

# **Designing Inclusive Social Policy: An Auto-ethnographic Analysis**

by

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## **Abstract**

In this paper, I discuss the problems faced by a disabled person looking for meaningful employment in a capitalist society and present an auto-ethnographic account of how my disability and my privileges impacted my ten-year journey to full-time employment. I analyze my social/personal experience to demonstrate how systemic and intersecting barriers to employment are created for a disabled person due to the linkages among disability support, employment, transportation and housing requirements. Suggesting some policy changes towards making the disability support system more inclusive, I make an overarching recommendation that systems relating to housing, transportation, employment and disability support should work in tandem rather than separately.

Keywords: Disability, Employment, Auto-ethnography, ODSP, Disability Support, Accessible Housing, Accessible Transportation, Accessible Employment, Inclusive Policy

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## **Dedication**

To my sister Samantha Walsh and Beth Harrison: thank you for believing in me. I could not have done it without you. As well, I would like to dedicate my MRP to the Kardashian family; although I do not have time to keep up with you.

## Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Setting the Stage .....	5
Neoliberal Capitalist Society .....	6
Social Assistance .....	9
The Social Position of Disability.....	11
Worker’s Body, Repeatable Body.....	12
Inclusive Disability Support Policy .....	13
Ecuador – a Brief Study .....	14
Disability Support and Employment.....	16
Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) .....	18
The Welfare Trap .....	22
“Active” Disability Employment Policy .....	24
Disability Employment Policy and the Individual .....	26
Auto-ethnography as Process and Product .....	31
The Process .....	32
The Product .....	36
My Ten-year Journey to a Full-time Job .....	37
Early Perceptions and Family Influences.....	37
Post-secondary Education .....	40
Early Job Experience: Precarious Labour .....	48
Affordable, Accessible Housing.....	51
Employment Supports Programs .....	52
Always on Call? (When is a Job not a Job?) .....	60
Working Poor? .....	69
Fighting Back .....	71
The Breakthrough .....	75
Making Sense of My Narrative .....	79
Connected Causes and “Double Jeopardy” .....	79
Broken Systems .....	81
Family Support.....	83
Disabled People Not Viewed as People .....	83
Professional Gatekeeping .....	85
Employment and Education .....	87
Disabled Bodies in an Ableist Society .....	87

Disability Employment in a Capitalist Society .....	88
Towards a More Inclusive Policy .....	91
Drug and Dental Benefits .....	93
Mobility Device Repair Coverage .....	94
Reinstating Cancelled Grants .....	95
Making Grant Information More Accessible .....	96
Alternatives to Job Finding Programs .....	96
Final Reflections .....	98
Housing and Employment .....	98
Transportation and Employment .....	100
Break the Silos .....	101
References .....	103



## **Introduction**

My name is Desiree Walsh and I am 33 years old. I identify as a white, disabled woman; specifically, I have cerebral palsy. This means I cannot walk, and I use a wheelchair to get around and complete tasks of everyday living. I also have a learning disability that affects my visual and spatial processing, and I have difficulties physically writing. However, that being said, I also have a lot of privilege: I am white; I grew up in a middle class home; I have a good group of friends and colleagues as well as good supportive family; I have had access to post-secondary education. This privilege is not lost on me as I narrate the story in this paper of my journey to full-time employment negotiating the twists and turns of provincial programs and policies along the way. The purpose of my narration is to make sense of my experience in the context of the social disability assistance structure in Ontario with particular reference to the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) and recommend a more inclusive social policy and process to facilitate employment for disabled people.

I also identify as a disability activist. Therefore, throughout this paper I will be using the activist term 'disabled person' rather

than 'person with a disability' as this is what activists who have a disability often to refer to themselves as. The reason for this is that the term 'person with a disability' puts personhood first and disability condition second, thereby negating the social issues and barriers having a disability may cause the person, not allowing them to fully engage in personhood (Michalko, 2002). As my paper deals with barriers to engaging with society as a disabled person, I felt this term is fitting because many of the barriers I discuss in this paper do not allow disabled people to fully participate in personhood.

In the province of Ontario, ODSP offers social assistance to citizens who identify as being unable to work due to chronic illness and/or disability. Participation in the program is based on financial need, primarily looking at how many assets one has when they apply for the program rather than their actual financial situation. Through a review of literature, I establish the paucity of studies on systemic barriers to meaningful employment, particularly those imposed by social assistance, and studies that include the lived experience of the disabled job seeker.

In this paper, I discuss the effects of capitalism on society from the perspective of a disabled person looking for meaningful employment. Using an auto-ethnographic approach to social inquiry, I leverage my personal history and experience of looking for, and finding, a job, to identify, discuss and mitigate the systemic and intersecting barriers to employment faced by a disabled person. In other words, the narrative arc of this paper traces my journey from being an ODSP recipient to finding meaningful employment. It analyzes the experience to highlight problems in the social support system. Specifically, it spotlights the vicious cycles that systemic barriers create through linkages of requirements relating to education and employment; employment and housing; housing and employment; employment and transportation; and transportation and employment. I also illustrate how government ministries (ministry of housing, ministry of transportation, and ministry of community and social services) work in silos, thereby compounding the problem of complicated linkages employment has with other important areas of society and life. The purpose of this exercise is to identify some ways of modifying existing disability support policies and

programs to help them better achieve their intended purpose. The paper, consequently, ends with some recommendations for making the disability support policy and process in Ontario more inclusive.

## **Setting the Stage**

To provide a background to my story, I examine the relationship between economic systems and the economic inclusion of persons with disabilities focusing on disability inclusion laws and policies impacting employers, including the systemic barriers put in place by government support programs such as the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP).

As the review of literature presented below shows, in most mainstream approaches to addressing the underrepresentation of disabled people in the workforce, the onus is largely on the disabled individual to transform themselves into the ideal worker and there are often very few obligations on employers to remove barriers to the employment of disabled people. In contrast, the dominant approaches to addressing this problem focus primarily on the employment impacts of disability social assistance benefits programs. Most efforts to improve the employment rate of disabled people assume that disabled people do not work because disability benefits were overly generous – or at least more generous and stable than available jobs – and therefore motivate

disabled people to stay on benefits instead of seeking work. Much of the literature taking up this perspective minimizes the impact of barriers to getting off benefits, instead emphasizing the notion that disabled people receiving benefits lack drive and motivation, or may even be lazy and work shy. The goal of this review is thus to illustrate a gap in research which shifts focus from the idea that each disabled individual must become a better worker to thinking about the role employers play in the workplace and, therefore, of economic inclusion of disabled people.

## **Neoliberal Capitalist Society**

For the purposes of this research analysis, capitalism will be defined as a type of social and economic organization that lends itself to the private ownership and control of mode of production. For example, in a capitalist society people are stratified by their position within the labour market. Those who own the means of production control and manipulate those who operate it. Capitalism has been written on extensively but Karl Marx is to be credited for his foundational critique of capitalism in his book *Das Capital* (Abercrombie, Hill, & Turner, 2000). A capitalist society is organized around individuals and the notion of individuals as

primary actors is created by the form of production. This is because the means to make money are primarily owned by individuals, therefore theoretically, anyone could buy the means to make money if they work hard enough. This is something Karl Marx deemed as mystification. This also speaks to Marx's concept of alienation wherein the individual is divorced from the mode of production, made to understand themselves as individual rather than collective, and made to be come out of touch with their own sense of feeling. Capitalism makes it easy for a society and individuals to understand an individual's failings as that person's own lack. In a capitalist society people understand themselves as competing individuals not members of a collective.

Neoliberalism refers to social policies and modern developments on the system of capitalism. Canadian society is organized as a neoliberal capitalist society. While, Canadian society has social programs and public medical care, there is still a strong zeitgeist of neoliberalism, which lends itself to a social understanding that the individual has agency, and their social position is self-determined. There may be individuals who experience legitimate disadvantage but that is for the social

programs and policy to determine. If an individual is found deserving of support, then there will be social infrastructure for them to use. However, in the case of disability this is often medicalized support, rehabilitation or limited economic resources.

A hallmark of a neoliberal capitalist society is the idea of a means test to see if one is really in need of support, or if their failings are individual. Neoliberal capitalism provides a notion that if one simply tries hard enough they will circumvent anything, even abject squalor and poverty. In a neoliberal capitalist society, if, for some reason, an individual is not able to provide for themselves or be autonomous, it becomes easy to construct the reason as the person did not try hard enough. Disability is understood as an individual tragedy that not only negates the utility of one's body but also diminishes one's social status (Barnes, 1996).

This attitude is quite convenient because it literally allows society to scapegoat all those who cannot participate in capitalist society by simply changing the story from 'cannot participate' to 'will not participate'. This attitude negates the responsibility of the state to help its people and makes social assistance seem like



an act of benevolence rather than something that the state ought to do. It erases or distracts from the idea that within a neoliberal capitalist society one needs education to get a job (and the job is still not guaranteed) and one needs a job to buy or rent a home.

### **Social Assistance**

The idea of social assistance was born out of the English Poor Laws (Hansen, 2011). In 1601 England was experiencing a depression with mass unemployment when these laws were born out of a necessity. The poor laws gave the local government the power to raise taxes as needed and use the funds to build and maintain almshouses; to provide indoor relief (i.e., cash or sustenance) for the aged, handicapped and other worthy poor; and the tools and materials required to put the unemployed to work. Parents were required to support their children and grandchildren. Likewise, children were responsible for the care of their unemployable parents and grandparents. Children whose parents could not support them were forced into mandatory apprenticeships. They had no right to object to the compensation or the interference with their own child-rearing activities. Vagrants

and any able bodied persons who refused to work could be committed to a house of correction or fined. (Hansan, 2011)

Although things have changed, we still have these laws but now they are social programs. They still look after the disabled, elderly, children, and those who do not work for whatever reason. Much like 1601 there is still stigma attached to being a beneficiary. The government largely controls these programs and can raise or cut funds. As we are in a capitalist society, the notion of poor laws is counter intuitive. Capitalism focuses largely on the individual allegedly working hard for their own personal gain leaving behind anyone who cannot do this (Zimbalist, 1988). Therefore, the need to gain meaningful employment is a staple of what is going to be successful in a capitalist society. This paper will further discuss the effects of capitalism on society but from the perspective of a disabled person looking for meaningful employment so that they too can participate in a capitalist society. This situation is exacerbated by the dominant discourse being based on the social model of disability.

## **The Social Position of Disability**

The social model perspective of disability was theorized by Mike Oliver and Tom Shakespeare (Corker & Shakespeare, 2002; Oliver, 1990). This model suggests that disability is a social creation of society's inability to imagine a body outside of the stereotypical "able body." The social model of disability become particularly poignant when discussing employment because, as the work of Tobin Siebers (2001) points out, "If we all live long enough we will all have the opportunity to be disabled." In addition, Rene Gadacz (1994) identifies that disability is an "open ended" category which people move in and out of depending on how their bodies and environments change. This perspective can enable us to conceptualize disabled workers as a critical mass rather than as relatively few isolated and unfortunate individuals.

