel wastage of human potential" (Teferra, 1992, p. 1).

Teferra urges developing nations such as his own to spend some of their scant resources on the education of the segment of the population who have disabilities, because "no country can afford, both practically and morally, to ignore a problem which affects 10 per cent of its population" (Teferra, 1992, p. 1). If Ethiopia can do it on a small scale, then a much wealthier country such as Canada can do it, and in fact, should be expected to do much more than is being done today.

For more than two decades, Teferra has explored educational improvements for Ethiopian children and students with disabilities and has worked to convince those who administer societal institutions to change their policies and attitudes. I think Teferra has been educating us and it is up to us now to take it from there. In particular, educated people with disabilities should not forget their experiences when they get a job and establish a life. We must remember the others who face similar problems and challenges, and the struggle should not end with our own personal achievement of success.

E. Faith, aspirations, learning coping skills, and persistence (Mulugeta, 2004)

Rural females in Ethiopia face huge environmental and cultural challenges to obtain education (Mulugeta, 2004, p.79). Mulugeta entitled her study "Swimming against the tide: Educational problems and coping strategies of rural female students in Ethiopia".

One important finding of Mulugeta's (2004) study relates to the Teferra findings concerning high achievers (1998, 1999) among university students with disabilities (1994). Mulugeta found that although female Ethiopian students may have been assisted at times by role models, supportive parents, and teachers to overcome the many challenges of obtaining education, in the end, many of the students attributed their success to their own efforts (p.71).

Persistance and determination were found to be vitally important. Mulugeta reported that a girl's aspirations and her faith determine how hard she works to get her education. She also has to use coping strategies such as "fighting back" (which could be called assertiveness or activism), "ignoring" (Mulugeta, 2004, p. 90) (prioritizing what is important), and "manipulating" (e.g., being diplomatic) (Mulugeta, 2004, p.71). When hard work is done and success is achieved, a young woman's family gives her recognition and support, creating a cycle that "feeds into" itself, and increases the likelihood of her success in education (p.71).

Similarly, an Ethiopian boy or girl who is blind may have family members who believe the common negative stereotypes and do not hold high expectations of their child's abilities, at first. When the students who have a disability (blindness) begin to achieve success through their own efforts and begin to overcome the environmental obstacles, the family often gives them recognition and increases support. Yet, as Mulugeta (1994, p.71) found, in the end, the success mainly depends on the determination and aspirations of the student. This is the case whether he or she is a rural female student, or a blind student.

Part Two: Research Literature Concerning the Influence of Disability (Blindness) on Family Dynamics

Introduction

In Part Two of my literature review, I examine the issues and challenges of life for families with a blind adult member. There is a notable lack of research concerning the interactions of persons who have visual impairment persons with their family members (Jackson & Lawson, 1995, p. 157-8; Nixon, 1994, p. 329). I discuss existing research and theory concerning family dynamics. I briefly explore current Canadian and global employment issues for adult employable people with a disability.

A. Looking Sociologically at Family Coping with Visual Impairment (Nixon, 1994)

Nixon's scholarly paper presents an overview of sociological perspectives regarding major social aspects of family coping with visual impairment. Nixon discusses characteristics of family networks, important social aspects of coping with a visually impaired family member, the social construction of experiences regarding impairment, and the impact of coping on family members. Nixon views the individual as part of a family system, rather than looking at individual psychological attempts at coping.

Coping is a family matter: Nixon's goal was to help the reader to realize that visual impairment is a "family coping matter" (p. 329). Teferra (1998, p. 195) and Beaty

(1994, p. 138) have similarly proposed that although a disability does exist within a person's body or mind, it is very important to realize that "disability" is a creation of the social environment. Disability's impact is increased or reduced by the social environment.

Nixon began by noting that a person's visual impairment may have a profound impact on the networks and relationships in which he or she is involved (p. 331). In intimate relationships such as families, coping is a shared experience (p. 329). Coping is shared by individual family members and by the family as a whole. The issues and demands of the impairment affect interactions and individual and collective opportunities to do things (e.g., watch a movie together, participate in outdoor activities, go to parties, or go to scenic places).

Decision-making is also affected by a disability. A study by Gill-Williamson (1991) compared families with one blind adult parent to families with two sighted parents. The researchers found that the blind parent's power to influence family decisions had decreased to some extent and the child's influence on decision-making had increased (p.248). The Gill-Williamson study demonstrated that, as Nixon says, blindness affects the whole family as a system, and coping is shared by the family members.

Coping is a social network matter as well. Nixon points out that success in coping affects the social networks of a person who is blind, and success is affected *by* social networks (p. 329). It is reciprocal. For example, for a person with a disability, the negative stereotypes held by employment agency staff affect his or her opportunities for success in coping. Conversely, a blind person's demonstrated success in coping has the possibility to influence social groups, such as one's cultural community, or others with the same disability, or even government policy makers.

Family networks and coping: Nixon describes ways of thinking sociologically about how family structures and social support are connected to family coping with visual impairment. First, Nixon uses a social structural perspective to describe families as a social network. They are networks of social relations. When a family is seen as a network, then it contains "social roles, relationships, shared commitments and activities that bind family members to one another" (p. 330). When the family is considered to be a network, then one is not looking at individuals. One is looking at relationships, and at the family as a whole.

Ways of coping in collectivist and individualist societies: It is not strange for me to think of people as being in social networks, because I was raised in a collectivist society, and today I continue to associate with people from my culture among my family and friends. Ethiopia has many cultural and linguistic groupings, and I am well acquainted with and interested in the diverse cultures of Ethiopia. To my knowledge, all the many cultures of Ethiopia have a collectivist social orientation which is what has helped their peoples to survive during several thousand years of history. With a collectivist background, it is not difficult for me to view families as part of a social network. Problems which North Americans would see as an *individual* problem, I see first as a *societal* problem. Problems such as the unemployment of an educated blind person are viewed as an individual problem in North America, in my experience.

In Canada, I have encountered a viewpoint that seems to be fairly common. It is believed that it is the responsibility of the individual to find employment, and not the responsibility of society to create genuine opportunities for persons with a disability. It has been my experience so far that the assistance of agencies for the blind and of employment agencies has not led to real opportunities for employment for myself and other people with disabilities. In contrast, in Ethiopia it was my experience that people from many cultures believed it was everyone's responsibility to create an opportunity for employment for persons with disabilities. I and other Ethiopians believed that the person is part of a family and a community. If he or she is employed, both the smaller and the wider social network will benefit.

I believe that North America is one of the few places where educated people with disabilities are left unemployed. I did not see educated people with disabilities left unemployed in Ethiopia, the country where I was born. To my knowledge, the government policy created employment for educated blind people. I see the Canadian situation as resulting from Canada being a society based on individualism.

"When one hand is ill, the other hand will suffer". "You cannot clap with one hand." These are Ethiopian proverbs. We believe we cannot advance ourselves and progress if we are leaving some people behind. Unfortunately, in Ethiopia, some blind people do not get the chance to access education and the resulting opportunity for employment. Although some become beggars, some are educated by the various religious organizations and become self-supporting to some extent. To my knowledge, the lack of opportunity occurs because of scarce resources.

Although, because of scarce economic resources, Ethiopia does not yet have a social safety net such as Canada's welfare system, nevertheless, for centuries traditional associations have existed among Ethiopia's cultural groups, associations such as "equb", "edir" ("Iddir"), "debo", and "mahber". Those associations collected their community's money. "Equb" used the money to help people get stabilized and set up in a productive way, similarly to a non-profit credit union, while "Mahber" used the savings for community gatherings and feasts, and social events. With "Edir", the savings were used during times of tragedy and hardship (Pankhurst & Mariam, 2000, p. 36). The traditional associations took the place of life insurance, health and fire insurance, credit unions, and the social safety net.

The small and large traditional supportive organizations which exist in rural and urban Ethiopian communities have been researched and their existence has been documented by anthropologists, political scientists, agricultural researchers, health promotion organizations, and many others. For example, Tsehay Redda (2002) and Pankhurst and Mariam (2000) have recently described traditional organizations in their research. Research demonstrates the ways in which local groups constitute a social "safety net", demonstrating that Ethiopia's cultural groups have a collectivist orientation informally and semi-formally. The social "safety net" can be seen when groups such as *Edir* help their members in times of crisis or bereavement (Pankhurst & Mariam, 2000). Other groups (e.g., *Equb*) help individuals and groups to market their products (Redda, 2002). Pankhurst and Mariam (2000) note that some groups constitute a form of "indigenous social insurance" (p.35). Researchers such as Redda have noted the existence of traditional supportive community groups, saying,

> "The idea of group work and formation of a group is not new to Ethiopia or, for that matter, to Africa. Different traditional local groups can be identified. For example, women organise themselves voluntarily into groups known as 'milk *equb*' and 'butter *equb*'. *Edir* is another kind of grouping in rural and urban communities where individuals organise themselves and build up common savings through periodic contribution. Moreover, there is also *debo* where,

> seasonally, groups of farmers combine their labour for farm work support and as a group focus on each member's individual plot in turn. Such group formation is self initiated and not imposed and the groups serve their purposes well in rural communities" (Redda, 2002).

Pankhurst and Mariam (2000), in their study of the *Iddir* (also known as *Edir*), noted that the work of that group creates a sort of "indigenous social insurance" (p. 35). "Iddirs are indigenous voluntary associations", they note, which are established primarily to help a family during times of crisis and bereavement, "but also to address other community concerns. Households become members of the associations and pay fixed contributions monthly" (Pankhurst & Mariam, 2000, p. 36).

In addition to the work of indigenous social institutions, religious organizations such as churches, mosques and synagogues have always taken on some of the social responsibilities that Canada handles by means of the welfare system. Who can say if the Canadian welfare system is better than the Ethiopian way? Some people may fall through the cracks in both systems.

Characteristics of a family network:

Nixon reviewed what Smith (1987, cited in Nixon, 1994, p. 330) has proposed are the principal characteristics of a family network. Family networks have several important characteristics:

> "size and stability; cohesion, which indicates how tightly family members are tied to each other, rather than to outsiders; density, or the extent to which family members are tied to others in their family through actual relationships; the accessibility or reachability of family members to each other; the amount of hierarchy in family relations; the openness of family members to contacts with outsiders; clusterings, subgroups, such as cliques or coalitions within the family network; and content of messages and resources that flow between family members" (Nixon, 1994, p.330).

Nixon points out that it is important to consider the intensity of relationships and the amount of reciprocity in them (p. 330). He adds that the clarity of expectations or roles, and the degree to which family members are linked by diverse types of relationships are also important. It is important to note whether there are family members who act as bridges to people outside the family, or as gatekeepers, deciding who can or cannot interact with the family (p. 330). The bridge or gatekeeper role is also played sometimes by people outside the family network.

Exchange of resources: Nixon points out that the exchange of resources is an important aspect of relations within families (p. 330). Families have individual and shared needs that result from one member having a disability. When coping with impairment, families accumulate, exchange, and use up resources to meet these needs. Resources can be tangible or intangible. They can be material assets such as a car or money, or they can be abstract concepts such as information or patterns of belief, feelings, and action. The amount of resources affects how well the family can cope with impairment-related stresses and challenges. Among the families with an adult blind member, I expect to see resources specific to their social group, such as cultural philosophical beliefs. Language skills are also a resource that is important to an immigrant family. There will be psychological resources such as determination, and hopes for their children's future, and ways of coping with depression.

'Stress' and 'strain': When relationships within the family become tense or disrupted, there is family 'stress'. When resources cannot meet the demands or needs, then there is family 'strain' (Eggert, 1987, cited in Nixon, 1994, p. 331). Impairment

such as blindness can be a stressor in families, causing both stress on relationships and strain on resources.

Coping successfully with impairment: A family is successfully coping with impairment when they are "able to meet the major needs of all its members, facilitate their pursuit of realistic goals and roles in the family and society, and to enable them to live happy and contented lives" (p. 331).

Social aspects of coping. Nixon continues on to discuss three important social aspects of how families cope with the impairment of a family member (p.331). First, when a family has problems caused by disability, it may affect the ability of all family members to perform their roles fully and efficiently, to their own satisfaction. Second, the problems can disrupt family relations, leading to neglect of family commitments, and even to breakdown or divorce. Third, when there are family problems arising from coping with disability, the family member who has a disability as well as other family members are likely to be deprived of social support. A major function of families in modern societies around the globe is to provide social support. The loss of social support is very important. Any person with a disability typically depends on their family for direct support and for linking them to external sources of support. I must add that family support and help linking the person with a disability to external support is even more important for an immigrant person with a disability. They are encountering a different culture and often a different language. They need the support of their ethnic community as well as the immediate family members.

If an immigrant with a disability comes to another country without a family, he or she will really feel the lack of much needed social support that would have come from one-to-one interactions and from links to external social support, as Nixon described. In that case, they need to reach out and find a way to be part of a system. In my own case, for example, I came to Canada without a family. I had no knowledge of the social and cultural system, and I did not even know the geographic layout of the area around my housing complex. I didn't know how to shop in supermarkets and I was not familiar with North American foods. In Ethiopia, people shop at an open market. As well, a person could ask for help and someone would get the foods for that person. When I arrived in Canada, I had a host family to help me become accustomed to the city. The host family told me where a store was, but they did not even understand the huge gap in cultural knowledge. They told me a phone number to order groceries, but I didn't even know the English names of groceries, or what the Canadian types of groceries were.

Eventually, I went to a store and asked for help. They showed me, for example, some of the various types of groceries available here. All this is necessary for survival. Without help, an isolated person with a disability who is struggling to learn about a new culture and environment will likely suffer malnutrition and depression. After a while, I decided to reach out to find social support. I phoned a church, because back in my homeland a church was a community. I thought that a church here might be supportive. As a result, I found a friend. He helped me learn to shop and cook, and he introduced me to many types of Canadian foods. He helped me link to supportive social networks. Eventually, he became like a brother to me.

Without having the social network I established at that time, I definitely can say my life would have turned out differently. Even sighted immigrants, when faced with similar problems, often will return to their country of origin. Eventually, I had a family of my own, and now experience firsthand the social support as well as the family stresses which Nixon has been describing.

Social constructions: Nixon states that the experience with disability for a family group may be viewed as social constructions. The social constructions are derived from the exchange of ideas within the family and with outsiders (p. 332). An impairment is more than simply a leg or an eye that does not function. Family members give meaning to impairment by the ways they think about it and respond to it, and thus the family's impairment experience is socially constructed (p. 332-3).

I can illustrate the concept that disability is socially constructed – or at least the impact of it is socially constructed - from my own experience. For example, earlier in this chapter I told the story of my father calling me "ewr", which means "a blind". "Ewr" is a noun, very similar to the English noun used to say, "a cripple". Although the word "ewr" has negative connotations, my father was using it to try to change my own construction of my impairment. My mother's construction of my blindness at first was that I would become a beggar. Later, when I returned from boarding school able to converse in English with a white schoolteacher, my mother began, because of this relationship, to construct my blindness in a different and more positive way. She saw future potential for me both as an individual and as a member of my community. My mother said that I was going to be "a lamp that shines for our people". In the two family stories from my experience, there is social construction of the disability experience. As Nixon says, the social construction arises from relationships.

One family might construct the experience of blindness of a family member as being a severe disability with huge negative consequences for the family, while in contrast, another family may construct the experience of blindness as mildly inconvenient with minimal effects on their family life. The physical disability is a reality, but the family experience with a disability cannot be said to be a "reality", says Nixon (p. 332). Instead, the experience is constructed, and is unique for each family and it is unique for each member of a family, as well.

How family members construct the meaning of impairment affects their behaviour and it affects how well the family as a whole copes with impairment (p. 332). In his overview of sociological perspectives, Nixon has compiled a list of factors that shape the meaning of impairment:

> "A family's previous exposure to impairment and its history of impairment; the actual and perceived type, severity, and onset of the impairment and changes in it; the gender and age of the impaired member; the members' perceptions of their responsibility for the onset or development of an impairment and of their power to change the impairment or its disabling implications; their acceptance of the reality of the disabilities associated with impairment; their sensitivity to the stigma of impairment; and, their perceptions of the things that must be done or acquired for an impaired member as a result of his or her impairment" (Goffman, 1963, Nixon, 1991, Stroman, 1989, and Voysey, 1975, in Nixon, 1994, p.331).

Support that family members can provide to each other can take a tangible or intangible form. Intangible forms of support include providing information, approval, affection, empathy, and respect. Nixon has found that family relations, family members' perceptions of the meanings of impairment, and social support from outside the family are three important factors in family coping with impairment (p. 331-2).

Seeking outside help and support. Nixon emphasized that it is important to realize that a family is a network of relationships that is connected to larger, external networks of relationships (p. 333). An Ethiopian immigrant might have connections to a school, a neighbourhood, friends in a community who attend a church or mosque, co-workers at a workplace, or to friends in a cultural community organization. The outside networks can be informal, or formal (p. 333). Some formal networks include: providers of disability services, medical institutions, employment agencies or services, or an inter-cultural support association. Social support from such external networks is related to success for families coping with visual impairment (p. 333).

Usefulness of Nixon's social structural perspective:

In conclusion, the information about the social structural perspective that Nixon provided is useful to me. It helps me to have a context for the family dynamics of blind immigrants and their families. The social structural perspective provides concepts that work as tools to help me understand and describe the families' experiences. The definition of successful coping (Nixon, 1994, p. 331) assists me to understand to what extent the study participants are coping (e.g., are they meeting the major goals of all family members). Nixon stressed the importance of seeing family coping with disability in sociological terms, in other words, seeing it as taking place in groups and networks (p. 334). I found Nixon's article to be enlightening. Nixon hopes his article will sensitize researchers and practitioners who work with people with a disability and will increase awareness of important social aspects of family coping and social support. I believe the information he provided is valuable for practitioners and researchers to accomplish positive change for families who have a person with a disability. The information in Nixon's 1994 article was relevant and very useful. It increased my understanding because I now can perceive that blindness is not only a problem within the individual. On some level, I knew this, but it is helpful to see it put into words and stated in such a concise, organized, and readable article. I found the concepts in the article to be useful tools for myself and for other researchers and practitioners.

B. Family Environment and Psychological Distress in Persons Who are Visually Impaired (Jackson & Lawson, 1995)

Jackson and Lawson's study explored the relationship between perceived family environment and psychological distress in persons with a visual impairment. Psychological distress was tested using the Brief Symptom Inventory (BSI) (Derogatis & Melisaratos, 1983). The family environment was evaluated using the Moos Family Environment scale (FES) (Moos & Moos, 1976). The study revealed that factors in the family environment strongly influenced visually impaired people's adjustment to vision loss (p. 157, 159). This finding is in accordance with previous studies described in Part One of the literature review, and it matches Nixon's view that "coping is a family matter" (Nixon, 1994, p. 329), described above.

In an earlier study, researchers found that visually-impaired people who had family members who were approving, helpful, believing, encouraging, honest, and supportive were more likely to achieve success, including finding employment (Moore, 1984, p. 105). Jackson and Lawson (1995) mentioned Moore's earlier study in their literature review (p. 158). In their quantitative study, Jackson and Lawson found that various characteristics in the family environment will predict how well the blind person will adjust (p. 159). The study findings showed that certain family characteristics were related to high or low distress scores. High cohesion and independence were matched with low distress scores. High scores on conflict and control were positively correlated with high distress (p. 159-160).

The authors quote Winkler on the topic of family involvement in an individual family member's experience of blindness. Winkler writes, "Blindness in a single individual inevitably becomes a family affair. All members of that person's family are forced to share it with him in some way" (Winkler, 1975, p. 19).

Visually-impaired persons who were not involved with a church or synagogue community had a higher level of psychological distress than those who were involved (Jackson & Lawson, 1995, p. 158). The findings of the Jackson and Lawson study supported their belief that it is important to build strong mutual support networks for blind people, within and outside the family. Similarly, Nixon has proposed that successful coping involves strong relationships with a social network outside the family (1994, p. 329).

The findings in Jackson and Lawson's study supported Nixon's (1994) and Moore's (1984) view that blindness is socially constructed. They found that interpersonal relationships within the blind person's family influenced "what blindness comes to mean, what the blind person does with it" (Jackson & Lawson, 1995, p. 158).

The researchers' discussed the impact of stress on a family. The disability is not confined to the individual who is blind, since, in their view, the family members share the blindness. They are members of a system. Stress is also shared. Stress on the family system can cause the reorganization of family roles, and the system becomes unbalanced. Conflicts in the family's role interactions can be resolved positively, in a way that helps the blind person's adjustment and achievement of success. Alternatively, conflicts can be handled in a negative way that hinders adjustment and does not resolve the conflict.

Although Jackson and Lawson studied the stress of the onset of blindness and resulting need for rehabilitation, the act of moving a family with one blind adult member to North America from another part of the world would have equally significant stress. For example, Young (2003) has stated that the assimilation of African immigrant families into Western societies has significantly impacted family dynamics and structure, values, gender relationships, group identity and coping skills (p. 164). Similarly, another immigrant adjustment study by Woon (1986, p. 349) found that an immigrant's cultural heritage interacts with the new environment, producing an emotional state and mind-set that in turn affects his or her interactions with immediate family and kin.

The stress of cultural adjustment will occur whether or not there is a blind member in an immigrant family. Nevertheless, the most important issue in the experience of an immigrant family with a blind adult member is the impact of blindness. Immigrant families who face unemployment and lack of acceptance of their educational credentials can go and achieve Canadian education and retraining, whether or not an individual is sighted or blind. However, to gain Canadian education or retraining will result in increased chances for employment for *sighted* immigrant people, but it only results in continued unemployment for blind immigrant people even after achieving Canadian education. For that reason, this study does not focus on the adjustment to a new culture and society experienced by immigrant families, which is a common experience for all, sighted or blind, but rather, I focus on the experience of immigrant families with a blind adult member.

C. Abuse and Violence in the Lives of People with Low Vision: A National Survey (Kelley & Moore, 2000)

Kelley and Moore (2000) conducted a national survey to examine the experiences of abuse and violence for people with low vision in the United States. Kelley and Moore were aware of research that demonstrates that people who have a disability are more vulnerable to abuse and violence than are the able-bodied population (Sobsey, 1994, Watson-Armstrong, O'Rourke & Schatzlein, 1994, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1990, cited in Kelley & Moore, 2000, p. 155).

It is not disability alone that increases the risk of abuse and violence, but many interacting factors. Isolation can be a factor. Visually-impaired people may have few opportunities to participate in community life or to be involved in a supportive network of people outside the family in the social environment (Cole, 1993). Again, as Nixon said, the social network is necessary (1994, p. 329). A person who is isolated and disabled may be dependent upon service providers or caregivers.

Because a socially-isolated person is dependent on a caregiver to meet many needs, he or she becomes vulnerable should the caregiver happen to be an abusive person (p. 155). Kelley and Moore remind their readers that the abuse is usually not perpetrated by strangers. More than half the time, abuse is from family members, paid caregivers, or other disabled people in a service setting (Aiello, 1986; Sobsey, 1994, cited in Kelley & Moore, 2000, p. 156). Kelley and Moore note statistics concerning abuse are high in studies by Pava (1994, p. 111) and Watkins (1990). When 161 men and women with visual impairment were surveyed, one-third had been victims of either attempted or actual sexual assaults (Pava, 1994, p. 110). One in ten people reported sexual assault during adulthood in Watkins' 1990 study, and vulnerability was connected to factors such as depression, anxiety disorders and addiction.

Kelley and Moore noted similar results from a study by Aiello (1986). In Aiello's clinical experience with ninety adults with a disability who had been assaulted, only one had been attacked by a stranger (p. 157). Kelley and Moore listed factors that are associated with the higher risk for abuse from family members which research has identified (Ammerman & Hersen, 1990; Hersen & Ammerman, 1990; Slaby, 1995, cited in Kelley & Moore, 2000, p. 156). Risk factors include: a family history of violence; substance misuse; social isolation or living in less supportive environments (including poverty) and underemployment or unemployment.

As Kelley and Moore (2000) note, people with a disability also face increased risk of abuse because of reduced ability to resist abuse, difficulty in being believed, and being hesitant to disclose abuse or report it (p. 156, 158). Andrews and Veronen (1993) examined the experiences of eight women with disabilities who had been sexually abused. They found that the women had been lonely and socially isolated. Exploitive persons offered the women what initially appeared to be affection and social acceptance.

The findings of the study by Kelley and Moore (2000) were that 35 per cent of the total participants, people with low vision, had experienced physical harm or abuse, and 17 per cent of female participants had experienced sexual violence. The researchers found that 57 per cent of participants had experienced emotional abuse. As well, 35 per cent had been harmed or threatened with objects or weapons by a diverse range of perpetrators. Threats or actual physical harm came from acquaintances, parents, partners, children, paid caregivers, and strangers (p. 160).

Over 60 per cent of participants believed that people with disabilities are at greater risk for abuse and violence than are people who have no disability (p. 160). Two-thirds of participants wanted health care providers, police, judges, and crisis workers to have training to increase awareness of disability-related issues such as risk of abuse. Kelley and Moore stress that helping professionals should be aware of and sensitive to the risk of abuse for clients with visual impairment (p. 160).

Research has found that the experience of abuse adversely affects the health of people with a disability (Department of Health and Human Services, 1990, p. 226, cited in Kelley & Moore, 2000, p. 156). Abuse and violence are currently being acknowledged as psychosocial aspects of visual impairment (p. 155).

Part Three: The Political Perspective

In this section, I include several articles and studies which elaborate on the political issues involved in the social environment and the construction of disability in Western countries.

A. Disability and the Political Perspective (Clear, 1999)

In his article, Clear (1999) argues that alienation and oppression in the lives of people with disabilities are similar to the issues involved in racism (p. 6). Despite protective legislation and social policy in Australia, North America and parts of Europe, the reality exists that disability is usually associated with poverty (p.7). Clear cites Australian research statistics which show that on the key indicators of quality of life (education, participation, employment, income and housing), people with disabilities score poorly, and females with a disability are the most disadvantaged (AIHW, 1995, cited in Clear, 1999).

In comparison, Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC) reports that Canadians with a disability who are between the age of 15 to 64 are almost twice as likely to experience low income as are able-bodied persons and their employment rates are substantially lower (HRDC, 2003, p.2-3). Among Canadian adults with disabilities between the ages of 25 to 54, the Participation And Action Limitation Survey (PALS) study reported by HRDC disclosed that 42.7 per cent of people with disability were not in the labour force. In the 25 to 54 age group, 27.9 per cent were experiencing low income while in comparison, 10.2 per cent of the able-bodied persons were experiencing low income (HRDC, 2003, p.39).

Clear blames the way that countries such as Australia, Canada, the USA, and others organize their economic systems (1999, p.7). The discouraging picture of life for persons with disabilities even in wealthy countries around the globe "flows from the way we organize our production systems, distribute resources …. In a just and equal society, there would be no reason why any particular form of difference should result in systematic disadvantage, injustice and discrimination" (Clear, 1999, p. 7).

Clear's view is that "society disables people" - people who have an impairment (p. 7). Beatty, Teferra, and Nixon have reiterated that view, as described in the earlier part of this chapter. Clear proposes that we challenge our ableist and exclusionary political systems (p.8). Our societies are ableist both economically and socially. Cultural "ableism" can be seen in attitudes, stereotypes, and cultural representation of disability. The attitudes are based on the idea that disability such as blindness involves dependency, helplessness and tragedy. The cultural representations and attitudes are enmeshed with and reproduce the exclusion of people with impairments. Exclusion results in economic and social disadvantage (p.8).

Throughout history, the injustice experienced by people with disabilities has often been explained away by looking at individual pathology. When we look at individual pathology, we forget to look at and challenge the social foundations of disability (p.8). Clear states that ableism is similar to injustice based on race. There are entrenched structures of economic and cultural power that produce the societies we live in. They struggle to keep reproducing themselves. The existing economic and social structures cause people with disability to live in an unjust and significantly "ableist" world (p. 8).

Throughout his article, Clear emphasizes that the experience of "disability" is political. "Disability" is more than a physical limitation; it is a social construction. The disadvantage that results from impairment is not natural or inevitable, he states, just as others before him have said, such as Teferra (1998, p. 195), Beaty (1994), and Oliver (1990). In their writings as well as in the PALS report (HRDC, 2003), one can see clearly that disability is a form of cultural and economic oppression. Looking at the effects of disability on people in wealthy societies around the world, one can even say that it is a human rights violation.

B. What Could I Know of Racism? (Weeber, 1999)

Clear's argument that disability is political is supported by the experience of Weeber (1999). In "What could I know of racism", Weeber compares her personal experience with disability to the discrimination that is part of racism. A middle-class, college-educated white woman, she believes she is rendered invisible by her disability (p. 20). The way that ableism operates is universal, despite the race or class of a person who has a disability.

Ableism.

i. Ableism and racism: Weeber drew a parallel between racism and ableism. She asks ironically, "What could I know about being told that if I "work hard enough" I could make it … of having to endure painful procedures to make my appearance more acceptable … of growing up in a society that never portrays my people with positive images in the media?" She adds, "What could I know of being viewed as less intelligent simply because of the way I look?" (p. 20). She has to work twice as hard to prove she is as good as others. "What could I know of being viewed as a charity case, rather than one who possesses civil rights?" she asks (p. 20). Weeber says that "I can know the pain of all of these things because I am disabled" (p. 21).

Weeber believes that society often reduces her to one thing, her disability feature (p. 20). All her qualities are negated (e.g., her college education, her abilities, and her white privilege) by her disability.

Weeber defines ableism as a "form of prejudice and bigotry that marks us (people with a disability) as less than those who are non-disabled" (p. 23). Ableism is an attempt to convince people with a disability that there is something fundamentally wrong with them, that they are "defective", and that they are not acceptable the way they are (p. 23). She states that ableist attitudes hurt both the disabled and the nondisabled. As Rousseau said, "Man is born free, but everywhere he is in chains."

ii. Assumptions of ableism:

Weeber lists a number of assumptions that support ableism:

a) "everyone is, or should be, "normal" (i.e., white and very able-bodied);
b) "everyone should be capable of total independence, and capable of "pulling themselves up by their own bootstraps";
c) being "non-disabled" makes a person superior; and,
d) "everyone who is disabled wishes they could be non-disabled – at any cost". (Weeber, 1999, p. 23).

Rejecting the stigma.

Weebers speaks of how hard she tried to prove her abilities, and to prove that she was not a "cripple". For many years, she did not express her emotions. She was exhausted inside, and lonely, angry and depressed. Others only saw her "bright, cheerful self" (p. 26). I could feel a connection when Weeber described her situation. Similarly, when people look at me they see a smiling face, but inside I am often exhausted and hurt.

Weeber found that there was a huge change for her when her isolation ended and she connected with another person who had a disability, someone who understood. Since then, she said, "I never felt alone" (p.26). She found that belonging to a community was healing. She believed that the disability community taught her to love herself wholely, even the parts that the ableist society rejects (p. 27). As Nixon (1994) said, there is huge value in networking.

Weeber had to overcome her learned aversion to other people who have a disability. She had accepted the view that people with disabilities were "defective" and she saw that they were stigmatized in society. When Weeber had felt aversion to people who have a disability, that is internalized oppression.

Today, Weeber rejects the stigma, and celebrates her uniqueness. Similarly, I myself love my uniqueness and love being different in so many ways. The world would be a very boring place if everyone was the same. I often use the following metaphor. If there was a big garden, with only one kind of flowers, nobody would enjoy looking at it. If that big garden is beautified with many types of flowers, people appreciate it, and they say that it is breath-taking. It refreshes your mind. It leads you to admire the scene. Similarly, we human beings are the same. There are so many different ways that we can be different from each other. Our difference should be seen as something that beautifies us, rather than being a basis for disparity and inequality.

In the end, Weeber realized that she had to embrace her disability, despite the social difficulties she encounters. She quoted James Baldwin, who wrote in 1972 that, "to be liberated from the stigma of blackness by embracing it, is to cease, forever one's interior argument and collaboration with the author's of one's degradation" (p. 190, cited in Weeber, 1999, p. 28). Embracing and accepting her disability was very healing.

Again, Weeber realized the importance of community. She said, "to embrace my whole self, disability and all, was not a task I could do alone" (p. 29). She is proud today to belong to the disability community. She is proud to learn about their history of fighting for civil rights and to join them to create a culture that celebrates uniqueness.

C. From the Margins: Voices of Women with Disabilities (Hawley, 2003)

In her dissertation, Hawley created fictionalized stories about the vocational rehabilitation experiences of Canadian women who have disabilities. The stories were based on her twenty years' experience working with women with disabilities. The stories considered how the women survive and resist the challenges they face every day (p. 11). The prevalence of abuse for people with a disability was discussed in the stories, as well as gender biases towards women in Canadian society (p. 2).

Hawley states that women with disabilities are the most employment-challenged of any adult group (p. 21). Employment, however, is a key element in full citizenship (p. 2). Employment is strongly connected to having had disability-related supports (p.2). Income is related to employment, and for people with a disability, employment is the best defense against poverty (p. 21).

Hawley realizes and appreciates the uniqueness of the women with disabilities whom she has known, and she notices and writes about their commonalities (p.19). They face common social issues that reflect their marginalization. For example, in recent times Canadian women with disabilities face poverty and reduced opportunities for social, educational and rehabilitation services (p.20).

Hawley's statements about the marginalization of women with disabilities are supported by Fawcett (1996, 2000) and by information in the HRDC (2003) publication, *Disability in Canada: A 2001 Profile*. Fawcett has found that women with disabilities have the lowest rate of participation in the labour market compared to all other groups (Fawcett, 1996, p. 100-101). They are generally to be found in semi-skilled and unskilled jobs, whether or not they have education. They are less likely to work full time than are disabled males (Fawcett, 1996, p. 83) and in Hawley's experience, women with disabilities are the most employment-challenged of any group in Canada (Hawley, 2003, p. 2). More than 60 per cent of Canadian women with a disability depend totally or partially on the welfare system to meet basic daily needs. Women with a disability have the highest rate of poverty of any group in Canada (Fawcett, 1996, p.131, 135). They are more than twice as likely to be divorced and to be single parents (Fawcett, 1996, p. 164). They are a very vulnerable group for abuse, including sexual assault (Hawley, 2003, p. 2; Kelley & Moore, 2000, p. 155). In fact, they are the most vulnerable group (Hawley, 2003, p. 21).

HRDC (2003) analyzed the average and median earnings for men and women who have disabilities. The analysis considers earnings, and not the income of people on social assistance. It only considers the earnings of employed persons. The HRDC study found a huge disparity between the earnings of males who have a disability compared to men who do not. From age 25 to 54, men with a disability earn on average $34,536 annually while men with no disability earn $44,312 annually, on average. In the same age group, women with a disability earned an average of $23,302 while those women without a disability earned $28,697.

There is not only a huge gap between the earnings of people with a disability compared to the nondisabled. As well, there is a huge gap between the earnings of men and women. Women with a disability come out worst off when their average annual wage, $23,302 is compared to the average wage of men with disability: $34,536 (HRDC, 2003). An eleven thousand dollar difference is huge for people in low income categories.

The HRDC (2003) study explored the employment status of men and women with a disability and compared it to that of non-disabled persons. It was seen that 55.5 per cent of men aged 25 to 54 with a disability are employed. In comparison, 88.9 per cent of males who have no disability are employed. For women who have a disability, 48.4 per cent are employed, while 78.2 per cent of the women without disability are employed. The gaps in labour-force activity are huge. I have set out the statistics concerning employment rates and wage disparities on two tables, attached as Appendix F and G.

The work of Hawley (2003) and Fawcett (1996, 2000) and the statistics contained in the HRDC (2003) study reveal that people with disabilities, and women in particular, are marginalized in Canadian society, facing poverty. If employed, they earn low wages. Women with a disability face double jeopardy in Canadian society because they are oppressed on the basis of gender and ability. If they are not white women, but belong to a visible minority group, the interaction of gender and disability and race is further pronounced (p. 21); they will face "triple jeopardy".

