

EXPERIENCES OF TRANSITION

**EXPERIENCES OF TRANSITION FROM UNIVERSITY TO KNOWLEDGE WORK
FOR GRADUATES WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES**

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ABSTRACT

There is a growing number of students with disabilities accessing postsecondary education in Ontario. Among this student body, students with learning disabilities are the largest sub-group. These students transition into knowledge workplaces, which have significant cognitive performance standards. Although there is some emerging literature on the outcome of university graduates with learning disabilities, there is little known about their *experiences* during this transition process.

There are two central purposes of this doctoral thesis: a) to provide insight into the experiences of transition for university graduates with learning disabilities, and b) to critically reflect upon the practicalities and politics of implementing participatory action research. The papers gathered in this dissertation are based upon a participatory action research project with mentees, and interviews with both mentees and mentors from a learning disability mentorship program at an Ontario university. The first paper is a collaborative writing piece with co-researchers that applies an analogy of 'taking center stage' to reflect upon the process of participation for co-researchers. The second paper involves a critical reflection of the *imagined distance* that took place amongst the research team, and an exploration of participatory techniques to address this distance. The third paper examines qualitative interviews with mentors and mentees on three stages of the transition process: interview, general cognitive ability testing and probationary period.

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Doctoral studies can be seen as a feat of academic endurance with its peaks and valleys. It is the emotional strength and support from my family and friends that guided me through those long stretches in the research process that seem to have no end (e.g. transcription). I want to thank Tesha Goodfellow, Nathalie Budd, Suzanne Tordjman, Katherine Duffin, Joe Oppedisano and Kim Hutchinson. I want to especially thank Jen Rinaldi for breakthrough study session that would untangle me from my own conceptual web.

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DECLARATION OF ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

The papers that comprise this thesis were based on research designed, conducted, and analyzed primarily by Athena Goodfellow. In Chapter 3, the co-researchers contributed by way of reflection in the footnotes of the chapter, and were provided with drafts for their feedback on accuracy of events and their viewpoint. In this chapter, Athena was the primary researcher and facilitated the process of feedback for the co-researchers. As supervisor of the thesis Dr. Robert Wilton contributed significant feedback and editorial assistance on all three manuscripts, as did other committee members.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this thesis is to explore and advance the knowledge of two emerging trends in disability studies and social geography. First, this thesis explores the complexities involved in transitioning from university to knowledge-based work for graduates with learning disabilities (GLD). This purpose is relevant in light of the two opposing currents: the increasing cognitive demands upon workers; and the increasing access to postsecondary education for persons with learning disabilities (LD). Second, this thesis takes interest in the application of participatory action research (PAR) techniques. Particularly, it advances a critical understanding of the politics and the practicalities of engaging in this method with the disability community.

This qualitative study poses two research questions:

- 1) How do recent university GLD negotiate their transition into the knowledge economy?
- 2) What practicalities are involved when using PAR for disability research?

To answer these questions, the thesis uses PAR to collaborate with mentees and mentors from a career mentorship program at a university in southern Ontario (University).

This thesis is presented in a sandwich thesis format. This approach has become increasingly common in geography and other social sciences. Among action researchers (Dick, 2002; Fisher & Phelps, 2006; Perry, 1994), the five-chapter model of conventional thesis writing is seen not to do justice to the messy and on-going nature of PAR. In this writing format, the body of the thesis is comprised of three substantive chapters that can be stand-alone pieces intended for, or in the process of, publication in a peer-reviewed academic journal.

In order to contextualize this research, this chapter offers a brief review of the literatures relevant to this study, before outlining the research objectives and the context and methods of the study.

Geography of Disability and Work

Disability geographers have been particularly interested in the ways that the production of space has (dis)advantaged or excluded persons with physical, emotional and/or intellectual differences (see Chouinard, 1997; Crooks, Dorn & Wilton, 2008; Imrie, 1996; Imrie & Edward, 2007; Longhust, 2010; Moss & Dyck, 2002; Parr & Butler, 1999; Wolch & Philo, 2000). Within the field of geography and disability studies, the labour market and the workplace has become an emerging area of inquiry.

Recent economic restructuring and the influence of neoliberalism have served to increase the vulnerability of *all* workers, while eroding the protections of the postwar welfare state (Harvey, 2006; Prince, 2004). For example, the

organizational shift of the labour market away from the “post-war standard of full-time, permanent, paid work” to more precarious and short-term jobs has amplified many workers’ insecurity in the labour force; while at the same time, subjecting workers to a new standard of ‘flexibility’ (Wilton, 2004; see also Barnes & Mercer, 2005; Lesile & Butz, 1998; Vick & Lightman, 2010). Workers who cannot respond in ‘flexible’ and ‘adaptable’ ways are often segmented to marginal employment settings that “pay less, provide fewer benefits and are less likely to be covered by labour law” (Wilton, 2004, p. 421) or what Marx identifies as the ‘industrial reserve army’ (Hahn, 1987).

At the same time, geographers have drawn from both feminist and post-structuralist theory to show how disabled bodies have been inscribed, both materially and discursively, as deviant in relation to ableist views of ‘normality’ in a variety of spaces (Chouinard, 1997; Moss & Dyck, 2002), including the workplaces (Chouinard & Crooks, 2008; Dyck, 1999; Hall, 1999; Wilton & Schuer, 2006). In other words, this scholarship critically demonstrates how workplace policies, practices and social ethos can serve to undermine those individuals who fail to perform at the intellectual, emotional and/or physical ableist standard. For example, Dyck (1999) illustrates how workplaces can be constructed as “places of risk” in which bodily performances are self-surveyed in an effort to adhere to particular social and cultural coding of employment spaces (see also Holt, 2004). In this way, disability geographers have suggested that bodies are comprised of complex embodiments that interweave social, political and economic realities (Chouinard, 1997; Parr & Butler, 1999). It is within these realities that workers who do not perform in expected mind/body ways must negotiate carefully these everyday spaces of employment. In spite of this growing interest by geographers in the area of disability in employment spaces, there has been little consideration given to the experiences of those with learning disabilities, particularly for individuals who seek to enter into employment situations that require considerable cognitive performance. This thesis responds to that absence.

Mind Differences and Knowledge Work

Early theoretical considerations of employment for persons with disabilities emerged during Canada’s manufacturing era, where the physical agility and mobility of employees was of primary concern. Likewise several scholars have questioned the degree to which disability theory, such as the *social model of disability*, is predicated on experiences of physical and sensory impairments (Baron *et al.*, 1998; Beresford, 2000), while negating the experiences of persons with mind differences, including learning disabilities¹ (Hall, 1999; Holt, 2004). This section focuses on the small but growing literature on individuals with mind differences

¹ Learning disabilities, within the context of this study, are conceptualized as non-visible disabilities insofar as they “do not fit the more taken for granted understanding of disability--usually because they are less visible or *invisible* [emphasis original]” (Jung, 2002, p.178).

within social geography and, to what extent these theoretical developments relate to the changing nature of work in Canada.

Within the field of disability geography, there is literature seeking to ‘excavate’ the experiences of people with cognitive impairments. However, these studies (e.g., Hall & McGarrol, 2012) have typically engaged with those diagnosed with severe learning disabilities², a diagnosis that is often accompanied by exclusion from the formal labour market and, often, some form of institutionalization. Conversely, there is relatively little critical geographic work on the experiences of persons with learning impairments who have greater human capital in the labour market by way of their postsecondary education. Thus, an understanding of the ‘hidden geographies’ (see Hall, 1999) of the more employable persons with learning disabilities is lacking. Responding to this gap in the literature is made more pressing given by the labour market shift toward knowledge-based work, and consequently, the valorization of cognitive performance in the workplace.

The changing cognitive demands are compounded by the demand for ‘flexible’ and ‘adaptive’ work. Disability scholars such as Wilton (2004) and others (Dyck, 1999; Hall, 1999; Jolie, 2010) have noted how the trend towards the ‘flexible’ worker in nonstandard work environments creates complexities for employees who cannot perform according to these workplace standards. However, what has remained unclear in the literature is how these changes might have implications for the largest disability sub-group transitioning from university into the knowledge economy, graduates with learning disabilities.

University graduates with learning Disability Transition into Knowledge Work

A university education is often a credential for knowledge work. The labour market in Ontario is more favorable towards university graduates. In Ontario, a university degree increases the employment rate from 58.4% for high school graduates to 75.4% for university counterparts (Statistics Canada, 2012). This is also at a time where “youth [15 to 24 years of age] employment rates fell to 50% and the youth labour force participation rate fell to 60.1%”, which are the lowest rates since 1976 (LIM, 2012, p. 2). Thus, it is not surprising that many young people are opting for a university degree, including a growing number of students with learning disabilities.

In recent decades, there has been a considerable increase of students with disabilities accessing university education in Ontario (Holmes & Silverstien, 2011; OECD, 2003). Within this population, students with learning disabilities are a prominent sub-group. Between 2008-2009, Holmes and Silverstein reported that 37.5% of university students with disabilities in Ontario identify an LD as their primary disability. This is an important phenomenon given that students with LD have been known to have less desirable outcomes such as: high secondary school

² These studies make reference to learning disabilities that would coincide with Canadian terminology of intellectual disabilities.

dropout rates, (Dunn, Chambers, & Rabren, 2004), lower educational attainment (Kortering, Braziel, & McClannon, 2010), difficulty in securing employment (Wagner *et al.*, 2005), and lower earnings (McGee, 2011). However, recent research focused upon the employment outcomes for postsecondary graduates with learning disabilities is gaining momentum (see Gerber & Prince, 2008; Greenbaum, Graham & Scales, 1996; Madaus, Gerber & Price, 2008; Madaus, Zhao & Ruban, 2008). These studies depict a more positive employment circumstance for GLDs than studies that consider their LD high school peers. Some positive findings include higher employability (Greenbaum, Graham & Scales, 1996) and greater job satisfaction (Madaus, Zhao, & Ruban, 2008). Although university educated students with LD fair better in the labour market than their high school equivalents, the employment outcomes disparity between LD and non-LD university graduates is less well understood.

The most recent Ontario specific statistics regarding GLD were released in Holmes and Silverstein's (2011) report entitled *Employment Experiences of Ontario's Postsecondary Graduates with Learning Disabilities*. By comparing these findings to the HRDC's (2011) employment outcomes of all graduates, it is apparent that those without an LD fair slightly better in terms of salary (\$40,547 for non-disabled bachelor degree graduates and \$40,307 for those with an LD) and a greater probability (7%) of full-time employment for those without an LD compared those graduates with LD. Holmes and Silverstein's report (2011) also suggests that what differs considerably between these two cohorts are their *experiences* in employment. Their study found that the majority of GLD (72%) feel their performance at work is negatively impacted by their impairment, yet choose to not disclose their impairment (62%), often for fear of stigmatization. These findings are consistent with research in the United States regarding students and graduates with LD (Madaus, Gerber & Price, 2008; Madaus, Zhao & Ruban, 2008).

Aside from these employment outcomes, research outside of Ontario suggests that the process of transition from university to work for GLDs is distinctive from non-disabled graduates. For example, Madaus, Zhao and Ruban's (2008) findings propose that in contrast to non-disabled graduates, self-efficacy for GLDs plays a larger role in job satisfaction than other variables such as earnings. Self-efficacy is a reflection of "how a person judges himself or herself to be capable of organizing and using a set of skills to achieve a certain level of performance or attainment" (Madaus, Zhao & Ruban, 2008, p. 323). The recent increase of students with LD accessing postsecondary education and their transition into the labour market has become an important trend in Ontario. Although the existing literature is useful in order to report on the employment outcomes of GLD, there is a dearth in the understanding of their *experiences* of transition. That is to say, there is little known about the ways in which GLD negotiate knowledge-based workplace, and the implications of cognitive performance expectations for these graduates. Further, what remains to be explored are the practical tools and awareness that can support the transition process for GLD.

Participatory Action Research

Social geographers and disability scholars have placed considerable emphasis on work *with* rather than *for* the community. PAR has been popularized for creating change in the community it seeks to serve. Nevertheless, this research approach is not without its challenges, namely: the researcher's ability to engage the community, multidimensional power dynamics amongst the research team and the feasibility of a PAR project within a doctoral program. This thesis seeks to engage with PAR both as a means to produce a useful tool for GLD transitioning into knowledge work, and as a means to critically reflect on the nature of the PAR process.

Since the late 1980s, PAR³ has been popularized in a variety of applied and social science research fields including anthropology (Whyte, 1955), health promotion (George, Daniel & Green, 1999) and human geography, (Young & Barrett, 2001, see also Dick, 2009). PAR often engages groups who are marginalized such as youth (Young & Barrett, 2001), persons with disabilities (Balcazar *et al.*, 1998; Gilbert, 2004; Sample, 1996) and women (Kindon, 2003). Sample (1996) and others (George, Daniel & Green, 1999; Hoggart, Lees & Davis, 2002) have noted that PAR does not prescribe a specific methodological technique but rather is an approach that seeks to democratize the research process. For the purpose of this thesis, PAR holds "a commitment to breaking down hierarchical practices of elite knowledge producers through collaboration at every stage of the research process" (Kindon, 2010, p. 525). This principle places the issues of participation and collaboration at the forefront.

Many of the first advances towards the development of PAR were a response to disenchantment with the more traditional positivistic research methodologies (see Chambers, 1992; Oakley & Marsden 1985). The critique of more traditional (positivistic) research within many social science disciplines has also been echoed within disability studies and geography. In disability studies, scholars have critically questioned the researcher-researched dualism (e.g. Kitchin, 2000; Gleeson, 1999; Oliver, 1986, 1990, 1996; Tregaskis & Goodley, 2005). Balcazar and colleagues (1998) point out two fundamental problems with a positivist approach for the disability community: (a) the tendency to silence the voices of persons the study seeks to investigate, and (b) a failure to transform findings into positive practical outcomes for the researched. Scholars such as Chappell (2000) and, Tregaskis and Goodley (2005) have called for a more reciprocal relationship between the researcher and the researched. In this way, the participants are considered 'expert-knower's' of their lived experiences; and researchers are conceived as 'expert- researchers' who "place their skills and knowledge at the disposal of those being researched" (Barnes & Mercer, 1997, p.

³ It should be noted that this approach has been used interchangeably with other methodologies such as *Participatory Techniques* (e.g. Johnson & Mayoux, 1998), *Action Research* (e.g. Lewin, 1946) and *Emancipatory Research* (e.g. Stalker, 1998).

6). Along these lines, the research participants are not conceived as subjects of the research but rather as co-researchers because they are equally engaged in the study's research question, methodology and dissemination of the findings (see Morris, 2001; Goodley, 1999). At the same time, the traditional researcher is repositioned as a facilitator (see Goodley, 1999). In social geography, Kitchin and Hubbard (1999) suggest PAR framework offers "a route for geographers to combine a role of activist with that of putative academic," (p.196). Pain (2004) makes the argument that a PAR approach is beneficial for spatial analysis because it is contextually sensitive, it valorizes local knowledge, and it calls attention to the relationship between people and spaces (see also Kindon, 2003; Mattingly, 2001; Sanderson & Kindon, 2004).

The Complexities of Participation in PAR

Rooted in grassroots movements (e.g., Fals Borda, 1979; Freire, 1970/1997 in Cahill et al. 2010), the notion of participation is central to the principles of *community based research*, including PAR. However, there has been a wide application of this term in the social sciences "some of which may not be participatory at all" which may even "mask tokenism and provide an illusion of consultation" (Cahill, Cerecer & Bradley, 2010, p. 408). In spite of the enthusiasm for PAR to create meaningful changes through participation, both geographers and disability scholars have critically pointed out the potential for intragroup tensions (for a discussion see, Cooke & Kothari, 2001; Arieli, Friedman & Agbaria, 2009; Kindon, 2010; Mohammed, 2001). A number of geographers (Cahill, 2007a; 2007b; Kindon, 2003; Pain, 2004; Pugh & Potter, 2003) have noted that the PAR process is not immune to power inequalities. Although practitioners of PAR are conscious of the value of 'local' or 'embedded' knowledge (see Schneider *et al.*, 2004; Balcazar *et al.*, 1999), researchers run the risk of reproducing inequality through their interactions with participants. For example, Meulenber-Buskens (1996) suggests that power differences can be conveyed through the (implicit) attitudes of the researcher "knowing better and wanting to do good" for research participants as opposed to conveying an ideal of equivalence between the members of the research team (p.47). Thus, the well intended efforts of researchers might result in reproducing, rather than dismantling, traditional hierarchical structures of research.

The notion of participation and collaboration is further problematized by disability scholars who question the positionality of (non)disabled researchers on two separate grounds. First, scholars interrogate the researchers as *knowers of* the disability experience (see Kitchin, 2000; Redmond, 2005; Oliver, 1992). Second, this is further complicated when the scholar identifies *within* the disability community. For instance, in Goodley's (1999) PAR study with persons with intellectual disabilities, he probes the *epistemological privilege* (see also Morris, 1996) of the disabled researcher who risks claiming *authentic* knowledge of what it means to live with a disability despite the fact he/she is distanced from research participants by other characteristics such as gender and race. In this sense, even researchers who engage with persons with the same impairment fall short of an

epistemological veto in the production of disability research (see Morris, 1996). How, then, does a study promote the participation of the disability community without reproducing hierarchies of power, particularly for a facilitator who identifies within the community? This is not an easy question to answer. Smith (2001) and others (Pain & Francis 2003; Kesby, 2005) confess that the development of non-hierarchical knowledge is common parlance yet remains poorly applied. Using critical reflexivity, this thesis explores the complexities of participation for both a disabled researcher and co-researchers, and the politics of LD identity amongst the research team.

This thesis critically reflects upon a the delicate balance of participation for all members of the research team: the self-identified disabled facilitator and the diverse voices within the disability community. This thesis is particularly attentive to the risk of drowning the voices of other co-researchers that could create the illusion that “there is no researcher/writer voice or perspective, only a 'community view'” (p. 657; also see Pain & Francis, 2003). Hopkins (2007) suggests that interrogating the similarities/differences of the researcher and researched—or in PAR terms, facilitator and community members— can reveal the ways in which various positionalities intersect within the research context. This thesis employs critical reflexivity processes both by the author (Chapter three) and in collaboration with co-researchers (Chapter two).

Research Objectives

There are four main objectives of this thesis:

1.1 To deepen an understanding of the experience of transition for GLD into knowledge work. The thesis explores the complexities involved in transitioning from university to a knowledge-based labour market for university students who identify as persons with an LD. This study seeks to contribute to the understanding of *how* GLD transition into knowledge work. In this way, the thesis takes particular interest in how GLD negotiate, through passing and resistance, their entry into workplaces.

1.2 To explore the politics of participation in PAR and the disability community. This thesis showcases the usefulness of PAR in disability and social geography research, which has been noted in both fields as a useful approach but seldom applied. Moreover, this study explores the politics of participation in PAR, from both the perspective of the facilitator and the co-researchers. This research offers a useful template for future geographic research that aims to engage with members of the learning disability community.

1.3 To increase the awareness of educators, service providers, employers and policy-makers in the field of higher education with respect to the barriers to and enablers of employment for GLD.

In collaboration with the research team, the PAR project aims to identify

major barriers to and/or facilitators of successful transition into the knowledge economy for GLD. A central aim is to disseminate the findings and analysis of this research to various affiliated organizations including: postsecondary institutions, employers and disability-related organizations across the province.

Research Scene

Using a PAR approach, this thesis project collaborates over a 24-month period with mentors and mentees of an Learning Disability mentorship program at a large university in Southern Ontario. This institution was, in fact, the first to offer a learning disability-specific program in Canada, which started from private funding from a family foundation. The department's mission has a "holistic model to facilitate the academic, personal and career development of students" (personal communication, Program Coordinator, September 20, 2012). The department services roughly 1200 students on their main campus during any given year. In addition to the academic services provided through this department, students with LD have the opportunity to participate in a yearlong mentorship program. The premise of this program is to connect students with LD with a mentor who is currently employed in the student's industry of interest. During the program, the mentor and mentee pairs meet on a monthly basis over the course of the academic year (eight months) and participate in the general mentorship workshops. The purpose of these workshops and meetings are for the GLD to explore and discuss career interest and potential pathways into employment.

This thesis engages with the mentees and mentors taking part in the University's LD mentorship program. This program was selected because it offers a unique opportunity to recruit university graduates with learning disabilities, and mentors who have an interest in the transition of GLD. Moreover, the mentees participating in the program seek employment opportunities in the knowledge economy. As noted on the program's website, previous mentors held positions in corporations such as Apple Canada Inc., Royal Bank Financial Group, and Bell Canada (mentorship program's website).

A formal connection was made with the program coordinator of the Mentorship program a year prior to the ethics application submission. The mentors and mentees of the program were approached to participate in the study after ethics approval was finalized at both affiliated universities. It should be mentioned that, in the initial planning stages of the thesis, it was anticipated to have mentors participate in the PAR project in the same capacity as the mentees. Due to scheduling conflicts with the mentorship meetings, however, this was not feasible for the mentors. Instead, mentors were offered the opportunity to contribute their thoughts and experiences by way of one-on-one interviews, and a feedback session of the accommodation chart created by the research team.

Prior to the author's formal involvement with the mentorship program through this PAR project, she had a personal connection as a past mentee of the program. The author—through volunteer guest speaking and serving as a mentor—has

maintained an on-going relationship with the program.

Definition of Terms

For the purpose of this thesis, there are two definitions of learning disability provided. The first definition derives from the Counseling and Disability Services (2009) website of the University:

For us, the term suggests a lifelong disorder, which causes individuals with average to above average intellectual potential to receive, retain or express information in different ways than do most other individuals. Current research suggests that many LDs are language-based, while some may be due to a variety of information processing problems. As a result, university students with LDs may experience difficulties in one or more of the following areas: listening, perceiving, speaking, reading, writing, calculating, and spelling. As well, some students may lack skills in organization, time management, or social interaction.

The second definition is a conceptual definition set out by the author prior to commencing the research project:

A learning disability refers to an individual's impairment⁴ interacting with disabling environments which manifests in one of the eight categories: memory, executive functioning, language, visual motor, attention, visual spatial, phonological processing and/or process speed.

This definition is rooted in the author's personal experiences with LD, and the accommodation chart, which was used as a resource for the PAR project. Author definition is distinguishable from that of University's insofar as it makes reference to spatiality of disability, as discussed above, and the *social model* of disability. The social model of disability has been widely adopted because it offers a way to conceptually distinguish between 'impairment' and 'disability' in an effort to emphasize disability as social and political in origin (see Barnes & Mercer, 1996; Morris, 2001; Oliver, 1990; Rioux & Valentine, 2006; Shakespeare, 2006). The model interprets disability as "a social process in which no inherent meaning attach to physical difference other than ones assigned by a community" (Davis, 1999, p. 506). This personal definition will be revisited in the concluding chapter.

Overview of Chapters

Following this introductory section, Chapters Two to Four include manuscripts

⁴ For the purpose of this study, *impairment* makes reference to a physiological or biological difference that acts as a functional limitation in daily activities, which is frequently legitimized in medicalized terms (Barnes, 1991). By contrast, *disability* is considered to be a socially constructed barrier that constrains and/or disadvantages a person living with (an) impairment(s) (Barnes, 1991; Barton, 1996; Oliver, 1984; Shakespeare, 1993).

in a sandwich thesis format, in preparation for publication, that together meet the objectives of the research. As recommended by Perry (1994), the critical reflections of the PAR project are discussed in the body in of the thesis (Chapters Two and Three), and the practical aspects of the research—specifically, the accommodation chart—is presented in the appendices (see Appendix A). The writing style of each chapter is tailored to the particular reading audience.