These statements are echoed by the work of Michael Prince in his writing on the situation of disability and policy in Canada:

Disability exists in the shadows of public awareness and at the periphery of policymaking. People with disabilities are in many respects missing from the theories and practices of social rights, political participation, employment, and civic membership (Prince, 2009).

Prince's statement suggests a gap in research that fails to consider disability as something that must be imagined when creating infrastructure, rather than a problem that must be negotiated by the individual. In addition to this, the work of Colin Barnes highlights that disability is often constructed as an individual issue. Barnes' work reminds the reader that disability is understood as an individual tragedy that not only negates the utility of one's body but also diminishes one's social status (Barnes, 1996).

### **Worker's Body, Repeatable Body**

The disabled body is often left out of working. A report published by OECD stated that most disabled people in the Global North live in poverty with unemployment rates of disabled people averaging twice that of non-disabled people and disabled people being excluded from many of the benefits of living in a developed country (OECD, 2010). Unemployment excludes disabled people from the psychological and social benefits of working, as well as the material benefits (Brooks & Klosinski, 1999).

The work of Siebers, Gadacz, Prince and Barnes provide context as to why the disabled body complicates the issue of work. When disability is perceived as an individual loss rather than an aspect of human diversity, the world gets organized with a specific body in mind. When this (this what?) is applied to work, the ideal body of a worker would be one that is repeatable and standardized. Lennard Davis (2002) suggests that the disabled body troubles the body of the worker because the disabled body is not a repeatable body. Davis' work illustrates that the worker's body is assumed to be repeatable and thus replicable. I will use Davis' work to contextualize other writing in regards to employment and social economic systems.

## **Inclusive Disability Support Policy**

This project came out of an interest in the contrast between the values informing the principles of inclusive design and those underlying capitalism. Inclusive design principles require that human diversity be recognized and valued such that all barriers to inclusion are eliminated (IDRC, n.p.). A 'barrier' is anything that prevents a person with a disability from fully participating in all aspects of society because of his or her disability, including a

physical barrier, an architectural barrier, an information or communications barrier, an attitudinal barrier, a technological barrier, a policy, or a practice. (Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act, s.2).

The question that arises is whether inclusive design can meaningfully coexist with capitalism. Ecuador provides a good example for economic inclusion of disabled persons, yet there is not enough reliable, peer-reviewed information about disability and employment in Ecuador to build a case study. A brief account is presented below, nonetheless.

### **Ecuador – a Brief Study**

Ecuador has very well developed legislation around employment for person with disabilities, in large part as a result of the contributions of Lenín Moreno Garcés, who was the Vice President of Ecuador in the democratic socialist government of Rafael Correa from 2007 to 2013. Moreno Garcés had become paralyzed in 1998, and subsequently became a disability activist. He spearheaded Ecuador's implementation of a law promoting disabled people's social and economic inclusion in 2007, which

took place after signing the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2006. In 2008, disability rights were enshrined in the constitution of Ecuador. The legal changes were designed to provide disabled people with better income and social security, as well as access to assistive devices, housing, education and training (Moreno Garcés, 2012), and included a quota system obligating employers to hire disabled workers (Caseli, 2013).

Ecuador currently has a very high rate of employment for people with disabilities, which is thought to result from a law requiring medium-to-large businesses to ensure that 4% of their jobs are given to disabled people (Caseli, 2013). The initial goal was to do a case study on Ecuador to find out why a small country such as Ecuador was able to achieve this while more developed countries like Canada have disability employment rates of less than 50% (Caseli, 2013). Research revealed a lack of peer reviewed information in English concerning Ecuador's economy or their disability legislation. There was however a lot of information available relating to economic inclusion of disabled people in Canada, the US, the UK and Sweden, that lent itself to research with a focus on disability and capitalism as well as disability and

employment in these countries (as described in the next section on literature review).

The above review showed that employers in these countries emphasize motivating disabled people to get off disability benefits, often by reducing eligibility and support levels. Unlike in Ecuador, where employers who fail to meet the disabled employee quota are subjected to fines and other penalties, there is little incentive in western countries for public or private employers to remove barriers to employment for disabled people.

## **Disability Support and Employment**

Unlike in Ecuador, the goals of neoliberalism clash with the rhetoric of human rights law in countries that are based on neoliberal foundations (Owen, 2007). However, the discussions around accommodation when talking about getting disabled people into the workforce also work well to bridge the gap around discussions about anti-discrimination (*ibid*). This fits well with Davis' work on the repeatable body as the ideal worker's body (Davis 2002). Both the US and Canada have a survival of the fittest attitude, which is problematic in regard to the notion of accommodation (Wysong, Perrucci & Wright, 2013). With this



attitude there is an understanding that if one is unsuccessful or unable to achieve, they are to be blamed for their own problems, and it is not the society's problem to accommodate their "shortcomings" (Hamilton, 2014). This means that according to the neoliberal perspective, the idea that disabled people should be entitled to accommodations or assistance is incoherent (Hamilton, 2014). This neoliberal attitude positions disability as an individual issue or failure rather than something created or in concert with society. Davis provides this context when thinking about ableism (discrimination against people with disabilities). He says,

We need to think of ableism in a somewhat different way than we have in the past. Rather than conceptualize it as a trait or a habit of thought on the part of certain somatically prejudiced people, we can consider it to be one aspect of a far-ranging change in European and perhaps global culture and ideology that is part of Enlightenment thought and part of modernization... One can see ableism as an aspect of modifications of political and social practice that have both positive and negative implications (101-102)

Davis' work provides context for the neoliberal perspective on disability that is common in Canada and the USA. In Canada, most of the legislation around disability and its implementation is piecemeal, in that it is different from province to province, and

often not reinforced due to a lack of structure within the laws (Kemper et al., 2010). In thinking about this we can also refer back to the research of the OECD (2010) and Brooks and Klosinski (1999), where it is pointed out that disabled people are often removed from the working world and from opportunities for economic inclusion.

### **Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP)**

In the province of Ontario, disabled people are supported through the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP, n.d.). This section provides an overview of ODSP. It outlines the benefits accruing to a single person without children and how the benefits are impacted by the ODSP recipient taking on work. Some of the paradoxes and challenges of the program are addressed here, and several more in the auto-ethnography section of this paper.

The ODSP website states: "Only a caseworker can decide if you are financially eligible for ODSP, however, you may use the [Online Application for Social Assistance](#) to see if you might qualify and to start your application" (Ministry of Community and Social Services, 2015). Thus, a person's eligibility under ODSP is essentially determined by a case worker, even though it is based

on financial need and disability. The ODSP website, which gives an overview of the program and answers frequently asked questions, does not define who a case worker is. Yet, a case worker is referenced several times throughout the document.

The website states that eligibility is based on financial need; yet no facts or figures are provided on how much money one gets per month. The website only outlines total eligible asset values and items of assets acceptable to have while on ODSP. More importantly, what would bar one from the program. For example, a single person is allowed to have “up to \$5000 worth of assets”, which could be: “cash in hand, money in bank accounts, Registered Retirement Savings Plans (RRSP), Tax-Free Savings Accounts (TFSA), property other than the house lived in, vehicles other than the main vehicle driven, trust funds, investments, and, collectibles (for example stamps or antiques)” (ODSP Eligibility, 2015). The maximum amount one can contribute to a Tax Free Savings Account, where the interest income is not taxable, is \$5,500 (TD Canada Trust, 2016).

Those who have a spouse, or are in a marriage-like relationship, can have up to \$7,500 worth of assets (Ministry of

Community and Social Services, 2015). This roughly works out to \$3750 per person, which is literally no savings for anyone. The limit for those who have children may increase by \$500 for each child who lives with them, no matter their age (Ministry of Community and Social Services, 2015). It would seem largely that ODSP is not based solely on financial need but rather on what one does not have. Actually, there is more information of what assets one can have on the website than there is on the actual program. Also the fact that the program is allegedly based on financial need is evident from the fact that they do not provide facts and figures on how much money one gets per month.

With respect to assistance with employment, there are specific eligibility criteria listed on the ODSP website as follows:

- be at least 16 years old
- be an Ontario resident
- be legally allowed to work in Canada
- have a substantial physical or mental disability that is expected to last a year or more, and makes it hard for you to find or keep a job

They also require applicants to fill out two forms:

- Application for Employment Supports (please see Appendix A)
- Verification of Disability/Impairment (please see Appendix B)

One of them is required to get a general practitioner to sign off on you, or in some sort of way, to prove that you have some sort of disability. The website does not say what happens after, but they have numerous videos of success stories posted there. I suppose (not a great place to suppose! Yes or no?) once you meet with a case worker they would give you a list of agencies that they work with that are funded by ODSP that would help you find jobs.

On the website there is a list of what these services will provide:

- help preparing for work
- help finding a job that is right for you
- help keeping a job
- job coaching

- on-the-job training
- help to move to the next level in your career
- software and mobility devices that can help you do your job
- interpreter or intervenor services
- transportation assistance
- assistive devices and training to use them
- tools and equipment you need for your job
- special clothing for your job
- specialized computer training
- other items you may need

In theory, these sound great. However, in practice this is not what happens, as my story demonstrates.

### **The Welfare Trap**

According to Pierson-Balik (2003), social assistance rates are often determined in accordance with the understanding that those who are not working should have a lower standard of living than those who are, including those who were considered as among the “deserving” poor, such as disabled people. She

explains that the “welfare trap” is a term used to describe the difficulty of moving from social assistance benefits to work, highlighting the system irrationalities and barriers embedded in many social assistance programs.

As an example, if a person who receives disability benefits could find a job, but transitioning to employment meant that they would lose access to affordable housing, health insurance or assistive device coverage, it might be impractical or even impossible to make that transition.

However, in a liberal society there is a notion that each individual should succeed solely based on their own merits and not by relying on the support of others (Chouinard, 2005; Moffitt, 2015; Morris, 2013). As Harrison (2014) explains, “The question of individual capacity (and indeed other disparities in social location) is not relevant within this schema” (n.p.). Neoliberal ideology keeps the idea of the ‘welfare trap’ viable in places like Canada and the United States because the focus on individualism is exceedingly strong (Kivisto & Faist, 2007). One theory as to why the welfare trap persists is explained by Grover and Piggott (2005), who write, “If everything is inclusive, everyone has access

to the resources they need, and there is no army of reserve labour to shore up the class system of economic exploitation.” However, as Magdoff & Magdoff point out, if everything is inclusive economically, the underclass of reserve labour gets lost and capitalism can no longer thrive (2004). The idea of the ‘welfare trap’ presents a further justification for the exclusion of the disabled body from the workforce.