Hawley emphasizes that theorists and practitioners have to recognize that there are social, political and economic constructs of disability that have an effect on women with a disability (p. 11). She notes that the traditional stereotype of women as being helpless and dependent is taken a step farther when women with a disability are being stereotyped. They are seen as even more helpless, dependent and victimized (p.23). In her dissertation, she provides her considerations of what practitioners could do differently. She hopes for theoretical and systemic change.

Besides stereotyping and stigmatization, there are more factors involved in the high unemployment rates for people with a disability. Employers lack knowledge about assistive technology and about the ability and productivity potential of people with a disability who have received training, and this lack of knowledge causes high unemployment rates for people with a disability who ought to be in the labour force (Williams, 2002, p. 1). Williams has written about disability, unemployment issues, and assistive technology for over 22 years. He is outraged that after much legislation to improve the employment situation for people with disabilities, more than 10 million people with disabilities remain unemployed in the United States (Williams, 2002).

The global statistics are equally tragic. The National Federation of the Blind (NFB) reports that globally the unemployment rate for employable persons with disabilities is always at least double the rate for able-bodied people in the labour force (NFB, 2005). In some cases, the rate of unemployment for people with disabilities reaches 80 per cent (NFB, 2005). As a result of unemployment, many persons with disabilities around the world live in poverty and social isolation (NFB, 2005). Their homelands have lost the potential contribution of their labour.

D. Disability in Canada: The PALS Survey in 2001

In Canada, the HRDC (2003) publication *Disability in Canada: A 2001 Profile*, which was cited above, revealed that 45 per cent of men with disabilities and 52 per cent of women with disabilities are unemployed (HRDC, 2003). It drew its statistics from the Participation and Activity Limitation Survey (PALS). Looking at all people with disabilities across Canada, the study revealed that many who are employed continue to live in poverty. They work for lower wages on average than the mainstream population.

Tables 1 and 2 in my dissertation illustrate the PALS figures regarding employment and income (see Appendix F and G).

After collecting survey data, several reports were published. Statistics Canada (2002) published *A Profile of Disability in Canada, 2001*. The PALS survey findings were discussed in regard to prevalence of disability, type and severity of disability, and were divided by age and sex. The 2001 survey revealed that 3.6 million Canadians reported having a limitation, out of a total population of almost 29 million. That figure represents 12.4 per cent of the total population. Statistics Canada's survey found that 1,968,490 people with disabilities were between the age of 15 and 64, the working-age years (2002, p.7). The PALS survey divided people with disabilities by gender, and found that 13.3 per cent of women and 11.5 per cent of men had a limitation of some sort (Statistics Canada, 2001, p.7).

The findings revealed that 594,350 Canadians have a visual impairment (Statistics Canada, 2002, p. 15). The PALS survey explored the rate of visual impairment of male and female Canadians age 15 and older. It was revealed that 2 per cent of men and 3.1 per cent of women over the age of 15 years had a visual impairment (Statistics Canada, 2002, p. 15).

The foregoing statistics clarified that in Canada, as around the globe, unemployment is high among people with disabilities, and their earnings are lower than for mainstream people. As well, the situation is worse for women with disabilities in comparison to males with disabilities. The HRDC (2003) and Statistics Canada (2002) reports concerning the PALS study of disability in Canada were also useful because they clarified the rates of disability and of visual impairment in Canada. From my literature review, I discovered that there is no current research concerning employment rates for persons with visual impairment across Canada.

Summary

The literature by Teferra revealed that people with a disability can achieve academic education and find fulfilling careers and independence if social conditions and government policy support their efforts. People with disabilities can be "high achievers". Nixon's work showed us the importance of social support networks in the lives of families, particularly when there is a disabled member. Mulugeta and Teferra also noted the importance of family support and of traits such as persistence when individuals from minority groups face challenges.

Teferra and several others (e.g., Kelley, Clear) each propose, in diverse ways, that disability is a social construction. Statistics in the literature that I reviewed revealed that the unemployment rates for Canadian immigrants who are disabled, the conditions of poverty and the potential for abuse, all unite to create shameful conditions in a wealthy nation such as Canada. We in Canada are capable of creating better living conditions and employment opportunities for people with disabilities than exist today.

As Williams (2002) said, the current situation for people with disabilities is "a social, cultural and economic tragedy." It lies upon us all to work for change in the social conditions that present barriers to employment, fulfillment, and full citizenship for immigrants with disabilities and for all people with disabilities in Canada.

Having reviewed the current literature, I saw that there was a gap in the research knowledge. Teferra, for example, looked at factors that helped students with disabilities to become successful, but he did not examine in depth what happens *after* they graduate from university and become employed. Based on my own experience, I believe Teferra, like other Ethiopians, assumes that the educated professionals with a disability are equal to other citizens and that there is no visible need to study their situation once they have graduated and become employed. No one had studied educated blind people's independent lifestyle and career after graduation in Ethiopia, and no one had studied what happens to educated blind professionals when they leave careers and independence behind to immigrate to Canada with their families. It became my goal to explore the successes and the challenges of Ethiopian educated blind immigrants and their families in Canada. I wanted to add to the literature and raise awareness of the capabilities of people with disabilities and of the challenges we are facing during our experiences. It is my hope that the knowledge that arises from my study will create beneficial government policy changes that lead to employment support for all people with disabilities in Canada. In the chapter that follows, I describe the method with which I explore the experiences of educated blind immigrants and their families.

CHAPTER 3

Methodology

Introduction

In my study, the central research question is: What is the lived experience of Ethiopian immigrant families in Canada in which one adult member is blind? I explore the following sub-questions: How does the fact that one family member has a disability affect the family as a whole, in their experience as immigrants in Canada? What are the social barriers that the blind immigrant and his or her family have encountered during the experience adapting to Canadian society? If married, what keeps the spouses together despite the stresses and challenges to their marriage - what are the strengths and coping mechanisms of the family members? What is the experience of staying together in a challenging situation like for them? What can we learn from their lived experience? For example, what can they tell us would improve their lives and the lives of other immigrant families with a blind adult family member?

In this chapter, I discuss the benefits of a phenomenological and heuristic approach. I discuss how the selection of designs is based on my anti-oppressive and feminist philosophy as a researcher. As a black immigrant I am a member of the population I studied. I discuss reflexivity and ways of knowing, and my assumptions. I describe the ethical considerations that arose when I considered working with a vulnerable population. I provide an extensive description of the steps in narrative analysis, and I describe the lenses which I used during data analysis.

Research Philosophy

I have chosen a research strategy that is qualitative, phenomenological and interpretive. There are four important benefits of choosing a qualitative method (Moustakas, 1994, p. 21).

1). The holistic nature of experience. Experience and behaviour are integrated.

2). A search for the root meaning of experiences. This is important in my research into the experiences of Ethiopian immigrants who are blind and their families.

3). Viewing the data of experiences as critical to understanding human behaviour. In my research method, the data has been drawn from the interviews. The data is critical to understanding the families' experiences, the family dynamics, and the strengths and coping techniques of the family members. I expected that the method would be helpful when I would seek to uncover the issues of the families, such as unemployment and stress on family members.

4). Focusing on problems and subsequent research questions that "reflect the interest, involvement, and personal commitment of the researcher" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 21).

The selection of either a quantitative or a qualitative design affects the research focus and myself as a researcher. By having chosen a qualitative, interpretive design for my dissertation research, I could study something that was abstract. For example, I would not be restricted by working solely with observable data in the form of physically observable behaviours. I could work instead with words, opinions, memories and impressions. As well, I could include the abstract social context, in the form of words and beliefs, which was important to get the complete picture of what had occurred

(Neuman, 1997, p.72). Also, I could study a process. I would be able to study the process of encountering challenges such as unemployment and family stress and the development of coping mechanisms.

How the Selection of Designs Affects the Research Focus and Myself as Researcher

A researcher's philosophy is linked to his or her method. For me, a qualitative design using phenomenology and interviews is linked to my philosophy of anti-oppressive practice and of feminist philosophy, especially regarding empowerment of minorities. The Ethiopian philosophy that I learned when I was growing up is based on respect for all people and I was taught that no matter what the person's disability is, they have a contribution that they can make to society. That Ethiopian cultural philosophy fits with the Western anti-oppressive practice and feminist philosophy that I learned about and came to accept during my academic education. That is why I chose a qualitative, phenomenological approach.

One major goal of feminist research is to explore and reduce oppression of any form. Feminists often use subjective, experiential methods such as mine. Telling their story is a way to make sense of their experiences (Riessman, 1993, p. 4). Telling their story is empowering to Ethiopian immigrant families with a member who is blind. As they tell their stories, the research process gives a social minority group a genuinely true voice, so that their experiences can be heard by the mainstream society, by policy-makers, by scholars who want to contribute to social change, and by anti-oppressive practitioners.

Phenomenological and Heuristic Approach

My research is both phenomenological and heuristic. A phenomenological approach allowed me to study the Ethiopian immigrant with a disability and his or her family members' lived experience in Canada. Phenomenology takes the approach that social reality is constructed. A dialogue between interviewer and the participant sheds light on the phenomenon. Researchers using phenomenology attempt to understand the meaning of experiences (Anderson & Arsenault, 1998, p. 121). This methodology requires retrospective reflection (p. 122).

Although both heuristic and phenomenological studies are designed to reveal meaning, they differ in several ways (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985, p.43). In phenomenological studies, detachment from the phenomenon is encouraged, but in heuristic studies, connectedness and relationship is encouraged. A researcher using phenomenology will conclude with definitive descriptions of the structures of experience, whereas someone using a heuristic approach will end with a depiction of essential meanings and portrayal of the personal significance of the search to know. Finally, they differ because phenomenology loses individual persons during the process of analysis, while in heuristic research participants continue to be portrayed as whole persons.

In my research, I followed a heuristic paradigm. I followed Moustakas (1990, p.42), who places more emphasis on process and discovery than he does on outcome, verification and corroboration. I realized that there would be uniqueness to each family in my study. It is important to me not to lose the uniqueness of each family in the study. I was sure that although they all would be Canadians originally from Ethiopia, each would have had different experiences and a different outlook on the processes they had gone through. I didn't want to lose the uniqueness. I didn't want to blend their experiences into one homogenous description of the experiences of Ethiopian Canadian immigrant families with a blind adult family member.

As Douglass and Moustakas said, phenomenology finds the essence of experience, while heuristic research retains the essence of the person in experience (1985, p. 43). I wanted to explore and understand the meanings and implications of the human experiences of the adult family members who are participants in my study.

My study was designed to focus on the interview contributions of several participants. I hoped to gather richly detailed data through interviews as I drew forth their experiences of being part of a family with an adult member who has a disability, in their new home in Canada. By examining the rich, detailed descriptions of their own experiences, I hoped to identify the thematic elements that contributed to their challenging experiences as immigrant families in Canada who have a blind adult family member.

Processes and Phases of Heuristic Research

Moustakas (1990, pp. 15-26) identified the processes and phases in heuristic research. The seven processes that he found to be most important are: 1. identifying with the focus of inquiry; 2. self-dialogue; 3. tacit knowing; 4. intuition; 5. indwelling; 6. focusing; and, 7. the internal frame of reference. Moustakas wrote that,

> Heuristic inquiry requires that one be open, receptive, and attuned to all facets of one's experience of a phenomenon, allowing comprehension and compassion to mingle and recognizing the place and unity of intellect, emotion, and spirit. The heuristic researcher is seeking to understand the wholeness and the unique patterns of experiences in a scientifically organized and disciplined way (Moustakas, 1990, p. 16).

Moustakas points out that there is an essential bridge between the researcher's implicit knowledge from tacit knowing, and explicit knowledge. That bridge is intuition. (1990, p. 23). Intuition has the capacity to form patterns, relationships, and inferences that lead to deepened and extended knowledge (1990, p. 23).

There are six phases in heuristic research: 1. initial engagement; 2. immersion; 3. incubation; 4. illumination; 5. explication; and, 6. creative synthesis (Moustakas, 1990, p. 27; 1994, p. 18). The first phase, initial engagement, involves the researcher discovering a question that he or she is deeply interested in investigating. The question should hold important social and personal meaning for the researcher. In the immersion phase, the researcher must immerse himself or herself in the question, and how it will be of benefit to society and to academic knowledge. It is my experience that, as Moustakas points out, during the immersion phase, the researcher lives with the research question in waking, sleeping, and dream moments (1990, p. 28). Conversations, meetings, readings, music, art, nature, prayer, and anything else that I encounter in the world will interact with the question. The immersion phase leads to deeper understanding of the phenomenon.

Incubation is the phase wherein a researcher ceases to have intense, concentrated focus and allows the inner part of the mind to silently work for a time. As Moustakas (1990, p. 29) says, it is like a time of silent preparation for birthing. Illumination begins to occur, and a researcher awakens to new dimension of understanding, or even corrects distorted understandings of the phenomenon being studied. A degree of reflexiveness is essential, and tacit workings occur, uncovering meanings and essences.

In the explication phase, it is time to explicitly examine the layers of meaning that have been awakening in consciousness. Explication leads to creating a comprehensive picture of the core themes and essential meanings of the phenomenon. During the final phase, creative synthesis, Moustakas (1990, p. 31-32) points out that the researcher must take knowledge of the data into a period of solitude and meditation, and will emerge with a "creative synthesis" which is a comprehensive expression of the essences of the phenomenon investigated.

The Researcher as a Tool of Research: The Importance of Reflexivity

Reflexivity is vitally important for myself as a researcher. It is an important part of my research process. Although I know first hand the challenges for immigrants who have a physical disability and for their families, it is a very complex social phenomenon to examine.

When I am using reflexivity, I begin by looking at myself and my own family experience. Banister (1999) has described the importance of reflexivity in research. Similarly to Riessman (1993, p.3), Banister also reported that her research participants were ashamed at first and had a hard time telling her things that are often not spoken about (p. 3, 4). I expected that my participants similarly would have a hard time telling me about some aspects of their experiences, such as family conflicts, or lack of success in finding employment. I expected to hear that in Ethiopia the blind participants were working, with fulfilling lives – that they were what Teferra (1999) terms 'high achievers'. It is my experience that because of the restrictions of Canadian immigration laws there are no blind immigrants admitted to Canada who came from a life of poverty. The *educated* blind immigrants score enough points on the immigration criteria to be admitted to Canada, and did not come here from a life of poverty. Similar to what Banister (1999) noted, I also expected that the participants would find it embarrassing or even humiliating to speak about their economic struggles and resulting marital stresses while living in Canada.

To address that problem, Banister set out on an act of reflexivity. She "set out to negotiate the personal meaning, for myself, of my changing body" (Banister, 1999, p.6). Similarly, I set out to negotiate the personal meaning, for myself, of my disability, and of being an immigrant and a person of colour, with cultural norms and expectations that sometimes differ from those of the mainstream society. I set out to negotiate the meaning of my disability in the context of my family. I examined the assumptions and beliefs underlying my experience. As well, I explored the stigma and stereotypes which are held by others but perhaps I sometimes take on myself. I sought to uncover the hegemony in my environment. It is possible that my own family sometimes takes on the stigma and stereotypes in some ways, too. To do so is a form of internalized oppression. Critical reflection was an important part of the research process for me.

In accordance with the approach of Banister (1999) and Hagey (1997), I used reflexivity and demystification as I challenged the barriers of the mainstream culture. I was articulating for myself and others some taboo topics that, in general, have not been spoken about openly by mainstream or by immigrant societies. Quickly, I began to see that during the research process, the topic would involve a vast amount of cultural information about several diverse types of societies that have been encountered by the immigrants with a disability and by their families.

The process of reflexivity had begun. I realized that according to my social background it is not always such a limiting or stigmatizing thing to be blind. A blind person is capable of achieving high status. Analyzing my experience, reflexivity helped me to realize that it would be important to discover what cultural beliefs the participants in my research have brought to Canada with them, and to discover the effects of these beliefs on their families. What were the blind immigrants and their families' expectations, based on the original beliefs? Have the expectations been fulfilled or changed, for the better or the worse? What are their beliefs now? It is a very complex situation. I was fascinated at the prospect of studying the phenomenon.

Describing and situating myself in this way, first, I felt that I was obligated to write about this situation and to do research with the goal of educating and creating social change. I wanted to change the social challenges that face immigrant people with a disability, and our families. When doing research, I am always very careful to do no harm to others, because harming others would be harming myself. Before I began, I believed that in the future when other immigrant people with a disability and their families would see my accomplishment with this research, it would encourage them and inspire hope that they, also, can fulfill their desires and goals. When a person with a disability reads this research, this is *our* life and experience! Before beginning the study, I wondered whether the research would be like therapy for participants in a way, because the interview and the results in the dissertation spell out all the issues systematically, and describe the participants' strengths, while protecting their confidentiality.

I hope that when people who do not have a disability read this research, they will understand our struggle more fully. By educating them, we will be making allies.

Making allies and educating for change may result in improving the prospects of success for immigrant people with a disability and for their families. Policy makers might be also encouraged to make positive change, and to draft a law concerning this matter, because it has been my experience that the Canadian constitution at present does not fully meet the needs of people with a disability. The first step toward these huge long-term goals was for me to undertake the process of reflexivity.

Drawbacks and Limitations of my Approach

Limitations. There are certain limitations to a qualitative design. First, the researcher cannot use statistical analysis of his or her findings, and therefore, the findings do not generalize to a larger population (Anderson & Arsenault, 1998, p. 134). Second, factors cannot be controlled as they would be if it were a quantitative study.

These are limitations for qualitative approaches. However, according to Neuman a qualitative study is valuable if the researcher has accurately described the participants' experiences, "providing a portrayal that is true to the experiences of the people being studied" and if the researcher provides a detailed account of "how they understand events" (Neuman, 2004, p. 117). A study is valuable if the knowledge gained from the study will improve people's lives. The goal of a qualitative study is to uncover meaning in events, in order to increase understanding (Riessman, 1993, p. 4; Anderson & Arsenault, 1998, p. 90).

Reliability and validity. Reliability is an important element of research. I ensured reliability by verifying the metathemes with the participants once coding had been completed. Validity is a critical issue when researchers are studying narratives. Researchers can ensure validity in qualitative studies by ensuring they have participants who are "trustworthy" (Riessman, 1993, p. 65) and "reliable informants" (Anderson & Arsenault, 1998, p. 133), who will provide the most accurate description of their experiences that they can. A phenomenological study has validity if the researcher has actually investigated what he or she set out to investigate. "Whose voice is represented in the final product?" asks Reissman (1993, p. 61). The researcher must ensure that it is the participants' "voice" that is heard in the final outcome of the study.

Internal validity. It is possible for a qualitative, phenomenological study to have internal validity. It is created by having meticulous records of data sources and thought processes; this is called the "audit trail" (Anderson & Arsenault, 1998, p. 134). I obtained internal validity by record keeping and journalling. I audiotaped my thoughts and increasing knowledge of the phenomena from the first interview onward, as an oral journal. I continued the record-keeping during data analysis, and I clearly described the steps in analysis and the realizations that I made.

Drawbacks of interviewing. Often, with the interviewing method, each interview is only a one time event. If the researcher realizes later that important information is missing, he or she cannot obtain it. This problem was partially overcome in my research design, to some extent. I contacted participants after the interview and asked them their view of the metathemes that emerged during analysis. At that point in time it was still be possible to ask for any small piece of information that seemed important. Nevertheless, I was limited, because after the interview had been completed I was not able to open up whole new lines of questioning.

Other drawbacks. Other drawbacks of my design included that the experience of the children in the participants' families would not be included. Also, I was not aware of the experience of blind Canadians born in Canada, in order to compare it to the experience of my own participants. I was not aware of the experience of the blind immigrants from Ethiopia who were poorly educated, because the Canadian immigration law has not allowed them to come to Canada. Before the study began, I expected to find that, similarly to my own situation, all the blind participants would have been well-educated, in order to be legally allowed to enter Canada.

The researcher – myself - and the participants were residing at great distances from each other. When I traveled to their cities to conduct the interviews, I expected that the situation would have its own stresses. I would have to find my way around an unfamiliar city, and time was very limited. That was another drawback of a design which uses interviews.

Further limitations. It is a further limitation of my design that I was not able to obtain participants through random selection. I limited the participants to blind immigrants from Ethiopia and their families, who were willing to talk to me openly about their family's experience in their new country, Canada.

Assumptions

Identifying assumptions. A researcher must become aware of his or her assumptions. Assumptions could get in the way of analysis. They could have prevented me from seeing evidence or findings that did not comply with them. I believed that to gain awareness of my assumptions would lead to a more neutral and inclusive viewpoint when looking at my data. To state one's assumptions is essential in qualitative, phenomenological research.

My assumptions as I entered into the research study included the following:

a.) No matter whom a person with a disability is, he or she is entitled to full citizenship, including equality of opportunity to access employment.

b.) Blind people have the capability to accomplish the goals they choose for themselves, but society needs to provide the opportunity.

c.) To create that opportunity, governments must create empowering and supportive policies for people with disabilities.

d.) All people with disabilities are entitled to access education- and employment-related resources that benefit a student or employee.

e.) Employment for a person with a disability should be at the level suited to his or her skills, education and capability. It is not justice if the person with a disability is left unemployed or underemployed.

When I was gathering data and analyzing it, I had to remember that my own experiences as an immigrant with a disability, seeking employment in Canada, had been negative and I have experienced a lengthy period of unemployment - meanwhile, some aspects of my time in Canada have been positive and fulfilling. I had to set aside my own negative experiences and I had to attempt to remain neutral as I conducted the interviews. My own experiences, positive and negative, were a resource that I drew from to enhance my understanding of my participants' experiences. At the same time it was difficult for me not to allow my own negative employment-related experiences to deter me from hearing what the participants told me of their own experiences. I went to the interviews determined to "open my ears" to hear anything that they wanted to tell me.

Lenses. I used several lenses in my study. They are lenses with which I usually view experiences. I call them the Anti-Oppression lens, the Anti-Racism lens, the Disability Lens (empowering people who have a disability), and the Anti-Poverty Lens. I examined them, as I describe in this section of the chapter, in order become aware of the lenses. The lenses are useful, yet they are based on assumptions. My assumptions about oppression, racism, disability and poverty include the belief that in society there are minority groups who are not accepted by the mainstream and are not given an equal opportunity to prosper. My assumption or belief is that the oppression in society needs to be changed. My assumption also is that even members of minority groups can prosper if they are determined and persistent in attempting to accomplish their goals. I believe that minority groups such as people with disabilities are in an oppressive situation, but they should not allow themselves to be trapped.

I reminded myself to remember as well that black immigrant people with a disability will experience the "Triple jeopardy" of social oppression based on disability, race, and immigrant status, and therefore I expected that perhaps my participants might feel hopeless concerning their situation. I had to remember that I have assumptions and be willing to distance myself from my assumptions in order to gain whatever knowledge I can from the data in the interviews. It was my assumption that my participants would tell me a true and honest account of their experiences to the best of their ability.

Participants

To obtain participants, I was not able to use random sampling, in which every member of the population has an equal opportunity to participate in the study. The sampling was purposeful and I used criterion sampling. The participants were eight adult Ethiopian immigrants to Canada who are members of families in which at least one adult member is blind. The eight participants are fully described in the section "Group Profile" in Chapter Four.

I recruited participants by contacting Ethiopian Canadian community leaders in metropolitan Canadian cities, forwarding a copy of the description of my study, attached as Appendices B, C, and E, and asking the leaders if they knew of blind Ethiopian immigrants to Canada and sighted family members who would participate in my study. When I received names and telephone numbers, I contacted participants by telephone. The information I gave them on the telephone along with a request to participate is attached as Appendix D. Participants had to be able to understand the study's purpose, and to be able to describe their lived experience. They had to be capable of providing informed consent.

Screening

Screening occurred during the initial contact. I checked that each participant met the criteria described above. I answered questions about confidentiality.

Data Collection

Participants met me at a mutually-agreed-upon location. I made sure they understood the purpose of the study. I offered to answer any questions they had, before beginning the interview. I described how confidentiality would be protected in the study, including that my data was to be kept in a locked room. Then I asked them to sign a consent form. All family members who had agreed to be interviewed signed a consent form. Blind participants were provided with a consent form in Braille.

Interviews

My method of gathering data was interviews. The interviews were audio-taped. Interviews took from one to two hours. The blind participants and their family members who participate in the study were asked pre-determined open general questions about their experience. An example of a broad, open question I used was: "Can you tell me about your experience living in Canada?" I used probes, such as, "Could you tell me more about that?"

I expected that during the interview process there would be a sort of tension between having knowledge of the research topic and being sensitive to the information provided by the participant, and trying to maintain a sense of being "naïve" about the topic and open to whatever data emerged. I expected there would be tacit, unspoken information shared between myself and the participant, which would have to be brought out during the interview process. "The interviewer and the subject act in relation to each other and reciprocally influence each other", says Kvale (1996, p. 35).

The equipment I used was one tape recorder and my PACmate. The small portable voice-activated Sony tape recorder (Model TCM 50DV, Serial No. 137933, three volts) was used to record interviews onto cassette tapes. I also recorded and took notes on my PACmate (model number BX400), a pocket access computer with JAWS voice technology and Braille keyboard and cell capabilities.

Debriefing after Interviews

At the end of the interview, I asked each participant to discuss how the interview experience had been for them. Because the research involved personal matters and investigating family dynamics and people's identities, and because people were co-operating with my research and will benefit from the outcome, I did not want to leave them in a state of worrying, or with troubling thoughts after the interview.

After each interview finished, I debriefed what we had discussed and I asked them how they were feeling. If participants felt upset, I had a list of local counselling resources for them.

As well, I had a counsellor available by cellular phone, who was willing to come on the phone immediately if it was required; fortunately, that was not necessary. I was willing to stay and spend as much time as was necessary to be assured the participant was calm before he or she left.

I believe that because participants knew that in general I had been through the same experiences as they had, that knowledge helped them to have or regain peace of mind during debriefing and before leaving the interview location.

Ethics

Working with a vulnerable population

My own life experience as a blind person immigrating from Ethiopia, being Canadian, seeking work, and being a family member was be valuable in this study. I share with participants the experience of being a member of a visible minority and the resulting social oppression. My similar experience gave me understanding of the participants' experience. It is a parallel thing.

I did not want to do harm while exploring the participant's experience during the interview. I was able to understand their frustration. I could understand how privacy was significant for the participants, as a cultural factor. I understood their vulnerability. I understood where their boundaries were and how to not encroach on their boundaries, because I have similar boundaries based on our shared culture and shared disability. I used my own life experience and my knowledge of the culture to help me avoid doing emotional harm during the interview.

My life experience growing up in Ethiopia helped with ethical issues regarding cultural norms and beliefs. For example, I grew up in a collectivist culture, as did the participants. I respected the importance of the family. I knew and respected the ways of knowing of members of a collectivist society, which are different than the experiences and ways of knowing of a person raised in an individualist society.

By providing the interview questions and the consent form in Braille, I respected those of the participants who were blind. It was my hope that they would realize that my intent was to show respect.

Confidentiality

Confidentiality was an important ethical consideration for my participants. I used no real names or identifying details. Instead, I used no names at all, and in Chapter Four I provided each participant with a number.

Empowering questions

I created open questions in order to meet my goals of empowering participants and to do no harm, as well as to collect data. Open questions allow participants to create a full description and to discuss anything they believe is important. By providing freedom to discuss what they find important, I was sharing the research power with the participants. It was my goal for the research findings to benefit the participants and other users of the knowledge discovered by this study.

I created several questions that were intended to help participants to realize that they were worthy, they could accomplish their goals, and that they had already demonstrated strengths and accomplishments. For example, after the participants described a barrier to employment or a family stress, I assumed they have strengths and they persist in trying to overcome the challenges. I asked the open question, "When you face this challenge, what is your coping technique?"

I knew that it was likely that all the participants would be high achievers among the blind people in their former homeland. Only high achievers who are educated would be allowed to immigrate to Canada, according to the Canadian *Immigration Act*. Using several questions that were framed in the foregoing way, I hoped to empower the participants and to reduce the risk of harm during the interview as they explored their experiences in Canada.

Method of Storing Confidential Data

The data was recorded on audiotape, and transcripts were made in electronic format on computer discs that are password-protected. As well, during analysis, the data was printed on paper. As I have described above, to maintain confidentiality the data was stored in a locked room. When it is determined that the data will no longer be required for the purposes of this study, at that point I will destroy the audiotapes and transcripts and I will erase files from computer software and discs.

Method of Analysis

The following section describes the steps in the process of data analysis. I chose narrative analysis for analyzing the participants' interviews. Narrative analysis is a qualitative method, and it is inductive. This method of research works "from the bottom up", not 'from the top down". With narrative analysis, researchers construct a description or an explanatory theory from examining the data. Therefore, the analysis is "grounded in the data". The process is not necessarily linear. Researchers can spiral or cycle from the data to the analysis and back again, repeatedly.

Researchers begin with an unexamined concept of the phenomenon, and as soon as the first pieces of data are collected, the process of analysis begins (Neuman, 2004, p. 320). During my analysis, I worked with the data from several interviews.

Step One: Gathering Individual Stories, and Immersion in the Data

I interviewed eight participants, during interviews which lasted from one to two hours. I gathered the stories of their family experiences in Canada. I expected that my understanding of the phenomenon would expand as new stories were gathered. In the first stage of analysis, Immersion, I examined the data holistically, looking for the meaning of the concepts behind the content. I had to become 'engaged', or involved, with the data (Moustakas, 1990, p. 27). I had to become familiar with the data as a whole before going to the next step of analysis. I had to read it and reread it. During this stage, I wrote a paragraph that summarized each participant's story, and then a page that summarized all the participants' experiences. I have done this to get a holistic view of the data and to begin to find the important parts.

I looked for complexities in the data. I asked myself, "How are the data that emerged in the interviews diverse? Are there parts of the data that are incongruent or congruent with other parts of the data? What aspects of the participants' interviews are difficult to understand? Are there paradoxes evident in the data?" These questions were all part of a narrative analysis. As well, following the heuristic method of inquiry, as a researcher I had to persistently remember to be self-searching and reflecting (Moustakas, 1990, p. 16) in order to better discern the themes as they started to emerge. I have discussed the importance of reflexivity earlier in this chapter.

I examined the lenses with which I usually view experiences, which I have described above. They are the Anti-Oppression lens, the Anti-Racism lens, the Disability Lens (empowering people with a disability), and the Anti-Poverty Lens. I did this because a researcher must become aware of his or her assumptions. Assumptions could have gotten in the way, and could have prevented me from seeing factors that are outside the areas covered by these four lenses. With awareness of my assumptions, it led to a more neutral and inclusive viewpoint when I was looking at my data.

The lenses were based on my anti-oppressive philosophy. As well, I had further assumptions that I brought into the data analysis with me, as follows:

a.) It was my assumption that metathemes that would emerge from the study would be useful for understanding the experiences of Ethiopian blind immigrants and their families who face the challenges of life in Canada.

b.) Ethiopian immigrants are experts in their own knowledge of lived experience and its personal meaning.

c.) The new social environment in Canada has a deep effect on Ethiopian immigrants' identity, their family dynamics, and their hopes for the future.

d.) It was my assumption, as well, that the participants would provide a full and honest account of their families' experiences since coming to Canada.

Step Two: Distancing Myself; Then Coding the Data into Text Units

Next, I distanced myself from the data (Moustakas, 1990, p. 28). At times, I set the data aside, to allow time for insights to occur. Then I returned to the data.

I anticipated that it might be difficult to distance myself if the participants' experiences were similar to my own. I distanced myself by thinking as an outsider. I asked myself, "what would an outsider think of these stories from the interviews?" Then I asked myself, "what will the children, first generation Canadians, think when they read these stories of their family's experiences as new Canadians?" Doing these things helped me to separate myself from the data, so that I could look at the data as a whole, in a more neutral way than previously.

Next, I coded the data. This was another step in distancing oneself from the data. I broke data into parts. Decontextualization meant that each piece of data was removed from the context. I separated the data into meaning units (Moustakas, 1994, p. 118, 122) or text units. Each text unit was a fragment of data that contained one complete thought. Separating the data into text units was classifying the data. I was "horizontalizing" the data, making each piece be of equal value (Moustakas, 1994, p. 118).

During this stage of analysis, as the researcher I had to step into the data, immersing myself, then I had to step out, distancing myself and looking at the components or parts, and then step back in. This was the spiraling process described above. The purpose of creating text units was to slow a researcher down. It made me view the data word by word. It forced me to see the parts of the data that I might have taken for granted or made assumptions about.

Step Three: Categorization

After coding the data, I entered the stage of categorization and comparison. At this point I read the text units, with the research question in mind. As I read each text unit, I asked myself, "Is this important to my understanding of the phenomenon of the experience in Canada of families from Ethiopia with a blind family member?" Using the voice-synthesizing computer system, I underlined the text units which led to understanding of the phenomenon. The rest had to be discarded.

As a blind researcher, I have developed two ways to analyze a narrative. The methods are to do key word analysis, and to colour code similar categories of text units. I combined the two ways in my analysis. During key word analysis, I used the command "Control F" to search a word that I suspected was common. I searched for it in the original transcripts, because the amount of times a word is found changes when the complex sentences have broken down into text units. The computer tells me how many times that word occurs in the original text, and shows me where it is. I listed the words that occurred three times or more on a page entitled "categories". Then each time a word was found, I marked an "x" beside it. When I perceived an extremely strong, powerful meaning to the word or phrase, I used a capital X. The reasoning for this is that then a really important word or phrase that only appeared once or twice would not be discarded later when making themes.

For example, I might have found the word "unemployed" fifteen times. If so, it would become a category. Categories can be a word, or a phrase. I might also have found the words "becoming very frustrated" eighteen times. That would have been another category. When a category was identified, I needed to analyze how the category contributed to the phenomenon. Because the idea of being "unemployed" may be connected to the ideas around "becoming very frustrated", for example, I was able to make one theme from these two categories.

At this point in data analysis, I began the second method of analysis that I have developed, mentioned above. I asked my research aide to colour code the text units within one theme in one colour. I then gave this theme a name. For example, a theme called "Frustration" might have been coloured blue, and the blue-coloured theme would have included all the categories about frustrated feelings during job search.

Any themes and categories that occurred frequently were considered worthwhile to investigate as one of the factors or meta-themes that were important in understanding the phenomenon.

Step Four: Recontextualizing – Making Themes and Metathemes

I looked for patterns, links and comparisons among categories. When I found similarities and connections, I grouped categories into themes. I recontextualized the data during this stage. I then listed categories and developed a master list of themes that were present in the data. Colour-coding the themes helped to find metathemes. I began to discern which themes were very important to understand the phenomenon that was being studied.

I followed the principle that themes that are repeated in interview after interview would be likely to be important in understanding the phenomenon. In narrative analysis, the important repeated themes are "meta-themes". Meta-themes are a common thread of meaning that can be found throughout the data. Sometimes two themes can unite to become one metatheme.

Using the masterlist of themes, I made a chart of how many times each theme appeared in each story. Then I had to weigh the importance of each tentative metatheme. The importance had to fit with my own understanding. If some theme (e.g., "working") showed up thirty times on the chart, then I would have had to realize "working" was an important part of the phenomenon. On the other hand, a meaningless thing might show up twenty times – then I would have had to use my own judgment to decide whether to discard it. At this point, there was value to having already examined my own assumptions and lenses, as described above, because then I would not discard something that actually was important.

It was useful to ask: "Are the tentative metathemes equally important to my understanding of the experience of the Ethiopian immigrant families with a blind family member? Are there any metathemes which could be combined? Is there any data that contradicts a possible metatheme?"

The metathemes were connected in many ways. It was useful to create a mental picture or a mind-map of the phenomenon. I explored the connections or links among the metathemes so that I could describe the phenomenon at a higher level of analysis. The higher level of analysis was abstract, rather than concrete. For example, the abstract word "frustration" might be used instead of the concrete words, "yelled at family members". During this final step, again I asked my research aide to colour-code metathemes in the original stories, the raw data, which was on the left-hand column of each transcript page. At that point, I was ready to begin to write the final analysis.

