

Being Blind and Belonging in Academia

by

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Being Blind and Belonging in Academia

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Abstract

Belonging is an essential human need. Developing a sense of belonging is important for people for whom academia is a place of learning, teaching, and employment. Academia – also known as educational institutions, higher education, post-secondary, college, or university – is a site of particular interest given the privilege engagement in this environment may imbue on individuals and communities. Moreover, academia is also problematic from the perspective of disabled people due to the ableist expectations embedded within it. Academia, and developing a sense of belonging there, may be particularly important for people from equity-seeking groups, including blind people. The general topic of this dissertation is an exploration of belonging in academia, from non-blind and blind perspectives. Following the introduction, chapter 2 presents a model – the Belonging in Academia Model - that explicates how sense of belonging develops in academia through five dimensions:

affiliation, familiarity, acceptance, trusting connections & interdependent relationships, and equity. The dissertation goes on to examine blind and partially blind peoples' experiences of belonging and non-belonging in academia, elucidating key nuances such as the importance of interdependence, feeling like a burden, and needing to perform as a disabled person. In chapter 3 this dissertation highlights scholarly teaching in the form of a workshop designed using research-based theatre as an affective pedagogical tool. Finally, preceding the conclusion, chapter 4 shares a brief exploration of doing 'insider' research as a blind scholar with blind people.

Lay Summary

Belonging is an essential human need. To flourish, people need to have a sense that they are wanted, included, involved, noticed. For people working or studying in universities and colleges, it is important to develop a sense of belonging within this environment. This dissertation explores how sense of belonging develops through five dimensions: affiliation, familiarity, acceptance, trusting connections & interdependent relationships, and equity. It then highlights blind and partially blind peoples' experiences of belonging and non-belonging, addressing nuances such as feeling like a burden, being able to act authentically, and needing to perform as a disabled person. This dissertation highlights a scholarly (i.e. robust, evidence-based, well-researched) teaching approach by describing a workshop that uses research-based theatre as a teaching tool designed to reach the heart and emotions, not just the head and mind. Finally, the

dissertation also explores what it means to do research with blind people as a blind scholar.

Preface

This dissertation is original intellectual and artistic product built collaboratively. Although Laura Yvonne Bulk is responsible for the overall design of this dissertation, the work was informed in relationship and conversation.

Chapter 2 contains research covered by UBC Behavioural Research Ethics Board Certificate number H17-02693 and H17-02499. Some of the material covered in chapter 2 (covered by H17-02499) is published as Y. Teng, M., Brown, M. L., Jarus, T., & Bulk, L. Y. (2020). How does a sense of belonging develop in postsecondary? A conceptual Belonging in Academia Model (BAM) from sighted perspectives. *Research in Education*, 108(1), 80-103. This work was covered by UBC Behavioural Research Ethics Board Certificate number H17-02499. Laura took the lead in co-supervising these students under the mentorship of Dr. Tal Jarus. With guidance, input, and collaboration from their co-supervisors, Teng and Brown conducted the data collection and

took the lead on analysing data. They also took the lead on writing all sections of the published manuscript. Chapter 2 is not the published manuscript, but rather integrates information, findings, and the model from Teng et al. (2020).

The research described in chapters 2 and 3 is covered by UBC Behavioural Research Ethics Board Certificate number H17-02693. The [research-based theatre](#) was co-created with participants. Laura Yvonne Bulk conducted focus-groups and data analysis contributing to the research, and designed the workshop described in chapter 3.

The reflective conversations that happened as part of chapter 4 were covered by UBC Behavioural Research Ethics Board Certificate number H19-01916. Laura Yvonne Bulk and Bethan Collins engaged in collaborative conversations and writing. Laura took the lead on the initial and final writing.

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List of Abbreviations

BAM: Belonging in Academia Model

CDT: Critical Disability Theory

RBT: Research Based Theatre

List of Supplementary Material

Research-Based Theatre Audio file: I know I Belong

When...Stories of Authenticity, Performance, and Burdens

Audio dissertation files: These audio files are versions of the sections of this dissertation, read by the author. These are being included to improve access for people who use non-visual reading strategies.

Glossary

Words have significance and power and should therefore be used with care (Titchkosky, 2008). Although some concepts within this glossary are further discussed throughout the dissertation, it is important to provide a brief outline of how these terms are being used in the text. The majority of terms have many possible definitions and connotations, and therefore carefully chosen, relevant definitions are provided. Note in co-authored chapters, words are used slightly differently depending on consensus among co-authors.