### **“Active” Disability Employment Policy**

The question before us is: does an “Active” disability employment policy promote employment or does it withdraw much needed support? Barr et al. reviewed 16 quantitative studies addressing the efficacy of cuts to eligibility and generosity of disability benefits as a means of encouraging disabled people to enter the workforce (1106) in four OECD countries with highly-developed welfare systems (Canada, Norway, Sweden and the UK) (1108). This study found that there is insufficient evidence to support the idea that limiting benefits eligibility and/or cutting financial benefits will cause an increase in disabled people joining the labour force. In some cases, cuts or reductions in benefits



increase poverty and impacts negatively upon the physical and mental health of disabled people (Barr et al., 2010).

Research by the OECD found that its member states as a whole spent an average of 2% of GDP on disability social assistance programs and benefits, with Scandinavian countries spending up to 4% of GDP and Canada and the US spending around 1% of GDP (OECD, 2010). While Scandinavians receiving disability support generally receive more financial support than the OECD average, they remain relatively poor in comparison with other members of their society. At the same time, Scandinavians with disabilities are no more likely to be employed than OECD average, which means that they are similarly excluded from the benefits of workforce participation.

Generally, analyses such as that undertaken by the OECD understand disabled people receiving social assistance benefits as drains on the economy, being unproductive as both producers and consumers (Banks & Pollock, 2014). This economic approach suggests that there is no infrastructure that would adequately support disabled people in finding meaningful employment. The consequence of this lack of infrastructural support means that the

onus is on the individual with the disability to find a way to gain employment.

For example: in the UK, independent living programs have been cut, personal income support has been cut, people who are clearly unable to work as a result of disability and illness have been subjected to unfair work readiness assessments and their benefits have been rescinded (Briant, Watson & Philo, 2013). This has led to a lower quality of life for people with disabilities within the UK; but, it also illustrates that the focus is on the manipulation of the individual rather than changing the infrastructure of society.

### **Disability Employment Policy and the Individual**

Both Canada and the US have policies in place regarding discrimination and employment. Canada's employment equity legislation and policy identifies the follow four groups as experiencing discrimination:

- Women of any race or ethnicity
- Visible or racial minorities
- Aboriginal peoples
- Persons with disabilities (Agocs, 2002).

The human rights violation complaint process requires victims of discrimination or harassment to carry the risk and burden of seeking redress. The process is reactive and to be instigated by the individual experiencing the discrimination. Both the Canadian Human Rights Act (1978) and the Charter of Rights and Freedoms of the Constitution of Canada (1982) contain sections that permit employers to implement voluntary employment equity programs. In contrast to the human rights complaint procedure, employment equity policy is not driven by individual complaints. Employers are required to undertake actions to proactively identify and remove or replace policies and practices that may have discriminatory impacts and to improve the representation of underrepresented groups in their workplaces.

Atkins (2007) seeks to contrast and compare Canada and the US. Atkins compares the approaches of the two countries to integrating disabled and marginalized workers. The article identifies that both disabled Americans and Canadians continue to fare badly economically and in terms of actual numbers in the workforce. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) has been

extremely successful in its requirement that American physical spaces become universally accessible to people with a wide variety of impairments. However, in terms of employment the ADA has not had the same success. Atkins found that in regards to legislation, more Americans with disabilities have lost employment discrimination cases than Canadians. Even though the US has done a lot to facilitate disabled people getting to work they have a hard time securing employment. This means that in America transit systems are more accessible and the built environment is more accessible making it easier for someone with a physical disability to literally show up for work. However, Americans with disabilities still report low job retention.

Canada by comparison has no federal accessibility laws or laws pertaining to disability but rather the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. In Canada people with disabilities are more successful in their disputes over employment but, a coordinated and federal approach to built environment accessibility is lacking. Atkins asserts that Canada views discrimination as something systemic, with less of a focus on individual self-management, treating disability to some extent as a social phenomenon rather

than characteristic of individual employees. Plaintiffs have received far more positive results in Canada than in the US, when fighting employment discrimination. However, statistically, people with disabilities in both countries still experience disproportionate amounts of discrimination and barriers to employment. In closing, Atkins suggests that when disability is viewed as a social issue and a universal remedy or solution is sought, access and anti-discrimination efforts tend to be more successful. When access is individualized and people with disabilities need to negotiate independently for access in the workplace, there tends to be little change in the overall experience of people with disabilities.

There is a gap in research relating to disability and employment policy, as there is little recognition of what employers could do to remove barriers to employment for disabled workers. Moreover, there is even less mention of what governments are doing to eliminate systemic barriers to employment for persons with disabilities that result from the problematic structure of disability social assistance policies.

Much of the literature talks about motivating disabled people to get off social assistance by cutting funds or re-evaluating

eligibility criteria. But, my experience over the past ten years as a disabled woman has been that this is problematic and counter to the goal of disability employment. To establish my point of view, I tell my story as an auto-ethnographic recount and, through systematic analysis of that story, I tease out the negative social implications of the ODSP, as currently implemented, to work towards some recommendations for policy and process change.

## **Auto-ethnography as Process and Product**

Methodologically, the scope of this paper is limited to social assistance programs in Canada, mainly Ontario, with the UK's model of disability benefits being used for contrast. Data are drawn from literature and from an auto-ethnographic account of my own ten-year journey to employment with intermittent support from ODSP. As with any other form of social analysis, the connections I make between my experiences and the social/administrative processes, practices, programs and policies that shaped them are my own. I believe that my work will evoke in the readers a feeling that "the experience described is lifelike, believable, and possible, a feeling that what has been represented could be true" (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011, n.p.). In the words of Holman Jones, my goal is "to produce analytical, accessible texts that change us and the world we live in for the better" (2005, p.764).

Auto-ethnography is a way of producing "meaningful, accessible, and evocative research grounded in personal experience" to sensitize readers to issues and experiences (Ellis &

Bochner, 2000, p. 733). Auto-ethnography is also a research methodology that allows me to use a narrative style of writing to document my journey as the researcher in an evocative story form to produce useful and relevant data for my research. It also allows me to be subjective, and emotional in my expression to influence my own research.

My work is also influenced by Inclusive Design in bringing out the awareness that human beings are diverse due to a host of factors and this diversity requires expression rather than perpetuating the stereotypical (IDRC, n.p.).

## **The Process**

As a method, auto-ethnography is “both process and product” (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011, n.p.). I present the ‘process’ of development of my auto-ethnography here and the ‘product’ or the story in the next chapter.

I retroactively and selectively wrote of instances from my job search that were relevant to disability employment. These instances were not planned by me. Rather, I gathered them together through systematic use of memory as they appealed to the cultural identity that I assume. I used personal experience to illustrate facets of disability



cultural experience to familiarize both insiders and outsiders with the characteristics of this culture. I told my story in first person using a chronological story progression (Didion, 2005). I adopted a personal narrative writing style to bring out the relationship between my job search and the socio-cultural contest of disability support from different quarters. My intention is to "invite readers to enter [my] world and to use what they learn there to reflect on, [and] understand ..." (ELLIS, 2004, p.46).

I began with jotting down individual events as and when I recollected them. At times, I consciously tried to remember details about some issue that I wanted to examine in my research. The jottings collectively formed the initial draft, which was iteratively refined through several rounds of discussions with my Principal Advisor. Every feedback and revision was reviewed to ensure that the spirit and purpose of the exercise was not lost in the process.

In consideration of 'relational ethics', which is the inadvertent implication of other actors mentioned in my story, I shared the text of my auto-ethnography with the people named therein. My parents, Karen Stephenson and Allen Walsh, conveyed their agreement with my accounts of their role in my

journey to employment. My sister Samantha Walsh has also expressed consent on her role in my narration. Since the above interactions did not involve seeking their personal opinions, my study did not require a formal research ethics review process, and this was confirmed by the Research Ethics Board of OCAD University.

Considering auto-ethnography is the study of one's self and situation (Ellis, 2004), I examined my experiences of trying to get and maintain employment while on ODSP. To get a better understanding of an auto-ethnography I read the chapter A Princess and a Problem from the book *On Being a Princess and a Problem: Negotiating Attitudinal Barriers in Academia as a Female Student with Chronic Pain and a Chronically Ill Female Professor* (Cameron & Chouinard, 2014). The character of the professor in the chapter helped me understand the flow of an auto-ethnography. The chapter was also on a similar topic to my story as both the authors and myself are talking about dealing with bureaucracy and systemic barriers to resources.

I took the approach of documenting my whole journey of employment starting with my perception of disability and

employment from when I was young through my postsecondary education experience when I started to identify challenges I faced in getting a job followed by my experiences with employment as an adult, right to my current job at a financial institution.

To connect my outcomes with literature during analysis, I also consulted a number of academic works related to the working poor, the repeatable body and disability and employment. Leonard Davis' work on the repeatable body was particularly useful for this paper as he talks about how the very fact that disabled people have a different type of body makes them a foreign entity to the workplace (Davis, 2002). I also consulted the work of Pierson-Balik (2001) around the idea of the Welfare Trap. Pierson-Balik writes that the confines of social assistance often make it hard for individuals accessing the program to get off welfare due to rules around employment. I also looked at the work of Tobin Siebers and Rene Gadacz in disability studies and the idea of the social model of disability. Both authors point out the importance of understanding disability as a fluid experience and identity, as anyone can become disabled at any time (Siebers, 2013). Rene Gadacz also talked about the experience of disability as an open

ended category in which people are moving in and out. Therefore, in the workplace, the idea of disability being a very individualized problem, is somewhat of a myth (Gadacz, 1994).

## **The Product**

Through the process described above, I arrived at a well laid out account of my experiences in searching and keeping jobs while negotiating the disability support system and benefits, which formed the core data for my research. This auto-ethnographic account follows.

## **My Ten-year Journey to a Full-time Job**

On March 21<sup>st</sup> 2016 I acquired my first full time permanent job as an investigator in the anti-money laundering unit of a major bank in Ontario. As a result, I am no longer a recipient of **ODSP benefits** because I make more money than one is allowed to make while receiving **ODSP benefits**. That is okay, because my job comes with benefits. The journey to my job took ten years. This is the story of what happened.

### **Early Perceptions and Family Influences**

Although I had been disabled since birth I only really realized it would be a problem around the age of 10. However, my worry soon eased when I started playing wheelchair basketball at the age of 10. Although I was an awful basketball player, I met adults who also used wheel chairs and were seemingly just like me but they were as old as my parents and they had all the things my parents had, jobs, relationships, houses, two cars, and some of them had kids. These adults taught me so much and profoundly affected who I am as a person today. Even though I only played basketball for four years, it changed how I view myself and also

taught me invaluable skills for being a wheelchair user. I learned how to go up and down curbs. I learned how to wheel my wheelchair over railroad tracks and other rough terrains. But most of all I learnt that I deserved the same things as everyone else and I should want the same things that typical able bodied people have. This was conveyed both verbally to me and my other team members; meaning, someone actually told me once when I was little to make sure I always remembered to value myself and believe I deserved the best in life even though I cannot walk. This did wonders for my self-perception. However, what did even more for my self-perception was listening to the adults talk about the other kind of disabled people.