Step Five: Confirming Emerging Findings With Participants

At this point in data analysis, I asked the participants for feedback concerning the metathemes which emerged during data analysis. I sent them the metathemes by email.

I asked the participants to write me in Braille or on electronic text, and I told them to omit their name when they return their feedback about the metathemes. In that way, I would be prevented from having bias toward which person had provided which feedback.

I also told them that if they did not wish to provide the feedback in the anonymous way, they also had the option to provide feedback verbally over the telephone.

I stepped back and took a second look at my findings and adjusted them, after considering the feedback I received from the participants. At this point, anything that the participants said verbally over the phone or on electronic text or in a Braille letter became more data, and was included in the final analysis. After having obtained and considered the feedback information, I adjusted my analysis and I created the final description of metathemes.

Use of Data

Data gained from the interviews was used for analysis of the participants' experiences. It was used in the form of direct quotations and in the form of themes and metathemes in the finished dissertation. In the future, the data and findings may be used in other forms such as journal articles and in conference presentations.

Summary

In this chapter, I have extensively discussed my design and method, and its limitations and benefits. I discussed my philosophy and assumptions, reflexivity, and ethical considerations, and I clarified my steps in data analysis. In Chapter Four, I begin to present my findings.

CHAPTER 4

The Voices of the Participants

Mahatma Gandhi said, "A nation's greatness is measured by how it treats its weakest members."

Introduction

In this chapter I begin by describing the process of traveling a long distance to meet the participants and to gather data. In addition, I discuss my impressions during the process of data analysis. Following the Process section, I provide a group profile that introduces the reader to the participants. In the remainder of Chapter Four, I present the metathemes that emerged from data analysis. I will present the themes that support and validate the analysis from which each metatheme emerged.

Most important of all, I provide quotations from my participants which will enrich the reader's understanding of each metatheme. These quotations are the true voices of my eight participants. In this chapter, the reader has the opportunity to hear the untold stories of the immigrant families, through the voices of my participants. The stories of their experiences can be humourous, tragic, or inspiring. The narratives contain unexpected messages, and they are sometimes messages that are difficult and uncomfortable for native-born Canadians to hear. Nevertheless, my participants' stories reflect the reality of life for immigrant families with one blind, educated family member.

In the presentation of each metatheme, readers will encounter the voice of the participants and will discover the essential findings. The discussion and meaning of each metatheme, and the connection to existing literature and to policy implications is reserved for Chapter Five and Six.

Process of Gathering Data

When I had obtained my participants' consent and the university's permission to begin my study, my original intention had been to travel to conduct interviews accompanied by my sighted research assistant, who is a trained counselor. Unfortunately, because of financial constraints my research assistant was not able to travel with me. When I knew this, my personal reaction was that it was a "nightmare".

Before I came to Canada, I had travelled by myself in many countries, but it seemed I had lost that former confidence about traveling in and outside the country by myself. My courage was low at that point, but then this study is really important and I could find no other alternative to traveling alone.

I made the decision to travel alone by airplane. I had to go to a major city where I had never been. Even while on the airplane during a five or six hour flight, I was shaking, not knowing what to expect … not to mention, there would be the huge airport, the subways, the train, the bus routes that I would have to understand and to negotiate. To add to the challenges, it was the middle of a record-breaking heat wave.

I arrived in the city late at night. This is true: disability is in the mind. It is really a social construction. I was soon to learn that, all over again. My disability, in the end, did not deter me from doing the task that I wanted to accomplish. In terms of difficulties which might arise in the interviewing process and in terms of counselling aspects, my research assistant remained available by phone daily and other trained counselors were at hand at the location where I conducted the interviews. Except for the personal reaction to the pain that my participants were suffering, all the "nightmare" turned out to be a false expectation. I arrived at the international airport, and I was accompanied by the hostess to the taxi, and the taxi drove me to my temporary residence. Since I arrived later than planned, at midnight, I had to take my guide dog out, and the people around my residence area showed me where to go. Since I have a guide dog, I had to wake up at six o'clock and we walked in an unknown place. The dog was relieved and I returned at seven o'clock without the help of anyone, to my residence, and I felt joy. I was pleased and proud of my guide dog for bringing me back to where we were residing. Then after I ate breakfast, I went out for a walk in the city, and for the first time I traveled by streetcar and subway, without a problem. I did it! And at that time, I even felt that in a way, I was not blind. Even sighted people as a stranger in a strange city could get lost, but I did not get lost. I went to a restaurant. I made some new friends. I went back to my temporary office and everything was superb. And, everything was easy.

So, what is blindness? It is superficial. In some ways, it is even good to be blind with a guide dog, because you meet people and you motivate them. I think it is a good opportunity to meet unknown people. As I was waiting at a huge intersection to go to the street car one day during my research trip, one lady was driving by. She stopped her car and asked me if she could give me a ride. Being safety-conscious about being in a new city, and also, wanting to do it by myself, I refused her offer. Then she asked me if she could wait with me until the streetcar came, and I consented. She parked her car, and she waited with me on that hot and humid day. She helped me board the streetcar and she gave me a big hug goodbye. I never saw her again, but her good deed stays with me. What a marvelous person to meet! And if I were a sighted person, I would not have met her or had this experience of human nature.

My personal reaction to the process of traveling to conduct interviews was that I discovered that people were generally friendly and helpful in that unfamiliar city. I was surprised and happy to realize that this friendly helpfulness would happen. I made two really good new friends, a man and a lady at a restaurant. They were educated people and were really interested in hearing about my research. They showed me the city and they showed me the marketplace, and we had a good time together. If I were sighted, probably I would not have met them. A person with a disability can take the friendly help as a gift. It is an opportunity to explore unexplored things and to use the friendliness in human nature in positive ways.

With those positive experiences and encounters on the first day, my attitude changed, and after that, the whole trip was excellent. Now, even, I have regained the confidence that I had years ago. This type of experience is shared by my participants. They travel by streetcar and by subway, and they take busses every day. Even when I told them the address for their interviews, they memorized many streets and intersections so that they could independently come to me. I offered taxi transportation, but to my surprise, none of my participants would accept it. They all wanted to use the public transportation. I am deeply respectful of my participants.

To my surprise, I now asked myself, how many of the able bodied people recognize my participants' courage, determination, independence, and perseverance? They have these qualities, and yet it is my experience that blind people are viewed by the majority of Canadian society as being less than an ordinary person. By the virtue of being blind, they are seen as less human, incapable, dependent, outsiders, unequal, and even conceptualized as a burden on society. What systemic injustice we are encountering! And I ask myself, why is the treatment of blind people so unjust?

It seems most Canadians believe we are the best country in the world, and we pat ourselves on the back. Nevertheless, most Canadians are really the blind ones when it comes to understanding the situation for blind people in this country, as the reader shall see in the findings in this chapter and in the discussion in Chapter Five and Six. All my educated blind participants were treated as equal citizens when they were in their home country, and they became employed and financially independent. Today, in Canada, all but one of these same educated and experienced professionals remain are unemployed.

Each participant, either blind or a partner of a blind person, traveled to our interview site independently, and we met for one and one half to two hours to conduct each interview. I did not encounter any difficulties during the interviewing process.

An unexpected part of the interview process was my personal reaction to learning about the blind participants' unjust situation in Canadian society. I learned that the blind participants face discrimination and disbelief that results in their unemployment despite their education, qualifications and skills. I personally found this situation to be very discouraging, even tragic. It was traumatic for me. When my highly achieving, educated blind participants travel to job interviews, employers ask them unintelligent questions such as how they managed to travel there, how they can eat spaghetti, or how they can find the washroom.

My personal reaction to hearing about such experiences included some anger, and I related their situation to my own situation. I felt, "Ha! Because of all the jobs I tried to access over the years in Canada, perhaps the interviewers felt the same way about me." I was saddened as I felt my hopes for employment had diminished greatly. When I applied for positions even at my home university, did the people with hiring authority feel that same way? I doubted they understood my qualifications and abilities, or what I had to do daily to independently accomplish my degrees, and to carry out my responsibilities in the social organizations which I have helped to create and administer.

I began to wonder whether once I obtained my doctoral degree, would I be on social assistance, as are some of my participants? I had been told by one of my participants that life on social assistance is one step lower than living, and one step higher than being dead.

During the interviewing process, I was struck by the faithfulness of the blind participants' partners to keep their marriage vows. Partners were supportive, despite the family's challenges. I had expected to see that in some cases the stresses of unemployment and immigration would have caused great strain on participants' relationships, almost to the point of destroying the marriages. Instead, I saw powerful caring and understanding and support between the partners, even though they admitted the financial stresses were present. The interview process revealed that the families had great strengths and were very supportive. The participants were living out their relationship commitment despite enduring years of financial stress.

The other surprise that I found was that the roles had changed and yet the role change did not cause as much stress as I had expected. All the blind participants, male or female, had been the breadwinner in their home country. For male blind participants, there was gender role reversal. Today, the male blind participants help out at home with housework and the children, and their partners are in the breadwinner role. Each respects what the other is doing. I expected to find unhappiness, anger and resentment about the exchange of traditional gender roles, but that was not the case. In my process of conducting the interviews, as the strong support of partners became evident, I felt overwhelmed. I felt that despite all the challenges, life can be worthwhile because of their attitude of caring and support toward each other. My question is, how long does it need to continue this way for the participants and their families? Must the blind participants continue unemployed in Canada for the rest of their lives, despite their education and work experience?

During the interview process, I saw that the partners of blind participants were carrying an unusually heavy burden and yet they remained in a caring relationship with their partners. For example, they continued to validate their partners for any work they did at home, rather than feeling resentment for their gender role change and for having to do low-status, minimally paid work.

One former social worker was now supporting the family by doing housekeeping, while her educated blind partner continued to be unable to find work in Canada. Because her educated blind partner could not find paid work in Canada, her options were limited. She was prevented by financial necessity from acting on other options as to get new social work credentials through education in Canada, or to remain a homemaker at the family home instead of working in a minimum wage in a position that she felt was demeaning compared to her previous career. Their love, caring and understanding of each other was not diminished by the stressful situation. Personally, I felt hope that for those people, their life would stay intact as I saw it, and that when the blind participants become employed, the burden would be lessened for their partners.

After I came back, because I had conducted the interviews in the participants' native language, it was a huge task to translate it to English. The task was overwhelming, when initially I had expected it to be easy. Because the interview was in their native language, the translation was very difficult. I wanted to make sure the translations said exactly what the participants wanted to say. The difficulty about that was that English is my second language. Also, it was difficult to go back and forth to the tape. The process was time-consuming. The participants were using concepts, terms and metaphors that do not have an English equivalent, and I had not foreseen that problem. It was much work to find an equivalent way of saying what they had said. To validate my translation, I emailed each participant a copy of their transcript and we discussed it over the phone. All participants are satisfied with the translation.

As I entered the various steps of data analysis and began to make categories and then themes, my personal reaction was that it takes a huge amount of time for a blind person to do this type of data analysis. At the same time, I was involved with my family responsibilities and the various crises that come up in a family from time to time, and I was involved in responsibilities in my community. The process of data analysis took several months, but I had not foreseen that it would take this amount of time. Nevertheless, my response to the lengthy and meticulous process was that it was worthwhile. The meticulous process of making meaning units and categories meant that I would not miss important information from the participants' interviews. I feel that I am respecting the participants for their contribution and fulfilling my commitment to them and to the ethics guidelines of the university, and to my committee. Still, what came to my mind, honestly, was the thought: At the end of this process of hard work, will I be employed? Will it be worthwhile? When I have that piece of paper, will it give me a job? Will it give me the dignity that I look forward to?

Group Profile

The participants in my study consisted of two sighted partners, one female blind participant, and five blind male participants. All the blind participants and sighted partners were born in Ethiopia, and all blind participants were high achievers during their education and career in Ethiopia, in comparison to the mainstream population. "High achiever" has been defined by Teferra, as defined in Chapter One.

All participants were employed before coming to Canada. The blind participants all had a bachelor's degree in Ethiopia, and their occupations included: teacher, lawyer, school administrator, music teacher, and librarian. Five of the six blind participants became married while in Ethiopia. All of the participants had fled their country because of political persecution and lack of freedom of speech and religion. They were not economic refugees.

All participants, at the time of the interviews, were aged in their forties except one, who was a little older. Several of them were raising children. On average, the participants had all been in Canada approximately ten years. All six blind participants obtained further academic education while in Canada, up to the level of Masters degrees. I do not provide their geographic location in order to protect my participants' privacy.

Despite the pre-existing education and employment history, and despite the additional education while in Canada, the blind participants are struggling to find full time employment. Only one has found full time employment. Their sighted partners have assumed a greater responsibility for obtaining the family income than they had done in the past, and as a result, the roles within the family have changed.

First, as I read through the transcribed data I began to feel overwhelmed by the social oppression that many of my participants experienced as the result of their disability (blindness) or as a result of their partner's blindness. By social oppression, I mean lengthy unemployment, financial struggles, and ableism (negative societal attitudes toward hiring people who have a disability). Consequently, I began to question my own knowledge, ability, and skill in the country where I and the participants reside, as well as in the country where we came from. I began to be very concerned about my own prospects of employment after obtaining my Ph.D. degree. The blind participants were high achievers and yet they had come up against the wall of restricting social beliefs.

I felt deeply saddened by the social discrimination, ableism and barriers which my participants face. And sometimes this sadness manifested itself as the face of rage against the evident social injustice toward my participants. Consequently, at times I felt anger and disbelief about what is happening to my participants – their struggle to find employment despite their intelligence, education, and previous employment experience. The blind participants all are high achievers, all graduated with distinction, and all, in the country where they came from, were working in respected occupations. So, why not here?

One common problem I encountered among the blind participants was that most lacked Canadian work experience. How are they going to get work experience here, unless there is a mechanism created by which they can get jobs and prove themselves to be productive? All of them, when they initially came here, their initial instinct was that because Canada is a developed country with technological advances, they would be employed and help their families, and contribute to their new country. They thought that they would have the equal opportunity to be a taxpayer, like an ordinary Canadian. But they found that that was not the case. All blind group members are all facing the dilemma of how to get work experience and to become employed.

When exploring the family dynamics between blind participants and sighted partners, I had expected to find much tension, nagging, anger, and resentment, and I expected to find that the changed family roles would be a huge problem. To my surprise, I became deeply respectful as I heard and later remembered the words of their wives or partners, the sighted participants. When you marry, you vow to be at your partner's side throughout bad and good times. It was amazing how the partners had kept that vow, despite the change from the early days of their marriages, in their homeland, when their partners were employed, respected, and bringing in an income. The ability to have effective and respectful communication between the two partners while facing difficulties in Canada was something I found amazing. This ability was found in all members of the group.

When someone is unemployed there can be a lot of family arguments, but with the participants, the differences were handled by communication and resolutions were found. The wives and partners of the blind participants showed me that they valued the work that their partners contributed in the home, and they were deeply caring about their blind partners' well-being. Indeed, that makes the sighted partners truly to be high achievers as well, and not only the educated family members alone were high achievers.

The blind and the sighted participants in the group all had a caring attitude toward each other and a positive attitude toward overcoming the obstacles. Because of that attitude they were achieving success in family relationships, and success in gradually achieving Canadian education and work experience, without giving up hope that one day they could find fulfilling employment. "The only disability in life is a bad attitude" (Hum, 2005).

Most of the blind participants in the group had been here ten years or more, but had not given up hope that one day they would be working. As well, their partners had been with them when they were employed in respected positions in their former homeland, and the partners knew they could do it, and were empathic and supportive about the barriers that their blind spouses were facing in regard to finding employment in Canada.

Emerging Themes

According to my methodology, I found themes among the meaning units and categories that came from the transcript of each individual participant. The list of themes is attached as Appendix I to my dissertation. I will now present my impression of my participants as themes began to emerge. I will also provide the main themes as they emerged during each interview.

Participant One – "The Independence Seeker"

Participant one was one of the blind participants. I learned about the participants' desire for independence beginning with Participant One.

Theme: Desire for independence. The first participant was the first one to refuse to take my offer of paid taxi transportation to the site of the interview. He demonstrated his capability and his desire for independence by choosing to make his way using public transportation, even though he had not been to that building before. Eventually, it came about that all the blind participants demonstrated their capability and desire for independence in the same way.

Theme: Good communication exists in his/her present family in Canada. This was my first interview and I was surprised and impressed by the good communication that exists in Participant One's relationship with his wife.

Participant Two – "The Caring Wife"

Participant Two was a sighted female.

Theme: Solid marriage; Theme: Wife of blind person is supportive; Theme: Wife shows that she is consistently caring toward him; Theme: Wife is aware of his abilities.

I expected to hear that people in this situation would have a hard time in their relationship. After the interview with Participant Two, I have changed my mind. Later on, several interviews were similar to this one, showing me that people could have a close supportive relationship despite the long term unemployment and other challenges of being a blind immigrant. It was striking to hear about their caring relationship despite many years of hardship in Canada. In fact, as the years pass, they get closer and stronger.

Theme: Experiencing being a welfare recipient in Canada. Participant Two said that rather than receive welfare, she would rather not eat.

To earn money, she has taken a much lower status job than the profession she had back home. She has shown commitment to her values and to her family, and has demonstrated perseverance in the face of long term social challenges.

Participant Three – "Little better than dead/The lowest rank of the living"

Participant Three was a blind male.

Theme: Feelings about unemployment. By the end of the interview with this blind male participant, I could feel his sadness.

"He is a little bit better than the dead people, but he is on the lowest rank of the living people", he said, regarding the experience of enduring lengthy unemployment despite his education and career experience. I thought about the fact that although it was a "tough" country with so much rejection, he could never go back to his country of origin, because he has lost his job, friends, status, and if he went back he would start over, "from scratch".

The dilemma is not his alone. Other blind people share his feelings. Other blind immigrants and their spouses have also lost everything and cannot go back.

Theme: The blind participant respects his wife. He described her respect and continuing support for him despite hardships and his stress-related illness.
When she came to see him in the hospital every day, he was grateful for her support.

Participant Four – "From Prime Minister to Governor General"

Theme: High achievement. Even though all my participants were high achievers, Participant four, a blind male, was an extraordinary person. Humour helps him to cope with the challenges of his current life. He was intelligent, highly talented, with years of professional development, yet he remains unemployed in Canada. Had his career in Ethiopia not been interrupted, I have no doubt he would have had a responsible post in the highest levels of government by now.

Theme: Unemployment despite education. I was struck that Canada is wasting people's minds. Our government is wasting his intelligence because they do not form policies which would increase employment for educated blind people, and I think that wasting his abilities is a terrible mistake. My reaction was that I felt that it is a terrible loss and it is terribly sad.

When I talked to Participant Four, I was overwhelmed by hearing so much really deep discussion coming from his very soft voice. I asked myself at the end, am I the right person to be asking questions of this kind of person? He is the highest intellectual I have ever encountered. I am grateful for that opportunity.

This was a lengthy interview and many themes began to emerge.

Theme: Social construction of disability. It surprised me in this interview to learn that disability doesn't mean anything, sometimes. Participant Four and his partner have raised their children to the full extent that they could, and their eldest children are in university now. They have defeated those social challenges.

Theme: Good communication exists in his/her present family. The secret, as he said, was that he and his wife had good communication and that they invited their children to be part of the communication.

Theme: Humour, funny memories. Humour helped this participant to cope with social challenges such as gender role changes after immigration to Canada. For example, he told me about his joke that in Ethiopia he was the "Prime Minister" of his family, but here in Canada his wife is the Prime Minister and he has been relegated to being "Governor General", which everyone knows is a merely symbolic role.

It is his "joke", but at the same time it is a real metaphor for gender role change after immigration. Participant Four is acknowledging that his wife plays an important new role within his family.

Participant Five - "The Intelligent, Compassionate Woman"

Participant Five was a blind female.

Theme: Persistence and perseverance in several aspects of life; Theme: High Achievement; Theme: Worked hard as a student; Theme: Respect in his/her employment.

In her community, because of her unusual high achievement and intelligence and because of her respected career in her former country, Participant Five has been sometimes compared to Einstein. She worked hard and persevered despite obstacles, and had high accomplishments.

It was during this interview that I realized that she and the other high achievers in the study did not realize they were high achievers until the point of integration to regular high school. When the teachers pushed the students to learn so much during the first years of education in a boarding school for the blind, they gave them a great basis of education. When the students integrated in grade 7, they discovered their education was beyond that of the sighted students in the regular school setting. Other students sought help from them. Most of them continued to stand in the top ranks. They continued to work very hard. It became an assumption that if a blind student was in their class, he or she would be in the top rank. Education was very competitive and students were ranked by the grades they had achieved in the past and perhaps they still are.

Theme: No other option except to achieve high in education. The second point that kept emerging in the interviews and particularly in this interview with Participant Five is that the blind students believed that to study hard was the only choice they had. The alternative was to be poor, unemployed, and a beggar.

Regarding perseverance, Participant Five spoke about persistence despite obstacles, strategizing, and remaining determined not to give up. She spoke of having patience, and said, "Find other ways if you fail one way."

Theme: Social or Community Responsibility of an Educated Person. This participant has had lifelong compassion and has been highly dedicated to helping her former school and other blind students.

Participant Six – "Achiever of 'full citizenship' "

Theme: unemployment despite education. Theme: Employment is part of full citizenship. Participant Six, a blind male, had quite an extensive professional career in his former country, like all the other blind participants. Similarly to the others, he has experienced lengthy unemployment in Canada despite his education and experience.

Theme: Social support network is necessary for blind immigrant and family; Theme: Expectations about blind employees. Participant Six is the only employed blind participant in my study. He eventually found a job in Canada by means of his supportive social connections. He has formed a good social support network among his neighbours and his religious community.

Theme: Wife or husband of blind person is supportive; Theme: The blind participant respects his wife; Theme: Wife shows that she is consistently caring toward participant. My impression is that Participant Six has a vibrant, 'alive' family, and that they treat each other with kindness and respect.

Participant Seven – "Woman Who Demands Justice"

My impression of Participant Seven, a sighted female partner of a blind person, is that she is a strong lady. She is educated and hard working, and she spoke about everything with passion. As well, she used humour, joking that she doesn't need to worry that her husband will be looking at other women.

Many themes arose during our interview, including: *Theme: Raising awareness. Theme: Government policies are needed to ensure that educated blind people gain employment. Theme: Blind people in Canada are not getting helped to find employment. Theme: Activism. Theme: Injustice that educated blind people remain unemployed in Canada. Theme: Wife is aware of his abilities. Theme: Wife or husband of blind person is supportive. Theme: Wife shows that she is consistently caring toward him. Theme: Humour, funny memories.*

Participant Seven is dedicated to her family and she knows her husband and his abilities very well. She was not bothered when people gossiped when she was engaged to marry him. She does not regret marrying him. She was outspoken about injustice. Participant Seven gets so angry when people disrespect her husband by talking to her and ignoring him. It emerged in the interview that she is outraged about ablism in Canada.

Participant Seven had much to say about the need to raise awareness about blind people's abilities in this highly developed country with all its technological advances.

Theme: Good communication exists in his/her present family. I was impressed by how much she loved her family. I learned so many things during the interview. I understood that a family with good communication can be really strong and dynamic, and they can overcome any challenges. There is a genuine love, understanding and respect present in the relationship among Participant Seven and her husband and the family.

Participant Eight – "The Thoughtful Man"

Participant Eight was a high achiever who became very successful in his former career, but after immigration to Canada, he remains unemployed.

Theme: Comparison of Ethiopia and Canada's treatment of blind people; Theme: Blind educated people were respected in Ethiopia; Theme: Employment is part of full citizenship; Theme: High Achievement. During the interview, Participant Eight came across as a professional man just as he was in his former country. Everything that he discussed was slow and thoughtful and he thinks about everything before he says it. He is a mature man. I can see his anger and his frustration at being unemployed despite his abilities. No matter what he does at home, he said that that is not enough. He wants to do more than to help out at home.

I can feel his frustration when he said that "success" means the opportunity to earn money and come back home at the end of the day. When he said that, I knew that he felt that he is not successful at this time, despite contributing at home in every way he can.

Theme: Difficulty getting Canadian work experience; Theme: Feelings about unemployment. Participant Eight stressed the lack of opportunities for educated blind professionals who have immigrated to get Canadian work experience. He is really stressed about being unemployed and waiting at home, which might create a lower sense of self worth than he had when he was working in his career in Ethiopia. I wondered whether he might regret coming to Canada. If he had known the situation here for educated blind people, he would have thought it over ahead of time and he might have sought other alternatives. He expected that when he came to Canada, he could use his professional training and that he could help his family financially. It was my impression that he now feels "a bit lost."

When I interviewed Participant Eight, I expected him to say a lot and to speak quickly, but instead he thought about everything and spoke slowly and carefully. That is his nature. Definitely, I could feel his sadness and vulnerability. He was angry with government officials for not preparing him for the employment situation before he came to this country.

To sum up his feelings about unemployment, Participant Eight used the Ethiopian metaphor that the experience of being unemployed and on welfare felt like being "a little lower than the living and a little higher than the dead."

Introduction to the Twelve Metathemes

When I began the narrative analysis of the meaning units in the data, I found thousands of categories. When I sorted the categories, I discovered 423 themes. Twelve metathemes emerged from the 423 themes. In Part One of this section I now present the twelve metathemes. A list of metathemes is attached as Appendix H, and a list of the themes that support each metatheme is attached as Appendix I. In Part Two of this section, I provide a description of each metatheme. I include quotations that assist me to describe and present the metathemes.

Part One: The Twelve Metathemes

Below is a list of the twelve metathemes found among the themes from all participants.

Comparison of Ethiopia and Canada's treatment of blind people;
High Achievement;
Persistence and perseverance;
Ethiopian expectations about a blind child or student;
Social construction of disability;
Importance of Advocacy;
Unemployment in Canada;
Desire to be independent and self-supporting;
Personal and family strengths;
Importance of social support network;
Participants' experiences accessing help from CNIB and employment agencies;
Recommended Government Policy Improvement.

Part Two: Description of Each of the Twelve Metathemes

In this section, I present a brief description of the metathemes along with quotations from the data that support each theme and metatheme. In this section, I present a description of "what is". I describe only what I saw existing in the data – the findings. In Chapter Five and Six I will discuss the implications of the findings.

Metathemes are presented here in random order because I have no intention to arrange them in an order that represents significance or hierarchy. All of the metathemes represent the experiences of the participants as people who belong to immigrant families with a blind adult member. I believe the direct quotations provided will enrich the readers' understanding of the eight participants' experiences. As well, the quotations demonstrate that my findings, the metathemes, were grounded in the data.

Metatheme: Comparison of Ethiopia and Canada's Treatment of Blind People

This metatheme emerged because the participants kept contrasting the two situations themselves. It emerged as the strongest and most powerful metatheme, even though I did not expect it.

The data from interviews showed that the participants' experience was that in Ethiopia, people were helpful to blind people, and that blind educated people were respected. The blind educated people were treated as equal. Because of being employed they had full citizenship. In contrast, participants' experience in Canada did not include respect, equal treatment, and full citizenship through employment. The data showed that participants came to learn that despite technological advancement, the Canadian government and general society lack awareness of the capability or needs of the blind.

Comparing their experiences in the two countries, the participants said educated blind people have a much higher chance of employment in Ethiopia than in Canada. For example, they said:

> "Disabled in Ethiopia have more prospects."
> "There are more employed blind people in Ethiopia than in Canada."
> "There are not very many employed disabled people in Canada."
> "When I was in that poor country, (Ethiopia) less educated, once I finished my education, with no hassle and trouble I was employed".
> "Here, with an educated society, a lot of facilities, I am unemployed".
> "Disabled people who live in Ethiopia, especially the blind people have more prospects once they are educated".
> "There are more employed blind people in Ethiopia than in Canada".

Comparing their experience in the two countries in regard to social respect for educated blind people, the participants said,

> "There is a huge difference in attitude between Ethiopia and Canada regarding respect for educated disabled people."
> "In this country, (Canada) disabled people have less prestige even after they are educated. In Ethiopia, once the disabled people are educated, they have prestige and equal opportunities."
> "In Ethiopian society, seeing a blind person educated that far, they think we were exceptional."
> "In Ethiopia, we blind were respected because we were educated."
> "(In Ethiopia), I was respected by my colleagues."
> "I have been here (in Canada) for 15 years. I have not seen that kind of attitude of respect for educated disabled people".

Again, the participants compared the helpfulness of Ethiopian role models for blind people to the lack of Canadian role models for blind people.

> "In Ethiopia blind people have role models. When they work hard, the blind people knew that they can achieve like their role models."
> "(Canadians) did not have role models of many working disabled people".

Participants found employment in Ethiopia as soon as they finished their university education, but in contrast, in Canada after accomplishing further university education, they remained unemployed. They said:

> "When I was in Ethiopia, I got a job, as soon as I finished my schooling."
> "I worked hard. I started to support myself and my family. I was a diligent worker. I was respected by my colleagues".
> "For an immigrant blind (person), getting employment in Canada is really tough and difficult".
> "I got a Masters degree in Canada. For some reason which I do not know, with a Masters degree I couldn't get a job at all.
> "Finding employment in Canada is really tough and difficult. Finding employment in Canada was the most challenging part in my life."
> "When I was in my former country, as soon as I finished my education, I was employed. Here, in Canada with an educated society, with a lot of facilities, I am unemployed. I don't know the reason why there are so many unemployed disabled people in this country."
> "Society in the country where I grew up was advanced in some ways, comparing to North American society."

In regard to the lack of employment while in Canada, in comparison to experience in Ethiopia, one participant said,

> "In this country, an immigrant blind person is victimized three times.
> It is triple jeopardy. Blind person is victimized first by being blind or disabled.
> Blind person is victimized secondly by being an immigrant.
> Blind person is victimized thirdly by being a person of colour."

Blind participants had experienced a supportive and helpful social environment in Ethiopia, despite lack of material resources. In contrast, blind participants and their partners told of experiencing a society in Canada that has not supported blind educated people to get employment. Participants said:

> "When I was in Ethiopia I and the other blind students didn't have enough educational resources. There was no computer. There was no tape recorder. We had a lack of Braille paper. We were depending on friends and close allies".
> "The people were kind and willing to help the blind students. In Ethiopia the societal or environmental support was favourable to blind students. The teacher and the director, they all worked for you".
> "I went to a lot of provincial and federal employment agencies. Despite all of them, it is very difficult to find a job. Even at entry level employment, they told me that I need Canadian work experience. I have been here 15 years, I do not have Canadian work experience".
> "Despite going to a lot of employment agencies, it is very difficult to find employment."

Participants clearly contrasted blind people's motivation to become educated and employed in Ethiopia to the situation in Canada. One person stated:

> "In Ethiopia, there is one thing we blind people knew from our experience. If we don't learn, and if we don't accomplish what we need to accomplish, there is no social service, there is no welfare system, there is no hope. We worked hard and we achieved high because there was no social services or hope if we did not achieve high. I believe that here (in Canada), that is the difference. Even if you don't go to school, you have that bloody welfare assistance cheque."

Metatheme: High Achievement

The data from interviews with blind participants showed that they all had pushed themselves to achieve highly when they were in their home country. They said that if they could not do that, their only alternative was to be a beggar, and they did not want that future. All the blind participants eventually became high achievers. All the sighted participants knew and said in the interviews that they were aware that their blind partner had much ability, and high achievement in the past.

The blind participants provided examples of being the top student in their classes, graduating from university with honours, and they were all employed in respected careers and professions. Teferra defines "high achievement" as including finding a position in one's community, being employed, and being able to become married (1998). University education was not necessary criteria for being considered a "high achiever" in the 1998 study. All the blind participants had exceeded Teferra's definition of high achievement for people with a disability. The data showed that they had set and accomplished their goals and found a fulfilling life in the time before they immigrated to Canada.

In regard to the experience of reaching their goals of high achievement, this is what my participants had to say about how they worked hard and focused on the goal.

> "I worked tirelessly to fulfill my goals to be self-supporting and self-sufficient."
> "Our desire was to finish our schooling and get a job."
> "Our interest was to help ourselves and to help our families."
> "We pushed ourselves."
> "We had to work really hard and try to be the top."
> "I was only focusing on my education."
> "There were no toys and no time to play."
> "Later, when I integrated with the sighted students, I realized how hard I had worked to achieve my education."
> "When (blind students) work persistently, they can achieve like the role models."

This is what blind participants said, remembering their high achievements:

> "I scored even better than the people who had enough materials, who could go to the library and read the books."

> "We were achieving beyond the level that the sighted people could achieve."
> "We scored high on the Grade 8 General Exam; we scored high on the University Entrance Exam in Grade 12."
> "We had accomplished beyond what our sighted friends had accomplished."
> "I stood first."
> "I scored really high. I was the top ranked student."
> "They sent me to General Wingate High School (an elite school) after I had the top score on the Grade 8 comprehensive exam. All my expenses were paid."
> "Presents, prizes, awards helped me to reach my goal."
> "I was awarded a gold medal for my achievement (in university)."
> "On the university entrance exam, I got an A".
> "I am proud of what I did at that time. They were big achievements."
> "Going to school and doing university course work, teaching music, and teaching in the school (all at the same time) is one of the big achievements."

In regard to believing that their only option was to study hard and do well, rather than become a beggar, this is what the blind participants said:

> "I realized that if I did not do well in my education, I would not have the choice to be a labourer."
> "The reason we stood in the top rank is that we did not have other choices other than studying hard."
> "We did not have other alternatives; we had only the choice to finish our schooling."
> "We blind people cannot be a labourer."
> "There is no welfare" (in Ethiopia).
> "We blind people cannot be a driver of trucks or taxis if we do not get our education."
> "There are a lot of disabled people in Ethiopia who did not have this opportunity … they are beggars. They are a little better than the dead people; they do not have hope at all."
> "Because we had only one choice, we had determination to achieve high in schooling."

The participants strove to do well academically despite lack of material resources. Difficulty taught them a lesson: how to overcome problems. Participants said:

> "Lack of Braille materials was the only challenge when I was staying in school."
> "We had to work hard to meet those challenges. That is why I accomplished much."
> "That material lack helped me to push myself, to study hard to reach my goal."
> "There were not many books in Braille or on audiotape in university."
> "Difficulty teaches us …how to overcome problems."

> "We had a lack of Braille materials, but due to the school staff and friend's assistance, I and my blind friend were doing well. My sighted friends were coming to me to tutor them."

Blind participants told me during interviews that during their education, because of their achievements they became a role model to sighted students and to younger blind students. They said:

> "The teacher believed that we (blind students) were the only ones who could pass the university entrance exam."
> "The teacher said to the sighted students, "You fool around and you go shopping to choose good clothing, and you don't do the work. You don't have a chance of passing the (university) entrance exam"."
> "I was one of the first few blind people to go to that university."
> "We opened the door for other blind people."
> "I was not only recognized within the blind community. I was also respected within the General Wingate High School with a 4A rank."
> "No blind student (except me) took a math degree when I was in university at that time."
> "I completed the university degree."
> "My goals were achieved when I graduated with distinction."
> "The first blind people who graduated became a role model … to society once the blind people got the jobs."

During interviews, the blind participants told me that their high academic achievement had led to employment, independence, and the potential to become married and support a family, when they resided in Ethiopia. They said:

> "I had two jobs."
> "As soon as I finished my education, I was employed."
> "When any blind students were taught in Education in Ethiopia, the Ministry of Education hired them back after their graduation."
> "(In Ethiopia) once a person is educated, they get a job."
> "Back home, no matter what a person's disability, once they are educated they will get a job."
> "It was not difficult to get a job once the authorities knew what we could do."
> "I married."
> "The woman I was dating, she became my wife."
> "I was independent and I had everything when I was in my former home … we had a maid … we were both working."
> "I started to support myself and my family. I was a diligent worker. I was respected by my colleagues."