The first substantive chapter of the thesis, Chapter Two, outlines the process of the PAR project. This chapter also addresses the third research objective by providing the *space* for the voices of co-researchers to be heard *in* the project. This objective is fulfilled insofar as this chapter is co-authored with co-researchers. This chapter uses the metaphor of *taking centre stage* to explore how, and to what extent, co-researchers progressively become involved in PAR projects. This chapter demonstrates how a PAR research team can collectively reflect upon the research process.

Chapter Three takes a stronger theoretical approach to the PAR process. This chapter focuses on the *imagined distance* embedded within PAR. Drawing from the facilitator's reflections, this chapter examines how the *politics of LD identity* can forge the space between the research team (*epistemological distance* and *epistemological nearness*) and how particular techniques (facilitator openness and peer interviews) serve to promote *safe communicative space*.

Chapter Four explores experiences of transition into knowledge-based workplaces for GLD. Using the theoretical framework of the *smart worker standard*, this chapter draws from qualitative interviews conducted with university students (mentees) and individuals in the labour market (mentors). The chapter analyzes three key stages of transition: interviewing, employment testing and probationary period. Recommendations to support the transition process for GLD are provided.

Finally, Chapter Five offers a conclusion to the thesis by summarizing the major findings; highlighting the theoretical, methodological and substantial contributions of the research; and discussing relevant implications of the thesis and potential research directions. Additional materials about the researcher such as journal reflections and data collection tools are provided in the appendices.

Chapter One:

Taking Center Stage: Critical Reflections on How We Became Engaged in our PAR Project

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Abstract

This chapter provides a voice to all the research members—academic facilitator and co-researchers—by incorporating our reflections into vignettes of our research meetings and activities. In this paper we, the authors, engage the metaphor of *taking centre stage* to critically reflect upon how co-researchers progressively develop the confidence, skills and knowledge to voice our opinions and execute our vision for a participatory action research project. Through this analogy, we consider the evolution of the co-researchers as they move from passively sitting in the audience, to standing in the wings, and finally taking centre stage. This paper seeks to contribute to an understanding of how co-researchers, specifically persons with disabilities, are engaged in participatory action research and how they can progressively take a leading role in the project.

Introduction

Participatory action research (PAR) prides itself on providing a vehicle for change for voices from below. PAR seeks to make use of the community's own knowledge as the basis for potential solutions to a collective struggle. However, this is easier said than done. Participation can be many things—it can take many shapes over time, can be called by many names, can look and sound different to different people—but what it cannot be is a singular voice. At the heart of PAR is the premise that we welcome the plurality of experiences and perspectives by “not just incorporating a singular voice of ‘difference’ but interrogating different perspectives and the spaces between them” (Pain, 2004, p. 654). The literature all too often omits the messiness of how this participation comes to be, how it is displayed and what it is called. It settles for an account of the triumphs and failures of the project and, in the process, melds together the experiences and perspectives of research members into a singular voice.

This paper interrogates the space of the ‘we’ by critically reflecting on our project, both as individuals and as a group. We weave together individual perspectives and a collective voice to share *our* story. This paper takes particular interest in the process of participation by co-researchers and how this engagement informed which tasks we adopted. The focus on the ‘we’ and the process of building participation is an important contribution in light of Friedman and Agabaria's (2009) review of action research studies:

...very few data are provided about the relationship building process...almost all of these stories of initiation and relationship are written at an abstract level with little detailed description or direct quotes...they are all told from the researchers' perspective (p. 265).

We use the metaphor of *taking the stage* to frame the process of how we—people with learning disabilities among other disability labels—participated in our PAR project. The contributions of this paper are twofold: (a) to provide an understanding of our PAR research; and (b) to voice the ideas and perspectives of all members of the research team.

In framing our reflections, we take inspiration from Kathy Fisher and Renata Phelps's (2006) paper. They engage with the metaphor of the theatre to explore the tensions and incongruities in doctoral thesis writing and the applicability of principles of action research in this process. They attempt to challenge conventional thesis writing styles and examination criteria for doctoral action research projects. Using the theatrical metaphor, their paper is organized into three ‘acts’ in which they share: (i) tensions with supervisory committees of doctoral students seeking to write action research as their own dissertation thesis, (ii) their key insights from action research completed in their doctoral studies, and (iii) the challenges of examination for PAR dissertations. They adopt this approach to propose how doctoral students and supervisors should be open to various writing

forms that “seem analogically appropriate to your research material” and to be aware of how the form might preclude certain perspectives on the project (p. 160; see also Richardson, 1990). In following their lead, we use the metaphor of the theatre stage to reflect on the PAR process. We use a combination of textual forms (e.g., footnotes and collective critical reflections), to offer a space for all members of the research team to speak out about the PAR project.

Using the analogy of theatrical performance, this paper takes a step back, or more appropriately goes *backstage*, to reflect on how members of a community become a part of the play. More specifically, this paper considers how participation is initiated and takes various shapes as the research process evolves. The analogy of the stage brings into focus many key components of PAR. First, it highlights the importance of the community members’ active participation in the research project. Second, it recognizes the ways in which the community learns the technical knowledge and skills for their research role. Finally, it speaks to the fact that the engagement of the community is a messy unfolding rather than an instantaneous achievement.

The practicalities of engaging members of a community to ‘take centre stage’ are somewhat hazy in the literature, and with good reason. In Dick’s (2011) literature review, she points out that although issues of democracy and empowerment are key buzzwords, they are “less often achieved” (p. 134). At the heart of this tension is “a tendency to assume that power can always be transferred, that academic researchers have this intention and that participants are willing to be empowered in this way” (Pain, 2004, p. 34). The paternalistic assumption that power descends from the ‘more powerful’ researcher to ‘less powerful’ subjects threatens the empowerment of participants because it risks reproducing the same oppressive relations that have plagued more positivistic methodologies (Northway, 1998; see also Gomm, 1993).

The central question of our paper is: how did co-researchers move from a bystander ‘audience’ position to actively playing a ‘role’ in research? To do this, we share our experiences and perspectives from a PAR project that aimed to develop tools and resources for graduates with learning disabilities. This paper is organized into three sections. The first section begins with a brief overview of the benefits and challenges of participation in PAR. This is accompanied by an outline of the context of the research and an overview of the research project. In the second section, we offer vignettes of key research meetings and activities. These vignettes describe three key phases of our PAR project: (a) phase one (in the audience): the facilitator approaches potential co-researchers; (b) phase two (standing in the wings): co-researchers participate in developing the tools and resources; (c) phase three (taking centre stage): co-researchers wearing the researcher hat through peer-interviewing, analysis and dissemination. In each of these vignettes, all members of the research team reflect upon the project’s process using footnotes throughout the description of the meetings and project activities, and we collectively connect our reflections to the wider literature on PAR in associated critical reflection subsection. We conclude with our recommendations for future co-researchers seeking to join a

PAR project.

Authorship is an important component of this paper, both as a part of a dissertation submission and within the context of the co-researchers' contributions. It should be made clear that the first author (Athena Goodfellow — who is also the doctoral student) wrote the introductory sections of the paper, including the literature reviews. She also wrote the initial draft descriptions of the PAR process and meetings. The other authors contributed in three ways. First, they reviewed and commented on the sections of the paper written by Athena, especially the descriptions of the PAR process. Second, they contributed to the writing of the critical reflection sections included in the paper's analysis. Finally, they added their own individual thoughts in the form of footnoted comments (see below). The collective 'we' in this paper makes reference to a viewpoint agreed upon by the entire research team through a process of collective reflection. Conversely, the space for each research member's own voice is provided in the footnotes.

Participation in Participatory Action Research

There are many research methods that seek to engage the community in research. For example, *co-operative inquiry* (see Heron & Reason, 2001) that involves research *with* the community or *practitioner-research engagement* (see Brown, *et al.*, 2003) that involves two communities coming together in order to solve a complex problem. Typically, these types of approach aim to bring people together to articulate their points of view as a means of bringing into focus the interplay between individual circumstance and structural forces. PAR takes these voices into action, operationalizing: "people's right and ability to have a say in decisions which affect them" (Reason & Bradbury, 2006, p. 10). For the purpose of this study, PAR is defined as a "systematic inquiry that seeks to collaborate with those affected by the issue being studied, for the purposes of education and taking action or effecting social change" (George, Daniel & Green, 1999, p 184). By bringing these voices to the centre of the research, PAR serves as a valuable tool for understanding how communities interpret, construct and negotiate meanings in their surroundings.

The nature of participation in PAR asks that members of a community go beyond simply making their experiences and perspectives available for the purpose of the project. It requires community members to become co-researchers: as curators of their knowledge, as communicators and as collaborators. Stoecker (2009) argues that co-researchers' participation is a catalyst for knowledge production and power over their circumstance:

By participating [the co-researchers] learn the process of knowledge production. By acting on knowledge, they produce power that in turn informs their knowledge production. And this process transforms the existing oppressive social relations of knowledge production (p. 398).

The benefits of providing co-researchers with the tools and resources to create change extend beyond the utility of the project's outcomes. Participation can

provide intrinsic rewards to co-researchers by way of greater confidence. The PAR process allows not only for “improving the self-esteem...[but also] building a positive sense of collective identity”(Shakespeare, 2006, pp. 199-200). In spite of these benefits, participation of the community does not occur automatically and without the potential of tribulation.

For this reason, there has been an enduring interest in factors that work for and/or against community engagement and participation. In recent years, several studies have attempted to address this topic from various angles, including: communication within the research team (see Herlihy & Knapp, 2003; Snoeren, Niessen & Abma, 2012); facilitator observation and directives⁵ (Valentine, 2003; Abbott, 2006; Gates & Waight 2007), record keeping (Cooke & Kothari, 2001) and non-monetary offerings such as food (Gates & Waight, 2007). However, as noted previously, there are few studies that have critically reflected upon the relationship building process from the perspective of the co-researchers. This paper attempts to provide the space for the voices of the community to critically reflect upon their engagement in the research process.

Participation in Research and the Disability Community

The issue of participation and empowerment in research is also a vibrant discussion in disability circles. In traditional approaches to research with/on the disability community, the academic researcher is the ‘expert’ observer whose role is to undertake research with the aim of producing recommendations that might improve the community’s circumstances. This suggests that the expert-researcher is central—the producer, director and actor in research—while the disability community passively watches on in hopes that the research has a positive impact on their lives. Barnes and Mercer (1997) accuse this approach of estranging participants from the research outcomes “by the way in which ‘unbiased social scientists’ follow their own agenda”, rather than contributing to the everyday struggles for the disability community (p. 2; see also Oliver, 1992).

In response, members of an increasingly politicized disability community have demanded that the focus of research should refrain from “descriptions of how awful it is to be disabled” and call attention to “the way this society is organized to exclude us” (UPIAS, 1976, pp. 4-5 as cited in Barnes & Mercer, 1997, p. 2). This has sparked a series of academic works in the late-1980s and early-1990s that aimed to develop an understanding of disability not as a *medical* concern but as a *sociological phenomenon* (see Abberley, 1987; Bynoe, Oliver & Barnes, 1991; Oliver, 1989; 1990). This new understanding of disability is known as the *social model* of disability, which has been widely adopted within the disability community. The social model of disability offers a way to conceptually distinguish between impairment and disability in an effort to emphasize disability as social and political in origin (see Barnes & Mercer, 1996; Morris, 2001; Oliver, 1990; Rioux &

⁵ This would consist of utilizing an extensive methodological ‘tool kit’ which includes prompt questions, meeting summaries, rating scales and pictures.

Valentine, 2006; Shakespeare, 2006).

In many ways, PAR responds well to the demands for more inclusive research approaches being made by the disability community. Scholars (Goodley, 1999; Kramer & Kramer, 2011; Ollerton & Horsfall, 2012) credit PAR as a means to “foster empowerment as people with disabilities gain opportunities to control relevant aspects of their lives and to make decisions that affect them” (Buettgen *et al.*, 2012, p. 5). Balcazar *et al.* (1998) distill the relevancy of PAR research for the disability community into four key principles:

Principle 1. Disabled individuals articulate the problem and participate directly in the process of defining, analyzing and solving it

Principle 2. Direct involvement of disabled people in the research process facilitates a more accurate and authentic analysis of their social reality

Principle 3. The process of participatory research can increase awareness among disabled people about their own resources and strengths

Principle 4. The ultimate goal of the research endeavor is to improve the quality of life for disabled people

At the core of these principles is an understanding that “disability research should be about research *with* rather than *for* or *on* disabled people” (Goodley, 1999, p. 27). At the turn of 21st century, Hall and Kearns (2001) argued that the involvement of the disability community in the research process has become a crucial element to disability scholars. They note that persons with disabilities, particularly “those in the place or situation under investigation, should be involved, to varying degrees, in the design, undertaking and writing up of the research” (p. 240). It is recognized in the literature that there is a need for an adaptability in research methods that leverages the strengths and capacities of the co-researchers with disabilities (Kiernan, 1999; Walmsley 2001; Walmsley & Johnson, 2003). It is with this belief—that persons with disabilities *can* and *should* be actively included in the research process—that the first author approached the design of the dissertation.

Setting the Context: University Graduates with Learning Disabilities & Their Experiences of Transitioning into the Workplace

For the past two decades, an increasing proportion of students enrolled at universities in Ontario are students with disabilities, including students with non-visible disabilities (NEADS, 2003). As a result, a greater number of students with disabilities are moving from post-secondary education into the labour market with higher levels of educational attainment. These graduates are now competing for employment with non-disabled graduates who have similar educational credentials. Transition is a critical period for these students because the responsibility for enacting accommodations shifts from institutions in educational settings, to the individual employee in workplace settings. While there is a large literature addressing the transition from secondary school to employment (see Dunn, Chambers & Rabren, 2004; Kortering, Braziel & McClannon, 2010; Lehman *et al.*, 2002; Wagner & Blackorby, 1996), research involving postsecondary students with

learning disabilities has been slow to emerge.

Given increasing accessibility *into* university for students with disabilities, there has been a growing interest in the postsecondary graduates' experiences of transition to competitive labour markets (see Greenbaum, Graham & Scales, 1996; Gerber & Prince, 2008; Madaus, 2008; Madaus, Madaus, Zhao & Ruban, 2008). According to the *Disability and Higher Education* report released by the OECD (2003), enrolment among Ontarian students with disabilities into postsecondary schools increased by 125% from 1993 to 1999. On campus, students with learning disabilities are the largest sub-group among the disability student population (37.5%) (Holmes & Silverstein, 2011). Despite the growing interest in the experiences of university graduates with learning disabilities transitioning into the workforce, there are few practical resources or tools to support students in this transition process. Thus, the development of a PAR project of university students with learning disabilities emerged.

Overview of the Research Project

In the early stages of Athena's doctoral studies⁶, she wanted her research to benefit students who encountered the same challenges associated with transition into the workplace. Although she identifies as a graduate with a learning disability, in no way did she believe or claim that she understood experiences of transition for *all* graduates with a learning disability. Athena was drawn to PAR because she saw this approach as a means of providing the space for other graduates within the learning disability to voice their opinion and make suggestions to improve the experiences of transitions.

With some exceptions (such as Klocker, 2012), the literature generally discourages the use of PAR in doctoral studies, citing: long-term horizons of PAR, concerns over academic contribution and rigour, and tension between the individualistic nature of thesis writing and collective demands of PAR project (Gibbon, 2002; Herr & Anderson, 2005; McCormack, 2004; Moss, 2009). Nevertheless, Athena felt that with the appropriate timelines in place and a supportive doctoral committee, PAR was a feasible option for her dissertation research.

At the beginning of the research project, Athena envisioned a research project engaged with current university students who identify as learning disabled in a PAR approach. For committee and ethic board approval, the products of the research project were intended to be twofold: (a) the development of a practical product that provides support for university graduates transitioning into mainstream workplaces; and (b) an exploration of the practicalities of undertaking a PAR project. The dissertation proposal outlined the expectation that the research team would identify a specific product to be developed that would be designed for entry-level

⁶ The subject in the singular makes reference to Athena, the academic researcher, prior to formal commencement of the research project with the rest of the research team.

employees with learning disabilities transitioning into knowledge-based work. Since much of the project's activities were not anticipated, Athena amended the ethics proposal twice over the duration of the project.

Method

The analysis that follows attempts to draw out how, and to what extent, co-researchers progressively engaged in a PAR project. The paper combines the facilitator's reflections on the research project as it unfolded (drawn from video recordings of meetings, written meeting notes and journal entries) with a process of collective reflection in which all members of the research team participated.

At the beginning of the project, meetings were recorded by video and journal entries by the facilitator (Athena). She used the video recordings to document the content of the meetings. This becomes an important point since later meeting details—as will be discussed in the vignettes—were recorded through written notes rather than video recordings. Athena continued to record journal entries after the video recordings were no longer taking place.

Athena drafted a description of each meeting and activity of the project and emailed it to the rest of the group for review. During reflection meetings, the research members' discussed the draft using the inquiry process 'theory in action' principles (Arieli, Friedman & Agbaria, 2009). As such, four inquiry questions were proposed to the research team to consider as they reflected upon the description:

- What were we each experiencing at the moment?
- What led us to speak or act in particular ways?
- What did we want to happen?
- How did we perceive each other and the project?

The three reflection sessions totaled seven hours. At the first reflection meeting, each member reviewed the description for accuracy of events and reflected upon our impressions at that time of the event such as what were our feelings at that given time. On our own time, research members reflected and commented on the project's meetings and activities using track changes in a Word document. All comments were electronically sent to Athena who integrated all comments into a single file. The research team met for roughly two hours to review all the comments and identify emerging themes. Based on group discussion and the comments provided, Athena drafted a first version of the manuscript. In drafting the manuscript, Athena suggested the concept of participation as a key theme in our reflections.

During the second session, Athena presented the second draft and talked about the issue of participation. The rest of the research team was in agreement that the nature participation was a key theme. As before, the research team reviewed their comments and reflected more deeply on the issue of participation.

We recorded our comments and edits in a Word document, and Athena combined all comments into one file.

At the final reflection session, we reviewed the research description and members' comments in the critical reflection subsections. Similar to Arieli, Friedman and Agbaria (2009), members of the research team were "free to stop at any point and inquire more deeply into their own, and each other's, thoughts, feelings, and assumptions" (p.268).

The following analysis is comprised of three components. First, we provide a description of the meetings and activities that is based on the initial description of events written by Athena and subsequently reviewed and approved by all co-researchers. Second, we offer our individual thoughts and feelings on the process in corresponding footnotes. These footnotes serve to give the space to each member of the research team—co-researchers and facilitator alike—the space to voice their viewpoint whether it is different, the same or nothing at all. We did not change the writing of one another's researcher's footnotes. Last, we critically reflect as a collective on our participation in the PAR process. We link this collective reflection to broader conversations in the literature regarding participation and practicalities of completing a PAR project as apart of a doctoral program.

Phase One: Sitting in the Audience

Recruitment (October 18, 2011)

Athena attended the first mentorship meeting with other potential co-researchers, mentees. This meeting is the first of three mandatory meetings for the mentors and mentees involved in the career mentorship program (see Chapter one for a discussion of the program). During the meeting, Athena was given an opportunity to present herself⁷ to the mentorship group at large and invite mentees to participate in the research project⁸. Athena began her speech with a personal introduction as an alumni and her interest in the research⁹. Athena indicated that if any mentees were interested in joining the group, they should speak with her after the meeting to obtain details about the project.

First Research Meeting: Introduction (November 7, 2012)

The purpose of the first meeting was to provide mentees who expressed interest in the research project the opportunity to review the ethics material and learn more about the project. All of these research meetings were held in the Disability Services Department boardroom at the university and held typically on Tuesdays, which coincided with the mentorship program's schedule. This first

⁷ **Athena:** I felt very nervous that I had such a short time to 'pitch' to the mentees to join the participatory action research project.

⁸ **Jasmine:** I really thought she was friendly and goal driven; this made me want to participate in more meetings.

⁹ **All co-researchers:** It was important to us that Athena identified as a person with a learning disability.

meeting was attended by three out of seven interested mentees; the other mentees had personal/work conflicts¹⁰. There were homemade cookies¹¹, light snacks and beverages offered at this meeting.

Jason¹² was the first mentee to arrive. Athena introduced the research project to him, which was broadly focused on the experiences of transition for university graduates with learning disabilities¹³. She presented several project options in which the group could collect data, including: journal writing, surveys with students on campus or in the mentorship program, an accommodation chart and participatory observation of a mentor's workplace¹⁴. Athena also showed Jason the Learning Disability chart¹⁵. Jason related well to the chart¹⁶. He was impressed by how the chart reflected his own experiences and the associated accommodation ideas. Sequentially, Jasmine and Todd¹⁷ joined the meeting. They also appeared interested¹⁸ in creating an accommodation chart (see Appendix A) for employees and employers.

Participants' overwhelming interest in the accommodation chart at this introductory meeting led the group to decide that the research project would focus on creating a similar chart to capture the challenges of transition to employment as a graduate with LD. The group decided that each person would select two LD categories from the exemplar chart provided: memory, executive functioning, language, visual motor, attention, visual spatial, phonological processing and process speed. Then, each person would provide additional strategies based on their own experience and

¹⁰ **Athena:** I was very concerned that I might not have enough people interested in participating in the project. I felt determined to make the project work so I offered to meet any interested mentees at a time that was convenient for them.

¹¹ **Todd:** The homemade food made me feel comfortable with the atmosphere of the group. The first meeting was very laid back.

¹² **Jason:** I thought that it would be less work. Thought it was a one-time thing. However, as I saw what was expected and what the project was trying to do, I figured it was something worthwhile doing and wouldn't be too much of my time.

¹³ **Athena:** I was getting nervous that other individuals who expressed interest in joining the project did not yet arrive. I was worried that I might have fewer people participating than I would have hoped, or than might be necessary from my committee's perspective. In the moment, I pressed on by introducing the project to Jason.

¹⁴ **Athena:** After the first meeting, I felt uneasy about the options. Jason was the only co-researcher who saw all of the research options first. Compared to the other mentees, the options presented to Jason were open-ended. Having the chart there gave people a concrete example of this option, whereas it was harder to do that for the other options. I felt this might have swayed Jason's, and others', selection of the chart.

¹⁵ **Athena:** A local school board has originally created the Learning Disability chart shown. Having worked in the school board for many years, I was provided with chart from a past colleague who thought I might be interested in the document.

¹⁶ **Jason:** This was great for myself being a student with an LD. I was able to see the things I already knew and was shown things I may not have yet known. This was helpful since I then took it with me and applied it to my life in school and outside.

¹⁷ **Todd:** I pointed out that it would be helpful to me. **All co-researchers:** we appreciated this suggestion.

¹⁸ **Athena:** I was pleasantly surprised how enthusiastically the mentees were interested in participating in the project.

additional research. Athena was responsible for e-mailing the group the minutes from the meeting and their assigned categories. In addition, Athena also sent web resources for the group to consider in their research. Since there were several co-researchers missing—namely; Suluxan, Ian and Daniel—the project’s objective was finalized at the first meeting: create an accommodation chart.