Whether this is true or not I was very much aware that being on social assistance had a stigma. I think this may have been due to my upbringing, although my parents never said anything negative about those who did not work. I always assumed that I would have the same adult life as my parents. Both my parents are very hard working they always had jobs although I do believe they got some assistance from the government in the form of child tax benefits and accessed different government programs for my

wellbeing. I never viewed them as lazy or victims. They always had jobs no matter what, and they never made excuses for themselves. I think it was because of this that I assumed that I would grow up and get a job and get married, own a house, have two cars, and kids, not because these were things I wanted, but these were things my parents had and I thought you were supposed to have.

The kind of disabled people you do not want to be like are the ones that do not work, do not have relationships, wear Velcro shoes, and hang around the mall. Sometimes they have slippers. They wear sweatpants and spend their days at the mall since they have nothing else to do. They receive money from the government because they cannot work as they are too disabled. These disabled people did not drive; they did not do anything interesting; they were scary. My mom sold wheelchairs and adaptive sports equipment for a portion of my life. This was great, since it afforded me to do a lot of interesting things that I could not have afforded if she had not done that. I water and snow skied in addition to playing basketball. However, my mom also sold wheelchairs to the other disabled people, the scary ones at the

mall. One day, when I was about 10, we were at the mall, when we ran into a man in a wheel chair that had no shoes and was wearing sweat pants. He was quite nice and was chatty with my mom and myself. After he left I asked my mom why it was we always seemed to see him at the mall whenever we went there. She responded that he was there all the time because he had nothing better to do as he cannot work. I asked who took care of his kids and if his wife missed him while he was at the mall. My mom told me he did not have any kids or a wife. She did not say it was because he was disabled. But I thought it might be. His situation worried me and unlike the disabled people I met while playing adaptive sports I knew I did not want to be like him. I did not want to become one of those disabled people.

I definitely learned from an early age that there were two types of disabled people: those who were normal and did typical things and those who were pathetic and/or lazy. I am not sure if these are merely middle class values.

## **Post-secondary Education**

I graduated from Brock University with a degree in philosophy in 2006. For most of my time there, I did not actually



have a job. For several reasons I did not work at the time. I was a competitive swimmer so swimming took up most of my spare time. In addition, the transit system in St. Catherines is not good; it makes the public transportation system in Toronto look like some inclusive design miracle. As a result, it was hard to get anywhere outside of the Brock campus so having a job off campus was not really possible. I did not mind though, because I was pretty busy with swimming and school. However, there were times in the summer that I wished it was easier for finding employment. I stayed at Brock at St. Catherines for summer school and swim. However, in the summer not that many courses are offered so it's hard to get a full course load. Most of the courses are at night. So, effectively, in the summer I had 4-6 hours of free time as I was not the most dedicated student an hour of this went to school work most days. Therefore, I could have had a job but there were so many barriers in that it was hard to find a job on campus that would allow you to work basically from 9:00 am till about 3:00 pm to accommodate swim practice. Swimming was from 6-8 am and then again, at night from 4:30

till 6:00 pm. We did get Thursday and Tuesday afternoons off but I would usually use these afternoons to go to school.

In hindsight it was not a lot of time but it was unstructured time. I worked out a lot. I slept and read magazines and schoolbooks. There were not very many people around in the summer so I did not really see a lot of my friends. It was a bit boring but I did not really mind. Occasionally, the coaching staff at Brock would ask why I did not have a job. As they had no critical analysis of systemic barriers to employment for those with disabilities, they did not understand my answer when I said I did not have time to work and because transit was bad and I could not get a job off campus. Also, most part-time jobs are in the service industry and involve you needing to be able to stand or walk. For example, Tim Hortons or MacDonalds. Luckily for me, this was not a common conversation; so it was only slightly annoying.

That being said, I did worry a bit about getting experience to put on my resume as I did not really think most employers would see the transferable skills in my only experience, which was swimming for 10 hours a week. As I mentioned above, though I

did not have time to volunteer or have a job, swimming took up most of my time and the time that was left got spent going to school and/or partying. Occasionally, I would sleep.

In my second year at the university, this lifestyle caught up with me and I burned out and had to go home for the summer, mostly because I could not afford tuition and residence for the summer. I took 3 courses on letter of permission at Wilfred Laurier University and also swam 3 times a week with a local coach in Waterloo. As a result, this was the first time I had an off-season reason for swimming and this is actually how I landed my first job.

One day, I was lying in my bed being as lazy as possible when my mom said that, if I ever decided to get up, I should apply for this job she found at KW Accessibility. This was a local advocacy and resource organization for those with disabilities in Kitchener Waterloo. When I finally did get out of bed, I faxed my resume over to KW accessibility along with a small cover letter my mom helped me write. I then followed up with a phone call and, as luck would have it, they asked me to come in for an interview. As the organization worked with people with disabilities I was not really concerned with discrimination or worried about

accommodation. My mom drove me to the interview. It was a summer student position.

The interview went well. They were really impressed by all my swimming and the fact that I played basketball in, like, 1994, and occasionally babysat. I was surprised but did not tell anybody when they offered me the job. I accepted and for the next two months at the age of 21 I was a summer student at KWA. I was pretty much the worst summer student ever. They had hired me to assist in a mentor project they were trying to get going where they would pair adults with disabilities up with children with disabilities. I tried my best to do good research, write good documents, and good correspondence. However, because of my learning disability, this is really difficult. I did have access to adaptive technology but even with that my writing is not the best. It was an interesting situation because even though they seemed largely unhappy with the outcome of the work I produced, they seems to really enjoy having me there and I actually enjoyed being there. As a person who spent more of their time swimming and did not really get to have typical summer jobs, it was fun to not have to worry about swimming and just go to work.

I liked going to work even though I was not good at my job. I felt it was a good experience. I liked telling people I had to go to work and, even though I was really bad at my job, it was 100-times easier than being a competitive swimmer; so it was a nice break. When I left the man I worked for, who also happened to be disabled, he told me I would never be successful because of my challenges. His feedback hurt my feelings but I did not worry about it too much. I told myself, "it is a problem for future, Desiree" and I went back to Brock to continue swimming, going to school, partying, and, occasionally sleeping.

That year, 2005, I made it to Cerebral Palsy World Games for swimming. This is a multi-sport games event for people with cerebral palsy and other head injuries. I represented Canada as a swim team. It had nothing to do with employment. It was just a good part of university. However, while I was at the games I got to meet people with cerebral palsy who had jobs and did interesting things. I met someone who was a teacher in New Zealand. Many people who ran their own businesses. This was interesting for me because till that point I had met several adults

with disabilities who had jobs but no one who had my disability who had a job.

The same year that I went to Cerebral Palsy World Games (during my third year at university), I had gone to see my academic advisor to make sure I was on track to graduate. She was also a disabled woman. To my surprise she was actually able to make it so that I could graduate in January of the following year. I immediately panicked and told her that I needed to figure out a way to graduate in January in the following year. As I was not ready to leave Brock since I had to make the 2008 Paralympics and if I left Brock in April of 2006 I would never do this. Also I did not have any idea of what to do after university so i would need to make a plan and to make a plan I would need more time. She laughed but she accommodated my request and found me some more courses so that I could take a fourth year in university.

In fourth year I applied for a super part time job helping people opt out of the Brock health plan for the first 2 months of school. It was a pretty easy job and I did not need the money since I lived off a line of credit from my parents but I felt it would be good to have another real job on my resume. Also, much like

my summer from second year I really liked going to work. The same year I went to a talk by a man who worked at the Bank of Montreal. He was running a lecture about professionalism and getting a job. After the lecture he allowed students to ask questions. I figured this was the perfect way to find about how to deal with asking employers for accommodations and finding a job when you have a disability. I did ask him my questions but his answers were disappointing. He asked me if I played wheelchair hockey and I looked at him strangely since I did not know what this had to do with my question. I say no. He then asked if I knew anyone else who was like me. I said, "of course, I know other university students" and again looked at him strangely. He then clarified that by other I meant other disabled people. I said, "yes, but what does that have to do with my question?" He then told me that I should ask other disabled people about finding jobs and dealing with accommodations since he did not really know about that. He did tell me that by law employers had to accommodate me and could not ask any discriminatory questions. But I already knew that. Although I was disappointed, I decided once again that

this was a problem for future Desiree and focused on graduating school.

I graduated in April 2006. As I felt that the job prospects for someone with a BA in philosophy are quite slim, I had made arrangements to start a post diploma in human resource management at Centennial College in September of 2006. Centennial College being in Toronto, I also made arrangements to swim with the Variety Village swim team. I was pleased with this decision because as much as I enjoyed working I was really scared to join the work world. Therefore, being at Centennial College for two years gave me the chance to try to make the 2008 Paralympics and also make a plan for finding a job thereafter and making a real life. I finished my diploma at Centennial College in 2008.

### **Early Job Experience: Precarious Labour**

Although, it did affect my ODSP I was able to work in a **work study position** at Centennial College. I also had a **part-time job** at Variety Village as one of their special Olympics swim coaches. Both jobs paid \$10/hour and made up about 17 hours of paid work. At that time ODSP was still taking money earned from part



time jobs away from students. So, even though I was still working I was not really making any money.

However, I did not really care because I had a line of credit in my **parents'** name that was paying for school as well as most of my living expenses. I also, wanted to make sure I had some work experience on my resume before I left university because I knew how hard it was to get a job without some experience.

I do realize that this is not the case for everybody and some people have to opt not to work so they can obtain the full ODSP benefits. ODSP has since changed their policy around working students and now if you are a student you are allowed to work the full benefits. This is to help students continue with their studies without having to live in poverty. This way in addition to earnings they will also have the opportunity to obtain valuable work experience to get a full time job when they graduate from school.

Although I mentioned above that I felt the value of getting work experience was far more important than maximizing my financial gains, I also wanted part time jobs while I was in school so I could fit in with my social circle. Most of my friends were able

bodied and some did not have the luxury of OSAP so they worked and complained bitterly about it. I think I also wanted to complain bitterly. I did not want the stigma of someone who got it easy and just got money from the government. Although in retrospect I'm sure no one cared, I sure did; so I guess that matters?