Metatheme: Ethiopian Expectations About a Blind Child or Student

The participants spoke about two types of expectations in Ethiopia when a child becomes blind. A parent might choose to send their child to a church school to become a '*deftera*' or a '*fukura*' (person educated in spiritual wisdom), if he is male. *Defteras* (Christian) or *fukuras* (Muslim) have social prestige, and they teach religious education. but that social role only enables a person to live at a subsistence level. Females, and people who did not become a *deftera* or *fukura*, have no way to even minimally support themselves. The second choice for parents is to put their child into a boarding school for the blind. It is a regular school, not a spiritual school run by the church. Those blind students will now have the same prospects as their blind role models and the same prospects as a sighted person. It takes awhile, and it takes energy. Some parents do not know about the schools, and their male child will at best become a *deftera*. Those who know about the schools will put their blind child into a boarding school and then their children have the opportunity to be like their blind role models in the future. They can achieve independence and a career, similarly to sighted students.

A blind child will believe and expect what the parents expect. However, when they are in the school, then they gain hope. When I first went blind, my mother despaired, and she questioned why God had done that. She worried that I would be a beggar, or be a deftera and teach the sighted children to memorize the Bible stories, for which I would be paid in goods, such as grain, chicken, or lamb. Then I went to the boarding school, and when a teacher drove me home for vacation, my mother saw me arrive in the village. She heard me interpret for the teacher, speaking English, and she was amazed. My mother said, "My son, you will become a lamp to your country." Her hopes had radically changed. It shows that my mom really was now convinced that a good decision had been made. Any blind person's parents might go through the same process of initial despair, then come to see that there is hope, and then come to have better expectations of what the future will be for their blind child. That is the experience of my blind participants, as well. When my father saw me completing middle school, he made a prophesy. His expectations of me had also changed since I went to the boarding school. He said, "You will be a teacher. You will go to a 'white' country. You will be educated there. You will have a family and a good life."

When a blind student is surrounded by such hopeful expectations, it helps them to push themselves to their limits, to open unknown doors, to work hard to fulfill their dreams despite obstacles. The participants' stories told of such expectations. The blind participants became high achievers partly because of the hopeful expectations of their teachers, their parents and themselves. When they arrived in Canada, they no longer were surrounded by the hopeful expectations of the community or of society in general.

In regard to family and community expectations about a blind child, participants told me:

> "I became blind. All my neighbours and family knew that terrible things had happened in our family."
> " I remember that time. I was in early childhood. The people said, "That's the end of his life!" They said it because they believed that I could not do anything. This attitude was not only among my close family ties. All the villagers believed that I could not do anything."
> "My family discovered that they could not do anything to heal the blindness. My family sent me to church school … to study the Bible. They sent me to school to become a "deftera".
> ""By going to the church school, he can teach people. By going to school, he can teach the Bible study", they thought."

> "My family didn't want to see me doing nothing every day at home. Instead, they would send me to the church school. Later, I entered the school for the blind."

My blind participants told me that upon entering a school for the blind, they began to have positive expectations of their own ability and their future. They gained hope from the people around them, including other students and blind role models, as well as school staff and people in their communities.

> "I entered the school for the blind. I saw the experience of other blind people in school. When I saw other blind people, then blindness was really nothing to me. Blindness was easy."
> "I got my education from grade one to grade six … in the school for the blind. It was a boarding school. During that time in boarding school, I obtained all the necessary education (for my future)."

Some of the blind participants spoke of entering high schools where the teachers had not taught blind students in the past. The teachers and other students soon learned that the blind students were very capable. Participants said:

> "We entered the integrated public high school in grade 7. We were with the sighted students."
> "I remember the first time when I entered high school. The teacher, the students, the whole school were not sure how far we could go and how far we could learn."
> "Then they (teachers and students) began to see that I could do more. They accepted me as 'a blind'. They accepted me as a student."

Blind participants had worked hard in boarding school to be able to go to high school, and expected high school to be challenging and difficult. Instead, they found out that they had a good foundation of knowledge and were capable of working hard and achieving high grades. Their expectations of their abilities and their future became more positive. They gained confidence. During the interviews, blind participants told me:

> "I was one of the top students (in high school). I thought everything is possible. I had the belief that blindness is nothing, to me.
> "All the sighted friends were depending on me … and on the other blind people in high school."

> "The environment in the boarding school made a huge impact on my life, my education, my social activity and my perception. The sighted people were dependent on us for education in the integrated high school. Personally, it didn't take me that much to adjust with the sighted people."

The participants remember that back in their home communities expectations of blind students were rising as the students progressed through their academic education. The blind students were respected because of their education.

> "I went to visit my family in the rural area. The people's reception toward me was changed in the rural area when I came back."
> "I came from the city. I had an education. I went back after being away for 7 or 8 years at the school. All their perception was changed."
> "When you advance your education, people in my country believe you are an extraordinary person. Here, people don't recognize your achievements."

In boarding school and high school, the blind students learned how to overcome obstacles. The main obstacle they spoke of was lack of material resources, but they learned to use human resources – teachers, sighted students, and each other – to help themselves persist in achieving their education. Concerning lack of resources, participants said,

> "There was no curriculum set up for blind or disabled people in my whole education."
> "The lack of curriculum and Braille materials were challenges during my education years. There were no materials for writing in Braille. There were no tape recorders for taping lectures in junior secondary and high school. Even if you had a tape recorder, you would not be allowed to tape the lectures. The teachers were not comfortable with being taped during lectures." (Note: this occurred for political reasons).

Blind students overcame the lack of material resources and specific curriculum for blind students by persistence, hard work, and using "human" resources instead of material resources. The participants remembered:

> "Despite lacking of materials, teachers and the school environment were favourable for the blind or disabled students. Everybody was willing to help."

> "There was no specific department set up to help blind or disabled people. The people were kind and willing to help the blind students. The societal or environmental support was favourable to blind students. The teacher and the director, they all worked for you. The teachers helped you scribing your exam. The teachers helped you a lot."
> "We didn't have enough resources. I realize it now. There was no computer. There was no Braille books. There was no tape recorder. The only things we had were a slate and a stylus. That was not enough. We had a lack of Braille paper."
> "By lacking those things, it was a hindrance to our accomplishments and our education. The curriculum was not ready for us. To some extent, we were depending on the sighted students and the teachers."
> "The sighted students were dependent on us. We were dependent on them to read to us from the curriculum book and from the black board. The teachers themselves were dependent on us (to help)."
> "There was one thing that I can tell you. We didn't want to show them up. We were dependent on them. I guess there was a mutual dependence. I'm not sure if the sighted people recognized the mutual dependence but there was a mutual dependence."
> "They (teachers, students, and staff) treated us as the people who know everything."
> "The sighted students would honour and respect us blind students."
> "We five blind people were the only high school students who passed the entrance exam and went to the university. What I learned from that experience is that once people know you, and what you can do, then it is a piece of cake."
> "Like rumors, everyone passes it to everyone. Then everyone believed that the blind people are intelligent. Even if you *don't* know something, they *believe* that you know."
> "When there was a social problem, the students came to us for advice. At an early age, I and the other blind people were acting as elders."
> "I and my friends finished grade twelve successfully. (There) were five 'blinds' in the class. We ranked first, second, third, fourth and fifth in the class. Being in the top rank, the teacher believed that we were the only ones who could pass the university entrance exam."
> "In our society, seeing a blind person educated that far, they think we must be exceptional."
> "We blind were respected because we were educated."
> "When you advance your education, people in my country believe you know everything."

Data from the interviews showed that it was very important for blind students to learn how to negotiate the social system, make friends and allies and be a friend, in high school and college. Participants said,

> "The system doesn't come to you. You have to work hard to enter to that system. In the country where I grew up that's what it is. You have to push. You have to be a diplomat. You have to work hard. You have to make friends."
> "You have to make allies. If you don't do this, you lose everything."
> "In Ethiopia, all 'blinds' know we have to do this (make friends and allies) in order to survive. All 'blinds' know we have to share our notes."

Blind participants remembered that the blind students learned that it was important and beneficial to support and rely on each other.

> "In our country, volunteering is not common. Instead of volunteering, when the blind people got together, we shared what we learned."
> "We discussed it and we talked about it. This was our daily activity."
> "We discussed what happens in class."
> "We shared everything (that we were learning). There were no secrets among us."
> "We accomplished so much. The other blind students were role models."

The blind participants spoke of role models who were respected for their education and achievements. They were influenced by having blind role models when achieving their education in Ethiopia.

> "In the country where I grew up the educated people think even that way. In the country where I grew up, the people respect disabled educated people."
> "We blind people have role models."
> "The prominent teacher who is here in Canada is one of our role models from back when I was in school."
> "Bahru Tafla, a professor and historian who teaches in Germany, is an Ethiopian blind model person as well."
> "There was a blind musician, whom we knew."
> "We knew of a blind musician who also was a role model for us."
> "We were assuming and were thinking, at an early age, that we could become just like our role models."
> "There are disabled people, whom we don't know, who have accomplished much. Those people whom we don't know could become our role models."
> "We didn't know Helen Keller or Stevie Wonder. They are a role model for all 'blinds'."
> "I think that having a role model makes a huge difference in our lives."
> "When sighted people know those role models whom we knew, then they think that we blind students have the same talents."

Expectations of blind students included that – like anyone else in society – they could be dating in high school or university.

> "I personally had a chance for dating."
> "I remember the first time, my girlfriend had a hard time going to a public place with me. She thought people might think that she is different. People were staring at her."
> "She is brilliant. We got acquainted really well. She didn't have any problem with me. We used to go to theatre places together. We used to go to parties together."

The data from interviews showed that as blind participants achieved their academic education in Ethiopia, they began to realize that, as they entered a career, they would have an obligation to help their parents and extended family. They acknowledged the help their parents had given them. As time passed, the blind students developed the expectation that they could and would achieve not only economic independence, but the ability to take on responsibility to help their family. Participants remembered:

> "At first, my professors were not helping me very much. Once the professors knew me, they became quite helpful. I think this gave me "shekim": a burden to help my family. When I accomplished my university degree, I knew it was a burden for me to help my family."
> "I got a job, as soon as I finished my schooling. I worked. I started to support myself and my family."
> "My parents did this, beyond what they can do. I have to give my parents respect. That is why I told you that I have a burden to help my family. They were poor and uneducated. I was now educated."

Metatheme: Persistence and Perseverance

The blind participants told me during interviews that, despite the lack of school materials, they had goals in their minds when they were young students. They were seeing the role models, blind people who accomplished much. They were all being told that they had no alternative but to study hard because otherwise they would become a beggar. They believed that to be true. This has also been my own school experience. The blind participants became persistent in sticking to their goals despite hardships. They became high achievers and they succeeded in the end. In their home country, they became educated, respected in their communities, had the opportunity to marry, and they all became employed in their professions.

One participant told me, "On the University Entrance exam, I scored a 4. A "4" on my exam means that I had an "A" in everything. From grade 9 to grade 12, I stood in the first rank. I scored even better than people who had enough materials, who could go to the library, who could read the books. The biggest secret of my achievement was my persistence. The biggest secret of my achievement was having the strong desire to accomplish my education."

Other blind participants also believed that persistence in overcoming challenges led to their success. They said,

> "Despite the material lacks, I did not have any problem achieving what I wanted to achieve. That (material) lack helped me to push myself, to study hard to achieve and reach my goal."
>
> "Lack of Braille materials was not the only challenge when I was in school. I had to work hard in order to meet those challenges. That is why I accomplished so much."
>
> "I was a punctual and diligent worker when I was working in my former country. If there is a will, there is a way."
>
> "While I was in university I had a job. I was working at the same time that I was taking the university education. I became a teacher when I was a university student. Many of my friends told me that I could not do the teaching job at the same time as the university education. I did not listen to their advice, and I did the job at the same time as I was getting my education."
>
> "I was determined and motivated to help my family. Wanting to help my family gave me the motivation that caused me to start working. Also, I was motivated to help myself."
>
> "My job was 45 kilometers away from the university … 45 kilometers is quite far in that part of the world with no good transportation. In the 4th year of my university education, I had a second music-teaching job. When I realize now what I did, it was good for me. For that short term, I was pushing myself."
>
> "Eventually I completed the university degree, and I am proud of what I did at this time. I believe this was one of my big achievements. Going to school, doing the university work, teaching music, and teaching in the school (all that the same time) is one of my big achievements."

The blind participants continued with persistence and perseverance toward achieving their goals after they immigrated to Canada. They said,

> "I immigrated to Canada. I had a hard time when I first came here. I was nervous. I had culture shock. I had lost my family by coming here. Although I came with my brothers and sisters, still it is challenging to be in Canada. Despite these problems I am managing to adjust to the customs and to the new culture. Being persistent helped me to adjust to the new country."
>
> "I have just finished my schooling recently. Disabled or blind in this country are not encouraged to look for work. A lot of visually impaired and disabled people are unemployed. It will be discouraging. I will be persistent. I will keep applying for a position."

Participants told me that persistence means not giving up, and it means working hard and finding strategies. They said,

> "Despite the stresses, you should not give up! You have to be patient. I am really patient, despite the hardship. Don't give up. Find other ways to learn. If you fail one way, try to find other ways to succeed."
>
> "Whether or not you are disabled, there are problems. Just challenge them as they come. I am strong. When you have problems, you have got to deal with the problems, and solve them as they arise."
>
> "The system doesn't come to you. You have to work hard to enter that system. In the country where I grew up that's what it is. You have to push. You have to be a diplomat. You have to work hard. You have to make friends. You have to make allies. If you don't do this, you lose everything. In Ethiopia, all blinds know we have to do this in order to survive."

Participants spoke of persistence in finding employment in Canada, and in changing Canadian society in regard to how disabled people are viewed.

> "All disabled people need to work hard to educate the society. We have to be vocal. We have to push. We are in a democratic country. We have to educate Canadians."
>
> "Disabled people need to push the employers; they need to push society. They need to make society aware of what they can do. Canadian disabled people should be required to make a contribution to their country."
>
> "I will continue to look for a job in the future. I will be persistent in looking for a job. I will persevere in teaching awareness to employers. I will not stop looking for employment."

In the end, the blind students learned persistence and perseverance because of the challenges they overcame in Ethiopia. As one participant told me, "Difficulty teaches us to conquer problems. This is one of the reasons why we Ethiopian blind accomplished so much. This is the reason why I and other Ethiopian blind became high achievers."

Metatheme: Personal and Family Strengths

In this section, I will provide examples of various personal and family strengths found in the data from interviews. Blind and sighted participants spoke of strengths such as support, mutual respect, and good and honest communication. Such strengths help participants to face the challenges of living in a new land and culture and help the family to face economic hardship.

The following story told by a participant shows that his family had strengths such as a sense of humour and openness to change. Such strengths, in addition to the social support of a host family, helped the participant and his partner with their transition to a new and very different culture than their own.

> "… when I came here. An immigration officer and the host family were waiting for me at the airport. Immediately when they saw me, they said, "Oh, the people who are going to Kitchener are here!" We didn't know what town we were going to, and we misunderstood, and thought they said "kitchen". (He laughs). We thought they would take us to a house where they cook things … that was a fun time.
>
> "Anyway, after I entered Canada and fulfilled all the immigration process, then I went to Kitchener. Since then, the host family helped me in every area that I wanted. They showed me a place to stay and they showed me the food stores. Because of this host family, I did not have a problem. I can say it was a smooth transition."

Humour. Humour was a strength for other participants as well. One told about the time when she was a young woman making the decision to marry her husband, saying, "And the other reason why I was comfortable (about choosing to marry him) is that because he is blind, he is not going to look at another woman, so I was comfortable! He would not leave me, later on." Another participant humourously described the gender role changes that have occurred in his family since immigrating to Canada:

> "I had a joke. I used this joke when I was at home and I use it here. When I was in Ethiopia, I assumed I was the President of my family. So, you know, when I was in Ethiopia I was the President of my family, but here my wife is the Prime Minister of my family. Here, now in Canadian terms, I am the Governor General and she is the Prime Minister. My role within the family is ceremonial now (a figurehead, without real power). She does everything and she has the social network. Within the house, she is the one who manages everything. Even when she goes to funerals, she represents our household. More or less, she does all the jobs. She does everything.
>
> "When there are guests, when they come home to our place, I am the one to greet them and this is a ceremonial thing. And also, people call my children, my family by my last name, and that is ceremonial. It is not only because of being blind, but I am kind of naturally lazy within my family, so I thank my wife and children."

Knowing each other very well. The blind participants who were married spoke often of how their partners knew them very well and knew their abilities. Because the partners knew their blind spouse's abilities, they did not blame them for their unemployment. Knowing each other very well was a strength in the marriage and it helped the partners maintain their relationship as they faced obstacles.

> "We were friends before we married. We married … back home. She is well-educated. She knows me, and what I can do and what I cannot do. So, when I came to this country, seeing me being unemployed …(she understood). It didn't surprise her. She herself is not able to work in her former profession, and is doing housekeeping instead. That is a stress on her."
>
> "I told you earlier that I met my wife when I was dating. … It is not the traditional marriage and traditional family arrangement that we knew. My marriage is not traditional."

Respect for the blind educated partner's capability, by knowing each other well. Sighted participants also spoke of knowing their partner very well.

> "Before I married him, we tried to know each other very well. After we knew each other, I decided to marry him."
>
> "And this long-time acquaintance helped me to get to know him very well. And we fell in love with each other."
>
> "You do not measure a human being based on his looks, you measure him based on his intelligence capacity. That's how I made the decision to marry him."
>
> "Before I married him … I didn't have any feeling about my husband being blind, because you measure people by their action, not by their looks. So it doesn't make a difference."
>
> "He lost his physical sight only. But, his mind is bright. He can see with his mind. So, I don't see my husband as being a blind person, because "blind" to me means a person who doesn't do anything. So, there are a lot of people who can see but they don't do anything. But for him, even though he lost his sight, he can do anything! So, what is being "blind"? His physical blindness is nothing to me!"
>
> "His disability is meaningless for me because his actions, his activity, are the only important thing for me. His actions, his activity, his intelligence, are more than (the abilities of) the able bodied. For this reason, I saw him as being equal with the sighted people, and even, he is beyond them. And knowing this, I was comfortable marrying him and I decided to marry him."
>
> "Also, my husband is not less than the sighted people."
>
> "As I said earlier, he is a way better than his friends, and because of that, I am proud of him."
>
> ""*When a rose grows in front of grasses, you can distinguish the rose from afar"* (an Ethiopian saying). And the blind person is like that within our family, to us."

Mutual respect and support. A sighted participant verified what the blind participants were saying about the strengths they had developed in their marriages. Like the blind participants, she spoke of the mutual respect and support which helped the partners to face daily difficulties.

> "You know, Abebe, money is nothing for us. The most important (thing) is understanding each other. We have excellent communication. Every day, we help each other in all difficulties we encounter. My husband was working when he was back home."

Communication. Another blind participant also spoke about his partner knowing him very well, and respects his ability. He added that they have developed good, honest communication between the two of them. They give each other support that helps them to face the daily challenges. He said,

> "She knows my skills. She knows how I am a diligent worker. I think what we have here, between me and her, is that we have good communication. We communicate with honesty, every day. We share our frustration. We support each other every day".

Regarding good communication, mutual respect, and support, other participants had this to say:

> "We had really good communication, before, and we still do now."
>
> "Communication is one of the ways that helps us to manage. We always are happy and we have good communication within our family."
>
> "And every day we compliment each other."

One sighted participant urges other immigrant families to develop their communication skills within the family. She has found good communication to be a strength that has helped her family to stay together and face hardship.

> "I and my husband had good communication. Every day we talked about the situation. And by doing that our relationship was strengthened.
>
> "And I believe other families with a similar situation should do the same thing. Don't hold worries or stresses for a long time; talk about it. Don't hold any anger, frustration or misunderstanding. Don't hold it! If you hold those things, you will get a disease. And you will have conflict as well.
>
> "It is similar to cancer. When you have got a cancer, if you don't cure it in the beginning, it spreads all over your body. And when you have a stress and the stress builds, it is the same thing. And this is exactly the same thing. You have got to cure it in the beginning. You have got to treat it in the beginning. And if it spreads, it would be really difficult to treat it and you cannot cure it or treat it. I think about family stress this way, as I said in the example. I would advise everyone to treat stress this way."

Activism to raise awareness and create respect. Sighted partners respect their blind partners, and blind participants were able to tell stories of how a wife would be an activist, and demand that others also treat her partner with the respect that he deserves.

> "When I go to places, people say to a blind person, "Sit down, sit there." (The blind person does not know where the person is pointing). "But my wife,

> she takes my hand and shows me a chair, or she gives a tap signal on the chair. I have a lot of respect for her. If I did not have my wife beside me, I would be in different shape (not doing well).
>
> "Let me tell you something here. I will give you an example. She introduces herself to people as my wife. Then, people stare, and she says, "You should shake his hand. Why are you staring?" She challenges people as far as this. She does this every day. She is a good supporter."

A sighted participant verified what blind participants had said. She said:

> "I have observed in the years since I came here that when someone is saying "Hi" from across the street with their eyes or body language, then they are saying it to me and they are not including him, and I feel bad. And they should say "Hi" with their voice.
>
> "Even, sometimes, when we go together shopping, instead of talking to him the store clerks talk to me. And I always get angry, and I say, "Talk to him, don't talk to me!" They don't get it, they don't understand that!
>
> And also, some people talk to him loudly as if he is deaf or has a hearing impairment. And I say to them, "My husband is not deaf! He is blind." They don't understand."

Maintaining the respect of outsiders for one's partner and marriage. One participant provided a practical example of a way that his wife is supportive despite economic stress that results in family arguments. She maintains the respect of outsiders for him and for their marriage. He is grateful that she supports him in this way. He said,

> "The other strength my wife has is that when she talks with her friends about me, she never mentions our arguments. Always, she talks of our strengths and of my achievements. Thanks to her. This is our biggest strength, as I said."

When the participant said this, I thought about a proverb that we have in Ethiopia. "Brle keneka, ayhonm eka" - "Once the goblet is cracked, it's finished." The "brle" is a special glass, brought out for respected people only on special occasions, to drink a special honey ale called "tej". One has to take care not to let the glass be cracked. The fact that it is a special goblet mirrors the respect in which partners are held in the marriage, in this situation. If a spouse let other people know of the family arguments, there would be gossiping, and one cannot take words back, once they are said. By being supportive and not discussing the family argument with others, the spouse makes sure her marriage and her partner are kept safely intact from the damage of gossip and criticism.

Respect and equality in the relationship. There is an Ethiopian proverb that says that "a husband and wife are two faces of one coin." They might each be unique and different, but the "coin", the marriage, cannot exist without both of them being present and united.

> "When I married a blind person, I loved him and I saw him as equal. He was a brilliant man. We were friends. It is unusual in our situation; most of the people in my home country, they got married by a family arrangement, but we were not. We knew each other, so there is no problem with marrying him. It does not matter whether he was blind or not. He is equal; in fact, he is better than the sighted people, even."
>
> "Also I respect him and he respects me as well. This was my expectation when I decided to marry him. So, my expectation is 100 % fulfilled."
>
> "Everyone is equal under God. And also, everyone should be equal. I see him equal with the other, sighted, people, so there is nothing to worry about or to be ashamed of about him. I respect him a lot and he respects me and that is what matters, for us."

Mutual empathy and caring. Partners of educated blind immigrants spoke of feeling empathy and providing their support and caring during the stress and hardships of long term unemployment. They said,

> "When the blind person did not get a job in a timely manner, quickly, then the family is affected. Within the family, they know the family that the disabled person is intelligent, he is even more intelligent than them. And they see him even as a jewelry. But when other people see him as worthless, that makes me sad, and that even makes me angry."
>
> "When I saw him going for different interviews and not getting a job, I felt bad. I thought that in this country he should find a job."
>
> "But he didn't get a job. It is terribly sad."
>
> "(Being unemployed long term) is wasting his time and energy. That is tough for him, so I have to encourage him every day. One day, he might get a job."
>
> "Now my husband has high blood pressure. I believe this is stress related. He didn't have high blood pressure when he was at home. I give the best care for him. It is not enough. I cannot *be* him."
>
> "We support each other. I worry for him because he is always at home.

I do not want to leave him home alone when I go to work."

The blind participants spoke as well about giving and receiving caring and support within their family.

> "We have good support from each other. When I was in hospital, my wife used to come every day. She even quit her job, and she was beside me every day. So, I am grateful to my wife. She thinks about me a lot. I believe that is our strength."
>
> "Indeed, I am not a breadwinner of our household, but I am a supporter. I encourage everyone around me. I support my family as much as I can."
>
> "My wife always encourages me, in everything that I do. And always she is telling me how much I changed her life for good. And I do the same thing for my family."

Blind participants provide practical support to their families during long term unemployment by taking on unfamiliar household tasks.

> "Indeed, I am not a breadwinner of our household, but I am a supporter. I encourage everyone around me. I support my family as much as I can."
>
> "My husband helps me at home. He does the dishes. He makes the bed. He is a good cook."
>
> "He does all the housework. When we were back home, we had a maid. So, everything was done by the maid. But here, we help each other. Here, (Canada) we have peace in our home. We have got that."
>
> "While I am working, he does all the housework. He cooks the food, he does the vacuuming, the laundry, and he changes diapers for my child. When I come home, the only thing I have to do is to sit at the dining table and eat my food. So my husband is everything for me, and without him I could not do my job."

Maintaining the marriage despite challenges. During an interview, one blind participant said, "I didn't come as an economic refugee. I had everything when I was at my previous home (Ethiopia). When my wife and my children came here first, then I joined them. I reunited with my family." He risked his career and economic independence by leaving Ethiopia to come to Canada. He was willing to start over. His sacrifice was a result of valuing his marriage and family more highly than the career and independence he had achieved in Ethiopia.

One blind participant acknowledges and values that his family is still persistently struggling to stay together despite the economic challenges that they face because of his unemployment. He and his partner remain grateful for what they do have. He said,

> "You know, if I was working, I wouldn't have these arguments with my wife or with my family. I have to give credit to my family that we are keeping together despite our stress related argument. Always, when I am angry or stressed I think to split up with my family and live by myself. (Yet) I know, to split up would not give me a real healing to my stress. I would still be unemployed."

He added,

> "We all understand this situation. We believe that if I was employed, I wouldn't have these family arguments with my immediate family members. I work around the house. I prepare the meal before she comes. I support her when she comes home. We thank God for what we have. Even though we don't have money and we don't have the luxurious things that other people could have, but at least we can say thank you for what we have."

Another participant spoke of the value for her in keeping her marriage together.

> "When I first came to Canada, I was worried. I was not sure … what I was going to do, even. For sure, when we came to Canada, we found that the city was clean and everybody was speaking English, as I expected. There is a lot of technological advancement. But the way the people think, I found it is not the way I expected them to be. … I was missing my friends, my family, and missing my home country. But the good thing is that I am really proud of myself that I am always beside my husband, even in another country, and that makes me happy, and (makes life) worthwhile."

To conclude, one sighted participant summarized her family's many strengths in her own words. She made it clear that she cherishes her husband and children.

> "The strengths I have within my family are: I love my husband, and I love him more than myself. I love my children more than myself. And this is our biggest strength.
>
> "When there is misunderstanding, immediately I talk about it.
>
> "Because I love them more than myself, I don't want other people to look at my husband or my children; I'm jealous! This is my strength. I am selfish! Selfishness is my strength. So, love for my husband and my children is our strength.
>
> "Another strength is that we trust each other. And other families need to have trust as well.

> "My husband doesn't go to bars. He doesn't get drunk. So that is one of the strengths he has." She concluded by saying,
>
> "This is what it should be. Men and women should be equal. This is what God loves and this is what people cherish, and this is an honest thing."

Metatheme: Importance of Advocacy

The interviews with my participants revealed that after fulfilling the immigration criteria and coming to Canada, the blind participants and the participants who were their partners found that their expectations to become employed were not fulfilled. Then the blind participants sought help by going to various employment agencies and to their surprise, there was still no job. They told me that, in their experience, no one was advocating on behalf of finding employment for the blind. At the same time, the sighted partners of the blind participants, instead of depending on social assistance, were finding work in lower status, low paid jobs, despite their own former professions.

The blind participants had had respected careers because of their education and they felt much responsibility to try to support the family in the way that they had before. It became their dream to do so once again. In order to fulfill their goal of independence and ability to support their family, all participants underlined the importance of advocacy in their new homeland.

All participants talked to me about the importance for all employment agencies to have advocates to work on behalf of blind job applicants, because most employers are not aware of the capability of blind educated prospective employees. One participant's story of his experience with a Canadian employment agency was very typical of the experiences of all the blind educated participants. He said,

> "I went to JVS, the Jewish Vocational Services, for a year. After a year, they told me to work as a "job shadow". I was doing photocopying, faxing,

> greeting people, writing about new clients. I had an evaluation every week about my performance. The company said that I was overqualified for that job. When I was sending a fax, the company said I was overqualified. How could they, for Heaven's sake, say that I was overqualified for sending a fax? It doesn't make sense, when they say you are overqualified for photocopying, for writing a client's data, for sending a fax. They say you are overqualified, and still they are not getting you a job.
>
> "Because of that experience, I quit after I went to JVS for a year. All in all, JVS treated me badly. I had a degree, and I had a community services worker diploma, but they asked me to do really minimal things. And the job shadowing work was volunteer work. I was not getting paid.
>
> "… The JVS makes huge money from the government. For me there was no result, no job, nothing. They said, *in words*, "You are brilliant and excellent", yet *in practice* that is not how they treated me. I believe they did not say, "You are brilliant and excellent" with honesty. If they were honest about "brilliant and excellent", what would be the problem for employers, in hiring me? I believe employers could hire me, if JVS were being honest."

The participant stated that he believes the real reasons why he was not finding employment are based on triple jeopardy, and in particular, ablism. He said,

> "I have so many reasons why I think the employers did not hire me. Because I was blind, because I came from another country, because I am black, I believe these and other factors may be why I did not get a job.
>
> "There was one staff person. I can still see that person so clearly in my memory exactly. He was not willing to help me. I believe that person didn't want to see me in an office, working. Despite that, I cannot say that all employers share his attitude."

Employment agencies need to be advocates for the blind clients, said participants, rather than taking the government's funding without helping clients. The situation should be investigated by the government.

> "The employment agencies are getting money from the government. They push blind and disabled people to come to their office for an indefinite time. If we don't go there, the employment agencies won't get their government budget. This is a ridiculous system you have here. The government needs to investigate the situation. The government needs to investigate what is going on with the employment agencies."
>
> "The government needs to work with agencies for the blind and with other educational institutes to *raise public awareness* about blindness. The government should set up an educational program to deal with this issue."

During interviews, participants told me that employers in general think that "everything is done by the CNIB". One participant said,

> "Every time I applied for employment, the employers asked us: "Have you contacted the CNIB?" Why doesn't the CNIB help you? They link us with the CNIB. That is really difficult. They think that the CNIB should do everything for the blind. They shouldn't link us with an organization by virtue of being blind. When they do this, and link us with this organization, this is a bias. They think that everything is done by the CNIB. They don't know that the CNIB has a limited capacity. CNIB doesn't find jobs for all the blind people."

Other agencies which are set up to assist people with disabilities were also critiqued for lack of awareness by my participants, based on their experience. For example, one participant said,

> "The people at the Accessibility Services at the University of ----- don't have a special commitment for the well-being of the blind students. I never saw any commitment from the people I knew who were working at the Accessibility Services. Their commitment was less than my expectation. I am assuming it was because of a lack of awareness. They are working there but they are only interested in and caring about their pay cheques. They do not care for the other people."

Participants spoke of the need for organizations for people with a disability to be activists for them, and of the need for advocates who would raise awareness of the capabilities of blind people.

> "All the concerned disability organizations need to have awareness, to work on awareness, not only for the employers but for the general society as well."
> "(Disability organizations) need to be open, and to raise awareness of what we disabled people can do."
> "(Organizations) should use highly accomplished blind people and disabled people as an example. Raising awareness about what disabled people can do will help society learn. Then as a result, disabled people can have the opportunity to work."
> "All the agencies that "serve" the disabled have a responsibility to act on this."

Participants spoke also about the need for advocacy by blind people themselves, whether they are immigrants or Canadian-born.

> "The disabled people themselves are not pushing that much in Canada."
> "There are a lot of blind teachers in Ethiopia. The blind are taking the authority, the ownership, of teaching awareness to society. The blind people have to act on it."
> "In this country, I think the most important thing that is being missed is that the blind people need to fight and to take ownership of the whole issue."
> "Canadian blind (people) need to have a strong common front. Canadian blind need strong organization OF the blind, not FOR the blind."
> "The problem is not the funding…. The problem is, the government and the organizations for the blind are not allowing the blind people to take hold of the problem."
> "The American Disability Act has done a lot of good things for the American blind consumers. This happened because the initiative was first taken by the blind community."
> "The difference is that the CNIB was first started for blind war veterans. Most of the war veterans spent their life up to adulthood as sighted people. When the CNIB was created, it was dealing with people who used to be sighted. The blind person's problems should be dealt with from the perspective of blindness. Blind people need to reorganize themselves."

Metatheme: Unemployment in Canada

All the blind participants were employed in their homeland and when they came here to Canada they entered a long period of unemployment. All of them experienced stress, and some of them became ill from the severe stress of their experiences with unemployment in Canada. They never expected that when they came here they would remain unemployed for so many years despite their academic education and professional career experience. They were saddened that their families had to experience economic hardships because of the blind person's long term unemployment.

Many immigrants are forced to take menial, entry-level employment positions when they first come to Canada. The blind participants felt frustrated because even minimum-wage, laborer-type positions are closed to them, leaving them with no options but unemployment and social assistance. They said,

> "In Ethiopia or Canada, sighted people can do the dirty jobs. Blind people, we can't do those dirty jobs".
>
> "I am not like a sighted person, able to get work experience in MacDonald's."
>
> "If I were not 'a blind', I could drive a taxi. If I were not 'a blind', I have two Masters Degrees and I could do a way better job than driving a taxi. I didn't have that alternative of working as a taxi driver. I knew I didn't have that alternative, after I immigrated to this country."

Blind and sighted participants spoke of more than frustration; they have sometimes felt huge stress and even despair.

> "My husband does not have peace of mind because he doesn't have a job. I hope that one day my husband is employed."
>
> "I see this problem among new immigrant disabled people. I know so many disabled immigrants in a similar situation. The disabled immigrants are in a *desperate* situation."
>
> "They are not getting help. They don't know where to turn."
>
> "A lot of visually impaired and disabled people are unemployed. It is discouraging."
>
> "Finding employment in Canada is really tough and difficult. It was the most challenging part in my life.
>
> "Back home, (Ethiopia) we were supporting our family and we were doing well, but here, we are barely surviving."

Worse yet, one participant reported that he feels ridiculed by the employers. Participants feel the bitter injustice of the situation.

> "When I try telling them how much I have accomplished and asking them to hire me, the employers laugh at me. Always they tell me I cannot be employed. That is a crime. That's unjust."

The employment problems begin on arrival, a time when many immigrants – blind or sighted - discover that their credentials are not recognized in their new country. All six blind participants discovered, after arriving in Canada, that their credentials were not recognized here. One participant described his situation after immigration:

> "After I came here (to Canada), I queried about getting employment based on the education I had brought here (a law degree). I discovered I couldn't get accreditation in Canada. The specialized degree in my country and the same degree here are different. In Canada, the system is based on common law. In

> Ethiopia, the degree was based on the French law system. They were two different systems. They couldn't give me accreditation of that degree. They said the courses were quite different. They told me it was useless.
>
> "They told me to start my education from scratch. I did not have status. I could not pursue my education to study for a law degree. I was not even permitted to take out a student loan at that time. I was disappointed. I knew at that time that I could not be employed in my former profession."