For those co-researchers who were unable to join the first meeting, Athena¹⁹ met with them on campus at a mutually convenient time. She discussed what had been explored at the first meeting and that the group had decided to create an accommodation chart. They were shown the exemplar chart used at the first meeting. All three people were interested in joining the research project. In conversation Suluxan asked whether Athena could assist him with his application to a master’s program. Athena met with him several times to help revise his application²⁰. (Other research members also requested periodically for Athena to review their resume or work application).

Critically Reflecting on Sitting in the Audience

In the first phase of the research project, it is the facilitator who is performing. She is preparing the script, practicing delivery and presenting to an audience. The quality of her performance and how people interpret this performance has a tremendous impact upon the likelihood of potential co-researchers joining the research team. The major drivers in the participation of co-researchers related to Athena’s friendliness, but also to the fact that she had identified as someone with a learning disability. Snoeren, Niessen and Abma (2012) suggest that for successful participation and engagement depends on “the quality of the dialogue and how it is initiated and developed during the process, that makes the difference” (p.191).

At the outset, Athena entered the field with a belief that university graduates with learning disabilities would profit from the development of practical tools to facilitate their transition to the knowledge economy but be willing and capable to take part in a yearlong project. As a requirement of the dissertation proposal and for the purpose of ethics approval, Athena was responsible for outlining the basic parameters of the project. In this sense, she had to ‘take the lead’ role in initiating the project. Attempting to maintain the PAR framework, the methodological components of the ethics application and dissertation proposal were kept deliberately broad.

In many ways, Athena anticipated that major research decisions would be made and executed by persons not yet involved in the project. Similar to Klocker (2012), Athena built into the ethics application and dissertation proposal sufficient

¹⁹ **Ian:** Athena seemed very welcoming, enthusiastic and flexible when I first met her. She put absolutely no pressure on me to join. I wish she had included more detail about what the project entailed (e.g., not just making the chart).

²⁰ **Suluxan:** Athena was always helpful. She would be able to work around her timetable. Also the one-on-one meetings were helpful for me because I was able to give my opinion.

methodological freedom by allowing the other research members to select the method of inquiry (e.g., survey, focus groups). Beyond that, many of the research details were unknown: the number of participants, the specific tool that the research team would develop, the process of development, and how this information would be disseminated. This meant asking individuals who were largely unaware of the project—the potential co-researchers—to get up from their seats and get involved.

For the co-researchers, Athena's friendliness and enthusiasm for the project got us interested in the idea of participating in the research. However, as Jason pointed out, the level of engagement — the development of the research agenda, data collection, analysis, and dissemination—was not initially well understood. Klocker (2012) points out that it is rare that non-researchers "conceptualize the world in terms of research projects...consider research a priority... [or] are found in 'ready-made groups'" (p. 153). At the first meeting, we were unsure how we were going to go about *doing* research. However, after the first meeting, we began to understand the project's timelines and research methods. At this point, Athena was the director of the performance insofar as she worked to ensure that everyone was following the same script - in this case the research project. For instance, she would ensure that all the research members who were not able to attend the scheduled meeting were updated in-person or by phone. In the end, people decided to continue with the project for several reasons. First, we found value in participating in a project that would allow us to get a first hand experience of research methods. Second, we found that this project was a great opportunity to not only help other students but also a larger disability community. We felt that creating an accommodation chart for employers and employees would enhance people's understanding about ways in which people with disabilities can empower themselves in the workplace. Third, we started to become aware of our learning strengths and weaknesses. Finally, we saw Athena as a strong and assertive leader whom we admired and wanted to get to know.

Phase II: Standing in the Wings

Second Meeting: Review of Chart Contribution and Set Up (December 12, 2012)

The second meeting occurred in the winter of 2012 in the same location²¹ as the first meeting. The purpose of this meeting was to bring together the accommodation ideas that everyone had been working on since the first meeting; figure out how to contextualize the chart through either peer-interviews and/or surveying the LD community at the university; and discuss the possibility of speaking with the mentorship group to get their feedback. There were six people who joined this meeting: Ian, Athena, Todd, Jasmine, Jason and Suluxan. At this meeting, Todd's recommendation for a poster-size meeting agenda was implemented. At the beginning of the meeting, there was a greater amount of socialization that centered on discussions of schoolwork and an explanation of

²¹ **Ian:** Athena gave me the wrong room number and this got me lost. This is the first time I met the other participants. I immediately felt welcomed to the group.

what it meant to write a dissertation. Following this, there were three major components of this meeting.

First, we discussed²² our experiences researching information for the accommodation chart and how we could provide recommendations to other individual's sections. After a quick glance over the chart, Athena suggested to everyone that they could review the chart on their own time rather than as a group. Athena suggested that each researcher would provide his or her comments and pass it along²³ to the next researcher for review.

Second, Athena spoke about the potential use of peer-interviews as a source of data for both contextualizing the chart but also for her own dissertation. During the brainstorming of which questions would be asked, the group spoke about topics that have irritated them over the years. For example, the group spoke about how the use of the term 'Spec Ed' is offensive to them. The group also began to share their own experiences of persons²⁴ doubting them in their academic journey to postsecondary education.

At the end of the meeting, we set up peer-interview pairs. The pairs were responsible for arranging their own meeting times. Athena offered to attend the interviews²⁵, but none of the groups wanted this. Athena sent out information about how to conduct interviews²⁶. At this time, the idea of co-researcher status was discussed. Jasmine and Ian exchanged high fives when they realized that they had ownership of the research. Ian was rather interested in the fact that he would be able to use the research experience on his resume and in future applications to graduate school. There was a discussion about attendance, specifically how many times people were required to participate in meetings to be considered members of the research group.

Third Meeting: Transcription and establishing the focus group (January 10, 2012)

At this meeting, Ian mentioned that he enjoys coming to the meetings because there were food incentives. We spoke about how homemade food is better than packaged goods. We also found that Athena consistently gave the wrong

²² **Athena:** After reviewing the video from the first meeting, I was much more aware of the amount of time that I spent speaking. I tried to remain attentive to the fact that every person needs an opportunity to speak.

²³ **Todd:** The process of completing the chart made me feel more comfortable with the other participants as it gave me the opportunity to learn about each other's learning styles, strengths and weaknesses. Additionally, I found this process highly enjoyable as I had the opportunity to collaborate with the other participants as well as learn a great deal about my own learning style.

²⁴ **Suluxan:** When I was in high school I felt that I was not smart enough for university. After I learned that other students felt the same way, I felt I was not alone.

²⁵ **Ian:** I asked Athena to do my interview, since I was not comfortable disclosing private information to the participants at that particular point. The fact that Athena has an LD made me feel much more comfortable talking to her.

room number. Some people²⁷ ended up getting lost because of this (Goodfellow, 2012). This consistent mistake became an important marker in Athena's identity as learning disabled. The purpose of this meeting was to talk about transcribing and data analysis of the peer interviews.

During this meeting, everyone discussed how he or she found ways to really connect²⁸ with the person they interviewed. For example, Jason explained that he had to "bite his tongue" because he wanted to interrupt Suluxan during the interview to have a two-way dialogue. People expressed concern that they were speaking too much, that the interview took too long and worried that transcribing would take a long time for Athena. Ian asked about how we were going to deal with the anonymity of the interviews if we were looking at the data collectively. Athena offered to transcribe the interviews, but Jasmine also expressed interest in learning how to transcribe. Jasmine and Athena made arrangements to meet separately in order to discuss how to transcribe the audio files.

Athena explained the meaning of data analysis. She offered to work with anyone interested in doing the data analysis²⁹. Everyone expressed an interest in doing the analysis as a collective. We made arrangements to meet as a group after the completion of the transcripts to conduct the data analysis. Todd suggested 3-hour intervals of working for optimal work efficiency.

We also dealt with the logistical matters of running focus groups with other students registered at the Disability Service Department. We divided up the responsibilities for running the focus groups^{30 31}: writing the email invitations, room and food arrangements, focus groups facilitators, and focus group questions

²⁷ **Ian:** This is referring to me. □

²⁸ **Todd:** After the peer interview I felt a great deal more connected to Jasmine since I learned a lot about her and realized how much we had in common. This experience did not have much of an impact on how I approached the project as a whole but did make me feel more comfortable with the participants.

Jason: Great way to start since it made everyone get comfortable with each other. This prevented anyone from being shy and unable to speak up saying exactly how they felt. This was great and allowed me to learn about your disability how it affected yourself as well as your partner. I think pairing individuals with the same LD has pros and cons. It helps each other out but I felt it was easy to get distracted when sharing similar experiences.

Jasmine: After I did the peer interviews I really felt closer to the project and had a better understanding as to why I was participating. The interviews gave me a better understanding as to how others felt in a work place, and the historical treatment of persons with disabilities in a work place. So I learned a lot more from individuals wanting to share their experiences. This made me see the project as a whole and how it wasn't only about ourselves but a whole community of people who need help in work environments.

²⁹ **Athena:** At this point, I had no expectation that anyone would be interested in participating the analysis.

³⁰ **Todd:** I think there are a number of benefits to using focus groups. First, many people are more productive when working in groups as it allows everyone to hear different perspectives. Second, it is a faster and more efficient means of getting research done. Finally, the format of focus groups is highly engaging to participants.

³¹ **Jasmine** We chose to do a focus group to get a bigger research sample. We needed more opinions and input.

creation.

Critical Reflection of Standing in the Wings

Similar to Buettgen *et al.* (2012), many of us felt at the beginning of the project that Athena was the expert because she was academically trained in the topic of transition for people with disabilities and she approached us to participate in the project. For the first few months of the project, we would tell other people that we were helping or participating in Athena's project, although she would repeatedly say that this project was a collective effort and that we were co-researchers. At this point in the project, we felt *a part* of the project but we did not feel like we *owned* the project. In some ways, we felt that we were still not contributing to the flow of the project because we were not in charge of research tasks. However, we still felt very much a part of the project and this gave us a great sense of autonomy and pride. To some degree, we also expected and wanted Athena to make the logistical arrangements such as meeting agendas and times. As in Bigby and Frawley's (2010) study, Athena took the primary role in organizing the logistical components of the research, namely: hardware, coordinating room bookings, recording meetings and to some extent transcribing.

The peer interviews were a major turning point in the research project. At this stage, we started (and enjoyed) wearing the researcher hat. We began to see that the project was more than just putting volunteer experience on our resume; it was about creating something for other students on campus with learning disabilities. We wanted to foster greater awareness of accommodation and resources, and inspire other students to get involved in similar studies and to advocate for change. This project was about helping students with disabilities think about employment opportunities, employers and work environments after their university experience. The development of the chart was one way of possibly making persons with disabilities and employers more united within a workplace setting. By unifying ourselves as students with disabilities through our participation, we were able to view the importance of unifying ourselves with others within our workplaces.

The peer interviews were also powerful in the sense that they revealed something new to us, our untold past. We feel that our use of peer interviews resonates well with Fine and Torre's (2008) thoughts on PAR as excavating buried stories of our past:

...participatory action research lifts the multiple stories and counter stories dwelling within any complex institution or social arrangement, privileging in particular those perspectives that age on the bottom of social arrangements, where the lies, the ghosts, the buried memories, the disposables, the traitors and the silences gather (p. 255)

The silence we often felt in the school system about our disabilities was not something we spoke about with peers who don't have learning disabilities. Throughout the peer interviews, we felt that many social issues came to the surface

for us, which were hidden within our daily thoughts, (such as not knowing when to disclose our learning disabilities to co-workers or friends). It was this set of experiences that we kept to ourselves. It was not until the peer interviews when we realized that our multiple stories painted a picture of a larger and more complex social arrangement of people who think and performed differently in school. At this point, we were progressing in the project where we felt we could talk freely and openly about our research findings and in turn make suggestions on how to fix issues we commonly faced.

Phase III: Taking Centre Stage

Analysis Session: January 31, 2012

Prior to the meeting, Athena cut up all of the answers from everyone's transcripts of the peer interviews and put them into Ziploc bags (Figure 1) that were labeled. These labels corresponded to the interview questions (Figure 2).

The data analysis session took place in the library³². The group met for three hours. Pop and chips were provided. Athena asked the researchers to collaboratively³³ discuss how to categorize the bags. The team created three categories: school, work and general LD (Figure 3). Everyone divided up into pairs and opened the bags one at a time³⁴ (Figure 4).

Although Athena³⁵ offered some ideas³⁶ about how to conduct an analysis, each group recorded their analysis differently. During this session, the team began to share openly their experiences of negotiating university policies for accommodations. For example, Jason and Jasmine spoke at length about how counselors at the disability office were reluctant to provide information about funding accommodations, such as a tutor. Toward the end of the session, Todd questioned why we were videotaping this meeting and this led to a group discussion about whether it was necessary for the project to videotape the meetings. The group agreed that the video recordings were not needed for the PAR

³² **Jason:** This was great and allowed you to learn about your disability how it affected yourself as well as your partner. I think pairing individuals with the same LD has pros and cons. Helps each other out. But I found it was easy to get distracted in sharing similar experiences.

³³ **Jasmine:** I felt as if the process was fun and interactive. We all got a chance to talk through the data and look at things from different perspectives together.

³⁴ **Suluxan:** This was very fun because I learned new types of disabilities. This made me want to learn about my own disability.

³⁵ **Jasmine** I feel that Athena was more than helpful; she helped me generate some ideas. She also made sure she had a way of being contacted either by phone, email or in-person. She really helped me understand what conducting research is about and how to go about it. Athena helped me learn about myself and gave me great tips on how to be a better student. She went above and beyond the meetings and showed that she really cares for people with disabilities.

³⁶ **Athena:** At first, I tried to make a recommendation to Todd and Daniel to read all of the quotes before recording a pattern. Daniel promptly told me that they would find their own way. After that, I really took a back seat by not providing any more hard directions unless asked otherwise.

project and Athena could take notes during and after the meetings instead³⁷. Jason made arrangements to reserve the room for the focus group.

Focus Group: February 28, 2012

The purpose of the focus groups (two in total) was to get feedback from the learning disability community on campus regarding their experience in transitioning into work and their feedback on the team's accommodation chart. At each meeting, there was pizza, beverages and baked goods provided. The roles for the focus group were assigned as follows: Ian chose to create the e-mail invitation; Suluxan, Jason and Todd wanted to run the focus groups; Jasmine was interested in drafting the questions for the discussion; (Daniel did not attend the meeting and was not particularly interested in assisting with the focus groups). At the first meeting, six students attended. Unfortunately, Jason was unable to lead the focus group because he was called into work. Suluxan and Athena, at the request of Suluxan, ran the focus group. No one showed up for the second meeting, which was scheduled for March 1, 2012³⁸.

Group Meeting: March 1, 2012

After the focus group meeting on March 1, the research team lingered to discuss next steps. Athena raised the possibility of the research group presenting to the larger mentorship program. Todd and Athena put together a presentation and once everyone arrived at our meeting, we divided up the sections³⁹ of the presentation so that each person would have their own section to discuss. The purpose of the presentation would be to gain feedback about the accommodation chart and to ask for ideas about how our chart should be disseminated and to whom.

The group also discussed briefly that we would want to send out this information⁴⁰ to organizations that might be interested in using the accommodation chart (e.g., governmental agencies, and local cultural centres). We decided to wait until we received the feedback from the mentorship presentation before presenting this to a wider audience.

Dissemination

On March 6, 2011, the research team presented both the accommodation chart and the process of our project to the larger mentorship group. All members of the research group spoke. After the presentation, we asked the larger group to

³⁷ **Athena:** I felt that this was an important turning point where the co-researchers started to take control of how the meetings operated.

³⁸ **Jasmine:** I think we should have had more focus groups or speed interviews in the halls of the university with others students with disabilities. I think it was useful because we got some useful information and found that they had similar opinions as we did.

³⁹ **Jasmine:** I feel safe to express myself and share my opinions without fearing judgment.

⁴⁰ **Jasmine:** I feel as if there is still a lot of work to be done and that there are many possibilities for this project. It can always keep growing and expanding, only we now need to establish a cut off point: where are we willing to go, when will our goals be met.

review and discuss the accommodation chart that we had created. This generated much discussion among the mentorship group and they recorded the findings of their discussion on feedback forms. We received a lot of positive feedback about the chart. We also received some suggestions for areas for improvement.

The end of the academic school year was rather difficult for the group. Many of our meetings were based around our class schedules and the meetings. After our presentation to the mentorship group, we met twice. At these meetings, we discussed how we could disseminate the document to the wider community. Todd wanted to share the chart with an autism association in Ontario that might be interested in creating something similar for their members. Jasmine was interested in presenting and distributing, through the human resource department, the chart to employees at her summer employer. Ian suggested that he would get into contact with his Municipal politician. None of these options materialized for lack of interest on the part of the other party and commitment from the team to follow-up sufficiently. We published the document online (www.LDchart.wordpress.com) and through the *Mentorship Portal*, which is an online portal for participants in the Career Mentorship program.

Critically Thinking about Taking Centre Stage

At this point of the project, we were no longer standing in the wings watching Athena research us; we took centre stage. The most evident moment of this shift was when Daniel and Todd questioned the necessity of the video recording during the analysis session. With endorsement from the other research members, it was decided that meetings should not be video recorded because what really mattered were the decisions made, and those details could be recorded in writing. The termination of video recording was, in many ways, a profound influence on the power dynamics within the research project. The shifting of power dynamics can take different forms—from taking on formal responsibility for transcribing to suggesting where the meeting should be held—and is dependent on the context of the research.

The dissemination of our project was, like other doctoral PAR studies, not what we anticipated. We fell short of distributing the chart to a wider audience. Some of the challenges were from organizations' interest level, and many of us did not have the professional connections to reach our audience. At the same time, the group's availability changed considerably. The end of the academic year meant that many members of the research team finished coursework, travelled and/or found employment elsewhere. Most importantly, Athena slowed down with arranging meetings because she was preoccupied with writing other chapters of her dissertation.

In spite of these challenges, we believe that PAR projects are 'do-able' within the scope of a doctoral project (Klocker, 2012). Even though the research meetings stopped and we were unsuccessful at disseminating the research to employers, we feel that future mentors and mentees who join the mentorship program will have an

accommodation chart to use and that we all learned about our own strategies (and made friends!). We hope that the chart opens up discussion between mentors and mentees, which in turn will raise critical questions in regard to their career goals. Most importantly, we believe like Balcazar *et al.* (1998) and others (Goodley, 1999; Moss, 2002) that PAR was a vehicle for us to become aware of our own skills and resources.

Conclusion

This paper has explored how co-researchers, and more specifically researchers with disabilities, participate meaningfully in a PAR project. In our paper, we attempt to respond to two concerns noted in the literature. The first concern—pointed out by Friedman and Agabaria (2009) and Dick's (2011) call for democracy in the writing up of PAR projects—recognizes the complexity and multiple voices within the research team. The second concern derives from disability scholars such as Pain (2004) and others (Kiernan, 1999; Walmsley, 2001; Walmsley & Johnson, 2003), who advocate that persons with disabilities *can* and *should* have a voice in research.

Over the course of this project, the research team came to understand that there were commonalities between the lived experiences and accommodation strategies used by individuals with similar learning disabilities. For instance, persons with process memory issues experience difficulty remembering names or meeting details, and a common strategy is to write down this information in a familiar place, such as a mobile calendar, to retrieve the information when necessary. In this way, the tools we developed grew out of the lived experiences that each co-researcher brought with them to the PAR project.

Let us not deceive you; this process was by no means flawless or smooth. The project evolved in ways we did not anticipate, such as our interest in transcribing and conducting focus groups. We experienced our share of incongruences: mutually convenient times for research meetings were scarce, the time commitment of the project was taxing at times and we were not successful at disseminating our research. As experts of our own PAR project, we recommend other co-researchers take several steps to support their journey in this research project.

First, we suggest considering the time commitment that is involved in PAR. It is well known that the amount of time that is required for a PAR project can be cumbersome (Cameron, 2007; Herr & Anderson, 2005; Moss, 2009). We found it helpful to make, when necessary, alternative meeting times one-on-one with Athena or conference calls when we could not attend a research meeting in-person.

Second, we suggest being realistic about the outcome of the research. At the beginning, we had lofty ambitions to distribute our accommodation chart to a wide array of companies, organizations and governmental agencies. Unfortunately, due to personal commitments, we had a narrow the scope of our dissemination.

Nevertheless, we feel that the process was worth it: we learned a lot about ourselves, about other people with learning disabilities and about how research is conducted. Moreover, we were able to share the accommodation chart with the mentorship program and other personal contacts interested in accommodation ideas in the workplace and will continue to do so on an informal basis.

Finally, we would recommend enjoying the process! PAR is a great way to connect with other people that have similar life experiences and interests. We find that the project was not only about political activism of the disability community, but also a space where we can enjoy good food, interesting conversation and new friends.

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Responses from
interview in labeled
bags.

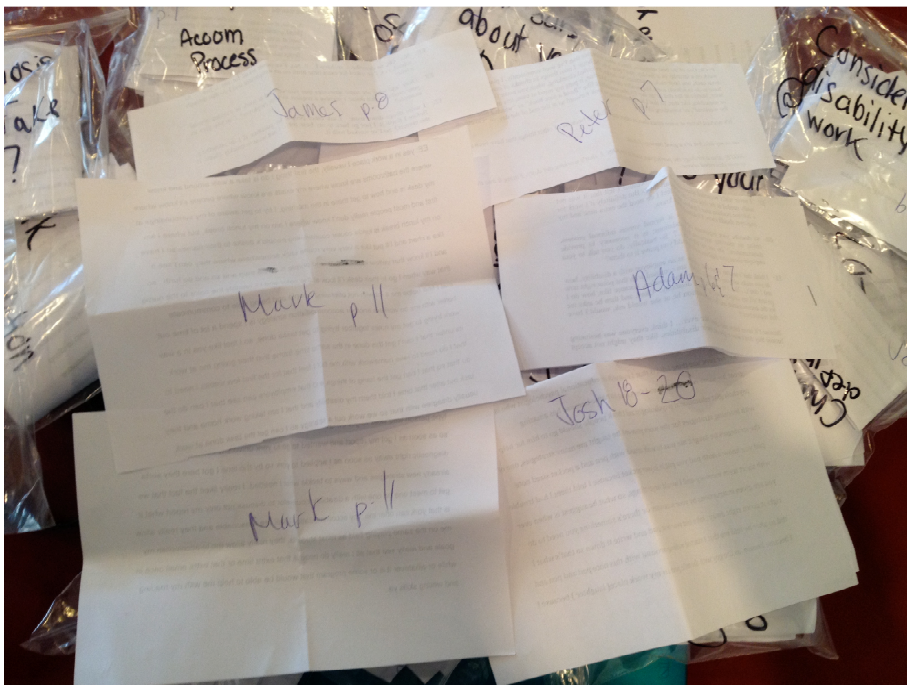
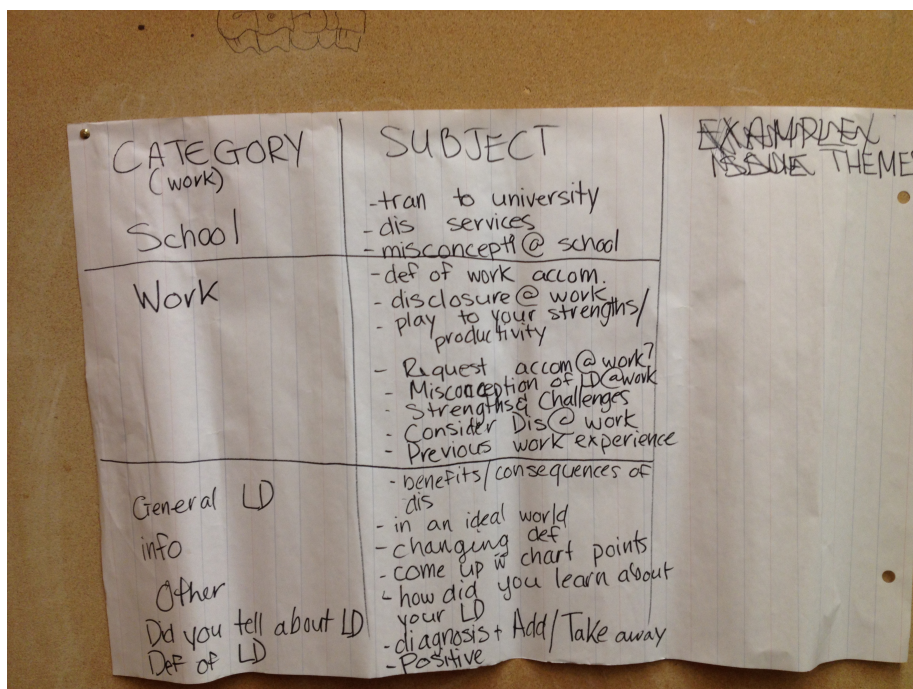


Figure 2. Reverse of co-researchers' answers labeled according to interviewee.