That being said, as I aged and eventually graduated from my Bachelors of Arts and my post-secondary diploma at Centennial college, the stigma of collecting money from the government soon became more prominent. Once you are out of school I think society feels you no longer have an excuse not to work. You also lose a valuable identity. When I was in school I was still very much disabled. But because I was a student, working or not, it was a valid social location. When one is a student, disabled or not, they are not considered a burden to society. Even though one may be collecting social assistance or living off a government student loan they are seen by society as furthering and developing themselves to one day get employment. Therefore, in my experience people are less likely to make the disabled student feel bad about receiving government assistance

or make judgments on their lives or social locations, merely because they are students.

## **Affordable, Accessible Housing**

After graduating from Centennial College, I continued to work for Variety Village as a swim coach. However, this job was only about 6 hours a week so I needed to find something else in order to afford my new adult responsibilities. As I am a wheelchair user it was extremely hard to find affordable accessible housing. There is an eight year waiting list in Toronto for an **income geared apartment** in Toronto. Therefore, my first apartment was a co-op. In **a co-op** the tenants performed some of the duties that a regular apartment would pay staff to do. Therefore, rent is slightly cheaper than market. They also often value diversity because they often have wheelchair accessible apartments. Although this was not ideal I thought it was pretty good and if I get a job this would be great. When I moved in, the housing charge was \$780 plus utilities. If I was only living on ODSP there would be no way I could afford this apartment as I would only have about \$200 left for other living expenses. However, my

parents still allowed me access to a line of credit; so I was somewhat fine.

## **Employment Supports Programs**

From April 2008 till October 2008, I started my job search. As a jumping off point, I decided to access one of the ODSP **employment supports programs** meant for entry level placements. As an aside, the Ontario government put a portion of money into a program they call **ODSP employment supports**. These are employment agencies that are focused on helping persons with disabilities find jobs. Although I felt this would be a good start to my job search, personally, I never had any job success through any of these programs. I discovered that the job developers I spoke to knew very little about any of the things that could help, and often viewed the fact that I need accommodation as a huge barrier to employment.

I met with a **career counsellor** for the said employment support program and I presented her with a resume that my friend and I had constructed the previous weekend. I have a post-graduate diploma in Human Resources and I am actually pretty good at **writing resumes**. Since I had done some part time jobs

and also was a competitive swimmer for 10 years, my resume turned out not too bad for entry level. She told me it was quite good and did not provide any other feedback or criticisms. We had a very pleasant conversation. We discussed possible jobs I would like to do as well as how much money I felt I could make.

Previous to this meeting I had a discussion with my parents about how much money I would need to stay in my new, awesome, grown-up apartment. My parents informed me that I would need at least \$30,000 a year. They then also told me that \$30,000 a year was not that much money. Therefore, I was surprised when the **career counsellor** laughed upon hearing that my minimum salary expectation at entry point was \$30,000 a year. She said no one would pay me \$30,00 a year to do anything. I then informed her that \$30,000 dollars was not that much money, just in case she did not know, and that someone had better pay me \$30,000 since that is what I need to stay in my apartment. She then inquired as to why I did not live with my parents or in **subsidized housing**. I informed her that there was an eight year waiting list for affordable housing in Toronto and I did not have 8 years to wait so I went with the co-op. She did not

really respond after that. We managed to end the meeting on a pleasant note, and I was excited for the opportunity she said she could provide me.

In about a week I got my first email from her with a job posting. I eagerly opened it, only to be disappointed when it was a **part time position** as a life guard at a summer camp. Although I enjoy swimming I am not qualified to be a life guard you need to take certification for that. It was also part time at a summer camp so it did not make \$30,000 per year. Annoyed, I angrily emailed her back that it was not a job I wanted and this was not helpful. She apologized, and then several weeks later she emailed me again with another somewhat inappropriate job posting. This went on for several weeks. I would also do my own job search. I would send her the job posting and the cover letter I had drafted up. Because of my learning disability, I was looking for support around grammar and spelling. She did help a little bit with these issues but not very much. I think it was because her case load was too big to really give proper support to anyone she was working with. I was also surprised when she did not really know about **accommodation in the workplace.**

As a student I had used about \$1000 in **adaptive technology** to communicate in the written word. I used voice detect software and screen reader. Throughout school I was told that employers had to accommodate and for most companies this would be a drop in the bucket. A few people had told me otherwise, but I was fairly confident they were wrong. I was also hopeful that the lady at the employment support program would give me some advice around workplace accommodation. However, she did not seem to know very much. She did inform me that many employers would accommodate me. That just meant we would have to find the ones that could.

I continued to work with the employment support program and their **employment counsellors** for the summer, all the while applying for things myself and getting support from friends who helped me write resumes or added cover letters. My employment counsellor had mentioned that the financial sector probably had the most money to accommodate someone with my needs

It was because of this advice that I decided to apply for a program that helped new graduates with **internships**. I found that on the back of a popular magazine with a disability focus.

They not only had a general program for all recent graduates but also had programs for different types of minorities. One of their programs focused on recent graduates with disabilities and I thought I would apply for that program.

However, unlike the ODSP Employment Support program, the program for recent graduates with disabilities at the time (in 2008) was more like a **job seeking website** than a support program for minorities. You uploaded your resume and a cover letter and then you had free reign to apply for any job you felt you could do. Also, much like some job seeking sites, employers had the ability to view your website and contact you if they thought you would be a good fit for a job.

As luck would have it, a staff member from the program contacted me regarding a recruitment position at one of the major Canadian banks. I was quite surprised because I had not even finished filling out my profile. I had started looking at it one night, then gotten tired and gone off to bed, So I did not think anyone could see my unfinished profile. It turned out there is another Desiree Walsh that happens to be disabled, who has a similar background. Due to some technical error, my half-done profile got



mixed up with her all-done profile, which was the reason the staff member from the program contacted me about the position. Apparently, the bank had this position up, earlier in the year and the other Desiree had applied. By then the bank had to pull their funding, and they ended up not hiring anybody. Later, they got the funding back and so she was calling to see if “Desiree” was still interested in the position. After a lanky and somewhat confusing phone call, we both figured out I was the wrong Desiree.

Since I did have an interest in the position, my employment counsellor set up a phone interview for me. I inquired with the counsellor about how one discloses their need for accommodation. She did not actually have any advice, which I found odd for someone working for a program that is allegedly meant to support disabled persons. The **phone screening interview** did not go the way I wanted it and I did not get that job but not for a disability related reason.

I continued spending the summer applying for Career Edge jobs and other jobs. I went on countless interviews and networked with many different types of people. For the most part, everyone always said how great I was, how good my experience was, how

interesting it was that I was a competitive swimmer, but no job. Finally, in October I got a phone call for an **internship** with the Ontario government for six months. The job was to work as a recruitment coordinator on a project surrounding the barriers of employment for people with disabilities in terms of applying for jobs in the Ontario Public Service (OPS). I was thrilled and said yes! For the next six months I did really interesting work that made me happy. The pay was half of what a person would make in a year (\$50,000) in 6 months. This meant I would no longer receive financial support from ODSP because I made well over the allotted amount per month. However, I still qualified for their **drug and dental benefits** as long as I sent them my pay stubs every month. Although personally, I did take issue with having to do this, I felt I did not have a choice since I needed drug coverage in case I got sick although I could say this was a bit of a luxury because I am not chronically ill.

For the next 6 months, I did not worry about money because I had more than enough to live, to pay for my grown-up apartment and I could pay my **student loan** back. Throughout the six months with the OPS I looked for full time jobs, ideally with the

OPS. However, when March 2009 rolled around, I found myself unemployed again. I called ODSP to inform them that my last meeting could be the second week in March. My ODSP worker informed me that the program was retroactive so it would be two full months before I received any disability support money. When I inquired as to how I was supposed to live, she informed me that I should have been saving money while I was working. I later found out that this is a common problem for people who are recipients of the program who do contract work, and in some cases this is why disabled people do not take up contract jobs.

The next two months were hard because I had no money. However, I still had the **line of credit** that my parents allowed me to access that was mostly paid off because I had worked for 6 months. I was able to apply for interest relief on my **OSAP loan** and my sister lent me some money. Again, I am aware this is not the norm. I did find myself wondering what I would do if I did not have a family as there are no wheelchair accessible homeless shelters in Toronto. This was important because without the monthly stipend from ODSP there would be no way I could afford my apartment. So I ~~kind of~~ figured I would have probably been

affected had it not been for my family, although my neighbour did inform me that it took a lot to evict someone. Eventually, I did receive money from ODSP, although not enough to meet my needs without my family and my access to credit to fill in the gaps.

### **Always on Call? (When is a Job not a Job?)**

From March of 2009 to October of 2009 I went back to job searching. This time I did not bother to seek the help of an employment counsellor. I went on several interviews for pretty good jobs. One of these interviews was for an on-call administrator for one of the school boards in Toronto. This is basically a fancy term, because you simply replace secretaries when they are sick. I got the interview through a lady in my co-op. She was the one that conducted my initial interview to get my apartment in my co-op. When I went to the interview there was a lot of concern around how I would pay rent for the apartment. I told them about my two jobs at Centennial College and Variety Village. Everyone seemed impressed until I told them the jobs did not pay very much.

The lady who interviewed me happened to work in human resources at a district school board. So she set up the interview

for me. As I mentioned above, it was for an on-call administer. I informed the lady that invited me to the interview that I did not want a casual work position as I do not drive and was looking for full time work. This was due to the constraints of ODSP that it is a lot easier to work with them when you have a full time job that pays well. She informed me that an on call administer was the only entry level job anyone could get if they wanted to work for the school board. I agreed to go to the interview, because a job was better than no job in terms of the giant gap on your resume from not working.

I was successful in getting this position and was hired October 19<sup>th</sup> of that year. However, because it was casual you had to wait for schools to call you as there was no formal call out system at the time. You had to network with schools in the area to get work. I was not very good at doing this; so even though I was employed it was very much like I was unemployed, which in a way was a good thing because if you do not make any income it does not affect your ODSP! However, I had now been in my grown-up apartment for almost 6 months without income. Even

with the support of my **family and line of credit**, things began to get a bit dicey.

I decided to try another **employment program** called Jewish Vocational Services. They had a **program that helped people with learning disabilities** I figured this would be a better fit because my learning disability is far more a barrier than my physical disability. My first meeting with them seemed good. Everyone was very serious about getting a job. I was feeling positive. I met with **a job developer**. It was very similar to my previous experience with the employment counsellor, although this job developer did not say anything negative about my quest to find a job that paid \$30,000 minimum. She did not know much about **workplace accommodations** and did not really pay attention to the job applications I sent her. She eventually got a new job herself and I was matched with a new job developer.