The participants spoke of being told by employers that they need and must have Canadian work experience; otherwise, they will not hire them. "Where am I going to get that work experience if they don't give me a job?" said one frustrated participant. Education can be a drawback when they try to get their foot in the door and get Canadian work experience. When they try to become hired in an entry-level position, sometimes they are told they are overqualified. Participants said,

> "The employers told me that I need Canadian work experience. I have been here for 10 years. I still do not have Canadian work experience. I am trying to find low-paid jobs. The employers see my education, and they think that I am mocking or joking at them."
>
> "The employers are always telling me that I am overqualified for the job. For this reason, I still I am unemployed."
>
> "Some people say that I cannot do the job. Some people say that "you are overqualified." The employers told me so many times."

When participants were advised to get new credentials for their careers, they thought that they would be hired upon graduation. First, they would have Canadian credentials and second, their experience in Ethiopia was that they were hired upon graduation, without any barrier to employment caused by their blindness. Instead, after re-education in Canada, the blind participants still could not gain employment and could not start to have Canadian work experience. One participant spoke of his dilemma:

> "In contrast to my experience in Ethiopia, when I came to Canada and had acquired a Community Service Worker diploma, there was no job. I am still unemployed. I don't know the reason, but every time I apply for a job, I am told that I do not have "*Canadian work experience*". If I had the means to go back to where I came from, my original homeland, I would. However, I lost everything.

> I lost my previous job and my friends. I don't know how I could go back, even if I wanted to. And I don't know how I can convince the Canadian employers to hire me."

Lack of awareness of what people with disabilities are capable of doing is a common barrier in Canada. Lack of awareness of blind people's capabilities prevents employers from allowing immigrants who are blind to access employment and begin to get Canadian work experience. Blind participants said,

> "Before I was employed, the *two biggest challenges* I had were my lack of Canadian work experience, and people who didn't know about working with a disability. They don't know how much a disabled person could work or could accomplish."
>
> "They don't know what kind of job fits for a disabled person. I had a hard time convincing these people to give me an opportunity to get Canadian work experience. That was one big challenge."
>
> "In terms of employment, definitely there are huge barriers. I think this is because of a lack of awareness."
>
> "There is a huge lack of awareness in this country. Canadians need to know that blind people can do a lot of things. They can work equally with the able-bodied. Canadians seem not to know that."
>
> "Canadian society needs to know that blind people can work. Blind can work anywhere that they want to go to work."
>
> "Canadians think disabled people cannot perform their work. Canadians think that way."
>
> "As disabled people, we have one common problem, and that is generalization. If people see one unemployed disabled person, they think all disabled people are unemployed. I think that affects us."

A sighted partner of a blind participant emphatically told me her thoughts about her family's experience with Canadian lack of awareness.

> "Canadians see blind people as more disabled than they are. It should not be like this! It shouldn't! This is a shame.
>
> "Do you know the story of Helen Keller, and Stevie Wonder? You know a lot of blind people who do so many things. All of them are disabled people, themselves, and you know what they have done. I am aware that most of people in society know about those disabled or blind people's story. So why can't they use them as an example?
>
> "It surprises me that people don't understand how much the blind person can do. The people don't understand. They should use Helen Keller and Stevie Wonder as an example.

> "I see this situation affecting the family in two ways. When the blind person did not get a job in a timely manner, then the family is affected. Second, *the family knows* that the disabled person is intelligent. He is even more intelligent than them. They see him even as a jewel. When other people see him as worthless, that makes me sad, and that even makes me angry. I am feeling bad that people do not see him in this way. They do not see his worth."

When blind participants had sought the help of employment agencies, their experience was that the services provided did not lead to employment. They saw a need for government policy which would encourage or motivate employers to hire people who are visually-impaired or blind.

One participant said that,

> "In my experience … there are a lot of employers who don't want to give a disabled or blind person a chance. I think the reason for this is the lack of government organization or the lack of motivation in government policy. There are no agencies that motivate employers to hire disabled people. It should be done.
>
> "There must be special funds, awareness and special services for this project. At the same time, there must be a special fund that can motivate or reward employers who are willing to hire disabled people. The government needs to do a lot of improvement in this area.
>
> "Out of all the resources and skills there are in this really large country, really nothing is being done. The other thing that the government and immigration should recognize is the skill we bring from overseas."

Despite their desire to be independent and self-supporting, all the blind and sighted participants reported that services provided by Canadian employment agencies were of little or no help. Several participants spoke of a need for government policy changes. These two aspects of the participants' experiences are addressed in the sections of this chapter which describe the two metathemes entitled "Participants' experiences accessing help from CNIB and employment agencies" and "Recommended government policy improvements".

Metatheme: Desire to be Independent and Self-supporting

During their education, all the blind participants wanted to achieve independence. They wanted to support themselves and their family, and to contribute to their extended family as well. They wanted to be a taxpayer, a full citizen, and to contribute to their country. They had achieved this goal in their former country. After coming to Canada, to be independent and self-supporting was still their priority. They want to become full citizens in their new homeland.

The one blind participant who had found employment told me how he felt about being employed after experiencing a long period of job-seeking.

> "When I see myself employed and contributing to the country and society, and to myself, this gives me real satisfaction. I am proud of myself. I am very much excited about my accomplishments."

"Canadian disabled people should be required to make a contribution to their country," said one blind participant. "We are able to contribute to our society and to the country that we cherish and respect," said another. Educated blind people are "able", but my participants' experiences and my own experience is that blind people in Canada are not being supported to have the opportunity to contribute to our country.

In Ethiopia, the blind participants had worked hard at school and had successfully become independent and self supporting. They remembered,

> "I got a job, as soon as I finished my schooling. I worked. I started to support myself and my family. I was a diligent worker. I was respected by my colleagues."
>
> "In Ethiopia … there is no social service or welfare system. If we don't learn, and if we don't accomplish what we need to accomplish, there (was) no hope for us other than begging".
>
> "I became employed. I came from a poor family. I started to help my family. That was the biggest accomplishment of my life. I joined the middle class. I became able to help my family and to contribute to my country. For me, that was the biggest satisfaction and accomplishment. "

> "In university … I was awarded a gold medal for my achievement. Blind and sighted young children might use me as a role model. Because of this accomplishment, my own family's attitude was changed. My family began to respect me a lot. I think this gave me "*shekim*": a duty to help my family. When I accomplished my university degree, I knew it was a duty for me to help my family. My parents were farmers. I had to do a lot of things for my parents."

The sighted participants confirmed what the blind participants had said, saying:

> "When we were back home, we both were working … Back home, (Ethiopia) we were supporting our family and we were doing well (there) but here, we are barely surviving."
>
> "He worked hard. We became financially stable."
>
> "He loved his job. He helped his people, his community. And that was my expectation, and indeed, he fulfilled all of this."

One participant said, "I didn't come as an economic refugee." He had been independently providing for himself in the past, saying, "I had everything when I was at my previous home", and he wanted to continue to be independent in Canada.

Like the other blind participants, he was to discover that the Canadian social system did not support his independence. In Canada, the participants' experience was that the social system seemed to have an underlying message: You don't need to be self reliant; you have welfare. The system does not support independence. The participants had known what it was like to achieve their economic and social independence in the past and they did not want to live in poverty and rely on welfare in Canada. They want more.

> "In Ethiopia, there is one thing we blind people knew from our experience. If we don't learn, and if we don't accomplish what we need to accomplish, there is no social service, there is no welfare system, there is no hope. We worked hard and we achieved high because there was no social services or hope if we did not achieve high. I believe that here, that is the difference. Even if you don't go to school, you have that bloody welfare assistance cheque."

One blind participant experienced the support of welfare as being like "spoon feeding", saying,

> "People think that they can hand you a lot of help or assistance here in Canada. To people such as me and others who are like me in similar circumstances, it doesn't mean anything to get handed assistance. Being handed assistance is "spoon-feeding. We don't need that spoon-feeding. We need to be self-reliant."

Despite the apparent easiness of being "spoon-fed" a small income in order to survive, receiving social assistance remains an unpleasant and even humiliating experience for many blind people. As one participant told me, "Depending on social assistance is a horrible experience. Not being able to be self-reliant is depressing." Another participant said,

> "To people such as me and others who are like me in similar circumstances, it doesn't mean anything to get handed assistance.... I need to support them (my family). I need to support myself. I need to be a taxpayer.
>
> "To be a taxpayer is an honorable opportunity."

Blind educated participants were not told before immigrating that their chances of employment were low in Canada. "I didn't know when I came here that I was going to experience being on social assistance (and) that I was not going to be able to be self reliant," one participant told me. Without knowledge of their low chances of employment in Canada, the blind participants were left without the opportunity to consider whether they would choose to immigrate to a country in which their ability would be wasted. Would they have knowingly chosen to immigrate to Canada if they had known that they would have little choice but to live at home, in poverty, receiving social assistance for the rest of their lives instead of using their proven skills?

Social assistance was described as "that bloody welfare assistance cheque" by one participant. Provision of that minimal financial support is part of a social system that does not support self reliance for people who are disabled. Participants spoke about the

Canadian social system and the attitudes which stand in the way of independence for people who are disabled, saying,

> "People in Canada do not help you to become self reliant."
>
> "People in Canada do not help you to become a taxpayer."
>
> "Disabled or blind in this country (Canada) are not encouraged to look for work. A lot of visually impaired and disabled people are unemployed. It is discouraging."

As soon as participants had arrived in Canada, they began to seek work in order to re-establish their independence. One participant remembered,

> "I went to the CNIB. I told the CNIB that I was ready to work in any type of job, anywhere. I told them that I wanted to help myself and my family."

One participant summarized his fifteen year job search experience:

> "Finding employment in Canada is really tough and difficult. It was the most challenging part in my life. I went to a lot of provincial and federal employment agencies … (and yet) it is very difficult to find employment. The employers told me that I need Canadian work experience. I have been here for fifteen years. I still do not have Canadian work experience. I am trying to find low-paid jobs. The employers see my education, and they think that I am mocking or joking at them. The employers are always telling me that I am overqualified for the job. For this reason, I am still unemployed."

Some of the participants have made a choice based on their principles. They have chosen to refuse the social assistance cheque. While the educated blind family member remains at home in Canada, unemployed and seeking work, the sighted partner takes on the low-paid work that most immigrant women are limited to in Canada. They struggle to survive in Canada on one income, an income that possibly is even less than they would receive as welfare recipients. One sighted participant spoke passionately about her family's beliefs:

> "(We don't) like the Canadian welfare system. ... I and my husband would not be on welfare. We prefer to starve and die."

Despite the fact that all but one of my blind participants remains unemployed, they don't give up the struggle for independence in Canada. As one participant said,

> "When I am employed, earning money, I will have freedom. That is the time I would feel I am a success."

Metatheme: Importance of social support network

One of the participants told me that, "if you don't have social connections, you are in a house without windows."

Without social connections, he said, "you are isolated. You cannot progress." Some of the participants are building social support networks for themselves and their family in their neighbourhoods, local communities, and spiritual communities. Some of them gain support from their ethnic community organization and spoke of the importance of keeping their cultural roots.

Only one blind participant was employed. He found a job after several years of job-seeking, and he found it because of social connection with people whom he knew. He did not find the job because of the help of employment agencies; they did not find him any work. It is likely that a sighted person with his career background and his new education in Canada would have found work in less time. In my study, I saw that a social support network is very necessary. It helps blind and sighted immigrant participants with adjusting to the new country, and with issues concerning their children, medical needs, and shopping.

One blind participant told of the challenges she faced when she first arrived in Canada.

> "Due to the political situation back home, I immigrated to Canada. I am not married. I had a hard time when I came here. I was nervous. I had culture

> shock. I lost my family by coming here. Although I came with my brothers and sisters, it is still challenging to be in Canada."

The following quotation tells us that the support of the family members for each other and the support of friends was important to help with culture shock and with the period of adjustment. Her words tell us how very important it can be, to have emotional support within the family and the support and encouragement of friends, when a family immigrates to a new country. She said,

> "We came to Canada together. My husband was not afraid of the new country. He is a brilliant man. The first time I came to the country, I was afraid. I was (culture) shocked. He encouraged me. Our friends also encouraged me as well.
>
> "After that encouragement, I managed well in the new country. When you come to the country for the first time, there are ups and downs in life. I was isolated. I was very far away from my family. I was a little bit lonely. Everyday, he was beside me. He was encouraging me. Now, I am ok. My husband and I are managing well."

Another participant spoke about the social support provided during the initial period of adjustment to a new culture and new homeland. On arrival, the participant was connected with a "host family" for a year, and also found the support of friends.

> "When I came to Canada, I was not surprised that much about the new culture. To speak the English language was not a problem for me. … I had a host family. The host family helped me for a year, and they made a huge difference when I came here.
>
> "The host family helped me with everything: they showed me where to stay, they showed me the food stores, how to get around, how to do laundry, how to cook the new food. The only things I learned about adjusting to the new country I learned from my host family and my other friends."

The blind and sighted participants spoke about giving and receiving emotional support within the family after immigration and during the lengthy period of job search:

> "To see him being unemployed is tough for me and for him. I encourage him every day. I hope for him that he gets a job one day."

> "Always, my wife talks of our strengths and of my achievements. I am not the breadwinner of our household at this time. I am a supporter. I encourage everyone around me. I support my family as much as I can."
>
> "We have a lot of strength. We support each other. I always think of him. He always stays home. He feels sad. I do not want to leave him home alone when I go to work. I support him in any way I can. He is really stressed. In Ethiopia, we were both working. Now, I am the only one who works. I am the only breadwinner. In Ethiopia, we were supporting our family. We were doing well there."

Participants spoke about the social support of people – friends, family and community – as being a resource when they were studying and when they were working in their careers in the past. That is where they had first learned the importance of a social support network.

> "In Ethiopia, the only resource I had was people, and friends. People are my resources. I depend on them."
>
> "In cultural and societal aspects for blind persons, I found Ethiopia is better .... Ethiopians are kind in helping disabled people in any way they can. People where I grew up were willing to sacrifice to help disabled people."
>
> "We blind students had to work many times harder than the average student in Ethiopia. I and my blind friends were not relying on our notes. We had to rely on our friend's notes or other student's notes. We did not have a note-taker or an assigned person to read to us from the blackboard. We depended on our classmates or our teacher's help. We were totally dependent on their willingness to help."
>
> "If there was no willingness to help from these people, then I personally could not be here today."
>
> "I have so much appreciation for my friends and colleagues and the people who worked with me in school. It is because of them that I am here. They were good friends. Without those good friends, our lives, and especially my life, would be in jeopardy."
>
> "There is no alternative to having friends. It is not a matter of choice. It is a matter of necessity."

The participants remain grateful today to their fellow students and their family for the support they were given in the past, and were happy to give back to their family, their friends and their country in return.

> "I (became) employed and contributing to the country and society. My parents, my family and my good friends helped me to achieve all this."

> "My parents did not know what and how much a disabled person could accomplish. They did not have the skills about how to help a disabled person. They lacked knowledge of what a disabled person could do. Yet when they heard about the school for the blind they sent me there. They encouraged me to go there, without knowing how far I could go, and what I could do. Thanks to my parents who created this opportunity."
>
> "Thanks to my friends, who are so important to my life! My friends helped me with all aspects of my education."
>
> "My friends were trying to help me just for the sake of helping me. Later on, when my friends saw how much I was achieving, they started to depend on me. When I saw that my friends were depending on me also, that gave me pleasure."

The participants' families face adjustment to a new culture, long years of struggling to find employment, and the stresses of poverty. Their support for each other did not result in an idealist, happy family where everything is fine and every problem has a happy ending, such as you might see on television. The stress of unemployment and poverty has caused illness within at least three of the participant's families. Some participants admitted that the stress of unemployment has caused family tension and arguments, at times.

One participant gave credit to his family that they remain together as a family unit despite the stresses of lengthy unemployment.

> "I had an argument with my family for not being employed. You know, if I was working, I wouldn't have these arguments with my wife or with my family. My spouse, because of the hardship related to the stress, went to the hospital. Thanks to God, now she is better and we are doing fine. The stress affects all our family. I have to give credit to my family that we are keeping together despite our arguments and stress."

He added that,

> "It is a mystery to me how long we are going to continue to do this. When I am angry or stressed, always I think I am going to split up with my family. I think at that time that I need to live by myself. In reality, to split up would not give me a real healing to my stress. I would still be unemployed.

He spoke of the family's strengths – "good communication" and "understanding" - which have helped them to stay together and be supportive to each other.

> "I think the blind person and their family, even though they have arguments, need to have good communication. Some times, we have really good communication. We discuss the reason why I am unemployed. Because of that understanding, we are able to survive."

Another participant also emphasized that communication is important, and that a new immigrant family needs to talk about the challenges they are facing, remember not to lose hope, and set the goal to educate themselves.

> "When people come to this country, no matter whether they are blind or disabled or any immigrant, first I advise them that the family needs to have good communication. They need to talk about things. Do not be in despair. (And) educate yourself."

One participant said that having a social support network of friends and acquaintances in the community will help an immigrant family with one blind adult member to face the challenges of life in Canada, because it decreases stress, and it helps a person to have a positive outlook.

> "My wife is a way better than me at dealing with stress. She has a good social network. … she is preoccupied with the social network system. My wife has a lot of friends. When you have a lot of friends and are involved in the community, your stress level is decreased. The other aspect is that you are more positive. Being positive decreases the level of stress."

Similarly, a sighted participant married to one of the blind participants told me,

> "You have to socialize. You have to go out. That's what I would advise (a newly-arrived family in a similar situation)."

One participant added that the social support network can connect a person to employment opportunities.

> "Try to find employment. My husband got the job he has because he knows people. So try to know as many people as you can. That's what I can say."

Metatheme: Participants' experiences accessing help from CNIB and employment agencies

Five of my six blind participants had not fulfilled their desire for employment, for the reasons which they describe below. All six of the blind participants have experienced long years of unemployment in Canada despite having re-educated themselves and attending employment programs provided by various types of agencies.

The interview data showed that employment organizations and the CNIB are not set up to effectively help immigrants who have a disability. My participants believed that agency employees do not presently have the skills or the means to do better for their blind immigrant clients. Participants' experiences were that employment agency staff passed off their failure to help the blind client a job by advising them that they need even more re-education, or that they need to find the opportunity to get Canadian work experience.

One participant summarized his experiences with diverse employment agencies over the years as follows:

> "They tell you to come to their agency for three months and they promise that you will get a job. But at the end, they said, "Mr. __, we will try to look for you, and you should look for opportunity as well." This happens after three or four months. They say, "We will let you know if we find you a job" and then they go for another victim.
>
> "That is how the Canadian employment agencies work. So the government and the policy-makers need to legislate strict laws concerning this matter".

Similarly, other participants indicated that their experience was that CNIB employment programs and other agencies did not provide them with any effective help to find employment. They reported,

> "Despite going to a lot of employment agencies, it is very difficult to find employment."

> "I see this problem among new immigrant disabled people. I know so many disabled immigrants in a similar situation. The disabled immigrants are in a desperate situation. They are not getting help. They don't know where to turn."
>
> "I went to the CNIB. I told the CNIB that I was ready to work in any type of job, anywhere. They were not helpful in finding me a job."
>
> "I went to the CNIB for many years, but had no success."

Employment agency staff told blind immigrant participants to get more education, and to get Canadian work experience. To do so did not lead to employment. It did not lead to practical help in finding jobs. The only jobs that were created were the jobs of the employment agency staff. After obtaining Canadian credentials, this was the experience of one participant:

> "I brought a copy of my degree and a copy of my community service worker diploma to the CNIB, and a list of my back-home work experience. The only thing the CNIB said was, "We wish that you had a Master's degree." If I had a Masters, I know that the CNIB would say, "We wish that you had a PhD degree." And those people who had Masters and PhD degrees were told by the CNIB that they were overqualified.
>
> "After the CNIB told me that, I quit going to the CNIB."

Other participants said,

> "I am working hard to get Canadian work experience. Having Canadian work experience is what most Canadian employers want us to have."
>
> "The adult blind immigrant should know that if they are looking for a job, it is not simple to find one here within a short time. They should not *expect* it to happen at all."
>
> "If they have Canadian training or Canadian work experience, they *might* get a job. That is the only chance. I would strongly advise that they should know this *before* they come to Canada."

Only one blind participant had found employment, and he found it by means of people he knew, not by receiving help from CNIB or employment agencies. He was the only participant who spoke of encountering an agency that did provide some support. Learning to extend his social support network led to his eventual employment, even if it was on his own initiative and not by means of an employment agency. He said,

> "In Ontario, there is the ODSP, which is the Ontario Disability Support department. It has good employment support for people with disabilities. I think the ODSP helped me a lot to overcome challenges and to extend my social network. I used that."

He also spoke of the challenges he had faced during long years of unemployment and job search, saying:

> "Before I was employed, the two biggest challenges I had were my lack of Canadian work experience, and getting people to understand my disability. I had a hard time convincing those people to give me an opportunity to get Canadian work experience. That was one big challenge."

Participants reported that employers and the concerned public believe that the CNIB can find all blind people a job. It is true that the CNIB has government funding to help blind clients search for employment. However, the CNIB has a limited capacity to find jobs. As well, the blind participants would like to be considered for work on their own merits, and according to their own abilities. They do not want to be limited to a situation where the CNIB would go to employers and represent them. That sort of situation does not present the job applicant in the light of ability. Participants said:

> "Every time I applied for employment, they asked us: "Have you contacted the CNIB?" Why doesn't the CNIB help you? They link us with the CNIB. That is really difficult."
>
> "(Employers) think that the CNIB should do everything for the blind. They shouldn't link us with an organization by virtue of being blind."
>
> "When they do this, and link us with this organization, this is a bias. They think that everything is done by the CNIB. They don't know that the CNIB has a limited capacity. CNIB doesn't find jobs for all the blind people."

Blind participants believed that they know what is best for themselves. They have had the past experience of being high achievers, and accomplishing their academic education and establishing professional careers. At times, they may have been more highly educated than the staff in employment agencies (the participants in my study included a lawyer and a mathematician, for example). The treatment that people with a disability receive from employment agency staff is sometimes humiliating or insulting. Staff did not always treat people with a disability with respect, as being capable adults. One participant told me during the interview:

> "I went to a lot of governmental and non governmental employment agencies. I used to go every Wednesday to the CNIB employment counseling. The CNIB employment counselling was a joke. We were treated just as five or six-year-old children.
>
> "One (blind) person said to the counselor, "We are doing nothing. We are not children. I think the CNIB session might be good for *them* (children). If you want us to bring our children, we are willing to bring them here. As for us, we are not benefiting from this session."
>
> "After that, the blind person who said this quit the CNIB employment counseling. The blind person never came to the CNIB employment counselor again, and I never saw that person again."

Data from interviews revealed that participants believed the CNIB would begin to improve if it was an organization "of" the blind instead of "for" the blind. All my blind participants and the sighted partners emphasized that future government policy must be created to address the lack of effective help from CNIB and other agencies.

> "The Canadian National Institute FOR the Blind should be the Canadian National Institute OF the Blind. The name has indicated the purpose of the CNIB here. In this country, the blind are not the owners of his or her organization."
>
> "In this country, I think the most important thing that is being missed is that the blind people need to fight and to take ownership of the whole issue. Canadian blind need to have a strong common front."
>
> ""Canadian blind do need to have a strong common front."
>
> "Canadian blind need a strong organization OF the blind, not FOR the blind. The American Disability Act has done a lot of good things for the American blind consumers. This happened because the initiative was first taken by the blind community."
>
> "The difference is that the CNIB was first started for blind war veterans. Most of the war veterans spent their life up to adulthood as sighted people. When the CNIB was created, it was dealing with people who *used to be sighted.* The blind person's problems should be dealt with from the perspective of blindness. Blind people need to reorganize themselves."

Participants told me that Canadian employers lack awareness of the capabilities of blind people, and that the CNIB and employment agencies are not working to create awareness. They said,

> "The CNIB and other organizations for the disabled in this country are not working to make increased awareness about this issue."
>
> "All the agencies that "serve" the disabled have a responsibility to act on this as well. I have been here for many years. I haven't seen this to happen."

Metatheme: Social construction of disability

The participants reminded me that the educated blind participants were previously doing better in their education and former careers than many of the able-bodied can do. They were high achievers. So, they asked, if they can do it, where is the disability? Where is the hindrance in being "disabled"?

As one of the participants pointed out, look at the story of Helen Keller, and of the physicist Stephen Hawking, and look at the thousands of high achievers who have disabilities. Homer the poet was a blind person, thousands of years ago, and still we are using his work. Look at what Louis Braille did. Disability is a social construction. The interview data shows that the blind participants have proven that they can achieve well academically and have professional careers, in spite of their disabilities.

Despite his academic high achievement and past career experience in his homeland, one blind job applicant was asked by an employer, "How would you find the washroom?" The applicant had traveled a long distance, unaccompanied, to come to the interview and he travels independently every day. Yet the employer's perception of him was so limited! The sighted and blind participants said there is a lot of work that needs to be done in this country to raise awareness of what blind people can achieve.

The sighted participants who were partners of blind participants spoke of their own construction of disability, and of what constitutes a human being. For example, they spoke with pride about their partner's intelligence, work ethic, and commitment to their community.

> "You do not measure a human being based on his looks. You measure him based on his intelligence capacity. That's how I made the decision to marry him. He is a way better than his sighted friends. I am proud of him".
>
> "My husband is a hard worker. He loved his jobs. We became financially stable."
>
> "He helped his people. He helped his community. That was my expectation. He fulfilled all of this. My husband is not less than the sighted people. He participates in different social activities in different community work. He participates in what I want him to do and what he wants to do also. His social activities are really good. I respect him and he respects me as well."

One sighted participant spoke of noticing that some Canadian people seem to have a negative stereotype about blindness. Because they are unaware about the capability of blind people, or even of how to interact with blind people, she critiqued their education. She pointed out that sometimes people speak loudly to her blind partner, and her frustration with the situation was obvious as she told me,

> "My husband is only blind, he is not deaf. Probably *they* are deaf. Watching all these things makes me wonder whether the people who do these things have a stereotype about blind people. How many educated people are there? Maybe the majority of society are educated, so how could they think that way? That's why I told you earlier to measure people's education by the way they act, not by the way they look!"

A sighted participant provided a detailed description of her experiences which demonstrate that the Canadian public is generally very unaware and uneducated about how to interact with blind people. She said,

> "I have observed in the years since I came here that when someone is saying "Hi" from across the street with their eyes or body language, then they are saying it to me and they are not including him, and I feel bad. And they should say "Hi" with their voice.

> "Even, sometimes, when we go together shopping, instead of talking to him the store clerks talk to me. And I always get angry, and I say, "Talk to him, don't talk to me!" They don't get it, they don't understand that!"

The sighted participant who is married to a blind partner continued on, to say: "Yes. Canadians see blind people as more disabled than they are. But it should not be like this! It shouldn't! This is a shame. And it is a shame for the country to be thinking this way." At this point, the participant cried, and repeated, "Shame, shame, shame …!"

She spoke about famous blind role models, pointing out that most North Americans know of these people.

> "Well … don't you know the story of Helen Keller, and Stevie Wonder? You know a lot of blind people who do so many things. And all of them are disabled people, themselves, and you know what they have done. And I am aware that most of people in society know about those disabled or blind people's story. So can't they use their example?"

The participants did not expect to find a negative social construction of disability when they immigrated to Canada. They were disappointed when they realized the situation here for people who have a disability.

> "When we came to Canada, you know, we found that the city was clean and everybody was speaking English, as I expected. There is a lot of technological advancement. But the way the people think toward disabled people, I found it is not the way I expected them to be."
>
> "Well, as a normal expectation when we first came to Canada from Africa, we were really happy. … But, I found Canada is lower than my expectations. I had high expectations when I came here but that is not the way I found it. Because, I immediately understood the disabled people were treated differently. I thought because many people were educated here, I thought the disabled people would be treated equally with the able bodied people. When I did not find that, I was really sad."

More than one participant, when discussing the negative social construction of blindness, emphasized that the Canadian public needs education about the capabilities of blind people. One participant told me,

> "The society is well educated compared to the society that I came from. But in practicality, I blankly can say they are not (well-educated). Because, if education cannot change society, then what does education mean? Then education is valueless. And even … in practical terms, they are (not doing as well as) the society of my previous country. Education must create change. Education must go alongside of creating change, at the same time."

One blind participant told his story of being challenged when trying to get Canadian work experience because employers were unaware of the capabilities of a blind employee.

> "Before I was employed in Canada, I had two big challenges. The first was lack of Canadian work experience, because I came from another country so I did not have Canadian work experience. Also, it seems lot of people don't know about working with disability and don't know how much a disabled person could work or could accomplish. They don't know what kind of job fits for a disabled person. Even, they could not convince themselves that they could help and could change the life of a disabled person.
>
> "So, I had a hard time convincing those people to give me an opportunity for getting the Canadian work experience. That was one challenge.
>
> "However, with the help of my wife and close family members, I have overcome all these challenges and I persistently push people to accept me as who I am.
>
> "And they gave me a chance; I proved that I could do the work, and still I am successful. And I am still working at the agency where I first worked."

Blind job applicants encounter many forms of ableism and lack of awareness when they go to apply for employment. In my own experience, this is not unusual. It is common treatment for blind people seeking employment. The following is an example of an experience that occurred for one educated blind participant, as told to me in his interview.

> "One day I had a job interview. I went to the interview place. The employers told me that "the washroom is downstairs. The photocopier is in

> another part of the building. It is very difficult to locate the photocopier and the office."
>
> He told me about all these "problems". He thought it was a problem. When he told me that, I knew that the employer (was) not going to hire me. I realized that.
>
> I have to tell him the truth. I asked him whether he knew other blind or disabled people. He said, "I knew them on the street outside. I have never invited a blind or disabled person into my office. I have seen blind people who have a cute guide dog.
>
> I asked him a second question. "You said the washroom is downstairs. The photocopier is around the corner in another part of the building. I told him: I came from *way farther* than the washroom and photocopier are located!
>
> He asked me how far I traveled. I told him again. I came by subway and streetcar. He asked me whether I had an assistant when I came to his office. I said "No."
>
> I said, immediately, "I came this far to come to your office, why would it be difficult for me to find the washroom and the photocopier in your building?" The employer, when he realized this, he apologized. He knew how far I traveled. I believe the problem is lack of awareness. He was not aware what I and other blind people can do."

The participant took an activist stance. He confronted the employer's ableism and lack of awareness about disability. Even so, he was not asked genuine interview questions and was never seriously considered for employment once the employer knew that he had a disability.

The blind participant's description of his job interview experience was validated by what I was told during an interview with his sighted partner, who said,

> "…when they were interviewing my husband about a job … they asked him, "how he would get here, and how he would get home, and what would he do on his break, and who is going to take him to the washroom?" This was their worry, their concern, and this is what they asked him.
>
> "And sometimes they did not ask real interview questions about how he could do his job."

Frustrated with the employers' lack of awareness, she added, "Those people are dumb people."

My own experience as well as that of my participants has shown that, sadly, the negative social construction of blindness in Canada includes the assumption that blind people are not employable, and that blind people must be welfare recipients. This state of affairs is challenging for blind people and their families, and it even can affect the lives of children in the family. One participant told me,

> "In the past, one of our sons was at school. He had a fight with his classmate. Because of the fight, he was suspended from his school. When we asked him, my son said, "I was tolerating the person for a long time. He was telling me that, "The son of blind parent! Welfare bum!"
>
> My son added, "When he was telling me that, I can't stand it any more... and I struck him.""

The participant added that, for families living in Canadian society, "That incident shows that there is an effect on children when they have a blind parent."

The participants even showed me that there is a negative social construction of blindness even within the elite society of higher education. One participant told me of resistance he encountered from a professor when he began a graduate program.

> "I will give you another example. One day I was registering for my Masters in one of the Canadian universities. I registered myself in the registration office. I went to the first day in class. The professor asked me why and how I registered myself in his class. He didn't know that a blind person was among his students. He asked me who registered me. I told him "the Dean's secretary".
>
> "He then asked me how I could do his work.
>
> "He had a hard time believing he was seeing a blind person in the Masters program."

The professor was resistant, and it required a long discussion before he would accept that he could not prevent the blind student from been in his Masters-level class.

> "We had a long discussion. The professor knew then that he could not change anything.
>
> "The professor began to negotiate with me. He asked me how he could help. He is an educated professor. He has lack of awareness about what a blind person can do. It is terrible.

> "Those well-educated people don't have awareness. (If this is so,) then the rest of society could easily be worse than them."

All the sighted and blind participants spoke about the need for increased awareness about the capabilities of blind employees. Some of the things that they told me during interviews included the following:

> "I am a wife of a disabled person. Canadians need to know that "disability" is in the mind of social attitudes. Disability is in the mind of ignorance. Please do not underestimate the capability of disabled people."
>
> "The employers think and assume that we blind people are less marketable. They believe, even, that we are less productive. I am assuming this is the impression of many employers. They might say that blind people contribute less to their job. One reason they might think that way is because of their lack of awareness."
>
> "To be a highly developed society or a technologically advanced society doesn't mean that the society has awareness of the capability or needs of the blind and disabled people. There are laws imposed that are intended to prevent discrimination. Having created that law does not mean that the authorities really have clear awareness of the needs or abilities of the blind person. Society needs to come to clearly understand the issues for blind people. Society needs to come to understand the situation for blind people."

The participants are very aware that disability is socially constructed, as they said in the quotations provided in the previous paragraph. What is the disability or limitation, if a person can overcome it and perform their work effectively? Participants told me,

> "There is not very much difference if the blind or disabled person works effectively. The disabled people who live in Ethiopia, such as: the blind people, have more prospects. There are more employed blind people in Ethiopia than in Canada."
>
> "Some people said that being blind is not a disability. There is one thing we cannot deny. There is a limitation, because there is a deficit in your body. This is a "limitation". It is a limitation to your sight. The limitation can be restored by the networking system and by the personal strength and activities, as well as by the social awareness. The Canadian people and the employers and the organization of the blind or disabled need to know this.
>
> "People have to become aware of the situation of the blind. People have to change their attitude."
>
> "The advice I give to the government and the public is: being a disabled person doesn't mean that you cannot do your job. Disabled people some times are doing better than some of able-bodied people."

> "Please, don't see disabled people as being incapable of doing their job. Disabled people *CAN* do their job. I am a witness."

When a blind person is also an immigrant, he or she faces the negative social construction of blindness in Canada, as well as the other social challenges that immigrants may often face. A participant put it very clearly:

> "In this country, an immigrant blind person is victimized three times. It is triple jeopardy.
>
> "A blind person is victimized first by being blind, second by being disabled, thirdly by being an immigrant and a person of colour. Definitely, all these three levels of discrimination treatment can cause huge effects in someone's life. I personally have experienced all this discrimination."

Other participants told me,

> "I do not advise an immigrant family with one disabled member to come to this country. There can be a lot of problems in the new homeland. In this country, being an immigrant with disability is tough. In this country, being an immigrant with disability is challenging."
>
> "I want to tell Canadians, it is the worst thing to bring an immigrant family with a disabled person to this country."

One participant told me that he is involved in "resisting against these discriminations" daily. He said that, "Every day, I am doing a lot of work dismantling these barriers. … Canadians don't know how to handle and deal with these issues of discrimination and stereotypes." In his frustration, he added that, "Not all people who can read and write are "civilized"!"

Nevertheless, he and other participants emphasized that they will never give up their hope for improved conditions for blind people in Canada and they will continue to work for change. One participant spoke of his hope for a better future, saying:

> "This is for everyone. Let us not think about negative things! Let us always think of positive things. It is starting!
>
> "Look at the Ontario Disability Act. It is in a process. When the Ontario Disability Act is going beyond the province, to the federal level and if it includes the whole country, then a change might occur. Sooner or later, I believe this will

> happen. When that happens, I believe some of the problems will be solved. Hopefully we might be able to see this change in the near future.
>
> "Let's think positive. When disabled people come here and bring different knowledge and different attitudes and energy, I definitely believe that things will change. All these knowledges, attitudes, energy, and experiences will make the society to change. I believe this change will create strong disabled organizations.
>
> "Also, it is my prayer and desire that, with these all experiences, Canada will become a country where all people are treated equally. I hope this will happen. And after that, everything will be OK! Think positive!"