CATEGORY (work)	SUBJECT	EXAMINED ISSUE THEMES
School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - tran to university - dis services - misconcept @ school 	
Work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - def of work accom. - disclosure @ work - play to your strengths/ productivity - Request accom @ work? - Misconception of LD @ work - Strengths & Challenges - Consider Disc @ work - Previous work experience 	
General LD info	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - benefits/ consequences of dis - in an ideal world - changing def - come up w chart points - how did you learn about your LD - diagnosis + Add/ Take away - Positive 	
Other		
Did you tell about LD		
Def of LD		

Figure 3. Research team's chart categorizing topics by theme.



Figure 4. Co-researchers working in groups of two.

Chapter Two:

Imagined Distance and The Politics of Identity in Participatory Action Research

To be submitted to:
Progress in Human Geography

Abstract

Participatory Action Research (PAR) has gained momentum in human geography in recent decades as a means of promoting the primacy of voices from below. However, this approach has come under fire for perpetuating a dualism in which the research facilitator is inherently at the periphery of the community and (by necessity) a homogenous group of community members is central. This dualism can be framed by Rose's (1997) theoretical lens of imagined distance in order to explore how insider/outsider tension manifests in PAR. Drawing from reflections of my doctoral PAR project, this chapter examines how a politics of the learning disability (LD) identity informed the imagined distance between members of the PAR research team. I reflect upon how the technique of peer interviewing as well as facilitator openness served to promote a safe communicative space that helped to bridge this distance. I consider, too, how this politics of identity might have manifested among research members through claims of epistemological distance and epistemological nearness.

Introduction

Emergence of PAR in Social Geography

The emergence of Participatory Action Research (PAR) in social geography has sprung from a commitment to ensure that the voices of those most often silenced in the wider society are provided with a means by which they may lead social and political change. PAR provides an opportunity for members of communities to assess, plan, implement and advocate for changes. Participatory research methodologies have served as an alternative to those traditional approaches in social geography that have been criticized for aiming to merely “survey (and ‘map’) the exclusionary landscape, but rarely do much to change that landscape apart from the occasional nod to ‘planning and policy recommendations’” (Kitchin & Hubbard, 1999, p. 195). In response to traditional positivistic methods, PAR practitioners have consistently highlighted the importance of, and benefits associated with, having the research’s purpose, process and product emerge from the local condition (Boyden & Ennew, 1997; Greenwood, Whyte & Markavy, 1993; Kindon, Kesby & Pain, 2007; Minore *et al.*, 2004). It is through this local lens that research efforts are guided to be mindful of the moral, material and socio-political climate of the community in question.

Despite the enthusiasm for participatory research in geography, including PAR (for a discussion see Pain, 2004; Sanderson & Kindon, 2004), many academics (Abebe, 2009; Cahill, 2007b; Cooke & Kothari, 2001; Kesby, 2005) are still uneasy about the practicalities of promoting collaborative efforts between potentially divergent parties, the academically trained researcher and the community of interest. Much of the literature regarding power dynamics⁴¹ between these parties has rested upon assumed difference(s) between them, such as knowledge and social status. Cahill (2007a) has cautioned that participatory research can still “reproduce rather than challenge unequal power relations” (p. 299; see also Kesby, 2005; Kothari, 2001).

Feminist geographers have long insisted on the situated nature of insider/outside knowledge evident in qualitative inquiry. Gillian Rose’s (1997) offers an analysis of this situated knowledge and the researcher-researched positionality in what she calls imagined distance. This distance, as a spatial metaphor, makes reference to differences between researcher and researched in terms of each party’s experiences, knowledge and material realities. These differences can set each party apart from one another both literally and figuratively. Rose notes that this distance is not easily reconciled; the popular convention of reflective exercises⁴² by researchers risks assuming that differences between parties can be

⁴¹ Within the concept of insider/outsider positions are undertones of power dynamics, which have been written about by Kesby (2005), Kothari (2001) and Mohammed (2001). In the interest of space, this paper cannot delve into that discussion.

⁴² See Rose (1997) for a discussion of reflective processes such as transparent reflexivity.

mapped as though agency is known and power is visible. Instead, she tasks geographers to question “how difference is constituted, [and to] trace its destabilizing emergence during the research process” (p. 313). Thus, Rose shifts the process of reflexivity away from a self-discovery process for the academically trained researcher—a consciously known, transparent and absolute process—to a focus on how both the researcher and the researched *construct* the self and one another in unknown ways within the context of the research project.

In this paper, I critically engage with the question of how insider/outsider status between research members was constructed in a PAR research project. This PAR project is a part of my doctoral research that focused on transition to employment for university students with learning disabilities. I reflect upon how the definition of who is/can be an insider within the Learning Disability (LD) community emerged, and how this understanding influenced how members of the research team—both the facilitator and student participants—interacted with one another. More broadly, I explore how the politics of LD identity informed the imagined distances (Rose, 1997) between all members of the research team.

The paper contains four main sections. To begin, I review the principles of PAR as understood in human geography, paying particular attention to the issue of positionality and the politics of identity. Second, I describe both the context for, and the nature of, the PAR project under discussion (referred to hereafter as the LD project). In the third section, I engage with Rose’s (1997) concept of imagined distance to explore the politics of identity at play in the LD project. To do this, I examine how the imagined distance between research members might have been narrowed by way of the facilitator openness and the use of peer interviewing techniques. I also consider how distance was reproduced through research members’ claims of being either inside (*epistemological nearness*) or outside the LD community (*epistemological distancing*). In the final section, I conclude with a call for greater recognition of conflicting interests within the community and the value of research techniques to address imagined distance.

Origins and Principles of PAR

In their own respective fields, geographers concerned with feminism (see Chouinard, 1997; Kindon, 2003), disability (see Hall, 2004; Gleeson, 2000), child (see Matthew, 2003; Matthew, Limb & Taylor, 1999; Sibley, 1991) and indigenous (see Connell, 1997) studies have mounted a wave of criticism against those traditional (masculine, ableist, adult-centric and Western) academic research practices that can create the illusion of knowing the experiences of disenfranchised persons. Viewed critically, more traditional academic representations dilute the “multiple causalities, historical dynamism, and the diversity” because they silence the very communities they attempt to speak for (Greenwood, Whyte & Harkavy, 1993, p. 178; see also Kitchin, 2000; Sibley, 1995). Moreover, traditional methods have been denounced for failing to transform research findings into positive practical outcomes for these communities (Kelly & van der Riet, 2001; Valentine, 2003). Slowly geographers (for example, Chouinard, 1997; Gleeson, 2000; Rose,

1993) have begun to re-imagine how research practices might better place the subjects' interests, perspectives and experiences at the core of the research.

Participatory action research has been an important part of this process of re-imagining the research relationship. PAR does not prescribe a specific methodological technique but rather relies on local knowledge and the participation of the target community in order to define the issue, collect and analyze data, and disseminate conclusions that seek to have a meaningful impact for the community. There has been a multitude of approaches associated with PAR, including *Action Research*, *Active Reflexivity*, *Community Inquiry*, *Emancipatory Action Research*, and *Participatory Research* to name just a few. This paper works from the viewpoint suggested by Kindon (2010) that although there is a diverse understanding of participatory action research, the core value shared is:

...a commitment to breaking down hierarchical practices of elite knowledge producers through collaboration at every stage of the research process. (p. 525).

Geographers have found PAR's spatial emphasis particularly attractive. Pain (2004) and others (Kindon, 2003; Mattingly, 2001; Sanderson & Kindon, 2004) have explored how PAR is useful for spatial analysis for a number of reasons: it is contextually sensitive, valorizes local knowledge and calls attention to the relationship between people and places. In geography, various forms of action research have appeared in a variety of geographic approaches, including: participatory rural appraisal (Kindon, 1995; 1998), participatory urban appraisal (Moser & McIlwaine, 1999) and participatory mapping (Herlihy & Knapp, 2003). Geographers have undertaken PAR with diverse communities, including: women (see Cahill, 2006, 2007a, 2007b) children (see Cahill, 2007a; Cope, 2009; Matthews, 2003), indigenous groups (Smith, Williams & Johnson, 1997) and persons with disabilities (Kindon, 2003; Pain, 2004). Social geographers have introduced their own tailored toolkit to PAR such as participatory diagramming/mental and behaviour mapping (Cahill, 2007a; Fuller *et al.*, 2003; Fuller, O'Brien & Hope, 2003; Kesby, 2000; Pain & Francis, 2003; Young & Barratt, 2001), and incorporate art techniques such as theater (Mattingly, 2001; Pratt & Kirby, 2003) and photography and film (Kindon, 1995, 2003; McIntyre, 2000, 2003). Central to these diverse approaches and techniques in PAR is the collaborative nature of the research process. It is this relational understanding of the researcher-researched position in PAR that breaks from traditional models of social inquiry to incorporate an understanding that *all* research members contribute, collaborate and reflect upon the research process.

Positionality and The Politics of Difference and Distance

The nature and quality of interpersonal relationships within a PAR research team are "critical to both the process and outcome of action research" (Arieli, Friedman & Agbaria, 2009, p. 265). Traditional approaches to research assume that researchers are experts in the lives and experiences of their subjects. The

presumed legitimacy of their findings as objective and neutral are thought to reveal “*the truth*, as grand, totalizing theories implying universal applicability [emphasis original]” (Mohammed, 2001, p. 101). Feminist and post-colonial scholars have problematized this Western ontological and epistemological framework as hegemonic and disembodied. Haraway (1997), for example, criticized Western scientists for “writing themselves out of their work” as “modest observers” in order to create the illusion that their research was immune to societal pressures (p. 191). For Haraway, all research including positivistic research is, in fact, situated reflecting the positionality of the researcher. From this perspective, research that seeks to have a meaningful impact *for* marginal persons must emerge from the positionality *of* the community. The credibility of research findings and recommendations no longer rests upon the distant objectivity and rigour of expert academics but emerges rather from collaborative efforts between academic researchers and community members to harness the insights, knowledge and experiences of the community. In this way, community members are valued as insiders to the everyday issues and potential solutions for their community; whereas, the researcher is a distant outsider.

In the simplest terms, the moral and procedural authority over the PAR process is reserved for persons with insider knowledge of the community. The insider/outsider paradigm makes reference to the “boundary that is seen to circumscribe identity, social position and belonging” in which insiders claim “a superior, almost organic knowledge of the community not accessible by outsiders” (Mohammad, 2001, p. 101). Insider knowledge can serve to justify assertions of what an entire community feels, thinks and wants. These claims emerge from persons who perceive themselves to be in-tune with, and representative of, “the community”. By contrast, outsider knowledge is inherently different from that of the community. It can be used to justify claims *about* the community from a seemingly a neutral, objective and professional perspective. Thus, those who are deemed to be inside have first-hand knowledge of the quotidian issues of that particular community. Whereas, academic researchers, typically considered outsiders, might be knowledgeable *about* the community but cannot speak *for* the community.

In some instances, academic researchers may attempt to immerse themselves in a given context in order to gain insider status (see Moss, 1995) or make claims by way of their own identity to a particular insider social location (see Oakley, 1981). For Rose (1997), this is constituted/imagined:

...either as a relationship of difference, articulated through an objectifying distance; or as a relationship of sameness, understood as the researcher and researched being in the same position. The contradiction is that the latter is impossible while the former is unacceptable (p. 313).

For Rose, the researcher’s situated knowledge—often privileged and academic—is inescapable. Even with the best of intentions, the researcher’s positionality risks dominating the project’s direction and outcome: by her/his own professional

agenda; by her/his taking control with their perceived authoritative knowledge and social status in comparison to the other research members; and by her/his perceived lack of personal stake in the project's outcome. Thus, from a PAR perspective, the academic researcher's knowledge, power and agency are construed, to a certain extent, as irreconcilable with the community's interest. By comparison, those pegged as holding insider knowledge—typically conceived as exclusively members of a community—have been unencumbered from critical analysis of their positionality.

While concerns about the power and privilege of academic researchers are valid, this position also risks narrowly conceptualizing 'the researched' as united in interests, goals and experiences. This, in turn, risks painting a façade of a community as a homogenous entity (see Guijt & Shah, 1998). Guijt and Shah describe the simplification of a community unified in participatory work:

... 'community meetings' as the forum for decision-making, representing perceptions in terms of 'the community map' as if only one view exists, and striving for a single 'community action plan' that will somehow meet the needs of the entire community (p. 7).

In this way, claims of sameness in the project can blur the complexities and fluidity of identities among community members, and also between community members and the academic researcher. In this context, claims of sameness and/or difference can position research members as distant from one another. Rose (1997) explains on the concept of *imagined distance*:

a researcher situates both herself and her research subjects in the same landscape of power, which is the context of the research project in question. However, the researched must be placed in a different position from the researcher since they are separate and different from her. Differences between researcher and researched are imagined as *distances* in this landscape of power (p. 312, emphasis in original).

However, in recent literature, the distance between researcher-researched, insider-outsider, different-same have been revised to capture the fluidity and messiness of everyday social interactions, perceptions and reflections. Parr (2000) notes that these boundaries are "more complex than a simple dualism of same/other... individuals may move between normal and stigmatizing positioning in social life cycles and social encounters" (p. 233). Valentine (2003) takes it a step further to suggest that a connection between researcher and researched can be made "across 'difference' or can fail to connect through 'sameness'" (p. 377). However, it is as yet unclear how boundaries of sameness and difference emerge and shift within the context of research, and how connections can be forged in practice.

In this paper, I make use of what happened in my doctoral PAR project to

critically reflect upon the complexities of these boundaries and how they informed imagined distance amongst members of the research team. Specifically, I explore the insider/outsider tensions that were produced by the politics of LD identity. I trace how understandings of who was believed to be inside or outside the LD community shaped imagined distances and proximities within the project. Through a process of critical reflection, I illustrate how imagined distance in LD project served to shape and be shaped by the research members. I also show how practical efforts to connect across lines of difference-sameness were realized and frustrated as the project evolved over time.

It is important to note that my own critical reflection on the insider/outsider paradigm at play in this project began before beginning fieldwork. This critical reflection informed how I approached the project and members of the research team. In the following section, I attempt to situate myself within the LD community and to articulate my interest in the particular topic of transition to work for students with LD.

The LD Project

The project in question sought to explore the experiences of transition for university graduates with learning disabilities into the knowledge economy. My interest in this topic emerged from my personal experience, passion and previous research with the secondary students with learning disabilities. Nevertheless, a specific interest in the experience of transition into knowledge work for students with LD developed through my involvement in a university-run mentorship program for students with LD.

During my master's degree, I participated in a mentorship program for students with LD. The purpose of the mentorship program is to provide students with disabilities the opportunity to be mentored by an individual currently employed in their industry of interest, and to attend career workshops. For me, this program initiated questions about how persons with LD negotiate the workplace.

Consulting the academic literature on the transition to work for persons with LD, I found that my question was an important one given the larger trend of persons with disabilities transitioning from postsecondary education into work. For example, between 1996 and 1999, there was a 125 percent increase in the number of postsecondary students with disabilities in Ontario (OECD 2003). In spite of an emerging literature including doctoral theses (see Meredith, 2005; Steele, 1996; Yates, 2009) and academic publications (see Greenbaum, Graham & Scales, 1996; Madaus, Gerber & Price, 2008; Madaus, Zhao & Ruban, 2008) on this topic, there is a scarcity of practical resources available to graduates with LD that support them through the transition process from university to the workplace.

Entering my doctoral studies, I was motivated to work *with* members of the LD community to develop knowledge that would facilitate their transition process from

university to work. Thus, the goal of my dissertation was to understand the barriers and facilitators facing university graduates with LD transitioning into knowledge work. Knowledge work was of particular interest because it makes cognitive demands on employees that might serve as barriers for persons with LD. Having engaged with focus group and photo elicitation methodologies in my master's thesis, I was curious to explore how graduates with learning disabilities might set their own research agenda and participate in a research project. Also, I envisioned that this project would serve both the personal interest of the research members, including myself, and the collective interest of the wider LD community. The principles of PAR resonated well with a vision to create a practical tool that could be used by the research members, future mentees of the mentorship program, and community stakeholders such as disability advocacy organizations.

The PAR research project described in this paper took place at a university in Southern Ontario with eight (8) undergraduate students who identify as having a learning disability (among other disability labels)⁴³. All research members were understood, within the parameters of research proposal, as 'inside' the LD community. This rationale was founded on the fact they were participating in the mentorship program that required them to be identified as having an LD by Disability Services at the university. All members of the research team were recruited through this mentorship program. The research members met regularly as a group over the course of nine (9) months and, since then, periodically we continue to meet on a social basis.

The issue of democracy and empowerment is, as Dick (2011) points out, well discussed in PAR and *action research* literature but "less often achieved" (p. 134). For the remainder of this paper, I will critically reflect on the insider/outsider dynamic in the LD project. Reflecting on how various members of the research team claim insider or outsider status relative to the LD community, the paper engages with my regular journal entries transcripts of discussion among the research team members that occurred before, during and after research meetings, which included myself (the facilitator). These discussions occurred both formally at the end of research meetings, and also through informal discussions between research members. A more detailed discussion of this critical reflection is provided elsewhere (see Chapter Two).

Safe Space in PAR

This section explores the politics of LD identity between research members, including myself. More specifically, this section explores how the politics of LD identity unfolds and serves to shape the imagined distance among participants within the LD project. With all members of the research team identifying as persons with LD, it could be thought that the team would have a homogenous perception of

⁴³ It should be noted that none of the research members were asked to provide any sort of proof of their disabilities. As such, none of the research members were privy to the details of any other research member's LD (including myself), or whether she/he had any additional labels.

barriers in the university-workplace transition and a strong and unified sense of the appropriate solutions to those barriers. In reality, this was not the case and negotiating between the different opinions and experiences of group members was a complex and dynamic process. Entering the research project, I was mindful of the importance of trust and safety in research yet was unsure of how the interpersonal dynamics between the research members would unfold. Here, I discuss two strategies that emerged during the project, which served to welcome the diversity of voices and situated knowledges that emerged within the LD project: facilitator openness and peer-interviewing.

Facilitator Openness

In PAR, the politics of the researcher's positionality is complex. On the one hand, community members may interpret the prestige of the outsider researcher's educational/ professional associations with a "blend of respect and distrust" (Smith *et al.*, 2010, p. 414). On the other hand, as discussed previously, a researcher claiming insider knowledge of the community may risk obfuscating other points of privilege and power. This section reflects upon discussions of researcher positionality that took place during a post-research session. In these discussions, group members argued that my disclosure of disability and confidence in identifying within the community was a critical component in fostering a space in which group members felt safe to express themselves and describe their experiences. Two key instances of my (facilitator's) openness were underscored: disclosure of LD during the recruitment process for the project, and the use of humour regarding my own disability identity. As explained by Rodger and Sandeep⁴⁴, my openness in identifying as LD in my initial presentation during recruitment for the project was pivotal to their decision to join the team:

Rodger: what I liked is that you kinda open up to us about who you are that made us feel comfortable about opening up to you. And, you took the first step, so it made it easier for us.

Sandeep: And the fact that you disclosed too you had a disability, which is like "good, this is someone that who understands us and not looking from the outside". You know, from an outsider.

The decision to disclose my disability was an uncomfortable choice. Seldom do I disclose for fear that this one social location, my disability, might override others' perceptions of my complex self. Despite this hesitation, I felt the moral obligation to be open and honest about myself in the way that I hoped the other research members would be with me. Beyond my disclosure, the research members found that I was confident in my LD identity. This perception of confidence materialized through my humour about errors that I attributed to my disability. For instance, for the first two research meetings, I provided the other research team members with

⁴⁴ All names are pseudonyms to protect the identities of co-researchers.

the incorrect room number. This resulted in several people going to the wrong location and arriving late. When Arthur pointed out this trend during the third meeting, I apologized and casually made the remark that ‘because of my LD’ I failed to pick up on the room number typo in emails. This became a running joke within the group. During the analysis session, Fred jokingly pointed out:

... I came early to the library because I wasn’t sure whether the room number you wrote in your email was right. Just making sure!

Typically, my reaction toward this scenario would have resulted in a sense of embarrassment and shame that my ‘LD always gets in the way’. However, in the context of the research group—where others also identify as LD—I felt safe to risk making a joke out of the situation. Upon reflection, this error and my sense of humour about it might have also conveyed to the participants a sense that I was comfortable in my ‘LD skin’ and welcomed others to be the same. In some ways, the light-heartedness towards my self-inscribed imperfections⁴⁵ and the group’s acceptance of my errors might have suggested to other research members that the research meetings were a safe space to share their own imperfections. However, the sense of trust and safety that developed within the context of the research team was not solely the creation of the facilitator but also developed from a growing sense of trust built through the efforts of the community research members.

Peer Interviewing

At the beginning of the LD project, I spoke to members of the research team about different methods and tools that we could potentially use to explore the experiences of negotiating workplaces. These options included surveys, journaling, photo collage, participant observation and other methods. Through discussion, the team selected peer interviewing. This research technique “takes seriously the notion that interviewing is a social performance between partners and a specialized type of conversation, an exchange of views” (Porter *et al.*, 2009, p. 291). For Porter and colleagues (2009) peer interviewing offers the space where research members can co-construct the interaction so that “they are able to withhold or report information in ways that they see fit” (p. 291). In the LD project, the peer interviews were organically arranged; the research members simply picked a partner. Each interview pair made arrangements to meet at a mutually convenient time and place. The research team created an interview guide based on a template provided by the facilitator. During these interviews, one research member interviewed the other, and then they switched roles (for greater discussion see Chapter Two).

At the following group meeting, all research members reported that they found themselves shocked by how they could relate to one another’s experiences.

⁴⁵ I have purposefully left this word, imperfection, here because that is the word I used in the project. I believe this highlights that cultural ideas of LD have been inscribed on myself, and how I potentially perpetuated these notions in my own PAR work.