This new job developer was similar to the first two ladies in that she did not really do much, yet she was somewhat different. She would ask me plenty of intrusive questions; everything from "how much did your Frappuccino cost?" to "how do you go to the bathroom?" One day we were talking about my job search and

she said “employers do not want to hire you because they think you are sick”. I informed her that it was not the 1950s and so I thought it was okay. She informed me that I was being naïve not to think people did not judge me or discriminate against me because of my disability. I told her that I was quite sure that people did discriminate against me because of my disability but not that many people, and I did not feel it was productive for me to go into job interviews thinking people already decided not to hire me. She said it would be hard to get anyone to hire me with my MS, and my learning disability. I told her that I did not think it was a problem since I did not have MS; I had CP. She then exclaimed “you die from that?” I said “no” and she said “okay, good; that will make things better”. She then suggested that we make strategies of the way we would inform employers that I was not going to die or cost them a lot of money on their benefit plans.

Needless to say, I left the appointment shocked. I regret not complaining but for some reason I felt Laura probably really needed this job, so I did not want to screw her life up. She did set me up with a receptionist interview at the food bank. I was very hopeful because I was getting close to using the food bank

and also I had discovered the line of credit had run out that past Saturday. It was a very dignified experience as I sat in the bank looking at the teller, exclaiming “where did all the money go?!” and crying, and then proceeded to call my mom in the bank to tell her that the money had mysteriously disappeared.

I was thankful for the food bank interview since I still had not been able to secure any work with the school board despite being employed by them. I called the hiring manager of the Food Bank only to discover that I did not get the job. He told me that they interviewed someone with 10 years of experience as a receptionist and felt it was better to give it to her since being a receptionist did not seem to be my true passion. I do not think it was anyone’s true passion but I did not bother to say that. The following week I applied for **subsidized housing** because I could no longer afford my awesome grown-up apartment. I was going to be one of those disabled people. As I mentioned above, the waiting list was 8 years long. I was not hopeful I would get something. I continue to look for a job. My parents begrudgingly sent me money for my apartment.



Then, on October 19, 2010, I called the man who hired me at the school board to confirm that I was no longer on the on-call administration list because it had been a full year and I had yet to work one day. They had informed us when we got hired that if we did not work at least one day within the school year we would immediately be removed from the list. To my delight, he called back and informed that the rule was somewhat fluid and offered me a three month contract at one of their HR help desks if I could use the bathroom in the building as the building was not very **wheelchair accessible**. Access was an ongoing issue with the school board that I will talk about some more later in this paper.

Everything worked out with the HR call center I worked there for a full three months and this time I also got an income-g geared apartment (subsidized housing). I was still able to live in it because they just geared the rent to how much you make, it's like 30 % of your gross income. At the time I did wonder, how it was going to work with my precarious work situation. I asked the lady who offered me the apartment and organized my **lease signing** but she did not seem to know the answer and could not put me in touch with anyone who knew. I decided not worry about

it because I was still working on the help desk and the other woman who worked there told me how easy it was to move up in the school board once you get your foot in the door.

The helpdesk job ended and I was able to secure a week of half days at an elementary school. Although this was not ideal, I figured it was better than no money because once again it would take ODSP two months to be able to give me any financial assistance. Also you needed three months of consistent income to have your rent lowered in my apartment so needless to say my rent was going to be quite high for some time. It was subsidized but not by that much. It worked out to about \$790 but this time, utilities were included. I also got **my damage deposit** back on my old apartment so this gave me some money and if you could prove that you had to pay first and last month's rent at your old apartment my new apartment would wave your first month's rent so I was somewhat okay.

Working at a grade school in the office is like being dropped into a war zone, or at least what I imagine it would be like with people yelling in your faces about things you are not sure why you should care about). You have to police people for things that you

would find completely reasonable in your home life – as if wearing a hat is the worst thing you could do in a school office. The half days did not pay as well as I thought they would, and to make matters worse the school said they did not need me next week. While I was working at the help desk, the school board instituted an automated call out system for supply jobs so this made finding work a little easier. However, if, you are like myself, use a wheelchair, the automated system did not let you know what schools were wheelchair accessible. They also had a substandard website that was supposed to let you know which schools had wheelchair access but it really was not much help so my work for the school board was quite precarious. As I was no longer working full time I inquired to my **housing office** about lowering my rent.

The lady who I never spoke to before did not seem to understand my situation but she did ask if I would be collecting ODSP, I said yes but not the full amount because I work. She just said “you cannot work and be on welfare”, to which I clarified that ODSP has different rules. In any event she told me that as soon as I got a cheque from ODSP, I should take it to the office and she would lower my rent. As I had never lived in **income-geared**

**housing,** I figured this is how it must have been and maybe there was some rule that if you qualified for a dime of social assistance you got to live in your apartment at the reduced social assistance rent, which is only \$139. Although this does not seem like much, if you are actually living on ODSP this is 30% of your income and if you are living on welfare it is even more, as you will only get \$600 a month for welfare.

When I got my ODSP cheque I took it over to the office and the clerk lowered my rent right away. I once again tried to explain my situation but either she was not listening or did not understand. She just said "give me your ODSP cheque and you are fine". Although this did not seem like something Toronto Housing would do, that is, allow people to work casually and live at a reduced rent, I did not question it because it was helping me out quite a bit and, as I mentioned above, I never lived in income-g geared housing so I did not really know. I continued to work casually for the school board, still struggling to make any real income. Things were still difficult but because of my lower rent, things got a little bit easier.

## **Working Poor?**

I continued to battle with the school board over access to schools so that I could work. I faced other disability related issues but I was making some friends and by my third year in the school board I was usually working at least a half-day every day. I think I was probably only make \$25,000 to \$30,000 per year and I did not really like the job because of all the systemic oppression. Financially, however, I guess I was doing okay.

In January of 2013, I secured another **long term contract** with one of the continuing education offices for the TDSB. I worked there until March and then went back to filling in at schools whenever they needed someone. Again, I was not making gobs of money and it was still hard, but because of my reduced cost of living I was doing okay. Then in May of 2013 we got a new **housing administer**. Every year in May you have to submit your **income statements** to your apartment building for future subsidy. I feel this is a rather intrusive practice, but still could not pay market rent. A few weeks later I got a phone call from the housing administer asking if I was working and I explained my situation to her but she did not really understand. She asked if I

would bring in my three months of **pay stubs** so they could readjust my rent. I said I would but also tried to explain how much I would be making each month; I could make a 1000 dollars or 75 dollars. I had decided it probably was not because she did not understand but rather she did not care. Next week, I brought in my three pay stubs and was disappointed to hear that my new rent would be 500 dollars, which is still a bargain in Toronto but with my precarious income it may have been a million. I had to fight with the housing administer to agree to negotiate it again. She said they could only readjust rent every three months so I would just have to agree to it at that point.

I'm not sure, but I think this was the day I joined the **working poor**. Working poor are the people who often have low paying jobs or precarious work that leaves them just outside of the qualifications for social programs or financial social assistance. While I worked, I estimate that ODSP probably took about 50% of my income. When my house raised my rent it was very difficult for me financially. Then again, although I had access to a credit card I did not have a line of credit anymore because it was maxed. So I was working desperately to pay it back. Although my parents

were less financially supportive, as I got older I knew I would always have food and they would never let me be homeless. My parents also did not really bother me about the fact that I probably would have made more money staying home and just collecting ODSP. I do not think it was because they felt that living on social assistance was bad but I think they saw the value in not having a big gap on your resume and therefore kept encouraging me to work and find a better job.

## **Fighting Back**

This went on for seven years as I did better within the school board. It was as if I was being punished by my apartment; the more I worked the higher my rent was. I kept going because I did not want there to be a gap on my resume and just kept believing that something better would come along one day. In year seven, I was convinced this would be the rest of my life. In 2015, the grievance I filed with **the union** against the school board for lack of access finally went to arbitration and I did win some compensation. They put it in the form of human rights damages so it was not taxed. This meant that I did not have to report it to anyone. However, what I did not realize is when you

get compensation from the school board they just add it to your next pay period so I received a pay check for a large sum of money.

This was great but I had to send my pay stubs to ODSP to still qualify for drug and dental benefits and if they saw a pay stub for a pay period of two weeks containing what I make in a year I would surely be kicked off. I contacted the **lawyer** that helped me as well as a union and the payroll department of the school board. They did not really understand and said I just needed to tell them what happened. I am quite sure that I am the only person who has ever come into money and it was a problem. Eventually, the school board was able to give me a copy of the pay check without the human rights settlement attached to it and things worked out but that was only after the lawyer that helped me pressured them. The human rights damages helped me a lot I was able to pay off the line of credit and my OSAP and finally pay off my ever growing VISA. I also used a portion of the money to enroll in a Master of Design program in Inclusive Design at OCAD University.



Another interesting thing that happened was that when I returned to school for my Master's, I received \$3600 in back earnings due to ODSP policy around returning to school. I submitted documentation that I was returning to school (my letter of admission) for the purpose of get the full income benefit from ODSP while in school without having them deduct my earnings, as noted on their website (Ministry of Community and Social Services, 2015). When I went to drop off my letter of admission the lady who took it from me informed me that I might be eligible for back earnings; this means that they would give me all the earnings they took off from my cheque in the past 4 months while I was working but she could not confirm. One of the things I found interesting was that she kept saying that the person who was my ODSP case worker is very fair and so I should get the refund. Later that week, my ODSP case worker called me and informed that I would get \$3600 in back earnings since I was going back to school and she would give the community start up grant which would give me \$500 to pay for my books. This was after she made me guess how much the government would give me back and I

informed her \$200. I went to pick up the cheques that day. It was a really big help to paying my school tuition and my books.

Since this time, I had gotten a different case worker and she has informed me that I need to prove I am in school again, although I think this is ludicrous. Would they not have my offer letter in my file? I did not have the time to argue with her and I did not think it would get me anywhere. I just sent her a copy of my timetable, hoping that is good enough, because the money is a big help.

Even after I enrolled into my Masters at OCAD, I continued to work for the school board. At this point, I was still looking for a full time job but had pretty much decided that this would be my life. I would never be homeless or hungry but I would never get to have fun or interesting hobbies; I would never own a house or travel; I would never get to do much of anything; I would just get to live. At this point, I could not tell what type of disabled person I was because I did not have the things my parents had but I hardly ever went to the mall since I did not have any money to shop. Eventually, in December of 2015, I went on an informational interview at CIBC, where I met with the director of

the anti-money laundering department. It was a really good interview she told me about the job and I told her why I would be a good fit. She asked about my life I told her about my life and she told me about hers. She did not inquire once if I was going to die! Even though the interview was quite positive I had been on enough informational interviews to know that nothing would come of it. I kept in contact with the diversity recruiter that set up the interview. We worked on interview skills and he setup a few more interviews. Although they were not positive, I still was hopeful they would lead to a job. I have heard that although the banks value diversity and hire disabled people, it is often for **low paying customer service jobs** that do not have benefits. In my opinion this was basically what I was doing now, so I was not all that interested or excited.