Metatheme: Recommended Government Policy Improvement

Government policy-makers need to be aware of the situation that faces immigrants who have a disability, and of the need to legislate new laws concerning these deplorable issues. The participants made many policy recommendations during the interviews.

The participants all spoke of the need for the Canadian government to begin providing accurate and reliable information when a person who is disabled or blind applies to immigrate to Canada. It might seem compassionate to bring a blind educated person here to Canada, but is it compassionate to sentence that person to a life of poverty and unemployment?

> "First of all, when a blind applicant applies to come to Canada, the Canadian government (immigration) should give them enough information about what will happen when they come here. I myself, I did not receive any information, about the unemployment situation before I immigrated to Canada".

The participants experienced lengthy unemployment, and in fact, only one blind participant has yet found work. The employment agencies are not finding them opportunities to get Canadian work experience and they are not being activists to raise employers' awareness of the capabilities of blind employees. The agencies seem only to be concerned with their "paper trail", as one participant told me. Participants spoke of the lack of accountability of employment agencies, which needs to be addressed by means of government policy changes. Participants said,

> "There are a lot of employment agencies that work for disabled people in this country (Canada). I tell you, there is *no accountability* for these employment agencies. The government and the policy-makers need to be aware of this situation and they need to legislate new laws concerning these issues."
>
> "We disabled people have created a job for them (employment agencies). They didn't create or find a job for us. The Canadian government needs to be aware of this matter, and must intervene quickly."
>
> "The government puts aside a lot of money for this purpose, but the employment agencies are using or diverting the money for their own purposes only, or God knows where the money is being used."
>
> "Government agencies and organizations for the disabled (blind) should hold the responsibility for the problem."
>
> "They tell you to come to their agency for three months, and they promise that you will get a job. But at the end, they said, "Mr. __ we will try to look for you, and you should look for opportunity as well." This happens after three or four months. They say, "We will let you know if we find you a job" and then they go for another victim. That is how the Canadian employment agencies work. So the government and the policy-makers need to legislate strict laws concerning this matter."

The participants believed that the Canadian government should create policy to hire blind graduates. There should be a place for their employment in government jobs when they have achieved their academic degrees. As well, government policy should make it a priority to find employment for educated students with a disability, after graduation. Participants commented as follows:

> "When any blind students were schooled in Education in Ethiopia, the Ministry of Education hired them back after their graduation. Here in Canada, after the higher education institutions have taught the blind students, they will not hire them back."
>
> "In Ethiopia, governmental and nongovernmental agencies even give priority to hiring educated disabled people."

One participant held that the employment of educated blind people is a human rights issue.

> "I would like to see the Persons with a Disability Act being used in practice. There should be equal opportunity and equal access, and they should translate that into practice. When the government does that, a blind person seeking employment will have concrete things to argue and to defend his rights. This should be legislated."

Participants had noted that Canadian government policies do not support people who are blind or disabled to seek work. One participant told me that, "No matter for an able or a disabled person, employment should be mandatory." Another said, "Disabled or blind in this country are not encouraged to look for work. A lot of visually impaired and disabled people are unemployed. It is discouraging."

Participants believed that if legislation was created that supported the employment of blind people, "by doing this, (legislating) the government *and* the disabled family will be benefited". People with disabilities would become taxpayers and be able to contribute to their country. Participants' said they view being a taxpayer as "honourable" and as meaning they have "full citizenship."

The participants spoke of the need for the Canadian government to create education to raise public awareness about the capabilities of people who are blind or disabled. The government needs to address the negative social construction of blindness, as described in the foregoing metatheme. Then the next generation will not be able to look back and criticize us for our failure to achieve awareness about disability, or for the lack of fulfillment of human rights for people who have disabilities, despite being a prosperous and technologically-advanced country.

Participants told me,

> "The government needs to work with agencies for the blind and with other educational institutes to raise public awareness about blindness. The government should set up an educational program to deal with this issue."

> "Being a disabled person doesn't mean that you cannot do the job. Probably you can do it a way better than some able-bodied people. So, don't see disabled people as "they are not capable of doing the job. Government and other authorities need to know this. There is no "knowledge disability". Disability is in the mind of people".
>
> "Do not underestimate disabled people".

Finally, the participants believed that if the government created supportive employment policies and improved public education about disability it would be doing more than just supporting individuals with a disability. There would be a chain reaction. As one participant put it,

> "Well, I would like to tell the Canadian government that once the immigrant has arrived, the government and non government need to help the disabled family.
>
> "When they help the one blind person, indirectly they are helping the *whole family*. When you are helping your family, you are helping the *country,* as well. When the government is helping the family to become able to get off of social assistance, then the government is saving their money, as well".

Conclusion

In this chapter I have described the process of my journey to gather data during interviews with eight participants, and I provided my impressions during the process of data analysis. I have included a group profile. I have presented the themes and metathemes that emerged from data analysis, and I have included numerous quotations from my participants which support each metatheme. In Chapter Five, I present and discuss the implications of the first nine metathemes. The final three metathemes, which are related to implications for policy, are discussed in Chapter Six.

CHAPTER 5

Discussion of the Metathemes

When a Blind wakes up in the morning

by Abebe Teklu,
May 26, 2005

When a Blind wakes up in the morning, he hates the day.
Even though there is beautiful weather, he doesn't see it that way.

It's a new day, what am I going to do?
I wish I was getting ready for work, like you.

I believe I'm capable of working, like you,
They barred the door to me and never knew.

Just for being a Blind, nothing else could they see.
I wonder who was really blind; them, or me?

When boredom drives me out of the house, I start to walk.
My cane or my dog is the only one to talk.

Even walking miles and miles, I still have the blues,
I have gotten tired and worn out my shoes.

As I walk along, "hmmmm!", I breathe the fresh air.
The sun is shining, the wind is touching my ear.

I can smell the odors, I can hear the traffic noise.
I hear the beautiful voices of girls and boys.

I listen to music from doorways and from cars passing by
And in the park, the birds sing and fly.

But *so what?* I cannot see it. I never will.
I cannot visualize it. It cannot lift my soul.

And I know I am talented. Gifts were given to us all.
I can't use my skills because I hit that wall.

What is life, if you cannot work, earn money, and go home
To look back on the day's work that you have done?

As a blind father, I have children and a wife,
And I want to support them with a fulfilling life.

I am sitting at home, with no production
Music and talk shows don't bring satisfaction.

They keep me in the dark, in something of a dream,
It isn't reality. A dead end, it seems.

The family is stressed. They know I'm angry or crying;
I cannot find employment despite all my trying.

I'm an "unfortunate creature", in some people's sight.
They bar me from working - is that justice? Is that right?

Is that humanity? I've struggled on my long trek,
Instead of a job, I get that bloody welfare cheque!

The night is here again … and I prefer the dark.
Everyone is home from their day of work,

So I am like the rest, when the dark is here.
I pretend to forget the sadness and fears.

The children are sleeping, quiet once again.
Their love is the only thing that heals my pain.

If I can get myself tired, I might sleep, anyway.
But at least I am hiding; dark is better than the day.

Introduction

I wrote the poem above before I ever went to meet and interview the eight participants in this study. The poem reflects my own experiences of grief and hope and alienation since coming to Canada, despite having a good education and a fulfilling past career in my former homeland.

To my surprise, I now realize that the poem also clearly represents the challenging experiences in Canada of my blind participants. Even the one blind participant who is now employed has "been there", and "walked in my shoes." I gave the poem to my blind and sighted participants at the end of the interviews, and all expressed that in their new homeland they have felt the same grief, anger, disappointment and sadness. I was surprised to see that as the metathemes emerged from the data of my study, they can almost all be found in the poem I wrote before doing the research.

In Chapter Four, I presented the twelve metathemes without discussion. In this chapter, I discuss the meaning and implications of the first nine metathemes. The remaining three metathemes are discussed in Chapter Six because they have the most clear implications for policy change. The findings are important for educators at all levels, disability and rehabilitation policy-makers, immigration policy-makers, government representatives at the provincial and federal level, administrators of employment agencies, human service workers, and for institutions and organizations that work for social change.

In this chapter, I link the first nine metathemes to discussion of current literature, including a nation-wide study, "The Needs of Persons in Canada who are Living With Vision Loss", (C.N.I.B., 2005). As well, I connect the metathemes to existing literature which was reviewed in Chapter Two.

Overview of Implications of the Twelve Methathemes

Two centuries have passed since the birth of Louis Braille, (born January 4, 1809, near Paris, France, and died January 6, 1852). He was the French educator who developed the Braille system of printing and writing for the blind (Braille, L., 2006, in Encyclopaedia Britannica). Since the time of Braille's contribution in the nineteenth century, there have been great increases in the life choices available to blind people. A varying range of opportunities for education and access to technological aids, along with varying opportunity for career goal fulfillment are available to people in some parts of the world, but not in others. Without such opportunities, many blind people often survive by begging and receiving alms.

It is counter-intuitive to what one would expect, when we realize that a fairly poor country such as Ethiopia was able to create a supportive system in which some blind people were able to access education. All educated blind people in Ethiopia, whether educated in a church school or in a Eurocentric education model, were able to obtain fulfilling professional careers. In contrast, technologically advanced and wealthy North American countries do not offer the supportive social system that ensures that all educated blind people do find employment in their chosen careers. As a result, blind people are deprived of the opportunity to experience full citizenship. When a person can access employment, they have the opportunity to live independently, marry if they choose, support a family, and be a taxpayer, thus contributing to their country – it is my belief that this constitutes the opportunity for "full citizenship".

The information provided by the eight blind and sighted participants in my study supports a picture of Canada's social policy as being like a meager gruel provided to a hungry man. Such a situation is not what one would expect. In North America, some support structures have been created to provide institutional support for blind individuals. When such social welfare structures have been created, it leads us to the expectation that educated blind people in North America would have less trouble obtaining meaningful employment than in less wealthy countries, such as Ethiopia. Nevertheless, it is my experience and that of my participants that blind educated Ethiopian immigrants and their families experience more difficulties in Canada than in Ethiopia, despite the vast difference in wealth of the two countries.

Canada's social policy is not providing the necessary support for employment opportunities for blind people and blind immigrants in particular. It has been written that the reality of life is "brutal" for blind people in third world countries (Vaughn, 1998, p. 3). The metathemes which emerged in this study have confirmed that the reality of life for many blind people in Canada, and for immigrants in particular, is just as tragic as in a third world country. Rather than participating fully in Canadian society, they are limited to receiving a handout, merely bread and a room over their head, or, as both I and my participants have said, "Instead of a job, the bloody welfare cheque."

Blind immigrants in Canada and their families expected their new homeland to be a land of hope. Yet the metathemes revealed that they are now going without necessities while living in the midst of plenty. The situation is as Vaughn (1998) describes for North American blind people in general. He quotes Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*, saying: "It was the spring of hope; it was the winter of despair; we had everything before us; we had nothing before us" (Dickens, 1859, cited in Vaughn, 1998, p. 3). The first metatheme which I shall describe addresses the contrast between the situation for blind people and their families in Canada and in Ethiopia.

Metatheme: Comparison of Ethiopia and Canada's Treatment of Blind People

When I began my research, I did not expect to find that the comparison of the participants' experiences in Ethiopia and then in Canada would be such an important metatheme. The issues about comparing two countries with such vastly different social resources have already been discussed at the beginning of Chapter Two.

When my blind participants were in their former homeland, they had the support of their many rich cultural beliefs and the social support network of their immediate and extended family. The blind participants had the support of the Ethiopian government and its empowering education and employment policies for people with disabilities. The policies helped blind people to access education and employment, and led to the ability to fulfill their goals in life - they had full citizenship.

In the data provided by the blind participants, they made many statements comparing their past situation in their former social environment to their current situation in Canada (e.g., "When I was in my former country, as soon as I finished my education, I was employed. Here, in Canada with an educated society, with a lot of facilities, I am unemployed." "In this country, (Canada) disabled people have less prestige even after they are educated. In Ethiopia, once the disabled people are educated, they have prestige and equal opportunities.") Despite the blind participants' high level of education achieved in their former homeland *and* in Canada, they have endured long years of unemployment in Canada. The injustice is based on their blindness and not on their education.

After leaving the political chaos of the time of immigration from their former homeland, and after leaving behind the dangers of a time when freedom of speech was denied to them, the participants now live peacefully in Canada. Nevertheless, many of the blind participants regret that they cannot return to their former homeland, because now they have experienced both a life of full citizenship and a life of deprivation. They have experienced marginalization, and alienation for themselves and their families. ("In contrast to my experience in Ethiopia, when I came to Canada and had acquired (education), there was no job. …If I had the means to go back to where I came from, my original homeland, I would. However, I lost everything. I lost my previous job and my friends. I don't know how I could go back, even if I wanted to. And I don't know how I can convince the Canadian employers to hire me.")

As the metathemes reveal, my blind participants' unemployment is linked to poverty and despair. To one participant, the experience of being unemployed and on welfare felt like being "a little lower than the living and a little higher than the dead." Despite protective legislation and social policy in technologically advanced and wealthy countries in North America, parts of Europe, and Australia, the reality exists that disability is usually associated with poverty (Clear, 1999, p. 7). The income of most Canadian people with a disability is well below the Canadian average, (HRDC, 2003; CNIB, 2005).

When one considers that my blind participants are well educated and have professional career experience in their former homelands, and have added Canadian academic education, then it is even more surprising and unexpected to find that in Canada they have endured long years of unemployment and poverty. I am certain that the employment situation is aggravated by "triple jeopardy". Race, colour, and disability all interact in my participants' experiences of marginalization.

I asked myself, "Do educated blind people *in general* in Canada – as opposed to *immigrant* blind people – find employment successfully, or do they live in poverty as immigrant blind people do?" When I sought to answer this question, I found two things.

First, the existing literature showed me that educated Canadian-born blind people still struggle to find work. The most recent CNIB study reports that blind people are "not under-educated" – in their large-scale study, 13 per cent had a bachelors degree and almost 6 per cent had a masters degree (CNIB, 2005, p. 14-15). Only 25 per cent of the blind people in the CNIB study were employed in any form of full or part time work, as opposed to 51 per cent of people with a disability in general, and the CNIB researchers concluded that education was important but "type of disability" – blindness – "appears to make a difference in becoming employed, and much needs to be done in the arenas of employer education and employment supports in order to change this picture" (CNIB, 2005, p. 15).

Second, I noticed that the CNIB (2005) study did not collect the data as to whether or not the participants were Canadian-born or immigrants. My own fifteen years of experience with CNIB as well as my interview with several CNIB researchers (personal communication, August 3, 2005) shows that the great majority of CNIB members are white, mainstream middle-aged or elderly Canadians and the majority did not lose their vision until after adulthood. Therefore, blind people who belong to socially marginalized groups such as immigrants, First Nations people, or other non-white, non-mainstream people are likely to have even worse employment success statistics. Their statistics would be worse than the 75% unemployment rate cited for the mostly mainstream blind participants in the CNIB study (2005, p. 15).

The comparison of the differences in social support received in Ethiopia and in Canada emerged in the metathemes. My blind participants fully described in detail the general helpfulness, support and equal treatment (rather than ableist treatment) that they received from Ethiopian people while they were achieving their education and establishing their careers in Ethiopia. Their positive experiences were matched by my own experiences. As well, Kathleen Prime, a blind North American who visited Ethiopia, has published her experience. Like other blind people, including myself, she is well aware when sighted people are uncomfortable or hold ableist attitudes when they are interacting with blind people. She reported that,

> "During my stay in Addis, I found that blind people were treated as the equals of sighted people. I did not sense any uncomfortable tension among blind and sighted people. All of us, regardless of culture or disability, interacted freely with one another. All voices were heard with the same attentiveness and respect" (Prime, 1999).

Prime added to this statement by comparing her egalitarian treatment by Ethiopians to her experiences as a blind person in North America, saying,

> "Conversely, in American society, I have, at times, felt out of place because people were either afraid to approach me or were limited by their apparent ignorance concerning those with disabilities .... (In Ethiopia) people were always ready to offer assistance, but not in a condescending way" (Prime, 1999).

While in Ethiopia, Prime (1999) visited a boarding school for the blind and she saw in person the achievements of blind students and the respect which they received for their hard work. That description matches the described experiences of my blind participants during their education in Ethiopia. Prime's brief report of her journey is attached to my dissertation as Appendix J.

Prime commented that,

> "... the lack of monetary and technological and other resources does present some difficulty, since it limits their efforts to bring about positive changes in the living standard of blind people in their country. Despite our more advanced technology here in the U.S., I believe we have much to learn from the African people on a social level" (Prime, 1999).

She adds, "In general, African cultures place a strong emphasis on family, community, and the value of life itself. This was very evident in the way I was accepted by the people I met in Ethiopia" (Prime, 1999).

Prime's description of her experience as a blind person while in Ethiopia verifies the description of Ethiopia's treatment of blind people which was provided by my participants and myself. It is very interesting to hear how an outsider views the treatment of blind people in Ethiopian society. It cannot be suggested that she is making her home country look better than it is, because Ethiopia is not her homeland. She is a neutral observer.

The situation regarding employment for blind educated people in Canada could be better, and to our shame, it *is* better in some societies that might have less economic ability to fund supportive programs for people with a disability. Vaughn (1998, p. 11) reports that in China, until the Communist revolution in 1949, there was a supportive social network of guilds that led to independence for blind people. The guilds, which existed for hundreds of years, were autonomous and were managed by blind people themselves. In present-day Spain, there exists a unique organization of blind people which was begun in 1938. The Organization National Ciego Espana (ONCE) is "more successful than any other at providing employment opportunities and relatively high levels of earned income," reports Vaughn, "and (it has) become one of the leading enterprises of modern Spain" (1998, pp. 11-12). In fact, blind people have a lower unemployment rate than sighted people in Spain, and the ONCE workers receive more than the double the minimum wage when they are at the entry level (Vaughn, 1998, p. 12). In Spain, blind people are not dependent on the state, but can be proud citizens.

What a contrast to Canada's present day situation. We can do much better. I explore participant suggestions and ideas for policy in Chapter Six.

Metatheme: High Achievement

In Chapter One, I defined the term "high achiever" as it is used in this study. According to criteria arising from the work of Tefferra (1998), certain people with disabilities are 'high achievers' because they are or were employed - "independently leading their livelihood" (p. 68-69), had the ability to marry and were socially "considered successful". For my study, I added the criteria of having achieved academic education at the post-secondary level.

My blind participants were high achievers, and that means that they can be competitive in the work force, and are motivated to achieve well in their education and work. They knew they were very capable because they had already achieved well as scholars and in their previous careers. They had at one time supported themselves, their families, contributed to their country and had a fulfilling life, as all who work hard expect to have in their lifetime. They were role models to other blind people and to the public.

The blind participants began to realize they were high achievers in high school, saying, "I scored even better than the people who had enough materials, who could go to the library and read the books." "We were achieving beyond the level that the sighted people could achieve." "We scored high on the Grade 8 General Exam; we scored high on the University Entrance Exam in Grade 12."

For Teferra, "high achievement" for people with a disability such as blindness meant becoming educated, and being judged as successful by the community organization(s) to which one belonged (Teferra, 1998, p. 68-69). The data in this study revealed that all the blind participants exceeded Teferra's definition of high achievement for people with a disability. They had university education. They excelled in their academic studies. ("I was awarded a gold medal for my achievement," said one participant). Three of them entered careers that were rare and unusual for blind people, such as law, music, and mathematics.

The blind participants had pushed themselves to achieve highly despite obstacles when they were in their homeland. They described knowing in their youth in Ethiopia that if they did not work hard to achieve their education, their only future would be to become a beggar. They worked hard and focused on their goals. They believe that the difficulties they experienced taught them a valuable lesson: that problems can be overcome.

Now they are here in Canada. They have skills and career experience, and they are still high achievers. They have the same qualities of persistence in setting and achieving difficult goals despite obstacles. Yet, as my poem says, they "hit that wall". The wall is the ignorance they sometimes encounter in the public and the wall is the ableist attitude of many employers. The wall is the lack of activism of policy-makers and some employment agencies. Still they persist in attempting to pursue their careers, and they manage the daily activities around their homes and strive to keep their families intact.

Their hope has not been completely changed into despair. We all know that ten or fifteen years without employment is disheartening and yet to still have hope – that also makes the person a high achiever.

Their sighted spouses, despite the loss of their own former careers, work hard for minimum wage to enable the family to survive. Would they not also be termed high achievers? Yes, they are high achievers, and kudoes to the spouses!

The interview data showed that the participants have proven themselves in the past to be high achievers and they have the same capabilities today. Yet in Canada they are forced into unemployment because of the ableism and lack of awareness of Canadian employers and government policy-makers. The negative social construction of disability in Canada, and the need for advocacy are metathemes that are linked to this metatheme of high achievement.

Metatheme: Persistence and perseverance

I was not surprised to find that persistence and perseverance were important traits for my blind participants, who were all high achievers. I have had to persevere myself, during my life, as a student with a disability, and as an employee. Mulugeta also recognized that the students' own efforts to achieve their goals are even more important than social support when one is struggling against environmental obstacles. Persistence and determination were found to be vitally important for the Ethiopian students in her study (2004, p. 71).

Teferra writes that, "Level of education is not the only factor affecting one's success in life" (1998, p. 70). He has found that participants with a disability who were high achievers had developed certain personal strengths: "strong desire and devotion to learn and work and (having) patience" (1998, p. 76-77). In finding employment, high achievers had to continue "demonstrating one's ability with patience and diligence" (1998, p.78).

The blind participants in my study were inspired by their role models and the data revealed that they had set and achieved specific academic and career goals. As students, they had been told that if they did not persist in their academic goals, they would become beggars. Despite the lack of materials, the blind participants developed the trait of persistence, and they became high achievers.

As one participant said, "Difficulty teaches us to conquer problems. This is one of the reasons why we Ethiopian blind accomplished so much. This is the reason why I and other Ethiopian blind became high achievers."

Persistence led to creating strategies and realizing their own abilities. The blind participants became respected in their communities; they had the opportunity to marry; and they all became employed in their professions. By doing so, they met Teferra's criteria to be called high achievers (1998, p. 68-69).

Just like any ordinary able-bodied human beings, blind high achievers expect that they will be able to fulfill their goals despite their disabilities. Disability did not prevent them from accomplishing their goals in the past. To achieve it, they required persistence and perseverance, and not to be swayed from it by any obstacle.

That belief in the value of persistence is the reason my participants are still persistent today and have not given up hope after ten or fifteen years of unemployment in Canada. They continue to strive toward their goal of independence and full citizenship which all human beings expect to have. Without the trait of persistence, they would have succumbed to despair long ago.

One participant spoke of the results of maintaining persistence despite challenges.

> "On the University Entrance exam ... I had an "A" in everything. From grade 9 to grade 12, I stood in the first rank. I scored even better than people who had enough materials, who could go to the library, who could read the books. The biggest secret of my achievement was my *persistence*. The biggest secret of my achievement was having the strong desire to accomplish my education."

Other participants mentioned bringing their persistence with them to the Canadian employment situation. One said, "If there is a will, there is a way" and another said,

> "Despite the stresses, you should not give up! You have to be patient. I am really patient, despite the hardship. Don't give up. Find other ways to learn. If you fail one way, try to find other ways to succeed."

Another said, "I will continue to look for a job in the future. I will be persistent in looking for a job. I will persevere in teaching awareness to employers. I will not stop looking for employment." More than one participant spoke of perseverance in the context of working to change Canadian employers' ableist attitudes.

Metatheme: Ethiopian expectations about a blind child or student; and
Metatheme: Social construction of disability

In this section, I discuss the social construction of disability that all my participants experienced in various situations during their youth in Ethiopia and the social construction of disability that they encountered after coming to Canada. In my view and in the experience of my participants, disability is indeed a social construction.

Overboe began his research and critique of the category of disability with the opening statement, "Throughout my life, others have defined me as a disabled person, but I have never considered myself a disabled person" (1994, p. ii). Similarly, Clear argued that it is society that disables people (1999, p. 7). Teferra has said that disability is a social construction and that ignorance of blind people's abilities "brings about much graver obstacles than the limitation caused by the disability" (1998, p. 66). He stresses that the real challenge for people with a disability is their environment (1999, p. 195).

There are positive and negative constructions of blindness for a blind child in Ethiopia, as I have already described in previous chapters. The Ethiopian construction which contains the expectation that a blind child will grow up to be independent, employed and self-supporting is the one in which the child accesses European-based education. He or she is expected to be able to have the same careers and prospects as a sighted person. Participants said, "In Ethiopia, once the disabled people are educated, they have prestige and equal opportunities." "When I was in Ethiopia, I got a job, as soon as I finished my schooling."

Other Ethiopian constructions of blindness cover a range of outcomes from being a respected "deftera" to being a beggar. One participant remembers the negative construction of disability which was encountered in his childhood,

> "The people said, "That's the end of his life!" They said it because they believed that I could not do anything. This attitude was not only among my close family ties. All the villagers believed that I could not do anything."

These are social constructions of disability. A blind child is likely to believe and expect his or her future to be what the parents and community believe it will be. When a blind student encounters positive expectations, it encourages him or her to persevere and to work hard to fulfill goals despite obstacles. An empowering and positive social construction of their disability contributed to the blind participants becoming high achievers.

My blind participants arrived in Canada with the hope of employment, prosperity, and a fulfilling life. They then encountered the Canadian social construction of disability, which in their experience has been the belief that most blind people have to become a welfare recipient. Whether or not they realize it, their actions show that many Canadian people believe that blind people are not capable of being independent and self supporting. The participants were able to do better in their education and careers than many able-bodied people in their former homeland. In Canada, they are able to get second degrees and even their Masters degree. Then where is the hindrance in being "disabled"? And what would then make them incapable of doing their job well?

The experiences of the participants showed that during job interviews, the Canadian employers' perceptions of them were very limited. One participant told me,

> "One day I had a job interview. The employers told me that "the washroom is downstairs. The photocopier is in another part of the building. It is very difficult to locate the photocopier and the office." He thought it was a problem. I knew when he told me that, that the employer is not going to hire me. I realized that. I have to tell him the truth. I asked him whether he knew other blind or disabled people. He said, "I knew them on the street outside. I have never invited a blind or disabled person into my office. I have seen blind people who have a cute guide dog.""

The participant then said to the employer,

> ""You said the washroom is downstairs. The photocopier is around the corner in another part of the building." I told him, "I came from *way farther* than the washroom and photocopier is located!" He asked me how far I traveled. I told him again. I came by subway and streetcar. He asked me whether I had an assistant when I came to his office. I said "No." I said, immediately, "I came this far to come to your office; why would it be difficult for me to find the washroom and the photocopier in your building?" The employer, when he realized this, he apologized. He knew how far I traveled.
>
> "I believe the problem is lack of awareness. He was not aware what I and other blind people can do."

Employers have not been exposed to blind role models in Canada, nor has the general public. One sighted participant who was married to a blind participant said,

> "I have observed in the years since I came here that when someone is saying "Hi" from across the street with their eyes or body language, then they are saying it to me and they are not including him, and I feel bad. And they should say "Hi" with their voice. Even, sometimes, when we go together shopping, instead of talking to him the store clerks talk to me. And I always get angry, and I say, "Talk to him, don't talk to me!" They don't get it, they don't understand that! And also, some people talk to him loudly as if he is deaf or has a hearing impairment. And I say to them, "My husband is not deaf! He is blind." They don't understand. My husband is only blind, he is not deaf. Probably they are deaf.
>
> "Watching all these things makes me wonder whether the people who do these things have a stereotype about blind people. How many educated people are there? Maybe the majority of society is educated, so how could they think that way?"

In Canada, the social construction of blindness which my participants and myself have encountered is that blind people, despite education and career experience, are deemed incapable and are destined to be welfare recipients. That is a flawed perception which results in injustice and in the creation of social minority groups, and that perception needs to be changed. Disability is political and ableism is similar to racism (Clear, 1999, p. 8; Weeber, 1999, pp. 20, 21).

A sighted participant told me, "That's why I told you earlier to measure people's education by the way they act, not by the way they look! Do you remember that?" She added, "Canadians see blind people as more disabled than they are. But it should not be like this! It shouldn't! … and it is a shame for the country to be thinking this way. Shame, shame, shame," she said, and she cried.

How you define disability, or how you construct it, is important. Disability can be defined many ways (Oliver, 1990, p.2). When social oppression is considered to be part of the definition of disability, then rather than having bad fortune which created a disability, the people with disabilities are viewed as being restricted from fulfilling their goals by an ableist society – a society which is ignorant of the potential of people with disabilities (Oliver, 1990, p. 2). There have been many places around the globe and frequent occasions during history when "blind people have had their lives restricted in the name of benevolence … Many agencies and programs themselves become barriers in the way of blind people who hope to participate fully in their societies" (Vaughn, 1998, p. 7).

Even faculty in educational institutions are often not aware of the abilities of blind students. One participant told me,

> "I was registering for my Masters in one of the Canadian universities. I registered myself in the office. I went to the first day in class. The professor asked me why and how I registered myself in his class. He didn't know that a blind person was among his students. He asked me who registered me. I told him "the Dean's secretary". He then asked me how I could do his work. He had a hard time believing he was seeing a blind person in the Masters program. We had a long discussion.
>
> "The professor knew then he could not change anything. The professor began to negotiate with me. He asked me how he could help. He is an educated professor. He has lack of awareness about what a blind person can do. It is terrible. Those well-educated people don't have awareness. Then the rest of society could easily be worse than them."

Employer attitudes are also influenced by the construction of disability. In "An Unequal Playing Field" (2005), the CNIB reported low employment rates for blind and visually-impaired participants. The CNIB found that the most common barrier in the employment search was,

> "… employer attitudes. Twenty-seven per cent of the working age participants reported that employers do not see the blind applicant's potential, and another twenty-six per cent reported that employers are simply unwilling to hire someone with a vision impairment" (CNIB, 2005, p. 15).

Is blindness a "disability" or a "characteristic"? As one of my participants stated, "Disability is in the mind of people". Most of what we think of as "disability" is actually created by the people in the social environment. Disability is a social construction (Teferra, 1998).

Vaughan (1998), and Jernigan (1996) speak of blindness as being merely a characteristic. Blindness itself is "simply and only a characteristic of individuals", said Vaughan (1998, p. 40).

In "Blindness: Handicap or Characteristic?" published in the July 1996 issue of *The World Blind*, Jernigan states that blindness is a "characteristic", and he emphasizes strongly that blindness is "*only* a characteristic". Jernigan was the President of the North American Caribbean Region of the World Blind Union and President Emeritus of the National Foundation of the Blind. He writes:

> "No one is likely to disagree with me if I say that blindness, first of all, is a characteristic. But a great many people will disagree when I go on to say that blindness is only a characteristic. It is nothing more or less than that. It is nothing more special, more peculiar or more terrible than that suggests.
>
> "When we understand the nature of blindness as a characteristic-a normal characteristic like hundreds of others with which each of us must live-we shall better understand the real needs to be met by agencies serving the blind, as well as the false needs which should not be met. By definition, a characteristic - any characteristic - is a limitation" (Jernigan, 1996).

Age, level of intellect, education, gender, height, and physical ability are characteristics with which a person has to work when trying to achieve their goals. Jernigan pointed out that,

> "… every characteristic - those we regard as strengths as well as those we regard as weaknesses - is a limitation. Each one forces us to some extent into a mold: each restricts to some degree the range of possibility, of flexibility and very often of opportunity as well.. Blindness is such a limitation. Are blind people more limited than others?" (Jernigan, 1996).

If we start looking at blindness as a characteristic, that viewpoint opens the door to many possibilities, and that is where beneficial societal change will become possible.

> "Take a sighted person with an average mind (something not too hard to locate); take a blind person with a superior mind (something not impossible to locate) - and then make all the other characteristics of these two exactly equal (something which certainly is impossible). Now, which of the two is more limited?
>
> "It depends, of course, on what you want them to do. If you are choosing up sides for baseball, then the blind person is more limited - that is, he or she is "handicapped." If you are hunting somebody to teach history or to figure out your income tax, the sighted person is more limited or "handicapped."" (Jernigan, 1996).

"Statistically, at least 10 per cent of any society is born with or acquires a disability, and about one family in four includes a disabled person", the creators of the *Charter for the Third Millenium* have written. "We must accept disability as an ordinary part of the varied human condition …. In the 21st century, we must insist on the same human and civil rights for people with disabilities as for everyone else" (Rehabilitation International, 1999).

Metatheme: Unemployment in Canada, and Metatheme: Desire to be independent and self-supporting

In this section, I discuss two metathemes together because, despite their proven strong desire and ability to be independent and self-supporting, all my blind participants have experienced lengthy unemployment in Canada. Only one blind participant has eventually become employed.

All my blind participants, when they were back home, from early childhood they had role models concerning being independent, employed and self supporting. Growing up with that mentality, they proved to themselves that they could be independent.

The blind participants remember being told, “If you work hard and study and gain your education, you will become employed and independent and have a good life”. It was not a false expectation, because in Ethiopia when the blind students achieved their education in diverse academic fields, they were hired immediately upon graduation. As one participant told me,

> “I got a job, as soon as I finished my schooling. I worked. I started to support myself and my family. I was a diligent worker. I was respected by my colleagues.”
>
> Another said,
>
> “I became employed. I came from a poor family. I started to help my family. That was the biggest accomplishment of my life. I joined the middle class. I became able to help my family and to contribute to my country. For me, that was the biggest satisfaction and accomplishment.”

The Ethiopian government policies created a social environment in which educated blind people would find employment. The blind participants all became successfully employed, and were socially respected. They were able to support themselves and to help their immediate and extended families. Success for people with a disability includes becoming successfully employed and financially able to marry, and having respect from their community (Teferra, 1998, p. 68-69). The blind participants in my study reported that they performed well in their careers over a period of years, until immigration. Most of them married. They were well integrated in their communities and were active members of their communities.

The blind participants overcame challenges to reach their goals in their homeland, and they have proven they are willing to persist and do the same thing here. In Canada, they have the same ambition, determination, and same belief that they can do it, as they had in Ethiopia. All of them have continued on to further their education in Canada. The one thing that is different is the Canadian social environment, which does not support their employment and independence.

There are barriers which work to the disadvantage of the visible minority professional immigrants to Canada (Basran & Zong, 1998, p. 6), even when they are sighted people. A recent census study by the Institute for Social Research at York University found that poverty in Ontario's largest city is highly racialized, and that the economic gap between groups of European and non-European ancestry has been increasing over the past three decades (York University, 2006). The author, Ornstein, reported that the 2001 census revealed that "extreme poverty is a daily reality for more than half of the members of the Bangladeshi, Somali, Afghan, and Ethiopian ethno-racial groups" (York University, 2006); their family incomes fell below the low income cut off (LICO) of Statistics Canada. They face extraordinary difficulties, and the situation is progressively worsening, said the author. The census revealed that 40 per cent of African ethno-racial group members lived below the poverty line in 2001 in that region being studied. That is the situation into which my participants came, unknowingly, when they arrived in Canada.

In "Devaluation of foreign credentials as perceived by visible minority professional immigrants (N1)", Basran and Zong (1998) reported that 73 per cent of visible minority professionals who immigrated to Canada experienced downward mobility in regard to employment (p. 11). Accreditation problems "result in a tremendous waste of human capital" (p. 8). Seventy per cent of foreign-trained professionals in the study live on less than $30,000 per year (p. 15). Their devaluation may violate human rights legislation; as well, "the impact on the health of foreign-trained professionals and their families" must be considered (p. 8).