Certain experiences were similar (such as their experience with the processes for academic accommodation); whereas, other experiences were different (such as experiences of peers' reactions toward disclosure). In both cases, their interest was sparked. Frazer explained that "[he] had to keep biting his tongue during the interview" because he could identify with much of Sandeep's lived experience. Judith echoed Alex's sentiments. For her, the peer interview:

was [a] learning process... where I got to learn a lot about Alex and a lot about myself through Alex... we were able to put together our similarities to see whether that was true for everyone [in the group].

This shock emerged from a profound sense of group identity that had not been experienced prior to the peer interviews. As Judith explained:

...learning disabilities is not a topic that all of us want to talk about or not all of us disclose, so [the peer interviews] gave them a safe atmosphere and a project to work on that so that we could talk about it.

Through the peer interviews, individuals were able to connect with other members of the research team in profound ways. Similar to Pitts and Miller-Day's experience (2007), the peer interviews represented a crucial turning point in the research relationship where the research members shared and felt safe in discussing experiences that were once perceived as isolating and alienating. The peer interview activity had benefits beyond the mere production of data. It served as an important contribution to the PAR process that allowed not only "improving the self-esteem ... [but also] building a positive sense of collective identity" (Shakespeare, 2006, pp. 199-200). The peer interviews fostered symmetry between the interviewer and interviewee. In so doing, it reduced the imagined distance between research members; sharing experiences and perspectives served to make the interviewer and interviewee insiders to one another's lives.

The Politics of Identity

In spite of efforts made to foster a safe communicative space through facilitator openness and peer interviews in the LD project, a politics of identity still permeated the PAR process. Here, I hope to shed light on the gray areas of interpersonal dynamics in PAR, and how they emerge. I offer a reflection, based on my own positionality and perspective at the given moment, of how issues of difference surrounding the definition of community influenced researcher members' participation in the project. I make reference to claims of authority as they informed how research members moved about the imagined landscape: epistemological distancing and epistemological nearness.

Epistemological Distancing

Despite extensive discussions in the literature regarding the politics of the research process, little consideration has been given to the politics of identity *within*

the community that is participating in research. In this project, the discursive construction of what constitutes the LD identity served to demarcate who was an insider or outsider. The claim of who *is* or *is not* learning disabled was formed partly by the research project, and partly by each research members' perception of themselves as learning disabled. Here, this section challenges the notion of the community as a united and homogenous group by illuminating how the politics of the LD identity created distance between research members. I echo the view of Alcoff and colleagues (2006) that identities are not descriptions of "our mysterious inner essences" but rather "casual explanations" we create about our "social locations in a world that is shaped by such social locations, by the way they are distributed and hierarchically organized" (p. 6). In the two following examples, I consider how distance was created among members and through the research project's definition of learning disability.

Differences in the way people participated in the project were often framed within the context of their LD 'type'. Over time, these differences became a wedge in the social cohesion of the group. For instance, during the analysis session, Fred took many breaks and appeared to be distracted at times from the task at hand such as text messaging friends and doodling. This was noticeable to the other members of the team and particularly frustrating to his partner in the task. Alex, his partner, felt that Fred was not sufficiently engaged in the process and mid-way through the session—when Fred was on break—asked whether he could switch partners. Fred returned from his break and was clearly upset over the change in groups. After the incident, Alex approached me to ask whether I would intervene by speaking to Fred about his behaviour. In my journal, I reflected on our conversation:

Alex spoke to me today before the meeting and asked if I could speak to Fred about his 'lack of participation' in the analysis session... Alex rationalized Fred's engagement level as a result of his "ADHD-ness" and his own work habits as a result of his own disability. I wonder: Is there a rift between them because of their disabilities? Or is it rationalized through their disabilities? Has the context of the "LD" project created this focus?

Reflecting upon this meeting, the identity that I thought united them—person with LD—I began to question whether it served as a rationale for their interpersonal tension during the analysis session. This tension underscores Valentine's point of "failing to connect through sameness" discussed previously (p. 377). The perception that differences in participation were a product of one's disability created imagined and literal distance between Fred and Alex.

A second form of distancing emerged in relation to people identifying with multiple disabilities. During a post-research discussion, Arthur—who disclosed to me that he identified with several disability labels—expressed that he initially felt that the project's parameter of LD did not "fit" into "who he was". His understanding

of the LD project's definition of community informed how he participated in the peer interview activity. For this activity, he asked me (as the facilitator)—privately—to interview him rather than a fellow co-researcher. He explained this request as related to issues of confidentiality: "I wanted to know that everything was going to stay confidential. Like, I didn't want it going up on anyone's Facebook page so the whole world could see". In this way, Arthur distanced himself from sharing personal experiences because he was unsure of his peers' reactions about experience that might relate to other disability labels. He linked this concern to experiences he has encountered with peers in the classroom; he worried that "they might start to treat me different, especially if they don't know anything about that kind of topic". The imagined distance between Arthur and other co-researchers was shaped in part by how the identity of 'person with a LD' was constructed within the scope of the project. For Arthur, this definition did not include persons with additional disability labels.

This discursive construction of the LD label was created in several ways, and, at times, implicitly. Firstly, the recruitment method for the research team occurred through the LD mentorship program, which meant that all research members met the definition of LD as provided by the Disability Service department (see Chapter One). Secondly, my characterization of the project during the introductory presentation and initial research meetings was explicitly framed as being for people with LD. Lastly, conversations during research meetings were based on the experiences of learning acquisition rather experiences, for example, with mobility. Therefore, the language used throughout the research project, particularly during the initial stages, drew upon a unidimensional definition of LD, while negating how this identity intersects with, and is shaped by, other social locations.

Feminist studies reminds us that bodies are constituted by multiple discourses of class, race, gender and ability (see Dyck, 1999), and of the complexities involved in the intersection of disability with other identity forms (see Valentine, 2007). Valentine (1993) argues that social categories are not simple 'add-ons' but rather "abrade, inflame, amplify, twist, dampen and complicate each other" (p. 13). In Heather's case, the epistemological distancing was amplified by not only her multiple disability identities (similar to Arthur) but also by her lack of attendance at initial meetings. After two individual 'catch up' meetings with me, she responded by email that she would not be able to participate in the project as hoped because of her unpredictable medical appointment schedule. In a post-research discussion, she explained how she felt increasingly distant from others in the team because her lack of attendance:

...I really didn't think I could help with the project... I'm not like the others in the group...I have a lot going on health-wise... I couldn't come to the first two meeting because I had last minute doctor appointments like I mentioned. I didn't come after those two meetings because I felt that I missed too much, like it wasn't fair to the others cause I missed too much, even if you caught me up. I wasn't apart of

the group. Everyone already met and I wasn't there.

The space between herself and the other members of the research team was reflective of both the physical (e.g., absence due to illness) and imagined (e.g., perception of difference) distance. Both Heather and Arthur are interesting insofar as they were, in fact, among the majority of mentees (six in total) who identified as having multiple disability labels. However, through Arthur and Heather's experiences, one can appreciate how the perception of 'fitting' within the LD community as set in the context of the research project was based on whether they felt that their multiple identity forms (newcomer, other disability labels) were conducive to the definition of community as defined by the discourse of research members throughout the project.

Epistemological Nearness

The politics of identity is also complicated when academic research members claim *nearness* to the 'insider' position. This section draws inspiration from Morris' work (1996) on *epistemological veto*, in order to explore how the (un)intended act of claiming an insider perspective by the academic researcher can reduce other research members' control over the project. For the purpose of this paper, epistemological nearness refers to (un)conscious and (un)attended efforts made by a research member to exercise control over a project's decision, process or topic by way of their insider status. Engaging with research journal entries, I critically question whether I (un)consciously claimed epistemological nearness and suggest how that might have distanced others from participating in the project.

Having engaged in fieldwork with members of the LD community in my master's work (Goodfellow, 2009), I had developed an appreciation for the role of emotions in research and the importance of reflexivity (see Widdowfield, 2000). In the LD project, I embraced this journey by engaging in journal writing. Prior to my first meeting with the research group, I journalled my concerns regarding my epistemological privilege:

I am nervous, apprehensive of overtaking the meeting. I am totally aware that I come to the project with a potentially unfair knowledge about the topic and solid opinion on the matter. I identify myself with these students. I was able to access these students because I, myself, participated in the LD mentorship program as a mentee two years prior. Not only that, I care about this topic [transition of persons with LD] so I have researched it extensively, but these students haven't. I'm worried that I'll just take over and end up telling them what we're gonna do. I want them to lead it, not me.

This journal entry was written the day prior to our first research meeting. Already my fear of assuming epistemological nearness took shape before any project decisions had been made. This concern continued throughout the research project. Particularly in the early stages of the project, it seemed that having initiated the

project with the sense that I possessed ‘insider’ LD status that placed me, at least from the perspective of the other research members, in a position of power. Often, I found myself repeating that the project’s activities and its products were a collaborative decision. Similar to Dyck (1999), I questioned the implications of my authority as an expert of the LD experience and how this might serve to make claims of epistemological nearness.

This uneasiness with respect to epistemological nearness was complicated by the fact that I felt my own views were not oppositional or foreign to that of others in the group. For instance, my personal struggles for self-accommodation⁴⁶ led me to explore this topic as one of the potential undertakings of the LD project. During the first research meeting, I provided many different potential research activities as examples of what the group could decide to do, including an accommodation chart. This chart was designed by a local school board to provide accommodation ideas to educators in order to assist students with learning disabilities. In the first research meeting, research members expressed enthusiasm for the chart as a model for the group’s work. Frazer’s initial reaction was positive:

This was great for myself being a student with an LD. I was able to see the things I already knew and was shown things I may not have yet known. This was helpful since I then took it with me and applied it to my life in school and outside.

Bringing my passion and personal experience of self-accommodation to the project, I was able to bring several tools, including the accommodation chart. Although I made a conscious effort to ensure that all options were presented as valid, I question whether I inadvertently set the parameters of the project or whether the selection of the accommodation chart based on a collective decision from all research members. Chouinard (1997) and others (Chappell, 2000) point out that, in fact, much scholarship emerges from researchers who share a moral and personal connection with a community. My ‘insiderness’ is thus a point of contention. On the one hand, disclosure of my identity appeared inviting during the initial recruitment process and, to some extent, with the suggestion for the accommodation chart. On the other hand, this risks claiming epistemological nearness—either consciously or unconsciously—to the LD identity. This is problematic because the project can become crowded by my own thoughts and feelings rather than providing a space for the representation of other voices other than my own. In the end, I found myself in the uncomfortable position of being neither an objective observer nor ‘just like them’.

Conclusion

PAR has become a valuable tool for understanding how marginal

⁴⁶ Self-accommodation refers to an individual that assess, plans and implements accommodation strategies independently to negotiate environmental barriers.

communities interpret, construct, and negotiate meanings in their surroundings. This approach can have both macro effects as such promoting awareness, knowledge and resources for certain groups, and micro affects such skill development and self-confidence research members. Social geographers (Parr, 2000; Valentine, 2003) have been, however, critical of insider/outsider positionality in qualitative research, including PAR. In this paper, I have explored how a politics of LD identity shaped the imagined distance between members of a PAR project through epistemological distancing and epistemological nearness, and how safe communicative space can emerge through facilitator openness and peer interviews.

In this paper, I demonstrate how efforts were made in the LD project to address this distance in two ways. First, I explore how my disclosure as a person with an LD and my sense of humor towards my disability label created a sense of trust and equality amongst the other members. Second, the peer interviews technique is shown to 'level the playing researcher-researched field' by providing research members the opportunity to assume both the interviewee *and* interviewer role (Porter *et al.*, 2009). These efforts were useful in creating a connection across boundaries of sameness and difference, where many members of the research team felt safe to express their perspectives and experiences.

Engaging with Rose's (1997) concept of *imagined distance*, I problematize the insider/outsider positionality. I illustrate how epistemological distancing and nearness can serve distant (both literally and metaphorically) certain voices while placing others in a position of authority over the research process. I question how the discursive construction of the LD label and self-perceptions serve to situate certain researcher members as insiders or outsiders to the LD community. Tensions between research members were forged by the perception that, for example, some members' multiple disability labels do not coincide with a project's definition of LD, and consequently, serve to distance these members from certain activities. In this way, this paper contributes to an understanding of how insider/outsider politics can influence participation in PAR projects.

Collaboration in PAR can seem as an elusive goal. In this paper, I call attention towards greater recognition of conflicting interests within the community (including for the academically trained facilitator) and its implications for co-constructing a project. While remaining aware of the risks involved in imagined distance, one must not lose sight of the value and diversity *all* researcher members bring to the project. Moreover, it should be emphasized that research techniques such as facilitator openness and peer interview needs far greater attention than it has been given to date in order to bridge distances between the research members. Nevertheless, I would argue that these efforts "are neither the right answer, nor the only answer, nor the last word in development of PAR research" (Messerschmidt, 1995, p. 99).

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Chapter Three:

Negotiating the catch-22: Transitioning to knowledge work for university graduates
with learning disabilities

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Abstract

This chapter examines the experiences of graduates with learning disabilities (GLD) transitioning into knowledge-based work in Ontario, Canada. The purpose of this paper is to identify and discuss the messiness in the university-to-work transition for GLD. To do so, this paper draws from interviews conducted with GLD in university and in the labour market. This paper first discusses the rise of the *smart worker standard* in recruitment of knowledge workers. The analysis of this paper examines three key stages of transition, namely: interviewing, employment testing and probationary period. The emerging theme from this study's analysis reveals a catch-22 situation of disclosure/non-disclosure for GLD who seek to uphold the smart worker standard. The conclusion provides recommendations to support the transition experiences of GLD.

The knowledge economy conjures a world of smart people, in smart jobs, doing smart things, in smart ways, for smart money, increasingly open to all rather than a few

–Brown & Hecketh, 2004

Introduction

The traditional tale of learning disability⁴⁷ research often focuses on students in elementary and secondary school settings (see Brooks *et al.*, 2008). Not captured by this literature are the students with learning disabilities (LD) who attend university and other postsecondary institutions. This absence in the LD literature is largely due to the fact that accessibility to postsecondary opportunities for persons with disabilities is relatively recent. Historically, students with disabilities were segregated in training and remedial education streams. This meant that the prospect of a university education was bleak, at best. Between the late 1980s and the early 1990s, the philosophical tide in elementary/secondary settings shifted from segregation to ideals of inclusion (see Artiles & Kozleski, 2007; Stainback & Stainback, 1996). By the late 1990s, the educational prospects of pupils with disabilities had improved significantly. According to the Organization for Economic and Cooperative Development (OECD) (2003), between 1993 and 1999 Ontario postsecondary institutions witnessed a 125 percent increase in the population of students with disabilities. Almost a decade later, students with disabilities represent a substantive proportion (15.2 percent) of the student body in postsecondary settings (HRSDC, 2009). On campus, students with LD comprise one of the largest (37.5 percent) disability sub-groups, account for between one-third to half of all academic accommodations (Harrison & Wolforth, 2007; Holmes & Silverstein, 2011). This wave of change has sparked doctoral research (see Meredith, 2005; Steele, 1996; Yates, 2009) and academic publications seeking to explore the experiences of transition for postsecondary graduates with learning disabilities (GLD) to work (see Greenbaum, Graham & Scales, 1996; Madaus, 2008; Madaus, Zhao & Ruban, 2008).

This study seeks to advance an understanding of the experience of university graduates with learning disabilities as they negotiate their transition into paid employment. Specifically, this study contributes to an understanding of how students with LD face a catch-22⁴⁸ concerning disability disclosure. That is to say, they face a dilemma to either disclose their impairment for the purpose of receiving accommodations, which bears the risk of being subject to stigmatization; or they choose to not reveal their disability in order to avoid potential stigma, which could preclude their access to workplace accommodations. This study analyzes interview

⁴⁷ Learning disabilities, within the context of this study, are conceptualized as non-visible disabilities insofar as they “do not fit the more taken for granted understanding of disability- usually because they are less visible or *invisible* [emphasis original]” (Jung, 2002, p. 178).

⁴⁸ Catch-22 makes refers to a situation where an individual cannot escape from a paradoxical problem due to contradictory constraints.

data collected from respondents against the conceptual backdrop of the smart worker standard to examine how GLD negotiate standards of cognitive performance in work. These standards are referred to collectively as the smart worker standard insofar as they impose work practice expectations on employees—in this case, entry-level employees—to demonstrate ‘speedy’ knowledge acquisition.

In Canada and elsewhere, workplaces have been transformed by a wider economic shift such that the “the classical factors of production land, labour and capital are becoming secondary to knowledge as the primary resource for the New Economy” (Lang, 2001, p. 539). This New Economy has fundamentally altered the nature of work and workplaces in industrialized societies and the standards by which a person is judged employable. This study examines the barriers and opportunities to employment encountered by people with LD transitioning into the knowledge economy. The experiences of this group represent an important, yet underexplored, topic of inquiry. As a whole, university graduates with and without disabilities comprise the largest underemployed cohort with one in five reporting employment in a position that required at most high school education (Li, Gervais & Duval, 2006). The employment and earnings gaps between non-disabled graduates and their GLD peers with a bachelor’s degree are narrowing⁴⁹. However, the *experiences* of entering into employment differ. Holmes and Silverstein (2011) report that the majority of GLD (72%) feel their performance at work is negatively impacted by their impairment, yet they chose not to disclose their impairment (62%), often for fear of stigmatization. In spite of a growing number of university graduates with LD transitioning into the workforce, there is actually little known about *how* GLD negotiate their transition into knowledge-based work.

This paper is divided into five sections. The first section considers the available literature on the employment of persons with disabilities and explores the theoretical premise of the smart worker standard. The second section discusses the methodological considerations of this study. The results section, the third section, analyzes three key transition phases: interviewing, employment testing and probation period. The discussion, the final section, proposes how these experiences offer insight to educators, service providers, employers and policy-makers in the field of higher education regarding support strategies for transition of GLD. In the conclusion, the final section, consideration is given to the value of this study pertaining to the existing knowledge of disability and the transition into the knowledge work.

Literature Review

Employment of Persons with Disabilities and Learning Disabilities

This section explores the current literature on the negotiation of workplace spaces and workplace standards for persons with disabilities. Particular consideration is

⁴⁹ There is a 7 percent difference in employment rate and comparable earnings (\$40,547 for non-disabled bachelor degree graduates and \$40,307 for the GLD counterparts) (HRSDC, 2011).

given to the concept of the smart worker standard and the politics of ‘passing’⁵⁰ as it relates to GLD’s transition into work. As a whole, persons with disabilities continue to face unfavorable labour market outcomes and marginalization in workplaces compared to their non-disabled counterparts. Statistics Canada (2012) data indicates that persons with mild⁵¹ disabilities—which is typical level of severity of university GLD—have slightly higher unemployment rates (8.3 %) than non-disabled Canadians (6.8%). Disability scholarship (Macan, 2009; Punch, Hyde, & Creed, 2004; Schur, Kruse & Black, 2005) links barriers in the recruitment process to broader stereotypes about disability, lack of disability awareness and inadequate resources to promote job-seekers employment in both private and public sector industries.

Once employed, persons with disabilities continue to experience unfavorable outcomes compared to their non-disabled co-workers. For instance, Kaye (2009) found that even when controlling for educational attainment persons with disabilities in mainstream workplaces are “disproportionately relegated to entry-level occupations that do not emphasize the better-remunerated job skills...[which] results in lower wages and less job security and stability” (p.115). Hall (1999) and others (Barnes & Mercer, 2005; Wilton, 2004) point out that the marginalization of persons with disabilities in work reflects broader constructions of disability that prescribe ableist norms of how employees can work, such as the expected response times for emails, or conducting office work in a ‘normal’ office chair.

Feminist and disability studies theorists have also sought to understand the construction of disability at work. Scholars have taken interest in how disabled bodies have been inscribed, both materially and discursively, as deviant in relation to ableist norms in a variety of spaces (Chouinard, 1997; Dyck 1995; Moss & Dyck, 2002), including the workplace (Chouinard & Crooks, 2008; Dyck, 1999; Hall, 1999; Wilton & Schuer, 2006). In other words, this scholarship demonstrates how workplace policies, practices and social ethos can serve to undermine those individuals who fail to perform to intellectual, emotional and/or physical ableist standards. Dyck (1999) demonstrates how workplaces can be constructed as ‘places of risk’ in which bodily performances are self-surveyed in an effort to adhere to particular social and cultural coding of employment spaces (see also Butler, 1990; Holt, 2004). It is within these realities that workers who do not perform in expected mind/body ways must carefully negotiate these everyday spaces of employment. In such instances, ‘disabled’ bodies/minds are in conflict with the normative understanding of appropriate workplace behaviors. The degree to which

⁵⁰ Originally proposed by Goffman’s work on passing, this term refers to “the processes of keeping a stigmatized identity successfully concealed... to be treated the same as anyone else in the workplace” (Brohan *et al.*, 2012, p. 5).

⁵¹ There is vast diversity of persons and impairments within the disability community. The reference to *mild* disabilities is the terminology used by Statistics Canada, which is measured by the intensity and frequency of activity limitation. This is an important distinction from other disability severity types, such as *severe*, since activity limitations influence an individual’s employment prospects.

an individual is willing or able to comply with the expected/acceptable performance serves to inform their 'Otherness' (see Sibley, 1995).

There are fewer examples of scholarship that considers the implications of these embedded norms for persons with learning disabilities. Baron and colleagues (1998) emphasized that the nature of 'speedy' work can present challenges for persons with learning disabilities:

...Where tasks change rapidly and start-up costs are to be minimized in the increasing frantic search for profitable investment. People with learning disabilities tend to learn slowly; slow learners are expensive. People with learning difficulties tend to produce slowly; slow producers are less profitable (p. 102).

In this context, the nature of work links the cognitive capacity of the worker to the profitability of the organization. Combining this capacity with the pressure for speedy work can present challenges for workers with LD who cannot perform in such ways. Studies (e.g., Butcher & Wilton, 2008; Hall & McGarrol, 2012) that take interest in the experiences of persons with LD have typically engaged with those living with severe cognitive impairments. These studies are often concerned with labour market exclusion. At the same time, there is relatively little work on the experiences of persons with cognitive impairment who have greater social capital in the labour market. Thus, our understanding of the 'hidden geographies' (see Hall, 1999) of the 'more employable' persons with learning disabilities is lacking. This study seeks to explore the experiences of this sub-group.

A Smart Worker Standard

In this study, the focus is on GLD's efforts to transition into employment within the knowledge economy. In particular, the study is concerned with how GLD negotiate workplace performance expectations that reflect a 'smart worker' standard. This study engages with Billett's (2000) conception of the smart workforce with the intent of pointing out the disabling nature of workplace expectations placed on entry-level employees. He defines the smart workforce as encompassing:

...the dimensions of work practice [that] go beyond identifying 'technical skills', and work organization to include the ways individuals need to engage in work practice that variously may need to be flexible, adaptable or, conversely, highly consistent given the particular requirement (p. 123).

Billett highlights that although technical skills or domain specific knowledge might be consistent across industries, work performance expectations are also sensitive to the socio-cultural systems of the work activities. These expectations "can be considered as the external embodiment of the workplace" (Billett, 2000, p. 138). For example, what is considered to be a 'competent' performance of an account manager might involve a distinct memory for clients' personal information, innovative marketing approaches to new clientele or a longstanding client base.

The understanding of which traits are valorized and how to achieve this standard requires experience *in* work. In other words, new employees face a considerable learning curve about a particular workplace's processes, norms and standard of work.