Ableism. A form of prejudice/bigotry that says non-disabled people are superior (Auterman, 2011). It forms the ideals on which the normal, able, autonomous, productive citizen is modelled (Goodley, 2014). Ableism is embedded at a structural level, for example in curriculum design, admissions procedures and language (Auterman, 2011).

Academia. Throughout this document ‘academia’ refers to higher, postsecondary, or tertiary educational institutions – particularly colleges and universities. Both research-intensive and teaching focused institutions are included.

Accessibility. A characteristic of environments and structures - physical, social, digital, pedagogical, systemic, etc. - that can be easily accessed and used by everyone, regardless of personal characteristics, including disability (UN Enable, 2007).

Blind. The term blind people is being used to include people who may identify themselves by various terms, such as visually impaired, legally blind, partially sighted, partially blind, etc. The definition employed is inspired by Jernigan (1984): a person who, related to his or her level of blindness, may use alternative (i.e. non-visual, or less visual) techniques to function efficiently in everyday life or aspects of life. The term partially blind will be used only in circumstances where it is *necessary* to distinguish that a person uses some vision.

Disability. Disability has been defined in various ways, by different stakeholders, and for different purposes. Power to determine official definitions of disability rests with the, often non-disabled, few in privileged positions. Many Canadian and international policy documents use the World Health Organization's (2001) definition, where disability is an umbrella term that links variability in body/mind function or structure with an activity limitation or a participation restriction in an individual's social and/or physical environment. Also, there may be different definitions for different purposes and one person may choose to use particular definitions in different contexts. For the purpose of this dissertation, disability is considered a legitimate way of knowing, experiencing, and being in the world, the meaning of which is shaped by context and culture (Levinson, 1997; Linton, 1998). Perspectives on disability will be discussed more fulsomely throughout the dissertation.

Disablism. Where ableism is the elevation of the ideal norm, disablism focuses on devaluing disabled lives (Dolmage, 2017). Kumari Campbell (2009) defines disablism as “a set of assumptions (conscious or unconscious) and practices that promote the differential or unequal treatment of people because of actual or presumed disabilities” (p. 4). Disablism involves exclusion of disabled people from social, political, cultural, and/or economic participation. It also has psycho-emotional impacts, whereby disabled people are marginalized through social interactions in which nondisabled people negatively impact the self-perception and self-efficacy of disabled people (Bulk et al., 2017; C. Thomas, 2007).

Occupation. Occupation is a human experience informed by context and which holds and creates meaning for individuals and communities (Huot et al., 2019; Kielhofner, 2008; Roley et al., 2008; Townsend et al., 2002). It often occupies space and time, and necessitates active engagement (physical, cognitive, spiritual,

and/or emotional) (Gallagher et al., 2015). Hammell (2009) suggests four categories for occupations: restorative occupations, doing occupations, occupations reflecting life continuity and hope, and occupations fostering belonging and contributing.

Occupational Participation. Within this work, participation is being referred to as involvement in occupation, or as the World Health Organization (2001) states it, in a life situation (K. Morris & Cox, 2017).

Social attitudes. Social attitudes are expressed by people in an environment and contribute to creating the social environment. An attitude is the evaluation of a person, situation, or group, and includes behavioural, cognitive, and affective components (Chan et al., 2009).

Social environment. The social environment includes the cultural and social surroundings in an individual or group's immediate environment. Its components include, among other things, beliefs

about place and community; physical infrastructure; industrial and vocational structures; labour markets; social and economic processes; wealth; social, human, and health services; power relations; government; race relations; social inequality; cultural practices; the arts; religious institutions and practices; and traditions and folklore (Casper, 2001).

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Soli Deo Gloria. Galatians 2:20. Matthew 5:16.

This journey was a privilege, sometimes felt like a trial. It is a gift whose unfolding took, well, a while. Alone it could not be done.

But with a village, look where we've come! God, friends, family, faithfully there for blessing and calamity. From giving me a place to stay, to helping me find my way. Supervisors, students, teachers, allies, colleagues, committee. You've helped this work come to be. I lack sufficient words to let you all know, how much you've meant but I'll give it a go!

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My spiritual community. You are where I find my deepest belonging, my core identity. You have kept me grounded in Love. I am grateful for my brothers & sisters, Life Group, Redemption Church, IVCF grad group, Normans & Harvey. I am grateful for spiritual friendships, prayer partners, family. Through this journey, you have shown me who Jesus is through your love and service.

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Dedication

“Love is not affectionate feeling, but a steady wish for the loved person’s ultimate good” C.S. Lewis

I humbly dedicate whatever good exists in this work to my parents, **Eva Yvonne Bulk & Paul (Pleun) Bulk.**

Your love is not just an affectionate feeling, it is a steady wish and *action*. I have always known that you desire my ultimate good.