Basran and Zong (1998) list major factors that immigrants perceive as contributing to the occupational disadvantage of visible minority professional immigrants. For example, foreign credentials are not recognized or are devalued. Foreign-trained professionals perceived that as being the most important factor contributing to their inability to access professional occupations and to their downward mobility (Basran & Zong, 1998, p. 11). Almost 80 per cent of the study's 404 participants reported difficulty in having their foreign credentials recognized in Canada (p. 11). In addition, more than half the respondents reported that their work experience in their homeland was not fairly recognized by provincial government agencies, professional organizations and educational institutions in Canada (p. 12, p. 15). The participants and researchers concluded that structural barriers exist in the policies and practices of professional regulatory bodies (Basran & Zong, 1998, p. 9, 15, 19).

The study revealed also that more than 70 per cent of foreign-trained professionals who belonged to a visible minority group had either no income or annual gross income less than $30.000 (Basran & Zong, 1998, p. 15). The participants perceived their skin colour and their speaking English as a second language to be important factors that negatively influenced the evaluation of their credentials and the recognition of their previous career experience (Basran & Zong, 1998, p. 15).

Gray (2005), similarly to Basran and Zong, has also commented on the importance of recognizing the credentials and past career experience of immigrant professionals: "The failure to recognize the education and professional credentials of about 340,000 immigrants costs between $3.4 billion and $5 billion in lost wages every year, according to the Conference Board of Canada" (p. 34). An Ontario task force on barriers encountered by foreign-trained professionals found that several types of barriers existed in the ways credentials were assessed, and it concluded that the province lacked a good system for assessing credentials (Gray, 1990, p. 34). Immigrants' credentials were sometimes not accepted because the profession or trade did not adequately understand the person's skills. Immigrant professionals were encountering systemic discrimination.

The foregoing studies concerned the challenges for able-bodied visible minority immigrant professionals who seek to resume their careers in Canada. The situation is worse for blind immigrant professionals, and it is easy to see that the rate of unemployment for that group will be high in their new country, Canada, despite their professional training and previous career experience.

My participants' experiences with unemployment in Canada are more than disheartening. It is devastating, especially to a blind person who has known what it is to be employed, have a respected career, and be independent. It can make a person feel that he is "little better than dead". As one of the participants said,

> "Blind people will get some amount of money from the government. It is limited; it is minimal. He will receive less than a person who receives minimum wage. Definitely, there will be stress.
>
> "The disabled person cannot live adequately with that money. He is a little bit better than the dead people. He is on the lowest rank of the living people.
>
> "The stress on the person is beyond what anyone could comprehend. It is such a tough life. Canada is not a favourable country for a blind disabled person to live in."

One of the sighted participants works hard to support her family while her educated blind husband is not able to use his career experience to work in Canada. She and her husband are standing by their firm beliefs. She said, "I and my husband would not be on welfare. We prefer to starve and die."

After the blind participants lost their careers and entered a life of unemployment and poverty in Canada, they struggled with family stress, financial pressure, and illnesses caused by anxiety and depression. They had not anticipated being unemployed in Canada and were not warned by Immigration officials that this was likely to happen. As one participant said, "The other thing that the government and immigration should recognize is the skill we bring, from overseas."

Just as they had worked so hard in their former country in order to achieve independence and to become a taxpayer, a full citizen, and to contribute to their country, so they continue in their new home to work toward their goal despite all obstacles. It is still their hope and their priority to become full citizens in their new homeland. One participant said, "When I am employed, earning money, I will have freedom. That is the time I would feel I am a success."

The metathemes which arose from the interview data revealed that Canada is allowing capable people to waste their productive years, unemployed, on social assistance. As Basran and Zong (1998) said, the high rate of unemployment in Canada for foreign-trained professionals results in "a tremendous waste of human capital" (p. 8). My blind participants believe that because of their unemployment they are wasting their lives here. Yet, disillusioned, they cannot go back to their homeland. As one discouraged participant said,

> "If I had the means to go back to where I came from, my original homeland, I would. However, I lost everything. I lost my previous job and my friends. I don't know how I could go back, even if I wanted to. And I don't know how I can convince the Canadian employers to hire me."

The experience of the participants with unemployment, despite their education and past career experience, is not unusual for blind people in general, in Canada. It is similar to the findings of the PALS survey of 2001. The PALS study looked at disability in general and found that, in Canada, unemployment is high among people with disabilities and earnings are lower than for able-bodied people. When I began my study there was no current research concerning employment and income rates for visually impaired or blind people in Canada. Since that time, the CNIB publication "An Unequal Playing Field" (2005) has been released.

In November, 2005, the CNIB reported the findings of their nation-wide study of the needs of people in Canada who are living with vision loss. The first two key findings from the CNIB's NEEDS study, as reported in "An Unequal Playing Field" (2005), are that many participants in the study live in poverty (p. 14), and that access to employment is a significant challenge for participants (p. 15).

The CNIB report (2005, p. 14) revealed that many adult participants' gross annual incomes fall below the LICOs (Canadian Low Income Cut Offs) for their family size and location (p. 14). In regard to blind participants living in poverty, the CNIB report confirmed that the situation of my study's participants was the norm. The CNIB reported that more than 25 per cent of the working age participants in their NEED study reported gross annual incomes of $10,000 or less (p. 14). That finding includes participants with and without dependents. The LICO for single persons is $14,000 - $20, 337 and the LICO for a family of two is $17,429 to $25,319. The NEED study found that almost 20% of adult consumer participants' incomes fall well below the low income cutoffs (p. 14).

Sixty-one per cent of CNIB participants with no usable vision lived on gross annual incomes of $20,000 or less, compared to participants with some usable vision, of whom 39 per cent lived on $20,000 or less (p. 118). This comparison revealed that the risk of living in poverty was higher for people with no vision.

The CNIB's NEED study (2005) found that adult participants reported high levels of unemployment. The researchers found that 25 per cent of working age adult participants in the study were employed or self employed and 49 per cent of working age participants were unemployed (not employed, not retired, and not semi-retired). Of the adult participants who reported they were unemployed at the time of the study, 93 per cent had been unemployed "for years" (2005, p. 15).

Metatheme: Personal and Family Strengths, and Metatheme: Importance of Social Support Network

For blind individuals, Teferra defined success as the achievement of certain criteria, such as employment and a valuable role in his or her community. Similarly, but for families, Nixon has defined "coping successfully with impairment". He states that,

> "A family can be said to be successfully coping with impairment when it is able to meet the major needs of all its members, facilitate their pursuit of realistic goals and roles in the family and society, and to enable them to live happy and contented lives" (Nixon, 1994, p. 331).

The majority of the families in my study were not able to "meet the major needs of all its members" at the level that they desired, because of financial hardship resulting from unemployment. The family members worked hard to "facilitate their pursuit of realistic goals and roles in the family and society" in order to strive to achieve "happy and contented lives" in the future. I believe that the strengths of the families which I shall describe in the remainder of this section show that the participants and their families are generally coping well with impairment despite the many challenges they face. The necessary improvements need to emerge in the social environment and not from the individuals in my study.

The study revealed that despite all their employment challenges after arriving in the new country, the participants and their families have the same personal strengths today that they developed in the past in Ethiopia.

The data revealed strengths such as:

Humour;
Knowing each other very well
Respect for the blind educated partner's capability;
Mutual respect and support;
Communication;
Activism to raise awareness and create respect;
Maintaining the respect of outsiders for one's partner and marriage;
Respect and equality in the relationship
Mutual empathy and caring;
Maintaining the marriage despite challenges

The participants and their partners remain strong and they persevere despite facing economic problems and the negative social construction of disability in this, their new country. The data revealed that one of their personal strengths is adaptability, because blind and sighted participants told of changing their social gender roles within the family. The sighted partners became the breadwinners and the adult blind family members took on a larger role in the family's affairs around the house.

It is an amazing finding that the partners kept their marriage vows intact. They maintained their loyalty to each other, despite unemployment, economic hardship, and stress related illness. These personal strengths are not only found among the blind adult participants but were also found among the sighted participants, as well.

One sighted participant described how family members continue to value the blind family member despite the fact that Canadian society seems to devalue that person. She said,

> "I see this situation affecting the family in two ways. When the blind person did not get a job in a timely manner, then the family is affected. Second, the family knows that the disabled person is intelligent. He is even more intelligent than them. They see him even as a jewel.
>
> "When other people see him as worthless, that makes me sad, and that even makes me angry. I am feeling bad that people do not see him in this way; they do not see his worth."

A blind participant said,

> "She knows my skills. She knows how I am a diligent worker. I think what we have here, between me and her, is that we have good communication. We communicate with honesty, every day. We share our frustration. We support each other every day."

There were several themes that showed that the participants and their partners respected and understood each other and were consistently caring. Several of the participants were friends before they became married. Good communication was also a strength that emerged from the data about relationships within the family. Some of the other themes that emerged from the data and that supported the metatheme about personal and family strengths are: "Maintaining and valuing one's cultural roots - culture is a strength"; "positive attitude"; and "children help/are supportive".

Humour was a very important personal strength. One participant reduced the impact of his gender role change in the family by telling this funny story:

> "I had a joke. … When I was in Ethiopia, I was the President of my family. But here, my wife is the Prime Minister of my family. Here, now in Canadian terms, I am the Governor General and she is the Prime Minister. My role within the family is ceremonial now" (he is a figure head and he doesn't have the power).
>
> "She does everything and she has the social network. Within the house, she is the one who manages everything. Even when she goes to funerals, she

> represents our household. More or less, she does all the jobs. She does everything. When there are guests, when they come home to our place, I am the one to greet them and this is a ceremonial thing.
>
> "And also, people call my children, my family by my last name, and that is ceremonial. It is not only because of being blind, but I am kind of naturally lazy within my family, so I thank my wife and children."

Sighted and blind participants all continue to hope. They hope that despite experiencing years of unemployment, one day they will be employed and fulfill their dreams, supporting their immediate families here and extended family members abroad in their homeland, Ethiopia.

The partners of blind participants are becoming vigilant regarding the issues of disability and its social construction. They know that in the past their partner accomplished much although today the partner is unemployed.

Despite all the challenges, I discovered that blind participants and their sighted partners are working hard to sustain their lives. They have brought with them the cultural saying that, "A person cannot clap with only one hand." Blind participants and their sighted partners, when they work together, can survive.

The other surprising thing is that although only one person is employed in their family, their family strength is really high, and it seems their family is happy despite the hardships they face.

As the data showed, family members can provide tangible or intangible support to each other. Nixon wrote that the intangible forms of support may include providing information, approval, affection, empathy, and respect (1994, p. 332). Family relations, family members' perceptions of the meanings of impairment, and social support from outside the family are three very important factors that influence how a family copes with disability (Nixon, 1994, p. 332-3).

It is important to realize that a family is a network of relationships that is connected to larger, external networks of relationships (Nixon, 1994, p. 333). For example, an immigrant family might establish social connections to a school, a neighbourhood, friends in their religious community, co-workers, or to a cultural organization.

Outside networks can be informal, or formal (Nixon, 1994, p. 333). Some formal support networks include: providers of disability services, medical institutions, employment agencies or services, or an inter-cultural support association. Formal and informal social networks can provide much needed information, as well as useful forms of help. Social support from networks that are outside the family is related to family coping with visual impairment (Nixon, 1994, p. 333).

The metatheme "Importance of social support network" was linked to the metatheme about "personal and family strengths", and was supported by several themes concerning social support on arrival in Canada, the necessity of a good social support network, and that having social support is a strength.

The interview data revealed that the one blind participant who was employed, and his family, receive huge support from their neighbours and from the community in which they live, as well. Their neighbours respect them and view the family as successful and co-operative.

The other families did not establish extensive social support networks. Because of the low level of financial income, the families lack the ability to create an extensive social support network, and I believe that might contribute to the fact that the blind participants are unemployed. This was also the finding of the CNIB research study

(2005). The NEED study reported that the most common way that visually-impaired or blind participants found their jobs was not by means of employment agencies. Their participants found employment through social connections and 'word of mouth' from somebody they knew.

Similarly, the second most common way was reported to be family connection or friends (CNIB, 2005, p. 134). The CNIB went on to say,

> "It seems that people with vision impairments would benefit if they learned how to build their social networks. Of course, networking is a form of social inclusion, and we theorize that the more marginalized or excluded the person with a vision impairment, the more likely that person is to be unemployed, and vice versa" (CNIB, 2005, p. 215).

Therefore, because my unemployed blind participants and their sighted partners and family members were living in poverty, they decreased their opportunity to build social support networks in the community, and therefore decreased their chances to build connections that might lead to finding employment. The CNIB (2005) report was similar to what I found in my study.

As one participant said, "If you don't have social connections, you are in a "house without windows." You are isolated. You cannot progress." Despite obstacles, the participants continue to struggle to build social connections in their neighbourhoods, cultural and spiritual communities.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I provided an overview of the meaning of the twelve metathemes. I then presented the twelve metathemes and discussed the first nine, along with their meanings and implications.

I have connected the first nine metathemes to the literature. The final three metathemes are: The Importance of Advocacy; Participants' Experiences Accessing Help from CNIB and Employment Agencies; and, Recommended Government Policy Improvement. Because all three have strong implications for policy change recommendations, it seems appropriate and practical to present and discuss the final three metathemes together in Chapter Six. Following their discussion, I address limitations to my study and make recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER 6

Policy Recommendations and Conclusion

Introduction

In this chapter, I present the three remaining metathemes which emerged from the interview data in my study. I connect the three metathemes to the literature. The metathemes are: The Importance of Advocacy; Participants' Experiences Accessing Help from CNIB and Employment Agencies; and, Recommended Government Policy Improvement. All three metathemes contain policy change recommendations. Therefore, it seems appropriate and practical to present and discuss the three metathemes together in this chapter. As I discuss the three metathemes in this chapter, I propose policy changes based on the experiences and recommendations of the participants.

I present a summary of results, followed by discussion of the limitations of my study. I make recommendations for future research, and conclude by addressing the need for change.

Discussion of Final Three Metathemes

Metatheme: Participants' Experiences Accessing Help from CNIB and Employment Agencies

"They tell you to come to their agency for three months and they promise that you will get a job", one participant told me. "But at the end, they said, "Mr. --, we will try to look for you, and you should look for opportunity as well." This happens after three or four months. They say, "We will let you know if we find you a job" and then they go for another victim. That is how the Canadian employment agencies work. So the government and the policy-makers need to legislate strict laws concerning this matter."

The blind participants' experiences accessing help from the CNIB were not any better than their job-seeking experiences with employment agencies. Their employment prospects were surprisingly bleak, despite participating in CNIB programs. One participant told me,

> "I went to the CNIB. I told the CNIB that I was ready to work in any type of job, anywhere. They were not helpful in finding me a job. I went to the CNIB for many years, but had no success."

Another blind participant said, bitterly,

> "I went to a lot of governmental and non-governmental employment agencies. I used to go every Wednesday to the CNIB employment career counselling. The CNIB employment career counselling was a joke. We were treated just as five- or six-year-old children.
>
> "One person said to the counsellor, "We are doing nothing. We are not children. I think the CNIB session might be good for *them* (children). If you want us to bring our children, we are willing to bring them here. As for us, we are not benefiting from this session." After that, the blind person who said this quit the CNIB employment career counselling. The blind person never came to the CNIB employment counsellor again, and I never saw that person again."

Since coming to Canada, all the educated blind participants accessed CNIB and other organizations, for the purpose of finding employment. Unanimously, all my blind participants were not benefiting from accessing these organizations. Their situation is similar to my own. I have accessed both types of agencies, and I have no benefit from those agencies except for disappointment and discouragement. This shows that the participants' experience has been congruent with my own experience. The employment organizations and the CNIB are not set up to effectively help blind people to find employment, and they do not presently have the means to do better for their blind immigrant clients than what my participants experienced.

One participant emphasized his belief that the CNIB would improve by becoming an organization "of" the blind. He said,

> "The Canadian National Institute *for* the Blind should be the Canadian National Institute *of* the Blind. The name has indicated the purpose of the CNIB here. In this country, the blind are not the owners of his or her organization."

If you work for an agency and you do something *"for"* the blind people, then the blind are constructed as weak, helpless, dependent, and incapable, and an agency is there to do something "for" them. You (the agency staff member) are the person with the power. You make decisions *for* the blind clients. You are not "of" them, so you may make mistakes about what is in their best interest, mistakes that they themselves would not make.

If, however, there is an organization *"of"* the blind, the blind people are constructed as being strong enough and wise enough about their own issues to make their own decisions as a group. The blind people would have the decision-making power. The agency would be administered by blind people, in the majority.

Unfortunately, despite their good intentions, the CNIB is an organization *for* the blind. One might also ask, who are the blind people they intend to help? Originally, the CNIB helped veterans, and even today their main focus is on seniors and on people who lost their sight later in life, rather than in their youth. Who is going to help the blind students and adults who still have potential careers ahead of them? The CNIB is not focusing on that adult blind employable group. Should people from that group become

CNIB members, the CNIB's structure as an organization for the blind does not allow them decision-making power.

As one blind participant told me,

> "In this country, I think the most important thing that is being missed is that the blind people need to fight and to take ownership of the whole issue. Canadian blind need to have a strong common front. Canadian blind need strong organization *of* the blind, not *for* the blind. The American Disability Act has done a lot of good things for the American blind consumers. This happened because the initiative was first taken by the blind community.
>
> "The difference is that the CNIB was first started for blind war veterans. Most of the war veterans spent their life up to adulthood as sighted people. When the CNIB was created, it was dealing with people who *used to be sighted*. The blind person's problems should be dealt with from the perspective of blindness. Blind people need to reorganize themselves."

CNIB membership is heavily weighted with seniors, as one can see by the participants in the NEED study - 57% were working age and 43% were seniors (CNIB, 2005, p. 46). Thus, the CNIB's interest is on the issues that affect seniors and people who lose their sight later in life. Four focus groups were held for the NEED study, of which three were held with senior's groups (CNIB, 2005, p. 40). People who lost their sight later in life are not as likely to have the same issues, needs, and challenges as people who are young and still seeking employment and a high level of independence. For example, most of the CNIB clients use tape recorders (55.8%), handheld magnifiers (52.5%), and talking clocks, rather than having a motivation (such as education or employment) to learn to use computer technology (only 6 %), scanners (18%), refreshable Braille display technology such as PacMate or Braille Light (only 3%), or other electronic technology that is available in a wide range of technology for blind consumers. All statistics regarding assistive devises are from the NEED study (CNIB, 2005, p. 78).

When the educated blind participants in my study went to employment agencies, again, they received no practical help that resulted in successfully finding employment. All but one blind participant remains unemployed. The one who finally found a job did not find it because of the services of employment agencies.

The blind participants told of encountering barriers such as, "lack of Canadian work experience", "need for education", followed by being categorized as "over-qualified". One participant said,

> "I brought a copy of my degree and a copy of my community service worker diploma to the CNIB, and a list of my back-home work experience. The only thing the CNIB said was, "We wish that you had a Master's degree." Even if I had a Masters, I know that the CNIB would say, "We wish that you had a PhD degree." And those people who had Masters and PhD degrees were told by the CNIB that they were overqualified. After the CNIB told me that, I quit going to the CNIB."

The employment agencies and the CNIB were not helping the blind participants to find employment. Instead, the participants were coming up against a wall, as the poem in Chapter Five has described. It was a systemic barrier. I have encountered the same barriers in my own experience.

When are my blind participants and others like them going to get employment, if the agencies are not willing to improve the ways that they work with blind people? The agencies are not connecting them to potential employers.

Employers are not even accessing the HRDC funding with which, if an employer hired a blind applicant, his or her full salary would be subsidized for one year and necessary equipment would be provided. Employment agencies and the CNIB should make sure that the HRDC funding is well-publicized to potential employers. I believe that if this HRDC funding was offered to any employer, the employer would have no reason to refuse to hire the blind applicant. Nevertheless, the CNIB and the employment agencies do not advocate on behalf of their blind clients.

The participants said it eloquently. One participant said that the employment agency staff would ask you to come for three months. After you attend for three months, they say "don't call us; we'll call you", and they move on to their "next victim".

All the blind and sighted participants in my study emphasized that future government policy must be created to address the lack of effective help from CNIB and from employment agencies.

When I look at my blind participant's experiences with employment agencies, I see that they were encountering agency staff and employers who were unaware of the capabilities of blind employees and who have a negative construction of blindness. I see similarities to what Vaughan described in *Social and cultural perspective on blindness* (1998). Vaughan spoke of the socialization of blind people. Blind people become socialized during their interactions with other people during childhood and adulthood. During socialization, they learn about the roles that are expected of them, and they construct a concept of their disability. That socialization occurred for my participants back in their former homeland, and here in Canada. At the same time, service providers and potential employers are also being socialized about blindness.

Vaughan writes that, "The individual has much to learn and is suddenly confronted by parents, friends, teachers and service providers who may have widely different ideas about blindness and future prospects" (1998, p. 28). Service providers and employers may have a negative construction of "blindness", and I and my participants believe that it is up to the CNIB, employment agencies, government policy-makers, and blind people themselves to change that negative construction.

Vaughan adds that, although it was written three decades ago, he knows of no one who has significantly improved on Scott's *The Making of Blind Men* (Vaughan, 1998, p. 28). Scott discusses how blindness is constructed among the ordinary people in the blind person's family and community, based on what is thought to be "common sense", (Scott, 1969, p. 4). He adds that blind people begin to display many different kinds of behaviours which are derived from their interactions with others (Scott, 1969, p. 14-15). According to Scott,

> "The disability of blindness is a learned social role. The various attitudes and patterns of behavior that characterize people who are blind are not inherent in their condition but, rather, are acquired through the ordinary processes of social learning. Thus, there is nothing inherent in the condition of blindness that requires a person to be docile, dependent, melancholy or helpless" (Scott, 1969, p. 14).

Scott holds that a person's identity or self concept grows from his experience as a "socialized human being" (Scott, 1969, p. 15). A person's self image develops as he sees what expectations others have of him and he believes he will fulfill the expectations. "Because of this, the substance of a man's self image largely consists of his perceptions of the evaluations that others make of him, and particularly those others whose opinions he values most highly" (Scott, 1969, p. 15). Thus, the blind person learns that he is rewarded for behaving in ways that others judge appropriate.

My blind participants gained their self image or self concept in childhood and youth, in the boarding schools and university, which empowered them with the beliefs, confidence and skills to gain education, a career, and independence. The interview data revealed that the participants' positive beliefs came into conflict when they arrived in

Canada and faced the negative disempowering construction of blindness held by administrators of employment agencies and by potential employers.

Socialization occurs in three arenas: in childhood, in face-to-face interaction with sighted people, and in interactions with the organizations created to help blind people (Scott, 1969, p. 16-17). The interview data upholds Scott's idea of three arenas or areas for socialization. Scott's third area of socialization is very important. Through "this complicated network of organizations, agencies and programs for the blind, the phenomenon of blindness in our (North American) society has literally been transformed" from how blindness was constructed in the past (Scott, 1969, p. 16-17).

Has the construction of blindness been transformed in a positive or a negative way? Scott writes that the number of people who returned to their jobs or found competitive employment after seeking the help of what he terms 'blindness agencies' is, "in all probability, quite small" (1969, p. 108). His statement is supported by the experience of my blind participants and by the findings of the PALS study (HRDC, 2003, p.39) and the CNIB's NEED study (2005, p. 14).

Scott is looking at the experiences of blind people in North America, and the construction of blindness in North America. He labels as the "independent blind" those people who have managed to avoid dependency relationships with agencies and who have become integrated into ordinary life in the community (Scott, 1069, p. 108). That concept of the "independent blind" is similar to Tefferra's (1998, p. 68-89) construction of a "high achiever", who would be involved in the community, but in addition, Teferra's independent blind person would be *employed*. The difference between the two definitions demonstrates the difference between the Ethiopian and the North American constructions of blindness.

Scott's concept of blindness includes the view that those who succeed in escaping a dependent lifestyle are unusual; they have special qualities among blind people. He said, "While it is not a necessary condition for independence, blind people who manage to live independent lives often have either an independent income or some special and unusual quality or talent or both" (Scott, 1969, p. 108). I believe that the experience of my blind participants in this study shows that they did not require special, unusual qualities to achieve education and a career. They just needed opportunity, motivation, and a somewhat supportive environment.

I would agree with Scott that socialization does take place and it has a strong influence on people's self concept and their expectations about their abilities and their role in life. Nevertheless, the experience of my blind participants when in Ethiopia shows that socialization can be positive and empowering. Socialization of blind people does not have to be the limiting and negative experience that occurs in North America.

Vaughan accepts Scott's view of socialization, adding only one criticism. He points out that people are not objects; they are not blank slates. They are able to reflect on their experiences. Vaughan notes that there is "a reflective aspect of self development. Individuals are more than the passive objects of socialization experiences" (Vaughan, 1998, p. 30).

In response to Vaughan's comment that people can reflect on their socialization, I have encountered many Canadian-born blind people who have not overcome the negative construction and low expectations of their blindness. They have encountered negative expectations while they were being "socialized", growing up in North America and they continue to encounter negative construction of blindness later, as they seek employment. It is very saddening, even heartbreaking.

In contrast to the experience of native-born Canadians, my sighted and blind participants from Ethiopia have encountered both positive and negative constructions of blindness. They could critique the disempowering expectations of blind people that they encountered in Canada because they knew differently. The blind participants had already achieved careers and independence in the past. It is expecting a lot to think that Canadian-born blind people can just overcome the negative expectations that many have encountered all their lives. In my experience, some do; many do not.

Employment agencies and other social institutions are "manufacturing" or constructing blindness in a way that benefits themselves but leads to a system resulting in dependence for blind people (Vaughn, 1998, p. 20). In this system, blind people are to be "take(n) care of" (Vaughn, 1998, p. 20). My participants dealt with the negative construction of blindness in such Canadian agencies for ten to fifteen years. Only one found employment, and he did not find it by means of the agencies for the blind or employment agencies. Agencies should be held accountable for what they are doing. Discrimination based on their blindness is a social atrocity visited upon blind people.

Reforms are suggested when I discuss the metatheme 'Recommended Government Policy Improvement'. As James Overboe (1994) writes when concluding his critique of "disability" as a social category, the people who are using a negative social construction of blindness need to take responsibility for the actions.

> "… I believe that the able-bodied must begin to examine the extent to which they employ the abstract category of disability to devalue and exclude people with disabilities from participation in society. Then, they too must take responsibility for their actions" (Overboe, 1994, p. 152.)

Metatheme: Importance of Advocacy, and Metatheme: Recommended Government Policy Improvement

After coming to Canada, my participants found that their expectations for independence were not met. Governmental and non-governmental agencies were not set up to assist and advocate for the blind in their unmet need to live independently and self-sufficiently. One participant stated the case very clearly, "The CNIB and other organizations for the disabled in this country are not working to make increased awareness about this issue."

Agencies who work for blind citizens need to make changes so that blind people can achieve independence. The blind participants, like many other blind Canadians, want to resume their careers and support their family.

My blind and sighted participants emphasized that lack of awareness and lack of advocacy are two of the main problems underlying the unemployment of educated blind people in Canada. One participant put it this way:

> "All the concerned disability organizations need to have awareness … not only for the employers but for the general society as well. They need to be open, and to raise awareness of what we disabled people can do.
>
> "They should use highly accomplished blind people and disabled people as an example. Raising awareness about what disabled people can do will help society to learn. Then, as a result, disabled people can have the opportunity to work."

All the blind and sighted participants emphasized the importance of advocacy for all agencies that work with blind people. Such advocacy is lacking. Most Canadian employers are not aware of the capability of blind educated prospective employees. Advocates need to raise the awareness of employers.

Further, the Canadian federal and provincial governments need to step in. Policy-makers must become aware of the bleak situation for immigrant blind people, as well as the negative and disempowering construction of blindness in this country. The federal government needs to legislate and reform the laws in order to address these issues.

In *Social and Cultural Perspectives on Blindness*, Vaughan (1998) points out that organizations for the blind produce cultural images of blindness. He notes that, "Although (these organizations are) frequently intended to rehabilitate and educate blind people for participation in wider society, they can become an actual barrier to normal participation" (Vaughan, 1998, p. 32).

Vaughan points out that "ordinary citizens may come to think of these agencies as the "place where you send blind people"" (1998, p. 33). At the same time, citizens are receiving the impression or construction of a blind person as someone who does not belong in the work force. Often the organizations for the blind are the only resource that blind people have, so if the organizations are not set up to advocate for the employment needs of blind people, then the job seeker has few options. The majority of blind people, whether or not they are educated, are doomed in their lifetime to experience lengthy unemployment and underemployment, as the PALS study (HRDC, 2003) and the CNIB's NEED study (2005) have demonstrated.

In what way can the government change the dire situation for blind people? My participants can tell the elected representatives of the Canadian people, the policymakers, just exactly what they need to change.

"Do not underestimate disabled people," I was told. "No matter for an able or a disabled person, employment should be mandatory."

If we do our work based on the assumption that "employment should be mandatory," it could change the thinking of society and of all the organizations that serve people with disabilities.

Employment is part of full citizenship. The vision of my participants is to be able to work at the level of the best of their abilities. That also is part of the ideal of full citizenship. Policymakers should work toward that ideal. The *Charter for the Third Millenium* (Rehabilitation International, 1999) advocates that it become the goal of all nations "to evolve into societies that protect the rights of people with disabilities by supporting their full empowerment and inclusion in all aspects of life".

The Charter calls upon all governments around the globe to take part in creating change for their citizens who have disabilities, with the "conviction that implementation of its aims is a primary responsibility of each government" (Rehabilitation International, 1999). As Overboe has said, those who have the power to create change should take up the responsibility (1994, p. 152). Change will begin with a change in the attitude of educators, administrators of employment agencies, and elected representatives of the Canadian people.

Rehabilitation International's *Charter for the Third Millenium* (1999) points out that relevant non-governmental organizations must also live up to their responsibility to create social change for people with disabilities. The lack of accountability of employment agencies made my participants very angry. Some felt victimized.

"The government puts aside a lot of money for this purpose, but the employment agencies are using or diverting the money for their own purposes only, or God knows where the money is being used", said one participant. Another said, "They tell you to come to their agency for three months … and then they go for another victim." Another participant said,

> "There are a lot of employment agencies that work for disabled people in this country (Canada). I tell you, there is no accountability for these employment agencies. The government and the policy-makers need to be aware of this situation and they need to legislate new laws concerning these issues."

The lack of awareness and even outright prejudice and ablism that was typical in the experiences of my blind participants and their sighted partners has been noted by the creators of the *Charter for the Third Millenium*. "Scientific and social progress in the 20th century has increased understanding of the unique and inviolate value of each life. Yet ignorance, prejudice, superstition and fear still govern much of society's response to disability" (Rehabilitation International, 1999). The *Charter for the Third Millenium* advocates "dismantling all environmental … and attitudinal barriers to full inclusion in community life …. What is needed is the political determination of governments to end this affront to humanity."

One participant advised,

> "The government needs to work with agencies for the blind and with other educational institutes to raise public awareness about blindness. The government should set up an educational program to deal with this issue.
>
> "I would like to see the Persons with a Disability Act being used in practice. There should be equal opportunity and equal access, and they should translate that into practice. When the government does that, a blind person

> seeking employment will have concrete things to argue and to defend his rights. This should be legislated."

Another participant spoke of the need for help for newly-arrived immigrants who have a disability and for their families, saying:

> "Well, I would like to tell the Canadian government that once the immigrant has arrived, the government and non-government (agencies) need to help the disabled (person and their) family. When they help the one blind person, indirectly they are helping the whole family. When you are helping your family, you are helping the country as well. When the government is helping the family to become able to get off of social assistance, then the government is saving their money as well".

As the interview data shows, we clearly need a change in government policy. The government's goal must be to support the immigrant who has a disability as well as his or her family to achieve independence through access to employment.

A natural first step would be to organize focus group discussions across the country. Focus groups should consist of blind immigrant people, their partners, their employers and potential employers, and representatives of the agencies that serve the blind directly (e.g., CNIB and others) and indirectly (such as employment agencies). The most clear ideas about the changes that are needed will arise from the people who need the changes: the blind people themselves who are seeking employment. That is why focus group discussions are needed.

If the people who have the power to make the changes come face-to-face with the blind people, then perhaps the barriers to employment will become visible and will be torn down, once and for all. Starting from that first step of focus group discussions, and processing through the required steps to create laws and policies and implement the changes, we could eventually achieve a country in which people with a disability have access to independence, employment and full citizenship. At that point, we can be proud of our nation, because, as Gandhi said, we can judge a nation's worth by the way it treats its weakest members.

As my participants have said, they all arrived in Canada with skills and education, and they believed that they could use their career experience and their education in their new home. Among the blind participants were lawyers, teachers, mathematicians, and more. Despite having obtained further education after they came to Canada, they still could not find employment. They all live below the low income cut off (LICO) standard of Statistics Canada. They all are beseeching the government to make changes concerning advocacy for the blind, raising awareness of the capabilities of blind people, and increasing the opportunities for their independence.

Policies to Create an Inclusive Society

In the opening to the *Charter for the Third Millenium*, the Charter's creators advocate "a world where equal opportunity for disabled people becomes a natural consequence of enlightened policies and legislation supporting full inclusion in, and access to, all aspects of society" (Rehabilitation International, 1999). What kind of supportive and beneficial policies and policy changes can our government, and other governments, make? In this section, I will advocate policy changes which arose from the experiences of my blind and sighted participants.

To begin, a 1998 study by Basran and Zong revealed that the most important factor contributing to the unemployment of foreign-trained professionals was "nonrecognition or devaluation of their foreign credentials" (p. 11). Nonrecognition of their foreign work experience was also an important problem (p. 12). My first recommendation is that the Canadian government should take the initiative to dismantle these roadblocks to employment, by creating an internship program. Such a program would place immigrant professionals with employers to enable them to access Canadian work experience. To do this would help employers to raise their awareness of foreign-trained people's work abilities, as well. Such a program has been tried in Ontario, and 85 per cent of participants found full-time employment by the end of their internship (Gray, 2005, p. 34).

Secondly, I recommend the creation of a mentoring program. It would connect skilled immigrants, sighted or blind, with people who currently are employed in the same profession or field. It would provide a connection to existing professional networks.

A third recommendation is that the federal and provincial governments need to create an effective and clear system for assessing foreign credentials. Miller (*Worklife Report*, 1990) coordinated the Task Force on Access to Professions and Trades. He investigated barriers to employment for foreign-trained professionals and skilled tradespeople, and reported that Canadian assessment systems are lacking in clarity, validity, and fairness. Miller said that "in some cases, people were being discriminated against" because they were trained outside the country (p. 16). Miller and the task force recommended in 1990 that there be one organization, reporting to government, which would gain information on the education and training provided by institutions around the world, and which would provide a fair rating of the credentials of foreign-trained applicants (*Worklife Report*, 1990, p. 16-17).

Basran and Zong (1998) reiterated what Miller had said: 84 per cent of their participants reported that difficulty in having their foreign credentials recognized affected their opportunity to practice in their chosen professions (p. 16). Over 55 per cent of the educated, experienced professionals in their study reported that their foreign work experience was not being fairly recognized by government agencies, professional organizations and educational institutions (p. 15). As well, 59 per cent of their participants believed their work experience was compared to Canadian standards in an unfair manner (Basran & Zong, 1998, p. 15). Despite Basran and Zong's 1998 findings and Miller's 1990 recommendations, immigrants (including my participants) today face the same barriers to employment based on lack of acceptance of their foreign training and work experience.

Almost eighty per cent of the foreign-trained professionals in Basran and Zong's 1998 study thought that the federal and provincial governments had not done enough to assist them to find employment in Canada (p. 16). Basran and Zong, like my participants, believe that for professional people to be left unemployed is a huge waste of human lives and potential. It is a tremendous waste of a Canadian resource in the form of human capital.

My fourth recommendation is that the accountability of agencies which help visually impaired and blind people be increased. My participants all spoke of the lack of accountability that they and their families perceived during their experiences with employment agencies and agencies for the blind. They believe there should be someone in authority to critique how agencies are fulfilling their mandate, for which agencies and societies are receiving either the public's charitable donations or government funding. I recommend that there be an office created for this purpose. The appointed "watchdog" should report and make recommendations both to the government and to the public.