This study provides a conceptual critique of the smart workforce from a disability perspective. Using the Baron's analysis of speedy work (as discussed above), this study examines how (often implicit) workplace expectations of flexibility, speed and adaptability can be disabling for GLD. New employees are expected to quickly learn, for example, the workplace's protocol for drafting a meeting briefing such as procedural steps, language and formatting. Those employees whom might struggle with, for example, language conventions can be subject to the pressure and politics of concealing their writing process.

The construction of the smart worker is particularly important for entry-level, first-time employment candidates with LD who are competing in the labour market against other candidates with similar credentials. Competition places candidates in a position of vulnerability to display 'appropriate performances' (Holt, 2007). There is little known about the ways in which persons with LD persuade their minds to behave in expected ways, or to approximate a smart worker standard. Moreover, there is little known about how GLD negotiate the LD label. As GLD attempt to negotiate the smart worker standard, questions of passing and disclosure are likely to be central to their experience. For individuals who live with more invisible disabilities the issue of (non) disclosure is pertinent. Devlin and Pothier (2006) talk about "the possibility (and politics) of passing"—a concept that can be realized by the invisible nature of certain disabilities, such as LD (p. 15). Passing may depend upon strategies, such as staying late at work, in order to perform in non-disabled ways. People may negotiate ableist workplaces using strategies of *passing* (McDonald *et al.*, 2012, Brohan *et al.*, 2012) and/or *resistance* (Longhurst, 2010). For instance, one might attempt to pass as non-disabled by recording meeting discussions covertly on a recording device. Resistance to ableist norms can also take place in order to challenge dominant notions of disability and, more specifically, LD. This might involve a reinterpretation of one's LD as an asset, for example, as 'outside the box' thinking that can prove useful to business problem solving. It is these negotiation strategies that present themselves as an interesting area of inquiry.

Methodology

Setting

The setting of this study is a large university in Southern Ontario. The university's disability centre provides service to roughly 1,200 students on the main campus in a given year. In addition to academic services, the centre offers a yearlong mentorship program specific to students with LD. This program offers an opportunity for students to be connected with a mentor who is currently employed in the student's industry of interest. The mentor and mentee are expected to meet

periodically over the course of the academic year in order to discuss career interest and potential pathways into employment.

Participants

There were 20 participants in this study: eight mentee and 12 mentor participants. The mentees are comprised of seven undergraduate students and one graduate student from the university. The mentee and mentors of this program are well suited for this analysis since most have personal experience with issues related to transition for GLD. Their insights offer a valuable set of perspective because they startle the transition process as some are approaching transition, while others have successfully entered the labour market.

All mentees are registered with the Disabilities Services on campus and sought to participate in the mentorship program to help facilitate their transition to work. The age of the mentees ranged from 18 to 33 years of age. All mentees were Canadian citizens, single with no children. They all registered for the mentorship program because they were interested in issues surrounding transition into work for GLD.

The 12 mentors who were interviewed were at various career stages. With the exception of one retiree, the mentors identified as currently holding full-time employment positions in what would be considered knowledge work. Two of these individuals were self-employed. The age of the mentors varied between 24 to 63 years of age. Although it is not mandatory that the mentors identify as LD in order to participate in the program, all but two disclosed privately during the interview process that they view themselves as LD. All mentors expressed an interest in the issue of transitioning into knowledge work for GLD. All mentors, except for one, had completed a university degree.

Interview Method

In this research, two forms of interview methods were used: traditional researcher-participants method and peer-interviews amongst participants. A traditional interview method is employed with the mentors of the LD mentorship program; whereas the peer-interview method was used with the mentees. The peer interviews were tape recorded and transcribed. A more detailed description about the peer interviews can be found elsewhere (see Chapter Two). The reason for the difference in methods between these two groups is due to the fact that the mentees engaged in research activities as part of a larger participatory action research (PAR) project. Due to scheduling conflicts with the mentorship program, none of the mentors were able to participate in this PAR project in the same way as the mentees. Thus, mentors were offered the opportunity to participate in the research project through traditional one-on-one interviews with the author. Interviewing the mentors outside of the PAR project served to meet the study goal to integrate the experiences of persons with LD who are currently in the labour market. The use of both mentee and mentor data allows for a triangulation of experiences in transition and over the course of one's career path.

Interview Procedures

Initial contact with potential participants took place during the first mentorship meeting in the fall of 2011. Present at this meeting were both mentors and mentees. The author was given time to present a short introduction of herself and her project, and to offer an invitation to participate in the study. The nature of the presentation invited potential respondents—both mentors and mentees—to participate in the study. The mentees were invited to participate in the PAR project, whereas the mentors were invited to participate in one-on-one interviews conducted by the author. As a product of the PAR project, the mentees conducted peer-interviews. This process involved mentees interviewing one another, with the guidance of the author, about their experiences and perceptions of transition in the labour market. The author conducted one-on-one interviews with the mentors. Both mentee and mentor interviews were arranged at a convenient location for each respondent, and with permission, these interviews were audio recorded.

Data Collection

Respondent interviews were semi-structured and used open-ended questions. Interviews involved a process where it is not merely about "collecting data but also a site where data is co-constructed, where identities are forged through the telling of stories and meaning making begins" (Doucet & Mauthner, 2008, p. 335). The interview guide questions addressed themes of disclosure, accommodation request, disability perceptions at work and in school, disability identity and experience of learning disabilities at work and in transition. The author exclusively produced the mentor interview guide. The mentee interview guide was created by the mentee, with the assistance of the author (for a discussion see Chapter Two). This guide also included additional questions about accommodation and disclosure in postsecondary education. The questions derived thematically from disability and geographical literature.

Analysis

Audiotapes from the mentor interviews were transcribed in full by the author. The mentees' interviews were transcribed mostly by the author and, in part, by another co-researcher (for a discussion see Chapter Two). To protect the identity of respondents, all names are pseudonyms. In an effort to produce a 'nuanced' account of social exclusion (and inclusion) (see also Hall, 2004; Sibley, 1998), the transcripts were coded thematically and analyzed according to sequential stages of the recruitment process. The thematic codes were then interpreted using existing literature in disability studies, human geography and human resource management (Boyatzis, 1998). Particular attention was given to the ways in which work practices placed cognitive demands upon new entries, and how different individuals negotiated these demands.

Results

Data analysis revealed that aspects of workplace standards and the potential and pressure to conceal one's learning disability are key elements in the experience of transition to work for GLD. This section is organized according to three key employment stages in the transition into knowledge work: the interview process, employment testing and the probationary period. This section examines how, at each stage, aspects of the smart worker standard create pressure to conceal one's disability in order to avoid being flagged as a problem worker. This produces a dilemma for GLD as to whether, how and when to disclose one's disability.

The Interview Process

With the ever-growing number of applicants entering university, undergraduate degrees represent merely the 'first among many ticks in the box' (Brown & Hecketh, 2004). Graduates with and without disabilities enter the labour market with similar resumes: little work experience and a university degree. In Canada, GLD have two hiring pathways: through mainstream or diversity-hiring streams. The latter case has emerged in Canada, in part from Canadian legislative frameworks such as the Employment Equity Act⁵² (EE) and in part from employer-driven initiatives to offer equal opportunity to all candidates in recruitment.

In mainstream recruitment, the visibility of a disability is central to an interviewee's capacity to perform as non-disabled. For GLD, the possibility to pass as non-disabled is typically an option. However, non-disclosure results in forgoing accommodation requests, whereas disclosure of one's disability might result in fear of prejudice. Disclosure during the interview stage was rare (2 mentors), typically because respondents felt they 'didn't need accommodation' or they felt that their disability would have had a negative impact upon their interviewer's perception.

This hesitation to disclose one's learning disability has been well documented in the literature (Kakela & Witte 2000; Madaus 2008a; Price *et al.*, 2003; Adelman & Vogel 2000). Baderi, a recent graduate and past mentee of the mentorship program, articulates her rationale for not disclosing: "I don't know why [the interviewer] would hire me as opposed to somebody else who doesn't have a disability that have wouldn't have any challenges". She worries that her disability will be perceived as a burden to a potential employer. At the same time, she explains how she would profit from accommodations during the interview:

And every time I go to an interview I always feel like it would maybe be to my benefit to say 'listen, I might need some notes because I find it really hard to remember all the lingo, as well as answer the questions'. As well as remembering, because what they do is they ask you like a four-part

⁵² The Employment Equity Act seeks to "achieve equality in the workplace by removing barriers to employment for the designated groups" including persons with disabilities. The Act applies to parts of the federal public service, some Crown corporations and a small number of federally regulated private sector employers (Government of Canada, 2011).

question in one question and don't, allow you to write anything down because they say that it doesn't, it's not fair for the other candidates if I bring in notes... So I don't know, I haven't yet disclosed to be honest, but I think it might be to my advantage. Although I'm scared that it would stop me from getting a job.

Many respondents in this study expressed concern that interviewers would interpret their disability as an indication that they would not be able to meet the employers' expectations, as a tactical excuse for lack of intelligence or, as in Baderi's case, an attempt to gain an unfair advantage during the interview.

An alternative to the mainstream recruitment process is the diversity stream that is arguably more accustomed to accommodation requests by applicants. The diversity stream of recruitment seeks to: (a) attract designated groups as defined by the EE Act; (b) recruit from populations that may have not otherwise applied; and, (c) foster an inclusive recruitment process that is sensitive to the various needs of designated groups (see Equity and Diversity Directorate, 2011). Seeking employment through the diversity stream entails declaring an affiliation to at least one of the designated groups. In many cases, disability recruitment occurs at events for 'disabled' candidates. Neil, a mentor in his early 30s and a past participant in the mentorship program, had recently entered the workforce after completing his bachelor's degree in business. He reflected upon his experience with retail bank diversity hiring counselors:

[For work in] Private equity you have to be like the cream of crop, you have to be the best. So as soon as you, like, you meet one of these diversity counsellors and you say: "well I want to do private equity". They look at you as if, "yeah, I don't think I can get you in there". Not because they don't want to but they know if they go to the managing director of that department and say: "look I have someone with a disability"; [the managing director] is just going to say "no" right away: "Well we only want the best and the smartest" right? Even though you may be the best and the smartest, they won't accept you.

This experience may be illustrative of the existence of a glass ceiling in the EE stream. In spite of the bank's EE policy, some opportunities were effectively unavailable and even discouraged through the diversity pathway. Situations such as Neil's may be linked to some of the criticisms offered by scholars such as Verbeek (2011) and others (Levinson & Parritt, 2005; Hyde, 1998; Ng & Burke, 2005; Cunningham *et al.*, 2004; Stevens 2002), who highlight problems with the well-intended purposes of EE policies and their practical outcomes. For instance, Gillies' (2012) research on the transition to work for university graduates with disabilities found that legislative and policy initiatives "offer limited assistance in decreasing the negative stereotypes that exist regarding persons with disabilities" (p. 2). Baderi's experience involved adjusting her demeanor—not taking notes—in order to *pass* as non-disabled. In Neil's case, he attempted to resist the negative stereotypes about disability by using EE programs. In both instances, the smart worker standard is evident in the hiring process insofar as the norms demarcate

how employees should perform in order to be considered for knowledge work opportunities.

Experiences in both these hiring schemes point to the persistence of the stereotypes of incompetency and lack of intelligence. These stereotypes function in a circular relationship with individual-level challenges such as poor self-esteem and self-confidence. Several studies have noted that students with LD are more likely to face negative self-perceptions (Elbaum & Vaughn, 2003; Lackaye & Margalit, 2006), peer rejection and loneliness (Margalit, 1994). Dipeolu and colleagues (2002) have reported that students with LD's self-perception of worthlessness can serve to undermine their career potential. Lorna, a mentor, characterizes what she sees as the prevailing stereotypes of learning disabilities:

...that you don't care, you are not smart, that you don't understand, that you're not worth it, that you are trying to get away with stuff, that your work is sloppy, that its careless, that you're not committed... almost purposeful deviance.

Lorna's explanation highlights the perception that an individual with a LD not only lack the intellectual capacity to perform a cognitive task but also consciously choose to perform beneath their potential. These stereotypes—described by both mentors and mentees alike—echo the enduring labels of 'laziness', 'stupidity', 'undisciplined' and 'retardness' that are identified by other studies (May & Stone, 2010; Hazel, 2008).

For respondents, negative self-perception and stereotypes of LD play a predominant role in their approach to interviews. Alison, a mentor, explained a commonly held belief among respondents:

...they just don't understand what you're talking about so they put a label on you, they make an assumption and their assumption most likely was wrong. And therefore, they may not pick you [for the job] because you have a learning disability and 'I want this project to go well so I'm not going to pick you because it won't make me look good'.

Alison, like other respondents, felt caught in a catch-22 situation. They wanted to disclose for the benefits of receiving accommodation but felt concerned that prevailing stereotypes about LD would ultimately disqualify them from the employment competition.

Employment Testing

Employment testing has become an influential way of measuring the employability of job applicants in a seemingly objective and efficient manner. *General Cognitive Ability* (GCA) testing is widely employed by organizations for hiring purposes as a predictor of future work performance and training success (for a discussion see, Hunter *et al.*, 2012). These GCA tests seek to assess the "general mental faculty that includes the ability to reason, plan, solve problems, think abstractly, comprehend complex ideas, learn rapidly, and apply one's life

experiences to new situations” (Denis & Gilbert, 2012, p. 541). Such tests are arguably a manifestation of the smart worker standard because they seek to measure the cognitive performance of employment candidates. These testing situations pose considerable obstacles for candidates who require test accommodations.

In this pre-employment stage, study respondents reported that they were unlikely to disclose their disability or request accommodations. Of the five mentors who were required to complete a GCA test, only one mentor requested accommodations⁵³. It is interesting to note that Scott, the mentor who did request accommodations, was not provided with his accommodation to write on a computer. He describes his experience as “ridiculous”, inasmuch as the employer denied his request for the use of a computer because spell check was seen as an “unfair advantage” and further claimed that “it’s too much work to take it off”. The remaining four mentors reported that they did not request accommodations and, consequently, they all reported that they did not perform to their potential. The GCA test process presented another catch-22 situation. On the one hand, respondents expressed concern that the GCA test performance would *show* their LD. On the other hand, requesting the appropriate accommodations would require the disclosure of one’s disability. In both circumstances, they would be flagged as disabled or as a poor performer (see also, Hazer & Bedell, 2000).

Some of the mentors, such as John, refused the GCA testing altogether. John was offered a position that required him to take an aptitude test, which he unequivocally refused:

I got a phone call from a head-hunter saying, ‘Oh, there’s this consulting company that, you know, they’re interested in you’...It was a telephone interview, so I did this telephone interview and they said ‘Everything’s great and wonderful, now we want you to do those aptitude tests’, like intelligence test, an IQ test thing. And at first I said: ‘No’; I said ‘No, I’m not going to do it, it’s not going to happen’. You know what, they go: ‘Well, you have to do it, everyone in our company does it’. ‘That’s great but I’m not doing it’, you know. And they go: ‘Well why not?’ And I said: ‘Because you’re hiring me for, you know, for my skills that I have, you know, you see that I can do this’, you know. And I refuse to do it because I knew what would happen. They’d see my writing, they’d see everything else, and say: ‘You’re out’.

As shown in John’s case, GCA testing presents a dilemma for GLD. Although in the regular course of employment John found ways to deal with his writing difficulties, he refused to write the GCA test because he feared being flagged as disabled within this organization. Yet, his failure to complete the test undoubtedly prevented him from obtaining the position.

⁵³ It is important to note that a limitation of this study is that none of the respondents had positive experiences in obtaining accommodations for employment testing.

A specific issue identified by respondents with GCA testing was the time limit format/requirement, also known as the *speed mode* (for a discussion see Schlemmer, 2007). This is, perhaps, not surprising since extra time is, for students with LD, the most commonly administered accommodation for test taking (Lindstrom & Hartwig, 2007). Scott, a recently graduated mentor, draws an analogy: “if you don’t need me to swim for the job, don’t make me swim for the test”. His analogy puts into question the necessity of speed mode for GCA. The literature suggests that, under speed mode conditions, performance on GCA is negatively affected by test anxiety (see Ackerman & Heggstad, 1997; Wicherts, Dolan & Hessen, 2005). In the same way, Sena, Lowe and Lee’s (2007) study of students with LD found that these students had greater cognitive obstruction/ inattention and worried more about testing compared to their non-LD peers. Together, the study results and this literature suggest that GLD might be at a distinct disadvantage on GCA testing due to the absence of appropriate accommodations, further compounded by the negative effects of test anxiety under speed mode conditions (recommendations to address this issue are discussed in the conclusion). The concern of being flagged as disabled carried through into the probationary period of the employment.

The Probationary Stage

For any employee, a probationary period is critical to demonstrate work competencies to their new employer. In the traditional sense, the probationary period refers to the period of time in which the employer evaluates the person-job fit of a particular candidate (both with and without a disability), and the candidate can become accustomed to the work process and culture. However, the analysis in this study reveals that there is also a probationary period from the perspective of the *employees* with LDs. This period was conceived of by respondents as the time it takes to *prove* their work competency, or as Mark puts it: “once I prove to my employer... that, yes, I am normal”.

For respondents, the length of the probationary period ranged between a few weeks to two years. This duration was influenced by a number of factors including their perceived employment security and the sense of having cultivated a positive relationship with supervisors and coworkers. During this probationary period, respondents used a diverse array of coping strategies in an effort to prove themselves as *smart* workers. However, the successful use of such coping strategies can actually make the subsequent disclosure of one’s disability more difficult. As explained by several respondents, their accommodation requests were dismissed because they were perceived to be ‘too smart’ to need accommodations. These findings suggest that GLD face a catch-22 where they are not ‘smart enough’ to perform in prescribed ways at work but, when disclosure does take place, they are at the time perceived as ‘too smart’ to legitimize accommodations.

During the probationary period, some respondents used coping strategies to navigate challenging situations. Lorna, a mentor, for example, explains her practical challenge with using keyboard at work:

I can't recognize the letters on the keyboard, when I see 'I', because it might be a 'J'. Then again it might be a 'K' and it might be a 'J' and then it will change back to a 'K' again... it really sucks because you cannot depend upon your own sense. I cannot depend on what I see is actually there, I can't depend on the word I just saw was there, it could be some other word, somewhere else...

She explained that her visual recognition difficulty was negotiated in diverse ways. In editing her work, she describes how she would read her written work word-by-word in reverse to ensure correct spelling. Whereas for reading, she scans the text for keywords rather than reading material thoroughly:

I skim and scan material, I'm very good at identifying key points, I can make cross references to whether in fact I know what I'm talking about, I'm using all the short cuts that smart people use to deal with certain material, I don't actually sit and read something thoroughly.

Lorna believes that persons with learning disabilities should not be expected to perform in the same ways as non-LD individuals. She argues:

you have to find a way to make it easy for you, it shouldn't have to make it hard, if you can find the right way to do it, but that's different from other people, and that's the hardest thing for them to let go if they want to do the regular way.

In order words, for Lorna, it is essential that GLD develop individualized strategies to negotiate their particular workplace challenges. The most cited strategies among respondents include: arriving early and/or staying later at work, time management strategies (e.g., timetabling), and checking for understanding with one's supervisor. These strategies coincide with findings from other studies (Holmes & Silverstein, 2011; Madaus, 2008).

During the probationary process, some respondents developed rather creative strategies to negotiate workspaces in order to be perceived as 'normal' as possible. For example, Ashley, a mentee, had been employed at a cultural arts center. She describes how she concealed her disability for the first few months while she gained the credibility with her employer. During this time, she would place stickers on co-workers' desks that corresponded to a floor plan she had drafted. This strategy assisted her in recalling names, titles and other important details of fellow co-workers:

I don't normally like to tell employers [that I have a LD] at an interview process. I usually like telling them afterward because that can give them the notion that this person can't do the task or not do the job. And I don't want to mislead them, in any way. I like to prove to my employers, the first two weeks or three weeks, that I'm hired that: 'yes, I am normal, I can', 'OK, maybe she's a little strange, that she puts sticky notes everywhere'. But I'd rather they think that I'm a bit strange, than that I have this learning disability, that hinders me from doing the work. But I,

eventually, do tell them because they, eventually, kinda sorta clue in, which is nice because then at that point, that I do tell them they have no problem because I've been doing the work. I've been doing the tasks. I've been doing everything and I've proved to them that I can do the job, even though I have to like color coordinate peoples desks and I put stickers where they sit [laughter].

Although Ashley states she does not want to mislead her employer, she sees the two-week period as a buffer where she is able to prove her capacity to be a productive worker before disclosing her disability. Ashley appears to employ what Gerber et al. (1992) call *learned creativity* inasmuch as she considers how she can leverage her strengths of problem solving in order to compensate for her weakness in memory. Moreover, for this short period, she *opts* to be perceived as “strange” in an effort to negate the prejudice she feels might be associated with her LD. In other studies (see Brohan et al., 2012; Lee et al., 2006), concealing one's disability, as in Ashley's case, involves choosing between disclosure of one's potentially stigmatized LD identity or risk being perceived as another—potentially more socially damaging—identity such as lazy or competent. This concealment comes at an emotional cost. Brohan and colleagues (2012) note: “the experience of constructing a ‘cover story’ to explain unusual behaviour is described as a source of shame and an energy draining activity” (p. 8).

Most (12) respondents said that disclosure of one's disability at work was important to them for several reasons including: being honest (3), accommodations requirements (7) and sympathetic understanding from managers or coworkers (2). These findings are aligned with the disclosure rationales of persons with mental illness (Brohan et al., 2012). The timing of disclosure occurred at various stages. Very few respondents disclosed at the initial employment stages: two mentors disclosed during the interview but none disclosed during employment testing. The majority of respondents who disclosed did so at some point after the probationary stage was completed: in casual conversation (5), when met with a challenging task (7) or after a performance issue (3).

For many of the respondents, their use of diverse disclosure strategies served also to mitigate the social stigma of their disability. These strategies include using humor or creating simple analogies. Alison, a mentor, states:

I know myself, I'm dyslectic, and when I tell people, they're surprised and they go, “Oh, what does that mean?” So, I'm a lousy reader and speller and [a coworker will say:] “Yeah?”...so I'm not good at that, so they don't see that... So you have to be able to explain to people in a way that sounds positive, like why I prefer to listen to tapes, I get a lot more out of it. I can use them when I'm driving. That doesn't sound like I have a problem; just sounds like I learn better that way.

The lack of visual markers for Alison's disability played an important role in others' understanding of her need for accommodation. Central to the decision of disclosure and/or accommodation request is the tension between the respondent's fear of stigmatization based upon their disability label (e.g., lazy, not trying hard enough)

and the lack of understanding by coworkers regarding invisible disabilities. For instance, Scott describes how people are often surprised that they cannot ‘see’ his disability: “how many times do you get ‘Oh well, you don’t look like you have a learning disability’ [laughter]. Like, what am I suppose to look like?”

During the disclosure process, some respondents (4) discussed experiences of disbelief from coworkers about the nature of one’s LD because they were perceived as ‘too smart’. Larry discusses how his coworkers responded to his disclosure: “Well, first of all, people don’t equate intelligence or being very smart with having a learning disability... so, of course, the reason why they don’t believe me [when I tell them that I have an LD] is because they think I’m so smart”. This is an interesting finding considering that, as mentioned previously, considerable efforts are made by the respondents to perform in non-disabled ways or as a ‘smart worker’. It would appear that Larry and others are caught between being too smart to be acknowledged as disabled but not able to perform according to the smart worker standard. It is also interesting to note that the theme of being ‘too smart to be disabled’ was more widely discussed amongst the mentors; whereas, the mentees were more concerned with their ability to perform workplace tasks. This is most likely due to greater workplace experience of the mentors compared to the mentees, which would have allowed the mentors more time to master workplace tasks and greater experience in disclosure situations.