## **The Breakthrough**

By the time the new year rolled around, I had stopped thinking about the bank. Why get your hopes up with something that was not going to happen? Then, one day in February my phone rang. I did not answer it since I was at school and also did not recognize the number. When I finally did listen to the voice

mail, it was the director of the anti-money laundering department. She did not say much; just that she would like me to call her back. I worked all of that week and did not have a chance to call her back. Then on Friday, the **diversity recruiter** called me and asked why I did not feel the need to call someone back? I told them that I got home every day after 5 pm and did not want to leave a message. He told me to call her back right then as even though it was after 5 pm she would probably still be there. Just as I was picking up the phone to call her, she called me. She called to offer me a job in the anti-money laundering department at a major Canadian bank. It was a junior analyst position; it made \$45,700 per year.

I had one question: “when was it over?” She told me it would not be over. I explained to her that all jobs had contracts and all contracts ended. We went around like this for 15 minutes before I said “I just want to make sure I understand what you’re saying; I can have this job for as long as I want and follow bank policies?”. She said “yes”. I accepted the job and anxiously waited for 6 weeks for them to do the security check and contact references.

Finally, it was over and I was able to start my job on March 21 of 2016. It is where I currently work; it makes \$45,700 a year, has **pension and benefits** and is **full time permanent** therefore, eliminating any need for ODSP. Now my rent is also market rent but it does not matter since I have a job that pays enough so I can afford it. I worry every day that one day this is going to go away and I will have to go back to where I started but for now I think I'm going to be okay. Although, I am extremely aware that part of my success is due to the enormous amount of privilege I have, I often wonder if my circumstances were a little different would I have ended up here... I also find it interesting because although I have a really good job it is a bit of a stereotype to be disabled and work at a bank, because they have such good equity policies; but I guess it is a good one.

Thus, my story has a good ending, although the path that got me there was long and winding. I wonder if what got me there is my consistent and persistent idea that I need to be employed, even at the cost of financial loss due to a disability support system and policies that did not encourage me to take up employment

and retain it. I was motivated to identify and mitigate systemic flaws that posed barriers in my journey to employment.

## **Making Sense of My Narrative**

In this section, I use my own personal narrative as data for analysis. Moving it from anecdote to a form of social science data, I pull out some important points I made in my auto-ethnography and discuss them further here to arrive at actionable recommendations.

### **Connected Causes and “Double Jeopardy”**

Disabled people experience a sort of “double jeopardy”, using the concept put forth by Sandra Bartky in her writing about the intersections of oppression face by women of colour (Bartky, 1990). For disabled people their task is not just moving through the hoops of achieving education, finding a job and then buying or renting a house. For disabled people they must navigate inaccessible infrastructures to even have the opportunity to compete for resources such as education, work and housing. The entangled connections between accessibility, access to resources, housing, education and employment are largely overlooked. If individuals understand themselves as separate and autonomous,

a lack of housing, education, or job is perceived as an individual failing or deficit.

These connections relate to the literature around disability employment and the poor laws, as they reinforce the ideas taken up in the literature particularly, Michael Prince (2009), when he writes,

Disability exists in the shadows of public awareness and at the periphery of policy making. People with disabilities are in many respects missing from the theories and practices of social rights, political participation, employment, and civic membership. (Prince, 2009)

Disabled people are missing in terms of representation within social areas largely because of the organization of a neoliberal capitalist society and the attitudes it fosters, as mentioned above. Capitalism only allows for an able, genderless body. Furthermore, society is unable to imagine a productive body outside of the able body stereotype (Corker & Shakespeare, 2002; Oliver, 1990). This relates to the idea stated above that those who are successful must have risen above oppression through sheer will and determination as mentioned above, and is



in line with attitudes perpetuated by a neoliberal capitalist ideology.

Further to that, the notion of the 'welfare trap' that Pierson-Balik writes about is also in line with a capitalist ideology (2003). However, she points out the connections between affordable housing, social assistance and the challenges of finding work. She outlines that the transition might be difficult due to loss of affordable housing or mobility device repair coverage due to strict social assistance policy (*ibid*). This causes a circle effect because all these things are really connected, which is what my auto-ethnography also discovered and highlighted. The big institutions that were highlighted as being connected are:

- housing/accessible housing/affordable housing,
- accessible/reliable transportation,
- employment agencies and ODSP.

## **Broken Systems**

My auto-ethnography demonstrated that systems that provide support or bridging to resources, such as financial aid,

transportation, housing and employment, are broken and/or not designed in such a way to be person-centered. Therefore, in some ways it is a battle no one can win. Everything seems to relate very much to the idea of the repeatable body as theorized by Davis and what we do without outliers in this society. Davis writes,

All working bodies are equal to other working bodies because they are interchangeable. This interchangeability [...] means that workers bodies have be conceptualized as identical. And able bodied workers came to be interchangeable with able-bodied citizens. This ideological module has obvious reference to the issue of disability. If all workers are equal and all workers are citizens, then all citizens must have standard bodies to be able to fit into the industrial-political notion of democracy, equality and normality. Clearly, people with disabilities pose problems to work situations in which standardized bodies are conceptualized as interchangeable (p.105).

Davis' work illustrates that the disabled body is problematized within a capitalist society.

The major question that emerged from my auto-ethnography is: why are things set up the way they are, working in silos rather than as a holistic support system? As mentioned above, it is the effect of capitalism, which relies on an underclass of people. This stratification of class allows for an ongoing work

supply. Davis' work explicates this concept as the disabled body within capitalism is constructed as less than, and therefore producing inferior labour, which can then be purchased at a lower cost, increasing profit margins for the factory (owner). It seems largely like the system is set up not to help people but to ensure that they never get ahead.

## **Family Support**

Unfailing and steady support, including financial support, from my family was one of the big factors for my eventual success. Not everyone has this privilege. Social policy ought to consider providing steady support to job seekers with disabilities till they find a full-time job as provided by my family. I also believe that the social class of my family contributed to my success.

## **Disabled People Not Viewed as People**

Many of the job developers I met with were well-intentioned people. They were just overworked and did not have a good understanding of actual labour laws. I think part of the issue of why I had trouble and other people had trouble navigating institutions is that society (specifically these important gatekeeper people) does not understand disabled people as people.

Oftentimes in my job search, and even today with my fulltime job, people say it is good I'm getting out of the house; when really I work because I enjoy goods and services and my apartment does not let me sleep there for free. One could argue that the very fact that we have these systems in place to assist disabled people to find jobs is evidence that society does not see disabled people are disabled. This notion is echoed in the work of Michalko (2002). He writes,

That a society has no need for disabled persons isn't surprising. The contemporary obsession with health as well as with the purification and beautification of the body that defines the good life generates a particularly negative view of disability. Not only does a society with such an obsession not need disability, it also feels threatened by it and fears it. It develops all sorts of prevention programs, including those based in genetics...to stave off disability. [Michalko's footnote removed] It places its disabled members outside its conception of the good life, outside its conceptions of productivity combined with those of health, purity, and beauty (Thomson, 1997a). Placed in the margins, disability is viewed as bodies and lives gone wrong, as failures of medical science, and technology (p.22).

Michalko's work illustrates that there is a social need to constantly call to mind that disabled people are in fact people. The idea that disability somehow negates personhood is a troubling

notion. If disabled people were understood as fully human, then one would not require a job developer to make phone calls on their behalf. There would be no need to accompany an individual with a disability to a job visit or interview. There would be no need for a professional to try to convince or explain that it is beneficial to hire a disabled person. Securing employment becomes a challenge when one is disabled. This unemployment, or under employment, bleeds into other areas of life.

## **Professional Gatekeeping**

In my experience, a case worker appeared to be a gatekeeper to anything related to ODSP, be it financial assistance, health benefits or any other grant that ODSP provides. I have found many ODSP case workers seeing themselves as gatekeepers to the government's money and often seeing their job as trying to save the government as much money as possible, whereas their real job is to help people navigate through the bureaucracy that is ODSP.

The Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) would be an example of a neoliberal program. To be eligible for this program, a doctor has to deem you disabled. Then a case worker from the

program assesses what supports you are worthy of. This program suggests that there are some people who are not disabled “enough” to get ODSP. Additionally, it relies on other authorities to decide if an individual is deserving of support.

Further, the so-called “support” workers who aid people with disabilities in finding housing, employment and education are often, undereducated and overworked. As mentioned earlier in this paper, the employment agencies I worked with often had case workers that were incredibly overworked and under paid whose main goal was about meeting some sort of statistical quota rather than actually finding someone meaningful employment.

I find it curious that the decision to give me my back earnings of the \$3600 which saved my life tuition-wise was apparently up to the discretion of Kim, my case worker and not because of some policy. It seemed very much that if Kim felt I was deserving of the money, I would get it. I found this very strange because it was not like I was borrowing or asking for money from her personally. It was a policy from ODSP that I learned about from the case workers, although, as mentioned above, I could not find that exactly spelt out on the ODSP website.

## **Employment and Education**

Closely linked to employment is education. If one cannot receive proper training for a job, one is going to be relegated to a job that requires a simple knowledge set. Typically, jobs that are understood as labour tasks or simple work are low wage jobs and positions that often carry a stigma. A lack of access to education may complicate finding a job. It could be argued that if disabled people are not understood as potential members of the workforce, then there could be little incentive to provide them meaningful education.

## **Disabled Bodies in an Ableist Society**

Using the same concept, it can be argued that a shortage of accessible space and affordable housing in Canada also speaks to the notion that disabled people, as less than typical people, are not in need of typical housing options. It is my assertion that if there were a housing shortage for able-bodied people, the topic would be mainstream news, and the government would move actively to fix it. However, because it is a marginalized group not understood as fully people, there is social and political apathy.

The notion that disabled people are not constructed as fully human as they are socially positioned within a neoliberal capitalist society as having less valuable labour, speaks to why there is a collective struggle to franchise within society. The research done within this paper illustrates that space is not made for bodily variety or diversity. The disabled body is erased or marginalized at many points within a neoliberal society.

## **Disability Employment in a Capitalist Society**

Access to employment and resources required for survival and prosperity are a fundamental right in Canada. However, Briant, Watson and Philo claim that in almost all cases the onus is put largely on the disabled individual to circumvent barriers to employment (2013). Much of published literature (excluding critical disability studies) talks about needing to motivate disabled people to find employment but does not take into account the restrictions of most social assistance policies for its beneficiaries, the disabled people (Pierson-Balik, 2003). For example, a person with a disability who got employed might encounter exclusion due to issues with accommodation out of ignorance or indifference on the part of the employer.