Fifth, in regard to awareness, I recommend that a government agency be created for the sole purpose of raising public awareness of the capabilities of visually-impaired or blind people.

Sixth, I recommend that this agency, and all agencies for the blind, be staffed and administered in the majority by blind and visually impaired people. The people who administer and staff the organizations need to be an example and a role model to the public and to other blind people as to what blind people can do. All my participants emphasized the need to raise public awareness about the capabilities of blind people. My seventh recommendation is that all educational institutions such as schools, colleges and universities be encouraged to hire one or more visually impaired or blind persons to be on staff in an appropriate and visible position.

No longer should non-European immigrants naively enter the country expecting to find prosperity and many opportunities for their family. Studies show that the situation is bleak after arrival for *sighted* ethnic minority immigrants (York University, 2006; Basran & Zong, 1998) and the situation is worse for the person with a disability who is an immigrant, such as my blind participants. Unemployment and poverty is not what I and my participants were told would happen to us, by immigration officials when we discussed immigrating to Canada. Perhaps the officials were the naïve ones. My eighth recommendation is that immigration officials and staff be provided with the findings of current studies as to the real situation for ethnic minority immigrants in Canada, whether or not they have a disability or are able-bodied.

Further, I recommend that a policy be formed by which immigration officials begin to inform potential immigrants as to the real economic situation facing them upon arrival in Canada. There is a genuine need to make potential immigrants – especially immigrants who have a disability, and their families - aware of the high risk of poverty and unemployment that faces them and their families in Canada.

Summary of Results

My phenomenological and heuristic study was designed to explore the central research question, "What is the lived experience of Ethiopian immigrant families in Canada in which one adult member is blind?" The study also examined several sub-questions, such as: How does the fact that one family member has a disability affect the family as a whole, in their experience as immigrants in Canada? What are the social barriers that the blind immigrant and his or her family have encountered during the experience adapting to Canadian society? What are the strengths and coping mechanisms of the family members? And, what can they tell us would improve their lives and the lives of other immigrant families with a blind adult family member?

The interview process enabled me to gather the experiences of eight sighted or blind participants who were all adult immigrants originally from Ethiopia. The interview data went through a process of narrative analysis and was divided into categories and then separated into themes. Twelve metathemes emerged from the data analysis of 323 themes. They were: Comparison of Ethiopia and Canada's treatment of blind people, High Achievement, Persistence and perseverance, Ethiopian expectations about a blind child or student, Social construction of disability, Importance of Advocacy, Unemployment in Canada, Desire to be independent and self-supporting, Personal and family strengths, Importance of social support network, Participants' experiences accessing help from CNIB and employment agencies, and Recommended Government Policy Improvement.

During the process of my study, the emerging themes supported the view that "disability" is a social construction and that it is merely a characteristic. Despite their "disability", my six blind participants achieved academic education and carried out fulfilling careers in one country. They then endured long years of poverty and unemployment in a second country. The sighted participants who were partners of educated blind professionals verified their partners' experiences of poverty and ableism since immigrating to their new country. The two contrasting experiences demonstrated that "disability" was framed positively or negatively by whichever social environment in which the educated blind professionals lived and worked.

In contrast to the stereotype that successful blind people must be special or talented, the study revealed that blind people can become educated and employed in their careers when there is motivation, opportunity, and some small amount of social support. The participants all believe that employment is part of full citizenship.

The participants' experiences revealed that Canadian employment agencies lack accountability, and that agencies and the organizations for the blind are providing ineffective help for blind people seeking employment. Several participants noted that we need "organizations *of* the blind, not *for* the blind."

The study revealed that certain personal and family strengths of the sighted and blind participants have supported them to stay together and to persist without giving up hope. Despite hardships related to long term unemployment, the participants continue to live fairly peaceably within their families. Their support for each other within the family, and their persistence and refusal to give up hope was striking. All the participants called out for increased activism and advocacy for both Canadian-born and immigrant blind people, on the part of the Canadian government.

Limitations

There are a number of factors that limited my study. First, the views of my six blind and two sighted Ethiopian immigrant participants may not be generalized to all Ethiopian immigrants in Canada whose family includes an educated blind adult member.

Language was also a limitation. In order to allow all participants to fully express themselves, I interviewed them in their ethnic language, either Amharic or Tigrigna. During the process of transcription, I myself translated their words and ideas into English. At this point, I was limited by my own knowledge of the English language. I worked very hard to be able to retain the nuances of the participants' words and metaphors. It is my hope that I have done them justice in my work of translation. To address this limitation, their transcription was provided to each participant to obtain feedback. Although all transcripts were approved, I regret that it is not possible to fully provide English readers with the cultural richness of my participants' language.

The third limitation is that interview data provided only a snapshot of the experiences of eight immigrants to Canada who belong to families with an educated, blind adult member. To understand more about their experiences would require a large scale research study. With more time spent on each participant's interviews, with a larger number of participants, and with a method that includes the gathering of quantitative data, the researcher would increase the generalizability of the findings (the metathemes).

Fourth, to have interviewed the children of the participants would also have provided a fuller understanding of the family dynamics and the family's experiences.

A fifth limitation of my study is that it included only one blind female participant, and no sighted male participants. To have equally balanced the numbers of males and females would have provided a fuller understanding of the situation for both genders, for example in regard to gender role change in their situation.

A sixth limitation of my study is that I compare the situation of educated blind Ethiopian immigrants and their families to the situation of Canadian-born blind employment-seekers, without having included Canadian-born blind people in my study. I relied on statistics from the PALS study (HRDC, 2003) and the NEED report (CNIB, 2005) to provide a statistical picture of the education, employment and similar economic dilemma of Canadian-born blind adults seeking employment. I had only the statistical "picture" and did not have data concerning lived experience. Had I included Canadian-born blind participants in my study, it would have allowed me to obtain their lived experience in the form of qualitative data from interviews, in order to compare it to the qualitative data obtained from blind Ethiopian immigrant participants.

The final limitation to my study is that it includes only the phenomenological and heuristic model. I did not use any standardized psychological tests (e.g., the BECK Depression Inventory). I did not use other applied tools (e.g., a behaviourist recording of observation of the participants' interactions within their families by a sighted observer) to report or document the participants' experiences. As a result, only the participants' lived experience as they described it can be reported and understood.

Recommendations for further research

Before I began the study, my experience and knowledge was that when the challenges for immigrant families become overwhelming, the family is often broken apart by divorce. To my surprise, in my study of immigrant families who have one adult blind member, I encountered resilient families who had survived the severe challenges of employment discrimination, poverty and lengthy unemployment in Canada. More than surviving the challenges, the couples kept their wedding vows intact and they solved their immediate problems through practicing good communication with each other. They accepted the reality of unemployment and economic hardship instead of separating or divorcing. What made their family dynamics so strong and supportive? This question could be a useful basis for another research study.

I propose also that it would be worthwhile to create a study to investigate the experiences of the children of immigrants with a disability. They have observed the hardships that their parents with a disability have encountered. What have they learned from this? What will their own strengths be in the future, because of this challenging experience, and what paths will they take in their lives? I am curious about what this research would reveal. I believe the knowledge gained will be valuable for the next generation as well as a contribution to academic knowledge.

I believe that future research into the experience of immigrants with a disability who arrived in Canada should involve the immigrant people themselves. They should be involved not only in telling their own story, as my study did, but in designing the research itself and choosing the goals. It would be Participatory Action Research. That sort of research would be inspiring, and it would allow immigrant people with a disability to find ways to access their future careers. Being involved in such a study would bring out their strengths within themselves and motivate them. It would allow an opportunity for the participants to support each other and other blind people in creating ways to break down the barriers that prevent them from achieving their hopes and goals.

Further, a PAR study could be designed that would involve blind participants and policy makers, educators, and potential employers. The study's goals would be to raise awareness of the hardship encountered by unemployed or underemployed immigrant families and of the capabilities of the immigrant people with a disability. If the stakeholders are all involved in creating the design and the specific goals, the study might create very useful recommendations for policy changes.

Conclusion: The Urgent Need for Change

The high unemployment rates for Canadian immigrant people with a disability as well as the conditions of poverty for immigrant families with a disabled member reveal unjust barriers to employment and disgraceful social conditions in this wealthy nation. We Canadians are very capable of creating better employment opportunities for people with disabilities than what is revealed by the HRDC and CNIB statistics and by my participants' own experiences. I believe the data clearly shows that educated people with a disability and their families don't want a handout. They want training and employment. Employment is part of achieving full citizenship.

The unemployment rates and high risk of living below the poverty line experienced by educated blind immigrants and their families were not what my participants expected to find when they arrived in a country which is wealthier than their former country, Ethiopia. Their experiences can be described as a situation of social injustice.

Such unjust social conditions do not meet the ideals of Canadian society. We are living in the 21st century; we are a nation of great resources, and yet barriers to employment based on an ableist construction of disability still exist in our country. Ableism and lack of awareness of the capabilities of blind people affect the lives of the blind, whether or not they are well trained and educated. Their lives are negatively affected whether or not they were born in Canada, or arrived here as immigrants. However, immigrant blind people do face "double jeopardy". Immigrant blind people's risk of unemployment and poverty is higher than for mainstream blind people.

As Williams said, it is "a social, cultural and economic tragedy" (2002). It is a black mark on our history. Future generations will judge North Americans poorly for what we have done by not recognizing and improving the current tragic conditions for people with a disability. As Overboe (1994) said, the able-bodied have a responsibility to examine "how they use the abstract category of disability to devalue and exclude people with disabilities from participation in society", adding that "they too must take responsibility for their actions" (p. 152). I believe all educated people and all Canadians have a responsibility. It lies upon us all to work to dismantle the barriers to employment, and thus to full citizenship, not only for immigrant people with a disability, but for all disabled people in Canada. For that reason, in a previous section of this chapter I have provided my policy recommendations as to how we might accomplish such a change.

In conclusion, I and my participants walked as ordinary people walked. We went to school, we developed our desires, we worked and fulfilled our ambitions, and we became independent. As anyone could wish, we created and developed our careers and started our families. The progress of our lives was suddenly interrupted and we immigrated to a new country, hoping for a bright future. Little did we know, on arrival, that our blindness would be more than a characteristic in this country. Our blindness was constructed in a way that was a barrier that restricts us from finding employment and thus prevents full citizenship in Canada. For many of us, the years since immigration have been wasted and unfulfilling because we could not resume our careers and work to the fullest of our abilities. Still, none of us have abandoned hope.

The sighted and the blind participants in my study, and I as well, urge the government of Canada and its policymakers to act in the most humane way possible and to live up to the ideals of Canadian society, to allow us full citizenship. For my part, this experience has been a burden for me, personally, during the last fifteen years. It is my hope that writing this account will lift the burden from my back, and I will be able to continue on from where I am now. I am passing on this account as a torch. Now it is up to the readers to carry the torch and continue the journey, until one day everyone, whether or not they are able-bodied, will be able to live and work as equal citizens in their home country.

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Appendix A

Human Research Ethics Board
Certificate of Approval

Principal Investigator	Department/School	Supervisor
Abebe Teklu **Graduate Student**	**EDCD**	**Dr. Budd Hall**

Co-Investigator(s):

Julia A. Allain, Research Assistant, UVic

Project Title: **The Voice of Ethiopian Blind Immigrants and their Families: Facing the Challenges of Life in Canada**

Protocol No.	Approval Date	Start Date	End Date
05-107	**13-May-05**	**13-May-05**	**12-May-06**

Certification

This certifies that the UVic Human Research Ethics Board has examined this research protocol and concludes that, in all respects, the proposed research meets appropriate standards of ethics as outlined by the University of Victoria Research Regulations Involving Human Subjects.

Dr. Richard Keeler
Associate Vice-President, Research

This Certificate of Approval is valid for the above term provided there is no change in the procedures. Extensions or minor amendments may be granted upon receipt of a "Research Status" form.

05-107 Teklu, Abebe

Appendix B Participant Consent Form – Blind participant

[Your department letterhead] ***Participant Consent Form***

The voice of Ethiopian blind immigrants and their families: Facing the challenges of life in Canada

You are being invited to participate in a study entitled, "The voice of Ethiopian blind immigrants and their families: Facing the challenges of life in Canada" that is being conducted by Abebe A. Teklu.

Abebe Teklu is a doctoral graduate student in the department of Curriculum and Instruction in the Faculty of Education at the University of Victoria and you may contact him if you have further questions by telephoning him at (250)360-4043, or emailing him at abebe1@shaw.ca or abebetek@uvic.ca.

As a graduate student, I am required to conduct research as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree in Education. It is being conducted under the supervision of Dr. Budd Hall. You may contact my supervisor at (250)721-7757 (email: bhall@uvic.ca).

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The purpose of this research project is to explore the family issues of Ethiopian immigrant families in which one adult member is blind. How does the fact that one family member is disabled affect the family as a whole, in their experience as immigrants in Canada?

Research of this type is important because it is valuable to explore the social and cultural barriers that disabled (blind) immigrants and their families face in Canada, as well as the common family issues that emerge. Social workers, researchers, human service providers, and policy makers will benefit from increased knowledge about the issues for a disabled immigrant and his or her family in Canada, and from learning about the family's strengths and methods of coping with stress.

You are being asked to participate in this study because you have expressed interest in being a participant and you meet the relevant criteria.

If you agree to voluntarily participate in this research, your participation will include meeting myself and my research assistant at a convenient, mutually-agreed-upon location in your area, and taking part in an interview from one to one and one-half hours long.

Participation in this study may cause some inconvenience to you, such as the time it takes to go through the interview process (1 to 1 ½ hours) and possibly some transportation time to and from the interview.

There are some potential risks to you by participating in this research and they include possibly feeling embarrassed to disclose periods of unemployment during the interview. To prevent or to deal with these risks the following steps will be taken. I can assure you that you are not alone in facing such issues. In fact, I myself as a blind immigrant have faced the same problems. During the interview there will be a chance to take a break if it is needed, a chance to debrief, a chance to reschedule the interview, or the choice to stop the research activity altogether if you so desire. At the end of the interview, I will provide a referral list of available support and/or local counselling services and community resources. If emotional support is needed, my research assistant will not be far away, and is a trained counsellor. We will conduct the interview in Tigrigna or in Amharic. It is my hope that using our native languages will help you to feel comfortable and secure.

The potential benefits of your participation in this research include: It is an opportunity for you to tell about your experiences, in your own words, in a supportive atmosphere (since the researcher is also a blind immigrant from Ethiopia). Sharing your story may allow you a chance to express the joy and pain of your family's experiences, and to realize the strengths you've shown and the learning that has occurred. This can be an empowering process. You may even gain a broader perspective on your life.
You will also benefit by knowing that your participation in the study may help other people in the future. Knowledge gained from the study will help professionals, researchers and policy-makers to assist blind disabled immigrants and their families to improve their lives in the future. Society will benefit from this study because if the knowledge gained from the study is used to help immigrant families with a blind adult member, then the families will not face such huge stresses. There will be more knowledge available concerning the stresses on this population and there will be recommendations to help with addressing employment issues and with improving family dynamics within stressed immigrant families.

Your participation in this research must be completely voluntary. If you do decide to participate, you may withdraw at any time without any consequences or any explanation. If you do withdraw from the study your data will be destroyed.

To make sure that you continue to consent to participate in this research, I will provide the consent form in Braille to all participants who are blind. In advance of the interview I will provide you and all participants with a clear statement of the nature of the research project, my identity and affiliation to the University of Victoria, and a description of the type of questions to be asked. I estimate the interview will take 1 to 1 ½ hours. Your participation in the study must be voluntary. You may withdraw at any time without consequences or explanation and in that case your data will be discarded.

I will ask for you to confirm that you give consent at the start of the interview and I will ask for you to again give verbal consent at the end of the interview.

In terms of protecting your anonymity, names and identifying details will be changed as described below. However, because there are not a large number of Ethiopian blind immigrants in Canada, it is not possible to completely guarantee total anonymity.

Your confidentiality and the confidentiality of the data will be protected by the following measures. You and all participants will choose a pseudonym. Identifying details about your circumstances will be changed or omitted, (e.g., your age). I will change or omit the name of your city of residence, companies for which you have worked, names of Canadian training agencies in which you attended programs; names of religious communities you belong to; names of schools that children may attend; names of your family members and friends.

If I received your name from a source in the blind community, I will not tell the source whether you decide to join in on the study or not. I advise you to help keep it a secret that you have been a participant in my study.

It is anticipated that the results of this study will be shared with others in the following ways. The interview data will be used in the dissertation in a modified form (as themes) and also in an unmodified form (as excerpts from transcripts). Identifying details will be altered to maintain confidentiality. The results will be presented in written form in a dissertation, and results may also be published in a professional journal. The results will be presented orally to my doctoral committee, in fulfillment of the research requirements for completion of the Ph.D. degree at the University of Victoria. The results may also be presented from time to time in written or oral presentations to other professionals and interested groups. In whatever way the results of this research are communicated to others, I will strictly maintain anonymity and confidentiality in regard to yourself and all participants.

Data from this study will be disposed of in the following way: All tapes will be destroyed immediately after they have been transcribed. One year following the completion of the dissertation, I will delete all research study information from disks and destroy (shred) typed transcripts of interviews.

[IF APPLICABLE INCLUDE THE FOLLOWING:]
Individuals that may be contacted regarding this study include myself, Abebe A. Teklu, and Dr. Budd Hall. Our contact information is provided on page 1 of this Consent Form.

In addition to being able to contact the researcher and the supervisor, at the above phone numbers, you may verify the ethical approval of this study, or raise any concerns you might have, by contacting the Associate Vice-President, Research at the University of Victoria (250-472-4545).

Your signature below indicates that you understand the above conditions of participation in this study and that you have had the opportunity to have your questions answered by the researchers.

Name of Participant	*Signature*	*Date*

A copy of this consent will be left with you, and a copy will be taken by the researcher.

Appendix C Participant Consent Form – Sighted participant

[Your department letterhead]

Participant Consent Form

The voice of Ethiopian blind immigrants and their families: Facing the challenges of life in Canada

You are being invited to participate in a study entitled, "The voice of Ethiopian blind immigrants and their families: Facing the challenges of life in Canada" that is being conducted by Abebe A. Teklu.

Abebe Teklu is a doctoral graduate student in the department of Curriculum and Instruction in the Faculty of Education at the University of Victoria and you may contact him if you have further questions by telephoning him at (250)360-4043, or emailing him at abebe1@shaw.ca or abebetek@uvic.ca.

As a graduate student, I am required to conduct research as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree in Education. It is being conducted under the supervision of Dr. Budd Hall. You may contact my supervisor at (250)721-7757 (email: bhall@uvic.ca).

The purpose of this research project is to explore the family issues of Ethiopian immigrant families in which one adult member is blind. How does the fact that one family member is disabled affect the family as a whole, in their experience as immigrants in Canada?

Research of this type is important because it is valuable to explore the social and cultural barriers that disabled (blind) immigrants and their families face in Canada, as well as the common family issues that emerge. Social workers, researchers, human service providers, and policy makers will benefit from increased knowledge about the issues for a disabled immigrant and his or her family in Canada, and from learning about the family's strengths and methods of coping with stress.

You are being asked to participate in this study because you have expressed interest in being a participant and you meet the relevant criteria as an adult family member of a blind immigrant originally from Ethiopia.

If you agree to voluntarily participate in this research, your participation will include meeting myself and my research assistant at a convenient, mutually-agreed-upon location in your area, and taking part in an interview from one to one and one-half hours long.

Participation in this study may cause some inconvenience to you, such as the time it takes to go through the interview process (1 to 1 ½ hours) and possibly some transportation time to and from the interview.

There are some potential risks to you by participating in this research and they include possibly feeling embarrassed to disclose during the interview that there may have been periods of unemployment for the blind adult member of your family. To prevent or to deal with these risks the following steps will be taken. I can assure you that you are not alone in facing such issues. In fact, I myself as a blind immigrant, and my family, have faced similar problems. During the interview there will be a chance to take a break if it is needed, a chance to debrief, a chance to reschedule the interview, or the choice to stop the research activity altogether if you so desire. At the end of the interview, I will provide a referral list of available support and/or local counselling services and community resources. If emotional support is needed, my research assistant will not be far away, and is a trained counsellor. We will conduct the interview in Tigrigna or in Amharic. It is my hope that using our native languages will help you to feel comfortable and secure.

The potential benefits of your participation in this research include: It is an opportunity for you to tell about your experiences, in your own words, in a supportive atmosphere (since the researcher is also an immigrant from Ethiopia). Sharing your story may allow you a chance to express the joy and pain of your family's experiences, and to realize the strengths you've shown and the learning that has occurred. This can be an empowering process. You may even gain a broader perspective on your life and your family's experiences.

You will also benefit by knowing that your participation in the study may help other people in the future. Knowledge gained from the study will help professionals, researchers and policy-makers to assist blind disabled immigrants and their families to improve their lives in the future. Society will benefit from this study because if the knowledge gained from the study is used to help immigrant families with a blind adult member, then the families will not face such huge stresses. There will be more knowledge available concerning the stresses on this population and there will be recommendations to help with addressing employment issues and with improving family dynamics within stressed immigrant families.

Your participation in this research must be completely voluntary. If you do decide to participate, you may withdraw at any time without any consequences or any explanation. If you do withdraw from the study your data will be destroyed. There is no automatic expectation that because another family member is participating, you will participate. Your consent to participate in this study must be freely given.

To make sure that you continue to consent to participate in this research, I will provide the consent form to you by email or in printed form. In advance of the interview I will provide you and all participants with a clear statement of the nature of the research project, my identity and affiliation to the University of Victoria, and a description of the type of questions to be asked. I estimate the interview will take 1 to 1 ½ hours. Your participation in the study must be voluntary. You may withdraw at any time without consequences or explanation and in that case your data will be discarded.

I will ask for you to confirm that you give consent at the start of the interview, and I will ask for you to again give verbal consent at the end of the interview.

In terms of protecting your anonymity, all participant's names and identifying details will be changed as described below. However, because there are not a large number of

Ethiopian blind immigrants in Canada, it is not possible to completely guarantee total anonymity.

Your confidentiality and the confidentiality of the data will be protected by the following measures. You and all participants will choose a pseudonym. Identifying details about your circumstances will be changed or omitted, (e.g., your age). I will change or omit the name of your city of residence, companies for which you have worked, names of Canadian training agencies in which you attended programs; names of religious communities you belong to; names of schools that children may attend; names of your family members and friends.

If I received your family's name from a source in the blind community, I will not tell the source whether you decide to join in on the study or not. I advise you to help keep it a secret that you have been a participant in my study.

It is anticipated that the results of this study will be shared with others in the following ways. The interview data will be used in the dissertation in a modified form (as themes) and also in an unmodified form (as excerpts from transcripts). Identifying details will be altered to maintain confidentiality. The results will be presented in written form in a dissertation, and results may also be published in a professional journal. The results will be presented orally to my doctoral committee, in fulfillment of the research requirements for completion of the Ph.D. degree at the University of Victoria. The results may also be presented from time to time in written or oral presentations to other professionals and interested groups. In whatever way the results of this research are communicated to others, I will strictly maintain anonymity and confidentiality in regard to yourself and all participants.

Data from this study will be disposed of in the following way: All tapes will be destroyed immediately after they have been transcribed. One year following the completion of the dissertation, I will delete all research study information from disks and destroy (shred) typed transcripts of interviews.

[IF APPLICABLE INCLUDE THE FOLLOWING:]
Individuals that may be contacted regarding this study include myself, Abebe A. Teklu, and Dr. Budd Hall. Our contact information is provided on page 1 of this Consent Form.

In addition to being able to contact the researcher and the supervisor, at the above phone numbers, you may verify the ethical approval of this study, or raise any concerns you might have, by contacting the Associate Vice-President, Research at the University of Victoria (250-472-4545).

Your signature below indicates that you understand the above conditions of participation in this study and that you have had the opportunity to have your questions answered by the researchers.

Name of Participant *Signature* *Date*

A copy of this consent will be left with you, and a copy will be taken by the researcher.

Appendix D **Telephone script**

I am going to be conducting a research study into the experiences of Ethiopian immigrant families who have a blind adult member. I want to discover their experiences in Canada, and what have been the stresses, as well as the strengths. How do the families cope with the challenges.

Are you interested in taking part in the study?
I can assure you that confidentiality will be protected. Please maintain confidentiality by not telling others outside your family that you are considering being a participant in my study.

If you are interested, I will forward you more information in Braille or on e-text.
Thank you.

Appendix E

Sample Questions

1. Can you tell me about your family's experience when you first arrived in Canada?
2. Can you tell me about what happened when you first began to seek employment in Canada?
3. Can you tell me more about that?

Appendix F

Table 1: Employment rates for Canadian adults with and without disabilities, 2001

Total and age	Employment Category	Adults with disabilities	%	Adults without disabilities	%
Age 15-64	Employed	764,670	43.7 %	11,998,900	78.4 %
	Unemployed	81,460	4.7 %	781,690	5.1 %
	Not in labour force	902,180	51.6 %	2,522,380	16.5 %
Age 15-24	Employed	33,250	53.0 %	1,152,930	72.3 %
	Unemployed	8,600	13.7 %	145,000	9.1 %
	Not in labour force	20,950	33.4 %	296,630	25.7 %
Age 25-54	Employed	575,060	51.7 %	9,616,940	83.5 %
	Unemployed	62,480	5.6 %	569,350	4.9 %
	Not in labour force	474,500	42.7 %	1,334,330	11.6 %
Age 55-64	Employed	156,360	27.3 %	1,229,040	56.2 %
	Unemployed	10,380	1.8 %	67,340	3.1 %
	Not in labour force	406,730	70.9 %	891,420	40.7 %

Information from Table C.7, HRDC 2003, page 58, has been simplified to create the above table.
Total adults with disabilities was 1,832,250. (Of these, 902,180 are not in the labour force).
Total adults without disabilities was 15,303,290.
Total male adults with disabilities was 854, 270 (employed: 47.6 %).
Total female adults with disabilities was 977,980 (employed: 40.3 %).

Total male and female adults with disabilities who are employed: 764, 670 (43.7).
Total male and female adults with disabilities who are unemployed: 983,460 (56.3 %)
(81,460 unemployed people who are in the labour force, plus 902, 180 who are not listed as being in the labour force).

Appendix G

Table 2: Average and median earnings by disability status and sex

Total men and women		Adults with disabilities	Adults without disabilities
Total of age 15 to 64	Average	$ 26, 760	$ 32,085
	Median	$ 21,657	$ 25,992
Men	Average	$ 32,385	$ 38,677
	Median	$ 28,157	$ 31,500
Women	Average	$ 20,821	$ 24,776
	Median	$ 15,500	$ 20,000

Information from Statistics Canada (September 2003), *2001 Participation and Activity Limitation Survey Special Tabulation*, cited in *Disability in Canada: A 2001 Profile* (2003), page 55.

Appendix H List of 12 Metathemes:

Comparison of Ethiopia and Canada's treatment of blind people

High Achievement

Persistence and perseverance

Ethiopian expectations about a blind child or student

Social construction of disability

Importance of Advocacy

Unemployment in Canada

Desire to be independent and self-supporting

Personal and family strengths

Importance of social support network

Participants' experiences accessing help from CNIB and employment agencies

Recommended Government Policy Improvement

Appendix I List of Themes that Support the Metathemes

This list provides themes that combined to support metathemes found in data from all participants.

Metatheme: Comparison of Ethiopia and Canada's treatment of blind people.

(Themes: Independent and self-supporting (working) in Ethiopia; In Ethiopia, people were helpful to disabled blind people. Employment of blind person in Ethiopia. Employment; unemployment in Canada; Blind educated people were respected in Ethiopia. Despite technological advancement, the Canadian government lacks awareness of the capability or needs of the blind.)

Metatheme: High Achievement.

(Themes: Concrete Academic success; Achieving high academic rank; High Achievement; Worked hard as a student; Setting goals; Setting/achieving goals). No other option except to achieve high in education. "Difficulty" - Lack of resources (made the students work harder); Worked hard as a student; Cannot work as a labourer.)

Metatheme: Persistence and perseverance.

(Themes: Persistence and perseverance in several aspects of life; "Difficulty teaches us to conquer problems";
Persistence and motivation).

Metatheme: Ethiopian expectations about a blind child or student.

(Themes: His/her own expectation of blindness. Others expectations of a blind child Others' negative expectations of blind child; Negative expectation about a blind student; Other's positive expectations of educated blind student; Theme: Role Models).

Metatheme: Social construction of "disability".

(Theme: Disability is a construction! Ablism; Positive expectations of a blind employee; Negative expectation about blind if hired as employees, in Canada; Expectations about blind employees; Ablism: Prejudice based on disability in Canada; Role Models.)

Metatheme: Importance of Advocacy.

(Themes: Raising awareness; Hope; Advocacy by blind people; Lack of advocacy by CNIB; Theme: Employment agencies should be advocates for employment of disabled clients and for raising public awareness of blind people's abilities.)

Metatheme: Unemployment in Canada.

(Themes: Injustice that educated blind people remain unemployed in Canada; Feelings about unemployment; No hope; Taxpayer means full citizenship. Experience of welfare; Financial stress re meeting children's needs; social pressure on child in school).

Metatheme: Desire to be independent and self-supporting.

(Themes: Desire for independence; Independent and self-supporting in Ethiopia; Desire for independence.in Canada; Wanted to be independent and self supporting. Obligation (responsibility) to support parents or help parents; Social or community responsibility of an educated person: (e.g., helping their former school and their people); Employment is part of full citizenship. Taxpayers contribute to their country).

Metatheme: Personal and family strengths.

(Themes: Maintaining and valuing one's cultural roots, culture is a strength: Positive attitude is a strength; The blind participant respects his wife; Wife shows that she is consistently caring toward blind partner. they were friends, Solid marriage; Good Communication; Sharing the decision-making together; Wife is aware of his abilities; Wife or husband of blind person is supportive. Changing social roles after immigration – many themes here – Humour: now I am the Governor General; Humour, funny memories. Child involved in decisions about car. Children help support).

Metatheme: Importance of social support network.

(Theme: Social support on arrival in Canada. Good social support network is necessary for blind immigrant and family; Having social support is a strength.)

Metathemes: Participants' experiences accessing help from CNIB and employment agencies.

(Themes: Blind people in Canada are not getting helped to find employment; CNIB; Lack of advocacy by CNIB; met by CNIB on arrival, CNIB is "for not of" the blind. Lacking employment despite employment agencies; Positive experiences with Employment agencies; Difficulty getting Canadian work experience; Employment agencies should be advocates for employment of disabled clients and for raising public awareness of blind people's abilities).

Metatheme: Recommended Government Policy Improvement.

(Theme: Blind people in Canada are not getting helped to find employment. Triple jeopardy, discrimination; Government policies are needed to ensure that educated blind people gain employment. Need to provide information before disabled people immigrate to Canada (they can make an informed decision); Despite technological advancement, Canadian government lacks awareness of the capability or needs of the blind).

Appendix J

"Melkam guzo": In other words, have a great trip! By Kathleen Prime

I found myself and my traveling companion, Nesria Mohammed, a lovely Ethiopian woman living in Portland Oregon, on a plane going on a trip I had dreamed of making for several years. My heart was overflowing, as we were about to descend into the Ethiopian capital after an interminable flight of fifteen hours. Since I am totally blind, I wasn't able to appreciate the view of the city from the plane!

However, my other senses were ready to perceive whatever this African sojourn had to offer. Aside from the fact that I had come a long way to meet a very special person in my life, I was also eager to visit the many historical sites in Addis Abeba, and to experience this ancient and beautiful culture.

The city of *Addis Abeb*, means "New Flower" in Amharic. The warmth and friendliness of the people is ample proof that the city was rightly named. It is a city blossoming with life, full of music, and known for the fragrant spices used in cooking.

The weather is spring-like for most of the year, and although it was supposed to be the rainy season, the climate was as pleasant as ever. My traveling companion and I where able to enjoy swimming and outdoor massages from blind masseurs. The historical sites and cultural traditions are a unique blend of African, European, and mid-Eastern influences.

I was touched by the warm welcome I received everywhere I went in Ethiopia. Thanks to the graciousness of the people and my own familiarity with the Ethiopian culture, I never felt like an outsider or an unwelcome guest.

On the contrary, in each house that I visited, the people made a great effort to make me feel at home and to prepare delicious meals. In Ethiopia, sharing meals, coffee, and conversation is an essential part of life, one which we, in our fast-paced Western society, often fail to nurture. Once you have spent a day or so visiting with an Ethiopian person in his or her home, that person will consider you a good friend and may even address you as "brother" or "sister."

During my stay in Addis, I found that blind people were treated as the equals of sighted people. I did not sense any uncomfortable tension among blind and sighted people. All of us, regardless of culture or disability, interacted freely with one another. All voices were heard with the same attentiveness and respect.

Conversely, in American society, I have, at times, felt out of place because people were either afraid to approach me or were limited by their apparent ignorance concerning those with disabilities.

In Ethiopia, tour guides made a point to describe everything for me in detail. In restaurants, people were always willing to explain how the food was arranged. What's more, everyone was interested to know about American life in general and about the challenges confronted by blind individuals in the United States.

People were always ready to offer assistance, but not in a condescending way. I felt that they cared more about the inner beauty of each person than about any physical impairment that the person may have had.

While in Ethiopia, I had the chance to visit a boarding school for blind students and to participate in an awards ceremony to honor blind high school and college students who were at the top of their class. The younger children performed songs and poems, which they themselves had written.

During this program, I was asked to speak to the students, teachers, and government officials about the education of blind students in the United States. We compared notes on this subject and were pleased to have this opportunity to learn from one another's life experiences. I felt privileged to be asked for my input.

The Ethiopian National Association of the Blind, of which my close friend is president, has made a great deal of progress in serving the needs of blind and other disabled individuals. However, the lack of monetary and technological resources does present some difficulty, since it limits their efforts to bring about positive changes in the living standard of blind people in their country. Despite our more advanced technology here in the U.S., I believe we have much to learn from the African people on a social level.

In general, African cultures place a strong emphasis on family, community, and the value of life itself. This was very evident in the way I was accepted by the people I met in Ethiopia. If you are a blind person looking for an experience that will change your life and appeal to all your other senses, Addis Abeba is the place to go! I was happy to see that in Ethiopia, food is eaten with the fingers, thus precluding any need to cut meat!

The music is full of exotic tones to which our Western ears may not be attuned at first. It would be best for a blind traveler in Ethiopia to have access to a car of some kind, since buses and taxis are quite crowded and service is not always reliable.

There are many street children begging for coins, and yet, we tourists were able to ride in a Mercedes that was driven by our tour guide. When we decided not to give any coins to one little girl who was begging for money, she looked at the brand name of our car and said in Amharic "But if you are driving that kind of car, you must have hundreds of coins!"

Needless to say, I wished we had given her something. And, after that, I would have preferred to walk, rather than be seen in that expensive car!

People were very appreciative of my attempts to practice Amharic and were also pleased by my willingness to be immersed in the culture.

English is the business language of Ethiopia, so communication was easy for the most part. I had such a wonderful experience that I am eagerly awaiting my next opportunity to return to Ethiopia. I consider myself fortunate to have visited such a vibrant, welcoming country and to have learned many things from the people I met.

It has been a pleasure to share these thoughts with you. If any of you are considering an international trip of any kind, I encourage you to follow your heart in pursuit of your dreams, you can accomplish anything that you set out to do. If you hadn't thought about Ethiopia until now, think again! And, if you do go there, then I say to you "*I'melkam guzo*". In other words, have a great trip!

Kathleen Prime, Coram, New York.

Prime, K. (1999). "Melkam guzo": In other words, have a great trip!
http://members.dslextreme.com/users/kathyz/ov/ov1299.htm
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