Discussion

The purpose of this paper was to explore the experiences of GLD negotiating the transition into knowledge work. Using interview data from GLD in university and individuals with LD in the workforce, key employment stages were explored. The findings point toward a catch-22 situation where respondents are actively engaged in the negotiation of the smart worker standard. Negotiating transition into knowledge work for GLD involves using diverse passing and resisting strategies.

The data analysis demonstrates that the smart worker standard is a central theme in the experiences of transition to work for GLD. The interview process, for example, serves to disadvantage those who do not perform in ableist ways. For instance, candidates are expected to perform the interview without access to accommodation tools (such as note-taking) in order to ensure the perception of fairness. Thus, candidates are caught in the catch-22 of requiring accommodation during this process but fearful of the associated stereotypes of laziness, stupidity and the like that could result from such a request. Yet, without accommodations the interview process is anything but fair for them. Moreover, the analysis suggests that hiring pathways in EE programs can be problematic for candidates with disabilities who wish to be considered for more cognitively demanding employment opportunities. GLD must negotiate this hiring process by weighing the potential stigma associated with disclosure of disability against their accommodation needs. As a whole, most GLD do not disclose their disability at this stage of the employment process.

At the GCA testing, there is a significant deterrent for GLD transitioning into employment. Testing can be interpreted critically as systematic discrimination against applicants with LD for several reasons. First, the cognitive test might (or at least can be perceived to have the potential to) expose an individual's cognitive (dis)abilities. This is clearly a concern to individuals with LD who may not perform at the same speed, quality and/or fashion as a (non-disabled) norm. Respondents strongly felt that if they took such a test, their impairment would likely surface and disqualify them from obtaining the position. For most respondents, the option to request accommodation was simply out of the question. Any request for accommodation was, too, a flag that would 'out' their disability prematurely. During this pre-employment stage, disclosure was largely avoided. A key question emerging from the respondents' concerns over GCA testing is: how can employers administer testing in a non-discriminatory fashion wherein individuals with learning disabilities may not need to disclose? An obvious solution would be to provide the most commonly used accommodation, additional time. This accommodation might alleviate performance discrepancies among some candidates and offer an equal opportunity for GLD candidates to demonstrate their GCA potential. This recommendation is supported by the literature that has found that extended test times are more likely to predict actual job performance, for employees with and without disabilities, than restricted timed tests (Denis & Gilbert, 2011).

The experiences of the respondents suggest that GLD negotiate workspaces by attempting to perform in expected ways during the probationary period. One finding of this study concerns the extent to which GLD's own sense of just how long they are 'on probation' in a new job extends, sometimes significantly, beyond the formal period established by an employer. For GLD, this probationary period is defined by the time it takes for them to prove themselves as an employee. In many ways, the probationary period is a time in which they are actively engaged in negotiating the complex politics of passing/resisting. The initial probationary period involves the use of a number of coping and creative learning strategies. Most respondents noted that disclosure was important to them and did so after the perceived probationary period. This is an important finding considering the fact that the literature such as Holmes and Silverstein (2011) suggest that most GLD will not disclose their impairment in spite of the negative impact on performance. The findings of this study suggest that disclosure typically *does* take place. However, it occurs at a point in which the employees feel secure in their employment relationship. It is arguable that an individual's ability to approximate the smart worker standard during this timeframe will be determined by their resourcefulness and their ability to draw upon these various strategies. However, these strategies do not occur in a vacuum. They are the product of self-awareness and self-advocacy processes. The literature has suggested that processes can be fostered through postsecondary programs such as the *Ontario Learning Opportunity Task Force* program and other mentorship programs. These programs involve "intensive learning skills, education, and self-advocacy intervention" (Harrison *et al.*, 2012, p. 57).

This paper has examined how workplaces can be disabling for individuals with cognitive differences, specifically LD. Taken particular interest in initial employment process, it is examined how GLD can find themselves in a catch-22 position between as a non-disabled employee passing and resisting smart worker standards. The analysis of this paper demonstrates how employers and human resource managers can apply a geographic approach to the workplace policies and practices in order to critically appraise how the workplace such as the interview process and employment testing can be (dis)abling.

Conclusion

Increasing numbers of GLD are transitioning into knowledge work by negotiating smart worker standards. These standards are reflected in the expectation that candidates perform according to the organizational/ industry standard. The realities of GLD experiences are important in understanding how these critical transitional stages can present unique structural and individual barriers and opportunities. This paper demonstrates how GLD are caught in a catch-22 of (non) disclosure of one's LD. Mindfully, they engage in the politics of passing/resisting as a non-disabled candidate. Many of the respondents eventually disclosed their LD at work, once they felt secure to do so. These findings are timely as there is a growing interest in—and need to—recruit university graduates to fulfill knowledge work demands. Future research should detail the implications of the changing temporal demands of work for persons with LD; the various coping strategies and accommodation resources employed by GLD. In this paper, it is considered how persons with LD negotiate the social-cultural norms of the workplace. Conceptually, this allows for reframing disability other product of the interaction between the individual, workplace or potential workplace and not inherently as the result of intellectual inadequacies. These considerations are imperative in order to advance workplace accommodation for organizations to maintain and foster a diverse and productive work environment. As Lorna put it: “a person that has developed the right accommodations are far often far more likely more productive than other people in the same job because...they are maximizing their strengths”.

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Conclusion

Conclusion

I feel learning disability is a word just telling people you think different... you're different from average, but it doesn't mean that you're under... you shouldn't be underestimated

-Arthur's definition of a learning disability

When asked to define the term 'learning disability', the mentors and mentees provided diverse and colourful explanations. Some of the most memorable definitions include: free spirited minds being "squashed" by the educational system (Andre) to an "awful thing" where the "easy things are so hard for you and the hard are so easy" (Lorna). The PAR project and the interviews with mentors and mentees provided me with a rich experience into the perspectives of the learning disabilities (LD) label. These perspectives challenged me to think differently about the definition. It would, thus, be important to note how my own definition of LD has evolved as a result of the doctoral project. The beginning of this thesis provided two separate definitions of LD that included: the Disability Service and my own personal definition. I reconsider, here, the thesis's revised definition of LD:

a distinguishable difference in the acquisition and/or performance of knowledge or skill outcomes that deviates from the standardizes norm within a particular environment

This definition is mindful that what makes a person *different* by way of their acquisition or performance outcome can change over time and varies from place to place. This revised definition is informed by my experiences in the PAR project. For example, this definition differs from Chapter One's definition insofar as it does away with eight categories of LD (see Chapter One) might not coincide with intersectionality of other disability labels (for a discussion, see Chapter Three). From the mentor and mentee interviews (Chapter Four), each person's own experience with and definition of a LD was informed by their own life history that encompasses many layers in the fabric of their fluid social locations. The definition of LD possessed here is, therefore, honours how the LD label is multi-dimensional and changing construct.

This thesis examines the experiences of university graduates with learning disabilities (GLD) transitioning into knowledge work using participatory action research (PAR) techniques in order to address the following objectives:

- To deepen an understanding of the experience of transition for GLD into knowledge work.
- To explore the politics of participation in PAR and the disability community.
- To increase the awareness of educators, service providers, employers and policy-makers in the field of higher education with respect to barriers and enablers to employment for GLD.

This chapter provides a summary of key findings, and highlights the theoretical,

methodological and substantive contributions of the thesis. This chapter concludes with limitations of this thesis and directions for future research.

Summary of Key Findings

The first substantive chapter, Chapter Two, is a collective critical reflection with the PAR research team that explores how co-researchers become engaged in the project. This chapter takes a novel approach by providing all members of the research team the opportunity to reflect upon the project's progress and relate collective thoughts to discussions in the literature. The chapter takes inspiration from Fisher and Phelps' (2006) analogy of the theatre to explore how co-researchers move from a *by-stander audience* position to actively playing a role in research. Klocker (2012) points out that although there is an expectation for doctoral theses not to contain any co-authorship (Herr & Anderson, 2005), PAR is a collaborative process, which requires participation of *all* research members. The findings of this chapter support how the participation of co-researchers *can* and *should* have a voice in research. This chapter sheds light on how collective reflection process can refine all research members' skill set as researchers, communicators and collaborators. There are several recommendations provided for other co-researchers. These include: developing an understanding of the project's time commitments, remaining realistic regarding the outcome of the research and simply having fun with the process.

In Chapter Three, a more theoretical approach is taken in order to critically reflect upon the insider/outsider tensions involved in PAR. This chapter employs Rose's (1997) concept of imagined distance to examine how a politics of LD identity informed connections among, and spaces between, research members. Unlike the preceding chapter, this chapter is written from the author's positionality and perspective. This chapter underscores how all members of the research team can create *epistemological distancing* and *epistemological nearness* as they and others construct who is inside/outside the community. Epistemological distancing is formed when a research members claims to be outside of the PAR parameters of the community. This involves exploring the thorny issues of how the discursive construction of what constitutes a LD informs insider/outsider status, and how this intersects with other dimensions of identity. Epistemological nearness occurs when a research member makes knowledge claims about the community's best interest due to their insider status. From this angle, the chapter critically explores how the all members of the research team (un) consciously claim knowledge over the community's circumstance. This chapter reflects upon how *safe communicative space* was fostered by way of peer-interviews and facilitator openness.

The final chapter focuses upon the interview data from the mentees and mentors from a Southern University's (University) LD mentorship program. This chapter proposes a catch-22 situation of disclosure/ non-disclosure for GLD transitioning into knowledge-based work. The findings of this chapter highlight how GLD use passing and resisting strategies in order to negotiate *smart worker standards* in three key stages of employment transition: interviewing, cognitive

ability testing and probationary periods. This chapter reveals how GLD are most likely to engaging in passing strategies during the interview and general cognitive ability testing stages, and typically disclose their disability after a probationary period in which the employee with a LD has felt that they have proven themselves as a smart worker.

Contributions

Theoretical Contributions

There are two theoretical contributions of this thesis. First, contributes to the field of geography by building upon Rose's (1997) conception of imagined distance in order to consider the notion of epistemological distancing and epistemological nearness, and proposes an understanding of safe communicative space. Epistemological distancing and nearness are aligned with scholars who are critical of the premise of participation in PAR (for example, Gujit & Shah, 1998; Kesby, 2005; Mohammed, 2001; Pain, 2004), specifically the romanticizing the community as homogenous and the academic facilitator as inherently an outsider. In this thesis, I break away from an understanding that distance in research is inevitable (Rose, 1997) or a border crossing (Parr, 2000; Valentine, 2003). Instead, I hone in upon the process and politics of PAR in order to demonstrate how imagined distance is both a part of the process and that the relative balance, which depend upon the complex intergroup relations that constitute the project.

The second major theoretical contribution of this paper involves the concept of the smart worker standard. This concept integrates the work of Billett's (2000) theory of the *smart workforce* and Baron and colleagues' (1998) critique of speed of work for employees with LD. This is an important contribution insofar as it advances the theoretical understanding of workspaces as disabling beyond their physical attributes to cognitive differences. In disability geography scholars such as Gleeson (1999) and others (Chouinard, 1997; Dyck 1995; Moss & Dyck, 2002), have often reflected upon individuals with physical differences (Wilton & Schuer, 2006) or more severe cognitive impairments (Hall & McGarrol, 2012). The theoretical contribution of the smart worker standard offers insights into how ableist standards can place cognitive demands of speed and knowledge acquisition upon knowledge workers through procedures such as cognitive ability testing.

Substantive Contributions

The substantive contributions of this thesis are primarily demonstrated in the final substantive chapter, Chapter Four, which analyzes the interview data collected from both mentors and mentees who identify as learning disabled. In this chapter, several tangible barriers are identified, such as perceptions of LD in knowledge-based workplaces. A significant contribution of this chapter is its findings regarding disclosure. In other studies (such as Holmes & Silverstein, 2011; Madaus, Gerber & Price 2008), disclosure of one's LD at work is mixed. Through careful analysis of the mentor and mentee interview data, this chapter reveals that GLD typically want disclose their disability, and are likely to do so once they have completed a self-

defined probationary period. This period is understood as the time it takes to prove their work competency, or as Mark puts it: “*once I prove to my employer... that, yes, I am normal*”. There are several recommendations offered in this chapter to support GLD in their transition including providing additional time during cognitive ability testing.

The most practical and concrete contribution of this dissertation is the accommodation chart. The purpose of this chart is to offer accommodation ideas for employees, employers and GLD transitioning to knowledge work. The inspiration for the chart comes from a similar chart created by a school board in Southern Ontario. The school board sought to provide education solutions for elementary school students with LD. We adapted the chart in order to reflect the needs and experiences of adults in the context of the workplace. Our chart was created from a combination of the research team’s lived experience, and secondary research, focus group findings and feedback session with the mentorship program conducted by the research team. Brambilla (2012) advocates that theory and activism can function not as separate spheres, but as a border that can be crossed. This thesis attempts to do exactly that, cross the border between theories of disability geography and the practice of creating a practical tool for employees and employers.

Methodological Contributions

The last major contribution of this thesis is the application of PAR techniques. The key methodological tenets drawn upon and expanded within this thesis are twofold. First, this project is an illustration of the (in)feasibility of PAR within the scope of a doctoral thesis. On the one hand, this thesis shows how a PAR doctoral project can be completed within the four-year doctoral timeframe, which has been noted as a concern in the literature (Gibbon, 2002; Herr & Anderson, 2005; McCormack, 2004; Moss, 2009). On the other hand, the thesis demonstrates a number of issues that may arise in taking on a PAR project such as: the delicate issue of co-authorship with co-researchers as a part of thesis chapter and feasibility for dissemination to stakeholder groups (see Klocker, 2012). These issues are further explored in the limitation section (see below).

Second, Northway (1998) and others (Barnes & Mercer, 1997; Moore *et al.*, 1998; Pain, 2004) advise practitioners to adopt critical reflective processes as a means by which “the researcher is able to examine their own values, motivations and actions” (p. 145). This thesis underscores the importance of critical reflective processes for both facilitators and co-researchers. This is particularly important in order to be attentive to the politics that can arise in PAR projects. In this way, this thesis responds to Hynes, Coghlan and McCarron’s (2012) call for “an added focus on how we hear *other*, engage with *other* and re/present *other* [emphasis original]” (p. 297). This is particularly true in research involving people with disabilities. Hall and Kearns (2001) note that geographers are contributing to an understanding in disability studies of the “acute power relations existing within the research process and its active desire to produce a more representative and ethical

research paradigm” (p. 240). Both Chapters Two and Three demonstrate sensitivity to intergroup relations within the PAR research process. In this way, these chapters show how geographers and disability scholars can effectively deploy critical reflective practices in the context of PAR projects, even those that are a part of a doctoral thesis.

Reflecting back upon the overarching purpose of this dissertation, these findings contribute to an understanding of how individuals with LD negotiate workplaces, an exploration of the viability and politics involved in PAR projects, and the potential to increase awareness of workplace issues for people with LD through the development of an accommodation chart.

Limitations

Similar to any project, there are a number of limitations of this thesis. First, the university is among one of the long Southern Ontario universities with a specialized LD program and, more specifically, a mentorship program designed for GLDs. In selecting a university with such specialized services comes at a cost of not being able to generalize the findings of this study to the larger GLD population in Ontario or in Canada, more broadly. It was, however, not the intent of the project to generalize to the wider GLD population. Moreover, given that the findings of this thesis resonate with existing literature (e.g. Holmes & Silverstein, 2011) provides some sense of validity to the thesis’s findings. Second, the mentors were unable to participate in the PAR project, as explained previously, due to schedule conflict with the mentorship program. The mentors were, however, able to contribute to the project by way of one-on-one interview (see Chapter Four) and through the feedback session (see Chapter Two). It can be hypothesized that had the mentors partaken in the PAR project as initially anticipated, they might have had say over the type of project adopted by the research team, the nature of accommodations strategies suggested in the accommodation chart, and influenced the intergroup relations. Third, it should be noted that having the facilitator (Athena) conduct the semi-structured interviews with the mentor was a missed opportunity for the co-researchers (mentees) to utilize their research skill set and connect with mentors. However, mentees were unable to undertake the semi-structured interviews with mentors due to timing between when the PAR team gained interview skills and when interviews with the mentor took place. Fourth, Objective 1.3 (dissemination to community, employer and university stakeholders) was only partially achieved. This is an important limitation since dissemination is a key premise of PAR philosophy. This occurrence is largely due to the limited time available within the scope of the doctoral program, which has been discussed in greater detail elsewhere (see Chapter Two). It should be noted, however, that the *process* of PAR has served as transformative for co-researchers insofar as critical reflection, skill development and self-confidence building (for a discussion, see Chapter Two). Furthermore, efforts to disseminate the accommodation chart will continue beyond the completion of this doctoral project. Lastly, the third chapter of the thesis, which dealt with the politics of identity, was based on the author’s perceptions and critical reflections. The co-researchers were not provided the opportunity to comment

explicitly in this chapter (e.g., through footnotes). This could be interpreted, as a limitation insofar is contradictory to Chapter Two's approach that co-researchers *can* and *should* be involved in the critical reflection process. However, this limitation must be balanced in light of the importance for doctoral candidates to establish their own intellectual space within the thesis, and with realistic demands for co-researcher participation.

Future Research Direction

This thesis offers insights into the practicalities of engaging in PAR project and the complexities of the university to knowledge work transition process for people with disabilities. In terms of the applicability of PAR research, this thesis calls for a more geographic understanding of the practicalities involved in conducting a PAR project. Future research should explore the various ways in which imagined distance manifest itself, how to foster safe communicative space through PAR techniques and how co-researcher become engaged in the project. Further, this research focuses upon the transition to employment could be extended to other members of the disability community in several ways: (a) by documenting the experiences of other graduates with cognitive/emotional differences such as Autism Spectrum Disorder and psychiatric consumers/survivors; (b) further exploring smart worker standards for persons with disabilities beyond the transition process; and (c) by raising awareness the innovative accommodation strategies created *by* and *for* persons with disabilities.

Appendices A:

Researcher Reflections

Sample A1.

Journal Entry: PAR Meeting #2, December 12, 2011

I think I could sum up my impression of the meeting as: The Learning Curve. I used a lot of things I've learnt from the first meeting to help with this meeting. First, I made sure to have visual cues. I had an agenda, some probing questions for the review of the chart and an outline of options and steps for the 'contextualize your experience' discussion. Second, I made sure to have handouts for each of the co-researchers to ensure that they could make their own notes and read things individually. Third, I was much more aware of the amount that I was speaking. I also try to remain attentive to the fact that everyone needs an opportunity to speak. I noticed that J would often want to speak and stop herself. I tried to remain aware of it and ask for her opinion.

I also think I did certain things well, and I should keep doing them. I made sure to make some baked goods for the co-researchers. I also made sure to dress casually: no business wear, always wear jeans but look "presentable". I tried to keep the language student oriented. Ask everyone how their courses are going; made sure to really ask meaningful questions. For example, rather than just asking if they are finished with exams. I would ask them what kind of exam was with and make it relatable. Maybe tell them my preference for exam formats etc.

The areas that I think I need to address are the fact that everyone is coming in at different times during the meeting. As a result, certain people are missing some of the group discussion. Also, some people aren't showing up at all which means that they aren't able to participate in the decision making process. I feel like when I meet with them they are more passive and less committed to the research. I'm not sure how I can address this. Also, I want to make sure that everyone is really taking the time to think about the chart. I am finding it difficult to balance between having them thinking critically and also not burdening them with work.

Appendices B:

Interview Guides

Sample B1.

Informational and Interview Session
Transition Experience for SLD into Workplaces
Researcher(s): Athena Goodfellow

[THE COMPLETION OF THE INTRODUCTORY SECTION OF THE INTERVIEW SHOULD TAKE APPROXIMATELY 5 MINUTES]

INTRODUCTION AND INSTRUCTIONS DURING THE MENTORSHIP MEETING
[READ ALOUD]:

Hello, my name is Athena Goodfellow. Thank you Jayne for connecting me with you about my dissertation research. My research title is called: “Experience of Transition from University to the Workplace for University Students with Learning Disabilities”. Through this study, I am hoping that we can learn more about what variables contribute to the barriers and facilitators for people with learning disabilities obtaining employment and being successful at work.

This study looks to have both mentees and mentors discuss about what makes a successful transition into the workplace, and how to negotiate disclosure and accommodation. The mentee will be meeting prior to the mentorship meeting to take part in focus group discussions. Due to the time restriction for the mentors, interviews will be conducted either by phone, over email and/or in-person. By joining the research project, you will discuss these topics that will not only benefit you but also university institutions such as York and other post-secondary organizations such as NEADS.

To participate in the study, you will be asked to take part in interviews over the course of the Mentorship program. In other words, you are invited to participate in this study, which could last, if you desire, until September 2012.

I should mention that the risks associated with participating are *minimal*. You might feel uneasy thinking about issues around transitioning into the knowledge economy or how negotiate the workplace. However, you do not need to answer questions you do not want to answer or that make you feel uncomfortable. And, you can stop

taking part at any time. I describe below the steps I am taking to protect your privacy.

By participating in this study, significant efforts will be made to make sure that your information remains confidential. I will not use your name or any information that would allow you to be identified in any publications of this study or in any transcripts. Everyone in the study will have an alias in all of my notes, transcripts and drafts. Your identity will not be shared with other participants in the research. People participating in the York Mentorship Program *might* be aware of your participation in this interview process. However, the details of our discussions will not be revealed to them.

The information about our discussions will be kept in a locked desk/cabinet where only I will have access to it. Information kept on a computer will be protected by a password. Once the study is completed, an archive of the data, without identifying information, will be deposited.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. This means that it is your choice to be part of the study or not. If you decide to be part of the study, you can decide to stop (withdraw), at any time, even after signing the consent form or part-way through the study. If you decide to withdraw, there will be no consequences to you from myself, McMaster University, York University or the Mentorship Program. In cases of withdrawal, any data you have provided will be destroyed unless you indicate otherwise. If you do not want to answer some of the questions you do not have to, but you can still be in the study.

I expect to have this study completed by approximately August 2013. You will have much involvement in reviewing the information that will go into the final product. If you would like a brief summary of the results, please let me know how you would like it sent to you.

Do you have any questions?

Thank you again for your time.

Information about interview questions: This gives you an idea what I would like to learn about your perspective of the barriers and facilitator for persons with learning disabilities. Interviews will be one-to-one and will be open-ended (not just “yes or no” answers). Because of this, the exact wording may change a little. Sometimes I will use other short questions to make sure I understand what you told me or if I need more information when we are talking such as: “*So, you are saying that ... ?*”, to get more information (“*Please tell me more?*”), or to learn what you think or feel about something (“*Why do you think that is... ?*”).

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. INTRODUCTORY QUESTIONS

- What is your current job?
- How long have you held this job?
- Tell me about some of the specifics of your job? What is a typical day for you?
 - What do you like the most/least?
- What is your previous job experience?
- From where and when did you graduate?