You are selfless and humble in your service. You taught me that it’s necessary to be funny and frivolous at times. You demonstrate what it means to work diligently in all that I do, to the glory of God. You are generous to a fault, if that were possible, and I hope one day to reflect this same generosity.

You have always given me a place to belong,
to be authentically who I am,
to become who I am created to be.

Without you I would *not* be here and I would not *be* who I am – and not just because of the myriad ways you are there for me in the small and big things in life, nor because you lent me your DNA. You make me know that I am a person who has something worthwhile to share with the world, that I too can show true love to others. That is why I am here.

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 The beginning of a Doctorate

To begin, I share the story of how this PhD came about. I was doing my Master of Occupational Therapy when Dr. Tal Jarus (Professor, Occupational Science and Occupational Therapy, UBC) asked if I want to do a PhD. My thought was, “I’ll have to google what that means.” Being a first-generation university student and having previously pursued professional degrees, I did not have a strong interpersonal reference point for understanding academia. This became both a challenge and a strength - I entered with a fresh perspective, unencumbered by some of the expectations and socialization some might find restrictive. For example, I expected that the priority of a PhD is to promote justice for the community with which the research is done, that researchers should humbly learn from participants, and that academics should be kind to one another. An academic career trajectory, getting data as quickly and efficiently as possible, or

impressing academics higher in the hierarchy were absent from my agenda.

Do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly.

Micah 6:8 (The Bible, American Standard Version)

Working alongside people gaining the skills and confidence to thrive is one of the great privileges of practicing occupational therapy. I said “yes” to Tal’s invitation to pursue a PhD because I observed that sometimes people with disabilities cannot thrive due to social and institutional barriers. I believed that doing a PhD would provide opportunities for involvement in creating change, promoting justice, at social and institutional levels. Similar to Gristy, an “explicit commitment to social justice was a key driver, perhaps the driver, the ultimate aim” (2015, p. 372) of my PhD.

I began wading through many ideas and areas of passion. I knew I wanted this process to be emancipatory. I knew I wanted to contribute to justice. In what arena? For whom? Eventually I

chose to pursue working with “my own people” – that is, blind people. I reflect on that phrase from David Hayano (1979), “my own people,” as I discuss insider research in chapter 4. I identify as a blind person, and thus I am referring here to doing research with the blind community. By blind community, I mean a group of people who are unified by the characteristic of being, identifying as, or having been identified as [blind](#). Like Wall (2018, p. 1), I realized “the power of being guided in my research by my own experience and trusting in both what I had to say and in my right to say it.” This is part of what spurred me on toward what might be called insider research. Not in a narcissistic sense of having the right to speak and be heard, but rather in recognizing the power in a researcher who has the lived experience asking questions that concern her own life and to which she is determined to find answers that are meaningful both to her personally and to the wider community (Ellis, 1991).

I had some ideas, but wanted to make the project as collaborative as possible. Therefore, I had a series of conversations with members of the blind community regarding what might be important questions to ask. What matters to our community? How might I, or preferably we, address these questions in a way that would seem right to the community? I am grateful to this community for contributing to the foundation of this project, and will include some quotations from these focus groups throughout the introduction.

“Social isolation is a huge topic” (community member)

After having conversations with over 20 members of the local blind community about what might be important areas for research and action, it became clear that social isolation and belonging were topics of interest. It also became clear that while people appreciated my desire to be collaborative and include the community in the process, they felt it was vital that the topic be

something I am passionate about. The community was supportive of me pursuing what seemed best to me as both a scholar and a member of that blind community. I would also learn through the process of doing this PhD that doing collaborative research with one's own community is even more complex than I knew. I will touch more on the complexities of this in chapter 4. Through the frequent ways it came up in our conversations, I concluded that belonging is a concept that resonated for us as a community, and therefore I pursued this concept. As a blind person who has been in academia for over a decade, the context of academia is certainly relevant for me. Blind people are in academia and, as evidenced in literature and our own experiences, we face particular barriers to being in this space. Belonging in academia emerged as a central focus for this work.