And then, someone who has not gained employment faces the challenge of having to find a very specific job in order to make it worth their while and realistic for them to work. This job is usually a full time job with benefits that are permanent – something that is rare in today's society unless one is lucky enough to get a job with a financial institution, but even then there are no guarantees of a full time permanent job because the bank still hires on contract sometimes and has a lot of part time positions. It is important to get a full time job with benefits because often if someone was just to work a part-time job they would be losing money by going out and working because disability support programs usually have a limit on how much money one can make while receiving compensation from the program.

There is an old saying that money cannot buy happiness. However, capitalist society begs to differ mainly because those with money do the best in a capitalist society (Ollman, 1976). Money is primarily obtained through employment (and sometimes through ownership, such as inherited wealth). Therefore, employment is the cornerstone of success and happiness in a

capitalist society. To be precise, in a socialist capitalist society, meaning that although this society runs on a capitalist frame work there is support for those who cannot obtain meaningful employment for a myriad of reasons. Throughout the research, there have been many connections made, such as housing being related to work and meaningful employment being related to overall happiness. However, the entity that ties all of these concepts together is the organization of western society.

Disabled people struggle to gain access to education; they often face barriers to employment; and in 2017 there is a lack of accessible affordable housing within Canada. As brought out in my auto-ethnography, my experience reflects the situation of a majority of disabled job seekers because I believe we are all caught up in and funnelled through the same standardized, generalizing systems. There is a need to redesign existing disability support policies and programs to make them actually supportive rather than counter-productive and hindering.

## **Towards a More Inclusive Policy**

Through this research, I attempted to understand the economic marginalization of disabled people. I persistently found the problematic structure of benefits as the main cause of this problem. The mainstream discussion around this issue focuses primarily on motivating people to get off disability benefits. It says very little about what employers should be doing to break down barriers to employment. The policies currently in place for disability social assistance are more focused on the individual with the disability overcoming barriers to employment and conforming to what the job market demands, rather than creating jobs that adapt to people's capacities. In addition, benefits restrictions often make it difficult for recipients to work.

However, the challenges that face people in their attempts to getting off benefits are often not understood as caused by barriers to leaving benefit programs and entering the workforce, but by a lack of motivation on the part of the disabled benefit recipient. This belief may be driving the trend toward reducing the

level of support offered by many benefit programs as well as the strict, and even unfair, eligibility limitations being imposed.

Currently, in Canada, the US, the UK and Sweden, the onus is on the disabled individual to conform to what employers need as opposed to employers meeting the accommodation needs of the disabled person. Although there is human rights legislation in all these countries, the responsibility lies with the individual to prove that they were discriminated against. There is also a common sense understanding that some accommodations are just unrealistic. For example, many employers do not or cannot accommodate support around toileting and other personal care. Also, when there is discussion around hiring people with disabilities, the notion is that most accommodations are quite inexpensive (costing less than \$500) and easy to manage. The idea that disabled people are grateful to be working and are therefore less demanding upon employers as well as less likely to request time off or take sick days is also discussed. In reality, while many disabled workers can be accommodated easily and cheaply, this is not always the case. While some disabled people are absent less often than non-disabled workers, others may

require more time away from the workplace than average. The idea that disabled people owe a debt of gratitude to their employers is also unhelpful. Inadequate policy relating to employers' obligations in regard to hiring and accommodating disabled people does a disservice to that community. Without systemic change, disabled people will continue to face high rates of unemployment. Some changes to the existing policies and processes are suggested below.

## **Drug and Dental Benefits**

ODSP would actually save more money if they sent people drug and dental cards regardless of their financial status. Therefore, no one would have to worry about being without a necessary prescriptions and dental benefit. In my experience, if you have other forms of benefits you will typically not use the government benefits. Also, it has been found that people who could feel like their life has purpose often are healthier than those who do not feel like their lives have purpose. In my experience, meaningful employment, although not the only way to give one's life purpose, is a good example of a way to feel connected to your community and feel like you have a purpose. When one feels they

have purpose they are less likely to get sick and have other health issues, thereby possibly saving the health care system money. As mentioned previously in this paper, many disabled people who rely on ODSP employment supports do not work because they do not wish to risk losing their drug and dental benefits, which is costing the government money. However, as argued, if the drug and dental benefit were to be given regardless of financial status, more disabled people would probably attempt to work.

### **Mobility Device Repair Coverage**

Similarly, mobility device repair coverage could be made available by ODSP regardless of financial status, as discussed earlier in the paper. I have access to a VISA card and also have a manual wheelchair; so, although my wheelchair repairs are expensive they are not so expensive that there is no way I can afford them. However, for those who are not in my situation, or have more complicated pieces of equipment, this often is not the case. As I mentioned throughout this paper, I know many people who do not work because they cannot afford to pay for their own mobility device repairs. Once again, it is my considered opinion that if ODSP agreed to pay for mobility device repairs regardless

of financial status, more people would work. This would result in more disabled people having more accomplished resumes, which may also lead to them getting better jobs with benefits so that they would not need the government subsidy for wheelchair repairs. It is a question of breaking the current vicious cycle that plunges disabled people into deeper dependence on disability support programs and helping them get into a productive virtuous cycle of self-dependence and dignity.

## **Reinstating Cancelled Grants**

Some of the grants people could use to help with employment stand cancelled. For example, ODSP used to have \$500 available for items one may need for work such as clothing (i.e. work boots), training manual, for example school textbooks, safety goggles, etc. Even though, \$500 is not a large amount, it could certainly help buy uniform for a job.

ODSP used to also have a community start up grant that one can apply for if their contract ended at work or if they were moving to an unsubsidized residence. However, the government cancelled this grant as of January 2013 (Community Start-Up and Maintenance Benefit, 2013). Likewise, they also cancelled the

moving benefit that could help someone relocate for a job. Therefore, ideally, if the program was to be reconstructed, bringing back these grants would be very useful.

### **Making Grant Information More Accessible**

Making the information about various grants more accessible would also help. Currently there are a number of grants available for those on ODSP. However, in my experience, case workers generally do not mention them to clients, and I hear about them from other avenues within the community. Nonetheless, if I go to their office and say that I heard about a grant from my friend, teacher or pretty much anyone else in the community, the case worker would often tell me more about it and give me a form to apply for the grant.

### **Alternatives to Job Finding Programs**

ODSP pours millions of dollars into job finding agencies that are supposed to help persons with disabilities. However, in my experience there is a lot of duplication of resources in this area. If I were to revise the policy, I would probably see to it that there were regional centers that one could go to for support if needed. The people who work there would not merely be well-meaning



social workers but rather people who had a background in critical analysis and disability-demonstrated positive social model in disability politics. Possibly they could be disabled themselves. Above all, they would be up-to-date on human rights and employment legislation. They would know things about accommodation and strategies. The load on each case worker could be lesser so that they could actually help their disabled clients. That being said, it might also be worthwhile to just eliminate this part of the program all together as it does not seem to be helping anyone. Instead, more money could be added to the physical cheque that disabled people actually get.

The above recommendations on drugs and dental benefits, mobile device repair coverage, reinstating cancelled grants, making grant information more accessible, and eliminating job finding programs, might help propel disabled people closer to finding employment and depending lesser on support programs, which, I suspect, is the goal of ODSP anyways.

## **Final Reflections**

Through this study I aimed to identify systemic barriers that disability support programs such as the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) situate in the journey of disabled people seeking employment and keeping employment. The outcomes from this study highlight that, although ableism in the workplace does exist, there are issues around accommodation in the workplace. Also, there is not just a single system that deals with disability employment but multiple; and the policies and processes of those systems are entangled and interconnected in a vicious cycle that is capable of preventing persons with disabilities from gaining employment. Multiple support systems operate in silos with regard to housing, transportation, employment and disability support. What is really required is a cross-silo process for connecting what really matters in getting a job.

### **Housing and Employment**

Reflecting on my own journey to full-time employment as expressed in my auto-ethnography, I have identified not only the various gaps in ODSP but have also established several

connections. The connection between housing and employment is probably one of the strongest that I have made, chiefly because if someone does not have a house, they usually cannot have a job. Currently, there is a shortage of affordable accessible housing. There is also limited space in supported living apartments.

Typically, when an able bodied person gets a job they can often and quite easily move to the area the job was in. Despite the obvious inconveniences of moving. However, when you are physically disabled it is often a little different when it comes to housing. It is a situation of you can live here or you can live nowhere. For example, my sister who also uses a wheelchair works in downtown Toronto. But, due to lack of options for homes downtown, she is forced to stay in her apartment at Keele and Rogers. What is even more ironic is that she is thankful she has her apartment at Keele and Rogers. Her commute to work is over an hour by car (she is lucky she owns a car and can drive). Many able bodied people would just be able to move closer or would not take the job since the commute was just too bad. However, my sister faces a double-edged sword obstacle of housing being at a premium and a full-time permanent job being almost impossible.

Therefore, she puts up with her long commute and is always hopeful that maybe one day she will find a wheelchair accessible apartment that is a million dollars and closer to Bloor, where she works.

## **Transportation and Employment**

The other connection to work is transportation. Without transportation you cannot get from your home to work place and back. The issues imposed on disabled people by transit and housing go under-discussed in much of the research I have read. Like in the case of my sister described above, it is possible for her to keep her job because she owns a car and can drive. For many others, the job might have been inaccessible due to lack of affordable and efficient public transportation.

As mentioned in the literature review of this paper, often the discussion around disability and work talks about the lazy poor or discrimination and narrow minded thinking of the capitalist workforce. While that is indeed an issue, virtually none of the research I read discusses the links between housing, transportation and employment. Even in commonplace society

you rarely ever hear discussions of the links between housing, transportation, and employment for the disabled.

## **Break the Silos**

It is commendable that companies like CIBC have made commitments to diversity. Just recently CIBC committed to hire 500 people with disabilities (Matteis, 2017). They have also spearheaded several talks around disability and employment. However, none of those talks highlight the link between transportation, housing and employment or even discuss the barriers of government assistance. While putting the onus on corporate North America to include more disabled people into their workforce is useful, I think as a society we need to start looking at other factors with a holistic view. Transit issues relate to employment; housing relates to employment; and employment relates to housing. If we can fix these as a society, disabled people might be able to move ahead. We need to remove the silos in which the government operates with regard to housing, transportation, employment and disability support. These should work in tandem rather than separately. In addition, as a society we need to build more affordable, accessible housing.

As a society, we need to move away from the idea that those with disabilities who are successful in maintaining meaningful employment, living independently and having an interesting, fulfilling social life have these things simply because they worked harder than anyone else and are somehow saints for doing so. We need to face the truth and acknowledge that often these people were able to be successful due to factors of wealth and privilege and, really, luck. Once we move away from this idea as a society and start focusing on helping as a collective, rather than believing if you try really hard you can combat poverty, the world would be a much better place.

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