2. EXPERIENCE AS A MENTOR

- What motivated you to be a mentor?
- How long served as mentor?
- Could you briefly describe your experience as a mentor?
During this process what type of workplace issues were the most frequently a concern (e.g. disclosure, accommodations, impairment influencing work productivity)?
- From your experience as a mentor, what did you learn about workplace issues for persons with LD?

3. THE PERSON'S OWN EXPERIENCES OF TRANSITION AND WORK

- Can you tell me about your own experiences of transitioning from university to employment?
 - What were the biggest challenges you faced in transitioning from university to paid-employment?
 - What were some barriers you faced during this transition process?

- What were some facilitators of the transition process?
 - Have things changed since your transition? (for example, labour market conditions, what companies are looking for?)
- Can you tell me about your experiences of employment?
 - What have been some cognitive demands of your workplace?
 - Have these demands changed over the years?
 - What have been the biggest challenges you've faced so far in employment?
 - How would those challenges influence the work of persons with a learning and to what extent do you believe these are unique challenges to persons with learning disabilities?
 - What are some of the facilitators that promote your productivity at work?
 - Why are those facilitators helpful?

4. DISCLOSURE

- If had/have a disability, would you disclose it in your workplace?
 - Why?
 - To whom?
 - When?
- What are the benefits and/or consequences of disclosing one's disability?
 - What do you believe are the reasons for these positive/negative outcomes?
- Do you believe that the nature of work relationships/environments change would after disclosure?
 - If so, how?
 - If not, why?
 - How did/would you frame your disability?
- Do you believe that there are misconceptions about disability/ learning disabilities in the workplace?
 - If so, what are they?
 - If so, why do you think those exist?
 - If so, how do you think they can be address?
 - If so, how that influence a employee with disabilities perception of work?

5. ACCOMMODATION

- What does the term “workplace accommodation” mean to you?
- Have you ever requested an accommodation for disability or otherwise?
 - Describe your experience (e.g. formal vs. informal process; timing on receiving appropriate accommodation; necessity to provide documentation)
- Has there been modification to your work life that you’ve created that did not require you to formally request for accommodation.
 - Describe your experience (e.g disclosure to peers/ supervisor)

6. BROADER QUESTIONS

- What comes to mind when you think about the value of knowledge/ cognitive performance in Canada’s labour market?
 - How do you think that impacts persons with learning disabilities?
- Do you foresee any barriers or facilitators for the *transition process* for Canadian university graduates? Describe.
 - Are those factors different for someone with a learning disability? If so, why?
 - What do you see as the best ways to improve the transition process for students with learning disabilities?
- Do you foresee any barriers or facilitators *in* the workplace for person with a learning disability?
 - If you could implement measures to facilitate this work environment what would suggest?
 - Do you believe that a person’s learning disability influences their productivity at work?
 - If so, why
 - If so, how

7. LAST QUESTION

This research project is going to run for the rest of this academic year (through Summer 2012). Would you be interested in having further input to the project (e.g., another interview, e-mail correspondence, participation in a group discussion)?

Sample B2.

INTERVIEW GUIDE

Informational and Interview Session

Transition Experience for SLD into Workplaces

Researchers: Jasime Bustillo, Jason Dimmell, Todd Simkover, Amanda Sigh, Ian Wilgus Suluxan Paramaguru and Athena Goodfellow

[THE COMPLETION OF THE INTRODUCTORY SECTION OF THE INTERVIEW SHOULD TAKE APPROXIMATELY 5 MINUTES. DO NOT TURN ON THE AUDIO RECORDER UNTIL AFTER YOU'VE READ THE INSTRUCTIONS.]

INSTRUCTIONS DURING THE INTERVIEW [READ ALOUD]:

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. The purpose of the interview is to gain a greater understanding of your experiences of transitioning into work. The interview should be no more than one-hour in length. If, at any time, you want to take a break please let me know. I have a few points to mention about confidentiality and ethical protocol before we begin.

I should mention that the risks associated with participating are *minimal*. You might feel uneasy thinking about issues around transitioning into the knowledge economy or how negotiate the workplace. However, you do not need to answer questions you do not want to answer or that make you feel uncomfortable. And, you can stop taking part at any time. I describe below the steps I am taking to protect your privacy.

By participating in this study, significant efforts will be made to make sure that your information remains confidential. We will not use your name or any information that would allow you to be identified in any publications of this study or in any transcripts. Everyone in the study will have an alias in all of my notes, transcripts and drafts. Your identity from the transcripts will not be shared with other co-researcher in this study. People participating in the York Mentorship Program *might* be aware of your participation in this interview process. However, the details of our discussions will not be revealed to them.

With your consent, this interview will be audio recorded. Once this interview has been recorded, I will send it over to Athena who will keep our discussion in a locked desk/cabinet where only she will have access to it. Once she receives this file, I will delete the audio recording from my computer. Information kept on a computer will be protected by a password. Once the study is completed, an archive of the data, without identifying information, will be deposited.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. This means that it is your choice to be part of the study or not. If you decide to be part of the study, you can decide to stop (withdraw), at any time, even after signing the consent form or part-way through the study. If you decide to withdraw, there will be no consequences to you from myself, McMaster University, York University or the Mentorship Program. In cases of withdrawal, any data you have provided will be destroyed unless you indicate otherwise. If you do not want to answer some of the questions you do not have to, but you can still be in the study.

Do you have any questions?

Thank you again for your time.

[START THE AUDIO RECORDER: ASK THEM IF THEY CONSENT TO THE PARTICIPATING IN THE INTERVIEW AND IF THEY CONSENT TO HAVING THEIR INTERVIEW AUDIO RECORDED. ONCE THEY SAY YES, YOU CAN PROCEED]

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. EXPERIENCE AT SCHOOL

- Why did you pick York University as your school?
 - Were the disability services an important factor in this decision?
- Can you describe your experience in transitioning to university?
 - How did you find the accommodation process?
 - Were there any misconceptions about your ability to transition into university successfully?

2. EXPERIENCE AT WORK

- Do you have any previous work experience?
 - Tell me about it.
- What were some challenges/ things you found easy in your previous job?
 - Why do you think that is?
- Did you consider your disability when making your career choices?

3. LEARNING DISABILITY

- What is the definition of 'learning disability' to you?
 - Has your definition changed over the years? If so, how?
- Do you tell other people about your disability?
 - If so, how do you describe your disability to other people?
 - If not, why?
- How did you learn that you had a disability?
- When were you diagnosed?
 - What is your interpretation of that diagnosis?
 - Is there anything you would personally add or take away from it?

4. DISCLOSURE

- Have you – the wording here not to be clarified... for some, past experience will be relevant; for others, perhaps not? Would you disclose it in your workplace?
 - Why?
 - To whom?
 - When?
- What do you think are the benefits and/or consequences of disclosing your disability at work?
 - What do you believe are the reasons for these positive/negative outcomes?
- Do you believe that there are misconceptions about disability/ learning disabilities in the workplace?
 - If so, what are they?
 - If so, why do you think they exist?
 - If so, how do you think they can be addressed?
 - If so, how does that influence your experience at work?

5. ACCOMMODATION & STRATEGIES

- What does the term "workplace accommodation" mean to you?
 - Are they different from accommodations at school?
 - If so, how?
- Have you ever requested an accommodation for disability at work or at school?

- Describe your experience (e.g. formal vs. informal process; timing on receiving appropriate accommodation; necessity to provide documentation)
- What are some strategies that you've used at work in working around your disability that doesn't involve a request to your employer?
 - Can you give an example?
- How did you come up with the strategies for the chart we made?
 - Why are those strategies important to you?
- How are you using your disability as a positive at work/school?
 - How could an employer best play to your strengths?
 - Do you believe that a person's learning disability influences their productivity at work?
 - Can you explain why/why not?
 -
- In an ideal world, how would you like to be approached by an employer about the accommodation process?
 - Are there things they should avoid (e.g. certain terms, assumptions).

Appendices C:

Research Ethics Material

Sample C1.

LETTER OF INFORMATION / CONSENT

A Study of Experience of University Students with Learning Disability in the Workplace

Investigators:

Principal Investigator:

Athena Goodfellow, Ph.D Candidate
Department of Geography and Earth Sciences
McMaster University
Hamilton, Ontario, Canada
(905) 525-9140 ext 20441
E-mail: tordjmay@mcmaster.ca

Faculty Supervisor:

Dr. Robert Wilton
Department of Geography and Earth Sciences
McMaster University
Hamilton, Ontario, Canada
(905) 525-9140 ext. 24536
E-mail: wiltonr@mcmaster.ca

Purpose of the Study

You are invited to take part in this study, which focuses on the experiences of university students with learning disabilities as they transition into the knowledge economy.

By taking part in this study, I hope we will collectively learn about how aspects of the contemporary workplace serves as are barriers to, and facilitators of, successful employment. I also hope that we will learn about how people negotiate the transition to employment, and the strategies they use, such as requesting accommodations. The findings of this study will be shared with people in the research team but also with organizations that will help other students transitioning to work.

Procedures involved in the Research

During the study, you will be invited to participate in a focus group. During these sessions, we will discuss topics that are important to persons with learning disabilities transitioning into the knowledge economy.

For example, we will investigate topics such as: if and how my learning disability influences my career; if and how to disclose a disability; what are 'appropriate' accommodations; how do I request accommodations; what are some strategies that will make negotiating my transition into the labour market easier.

With your permission, these sessions will be video and audio recorded. These recording will be used to produce transcripts of what was said. the recordings will then be destroyed. The ideas that are generated at these sessions will serve to produce an academic and practitioner's report so that people transitioning into the workforce have some practical tools and resources.

Are there any risks associated with participating in this study?

The risks involved in participating in this study are *minimal*. You may feel uneasy thinking/talking about transitioning from university to the workplace and how you

will negotiate new workspaces. You do not need to answer questions/ participate in any conversation that may make you feel uncomfortable. And, you can stop taking part in this study at any time. I describe below the steps I am taking to protect your privacy.

Are there any benefits to doing this study?

i hope that the study will benefit you directly, as well as the university community and employers. I hope that through your participation we will learn how to make your transition into the labour market successful, what are the barriers and facilitators that will promote your success in workplaces, what strategies and resources your university can provide you with to support you in this transition. This could also help future students by providing them with the some strategies, which would be useful when transitioning to the labour market.

Confidentiality: Who will know what I said or did in the study?

By participating in this study, every effort will be made to make sure that your personal information remains confidential. I will not use your name or any information that would allow you to be identified in any publications of this study or in any transcripts. Everyone in the study will have an alias name in all of my notes, transcripts and drafts. That means that no one outside of the focus group will know what you've said during the session unless you choose to tell them. People participating in the York Mentorship Program might be aware of your participation in this group. However, the details of our discussions (who said what) will not be revealed to them. Also we ask the other members of the focus group to keep what you say confidential; but understandably, we cannot *guarantee* that they will do so.

The focus group sessions will be videotaped to ensure that the transcripts of our focus group session accurately record what each participant said. However, all videotapes will be destroyed immediately after each focus group session once a written transcript of the discussion has been produced. If you do not wish to be videotaped, you will *not* be able to participate in this study.

Focus group transcripts will be kept in a password protected computer where only I will have access to it. Once the study is completed, an archive of the data, without identifying information, will be deposited.

What if I change my mind about being in the study?

Your participation in this study is voluntary. This means that it is your choice to be part of the study or not. If you decide to be part of the study, you can decide to stop (withdraw), at any time, even after signing the consent form or partway through the study. If you decide to withdraw, there will be no consequences to you from myself, McMaster University, York University or the this Mentorship Program. In the case of withdrawal, any data you have provided will be destroyed unless you indicate otherwise. If you do not want to answer some of the questions you do not have to, but you can still be in the study.

How do I find out what was learned in this study?

I expect to have this study completed sometime in August 2013. If you would like a brief summary of the results, please let me know and I will send either a paper or electronic version to you.

Questions about the Study

If you have questions or need more information about the study itself, please contact me at:

tordimay@mcmaster.ca or by phone at (647) 984-9424.

This study has been reviewed by the McMaster University Research Ethics Board and has received ethics clearance.

If you have concerns or questions about your rights as a participant or about the way the study is conducted, please contact:

McMaster Research Ethics Secretariat

Telephone: (905) 525-9140 ext. 23142

c/o Research Office for Administrative Development and

Support

E-mail: ethicsoffice@mcmaster.ca

CONSENT

I have read the information presented in the information letter about a study being conducted by Athena Goodfellow of McMaster University.

I have had the opportunity to ask questions about my involvement in this study and about how I can receive additional details.

I understand that if I agree to participate in this study, I may withdraw from the study at any time. I have been given a copy of this form. I agree to participate in the study.

Signature: _____

Name of Participant (Printed) _____

1. I agree that the focus group sessions can be audio/video recorded.

... Yes.

... No.

2. ...Yes, I would like to receive a summary of the study's results.

Please send them to this email address

or to this mailing address:

... No, I do not want to receive a summary of the study's results.

Sample C2.

LETTER OF INFORMATION / CONSENT

**A Study of Experience of University Students with Learning Disability in the
Workplace**

Investigators:

Principal Investigator:

Athena Goodfellow, Ph.D. Candidate

Department of Geography and Earth Sciences

McMaster University

Hamilton, Ontario, Canada

(905) 525-9140 ext 20441

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Faculty Supervisor:

Dr. Robert Wilton

Department of Geography and Earth Sciences

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Hamilton, Ontario, Canada

(905) 525-9140 ext. 24536

E-mail: wiltonr@mcmaster.ca

Purpose of the Study

You are invited to take part in this study, which focuses on the experiences of university students with learning disabilities as they transition into the knowledge economy.

By taking part in this study, I hope we will collectively learn about how aspects of the contemporary workplace serves as are barriers to, and facilitators of, successful employment. I also hope that we will learn about how people negotiate the transition to employment, and the strategies they use, such as requesting accommodations. The findings of this study will be shared with people in the research team but also with organizations that will help other students transitioning to work.

Procedures involved in the Research

During the study, as a mentor, you will be invited to participate in one or more one-on-one interviews over the course of the mentorship program and, if desired, until September 2012. These correspondences will take place through email, teleconference or in-person. These sessions scheduled to work in conjunction with your regular mentorship meetings and your personal schedule. During these sessions, we will discuss topics that are important to person's transition into the knowledge economy.

For example, we will investigate topics such as: if and how learning disability influences career decisions; if and how to disclose a disability; what are 'appropriate' accommodations; how to request accommodations; what are some

strategies that will make negotiating a person's transition into the labour market easier.

With your permission, these sessions will be audio recorded. These recording will be used to produce transcripts of what was said. The recordings will then be destroyed. The ideas that are generated at these sessions will serve to produce an academic and practitioner's report so that people transitioning into the workforce have some practical tools and resources.

Are there any risks associated with participating in this study?

The risks involved in participating in this study are *minimal*. You may feel uneasy thinking/talking about transitioning from university to the workplace and how to negotiate new workspaces. You do not need to answer questions/ participate in any conversation that may make you feel uncomfortable. And, you can stop taking part in this study at any time. I describe below the steps I am taking to protect your privacy.

Are there any benefits to doing this study?

I hope that the study will benefit you directly, as well as the university community and employers. I hope that through your participation we will learn how to make your transition into the labour market successful, what are the barriers and facilitators that will promote your success in workplaces, what strategies and resources your university can provide you with to support you in this transition. This could also help future students by providing them with the some strategies, which would be useful when transitioning to the labour market.

Confidentiality: Who will know what I said or did in the study?

By participating in this study, every effort will be made to make sure that your personal information remains confidential. I will not use your name or any information that would allow you to be identified in any publications of this study or in any transcripts. Everyone in the study will have an alias name in all of my notes, transcripts and drafts. That means that no one outside of the focus group will know

what you've said during the session unless you choose to tell them. People participating in the York Mentorship Program might be aware of your participation in this group. However, the details of our discussions will not be revealed to them.

The interview sessions will be audiotaped. However, all audiotapes will be destroyed immediately after each interview session once a written transcript of the discussion has been produced. If you do not wish to be audiotaped, you will *not* be able to participate in this study.

Focus group transcripts will be kept in a password protected computer where only I will have access to it. Once the study is completed, an archive of the data, without identifying information, will be deposited.

What if I change my mind about being in the study?

Your participation in this study is voluntary. This means that it is your choice to be part of the study or not. If you decide to be part of the study, you can decide to stop (withdraw), at any time, even after signing the consent form or partway through the study. If you decide to withdraw, there will be no consequences to you from myself, McMaster University, York University or the this Mentorship Program. In the case of withdrawal, any data you have provided will be destroyed unless you indicate otherwise. If you do not want to answer some of the questions you do not have to, but you can still be in the study.

How do I find out what was learned in this study?

I expect to have this study completed sometime in August 2013. If you would like a brief summary of the results, please let me know and I will send either a paper or electronic version to you.

Questions about the Study

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tordjmay@mcmaster.ca or by phone at (647) 984-9424.

This study has been reviewed by the McMaster University Research Ethics Board and has received ethics clearance.

If you have concerns or questions about your rights as a participant or about the way the study is conducted, please contact:

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Telephone: (905) 525-9140 ext. 23142

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CONSENT

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I have had the opportunity to ask questions about my involvement in this study and about how I can receive additional details.

I understand that if I agree to participate in this study, I may withdraw from the study at any time. I have been given a copy of this form. I agree to participate in the study.

Signature: _____

Name of Participant (Printed) _____

1. I agree that the focus group sessions can be audio/video recorded.

... Yes.

... No.

2. ...Yes, I would like to receive a summary of the study's results.

Please send them to this email address

or to this mailing address:

... No, I do not want to receive a summary of the study's results.

Appendices D:

Accommodation Chart

Category	Executive Functioning
Definition	Refers to the ability to plan, organize and monitor learning, work performance, behavior and emotions.
Work Tasks that are a struggle	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Becoming familiar with new tasks • Adapting to changes in routine/new work environments or schedules • Planning and setting goals to complete tasks • Managing and being aware of time • Multi-tasking (i.e. waiting tables) • Organizing belongings • Being flexible as the circumstances demand (situations, aspects and problem solving)
Self-Accommodation Strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Carrying a pocket size notepad and pen to take brief notes when necessary • Avoid doing multiple tasks at once and/or ask for assistance from co-workers when multi-tasking becomes overwhelming • Record information in agenda/phone or other digital device to plan ahead (i.e. Set reminder alarms) • Arrange for regular check-ins with trusted peer/supervisor to monitor progress • Create a virtual or tangible bulletin board for reminder
Accommodation Idea for Employers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extra time for training: extra time to get acquainted with the job. • Assign a mentor: mentors provide consistent constructive feedback and be available for questions • Extra time for task: assigning longer periods for task, notify of upcoming tasks • Provide a clear work expectation outline in writing • Avoid multiple task assignments

Category	Attention
Definition	Refers to the ability to focus selectively on certain activities while ignoring others; to sustain concentration for periods of time; and, to resist distractions and to shift attention among tasks. Also to have the ability to focus on one specific goal.
Work Tasks that are a struggle	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Having trouble focusing and putting individual attention on a specific task • Feeling overwhelmed with multi-tasking with a variety of priority levels • Not being able to finish tasks on time
Self-Accommodation Strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Divide work into manageable assignments • Keep written/ electronic notes of the work assignment • Prioritize importance of task using color coordinating system • Take breaks when needed • Take extra time on off-work hours to complete tasks • Take regular breaks and create short work intervals • Use ear plugs or other noise cancelling devices • Consider doing physical activities before work or during lunch break • Ensure that office space is clear from visual/ audio distractions • Take detailed notes during meetings
Accommodations by the Employer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allow for breaks to move around • Have 15 minute meeting at the beginning of the day to review expectations • Engage in novel and challenging tasks that are short length assignments • Provide quiet space away from noise and distractions

Category	Memory
Definition	<p>Memory – refers to the ability to store information for short or long periods of time. The memory allows an individual to refer to this information at any time.</p> <p><i>Short-term:</i> Storage of a small amount of information for a short period of time without rehearsal</p> <p><i>Working memory:</i> Ability to hold information in mind to work with it or apply it.</p> <p><i>Long-term:</i> Storage of information for longer periods of time.</p> <p>Retrieval: Involves the use of strategies to efficiently and quickly access information; can be recall and/or recognition.</p>
Work Tasks that are a struggle	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Remembering information just heard or seen (i.e. phone number or person's name) • Following directions with many steps involved • Recalling <i>exact</i> details of information • Remembering how to complete tasks, such as working the printer. • Recalling verbal contracts between other employees or potential clients • Not knowing which verbal task is a priority based on the sequence they heard it in.
Self-Accommodation Strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask the employer to repeat the task • Ask the person to send a follow up email indicating the task step by step • Provide minutes to any meetings • Find trigger words that can describe the task in one word like "mail" or "revise ASAP" • Use abbreviations or patterns to help one remember • Carry a pocket size paper/digital notepad and pen to take brief notes when necessary • Record information in phone or other digital device to plan ahead • Create a bulletin board with visual aids to support recall • Keep a list of key words/ acronyms on bulletin board • Use symbol visual system to assist with recall • Use rhyming technique to assist with recall
Accommodation Idea for Employers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Send weekly reminders of important dates and times • Allow for voice recorder in meetings • Keep verbal instructions simple • Keep write instructions short and in plain language • Use visual aids to support retention (i.e. provide handouts during meetings) • Provide extra time for training • Provide a common chat room where one can post questions and have them answered by fellow employees • Send frequent emails indicating time and places of meetings

	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Make sure that employees have an understanding that you need repetition• Break tasks down into chunks/segments• Use bullet points when possible
--	---

Category	Visual Motor
Definition	It is the ability to co-ordinate your eyes and hands to produce physical work.
Work Tasks that are a struggle	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Copying/transcribing • Taking meeting notes • Quick response to motor tasks (i.e. typing emails quickly) • Producing visual design as envisioned • Writing in information into small boxes on a form
Self-Accommodation Strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Type rather than write • Use digital or audio supports for creative tasks • Avoid writing on chart paper for group meetings
Accommodation Idea for Employers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allow typing • Avoid writing on chart paper • Provide speech to text software • Provide extra time • Do not insist on taking notes during meetings • Provide forms in electronic versions

Category	Visual Spatial
Definition	An ability to organize visual information into meaningful patterns
Work Tasks that are a struggle	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knowing the difference between right and left. • Noticing details • Finding/noticing patterns and remembering details • Copying things exactly the way they are presented • Organizing and placing objects effectively (i.e. packing a car)
Self-Accommodation Strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask for a verbal explanation of instructions • Have a peer you trust to talk about tasks • Take extra time to proofread written material/ask a trusted peer to review written material
Accommodation Idea for Employers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide assistive technology software (i.e. Inspiration, Word Q) • Speak slowly and clearly.

Category	Language
Definition	Language can be divided into comprehension and expression across all of its domains - oral, non-verbal, reading and writing – and of which can be affected in individuals with LDs. Language is a tool that is used to express our self by communicating with others.
Work Tasks that are a struggle	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understanding complex vocabulary • Spelling/ grammar • Learning new languages • Interpretation of subjective/vague phrases (i.e. reading in between the lines)
Self-Accommodation Strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To have access to a computer while working • Individual space while working • Have written material proof read • Use assistive technologies (i.e. Kurzweil, Word Q)
Accommodation Idea for Employers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To be able to have extra time on project deadlines. • Provide assistive technologies • Write in plain language • Avoid using heavy jargon, sarcasms and puns • Provide pre-written material when possible

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