"I went (to the university) because of the isolation...it was the only way I could get out of the apartment and talk to people." (community member)

1.1.1 What is academia?

By academia I am referring to higher education, post-secondary, or colleges and universities, but I also recognize that I am also referring to a place with particular cultural and social factors. I am also referring to the culture of academia across what some call North America, and acknowledge that there are variations even from one institution to another. There are, however, some commonalities across many institutions. Powerful work has been done exploring the nuances of academia and the ableism embedded within its structures. I will not, therefore, provide an extended discussion thereof, but will rather gesture toward some of the people who have written and taught about the subject and will share some relevant notes about academia. In *Academic Ableism*, Dolmage (2017) describes how the very foundations of academia are based on ideals founded in eugenics and the segregation of disabled people, Indigenous people, and people of colour. In academia, disabled people and disability have been

more often the subjects of study, rather than the actors in research and teaching (Dolmage, 2017; Oliver, 1992; Snyder & Mitchell, 2010). Ableism is encoded within standards of productivity and performance of the ideal academic (N. J. Evans et al., 2017; Waterfield et al., 2018). In such an environment, disabled academics are forced to perform additional labour and prove the legitimacy of their existence in this space (Bulk et al., 2017; Dolmage, 2017; Easterbrook et al., 2015; Horton & Tucker, 2014; Titchkosky, 2008; Waterfield et al., 2018). For example, disabled academics must use their energy and labour to obtain materials in accessible formats, while continuing to give the same amount of or more energy and labour to producing publications.

1.1.2 Blind people in academia

“Sadly, I elected to take the program online and I think it was because I didn’t want to be a blind person ... I was like a closeted blind person ... I didn’t belong there” (community member)

In 2012 1.4% of Canadians, over 500,000 people, aged 15-44 had a sight-related disability (Bizier et al., 2016). More recent estimates indicate that approximately 5% of Canadians have vision loss (Aljied et al., 2018; Statistics Canada, 2019). The latter statistic does, however, include individuals over age 44, and as the prevalence of vision loss increase with age, these statistics are not directly comparable. Bizier et al. (2016) report that only 44.8% of blind people in the 2012 Canadian Survey on Disability had obtained post-secondary education, compared with 61.1% of non-disabled people. Blind people currently in or having been in school in the past 5 years reported that related to their disability, people avoided or excluded them (46.3%), they were bullied at school (39.5%), and some terminated their education early (37.4%) due to factors such as the negative social environment (Bizier et al., 2016). Given the impact of higher education on employment, it is unsurprising that 26.7% of blind people cited inadequate training or experience as a major cause of their

unemployment, or that there is a low employment rate among blind people aged 15 to 64: 37.6% compared with 73.6% for non-disabled adults (Bizier et al., 2016). Few publications specifically explore the experiences of blind people in academia, and therefore blind peoples' lack of *full* participation in higher education, including the vital aspect of belonging, is a hidden societal issue (Bishop & Rhind, 2011; Fichten et al., 2009; Hewett et al., 2017; Johnston et al., 2016; Lourens, 2015; Lourens & Swartz, 2016a, 2016b; C. Morris, 2017; Reed & Curtis, 2012).

“I didn’t feel like I belonged in university ... I just went to class and got it done. Most places I went and groups I was part of I had to spend a bunch of time making people comfortable ... I’m participating, but do I feel like I belong? No.” (community member)

Most factors identified as influences on the participation of blind people in academia relate to accessibility. These factors include large amounts of reading, difficulties using and obtaining adaptive

technology, and teaching methods reliant on vision (Bishop & Rhind, 2011; Frank et al., 2020; Reed & Curtis, 2012). Reed and Curtis (2012) found that blind postsecondary students in Canada experience significant social barriers, including social isolation, lack of understanding of blindness, and unhelpful attitudes of others on campus.

There is little literature that examines blind people's experiences in academia and mechanisms to support these students. Two studies specifically explored the experiences of blind people in an academic library, focusing on the importance of librarians' empathy for blind students' experiences and on the impact of students' library careers in providing a second home for blind students (Bodaghi et al., 2016; Bodaghi & Ngah, 2013). While there is little research about being a blind student, there is even less regarding disabled people, and blind people in particular, playing or desiring to play other roles within academia (such as teaching or professional staff). There is literature about people in

academia playing non-student roles with other disabilities, including Deaf/deaf and hard of hearing faculty members (Smith & Andrews, 2015) and people living with mental illness (England, 2016; B. A. Lee & Ruger, 1997; Oxenford & Kuhlenschmidt, 2011). There is also discussion of disabled academics in geography (Chouinard, 2010; Horton & Tucker, 2014) and medicine (Steinberg et al., 2002). Only two articles have specifically identified blind faculty, and they describe that having a disability may increase empathy toward disabled students (B. Hong & Himmel, 2009), disclosing to students may not impact student interactions (H. Evans, 2017), and creating one's own accommodations is used to avoid burdening others (H. Evans, 2017). The accounts in this literature, although limited in number, describe challenges faced by disabled people attempting to enter or excel within academic environments that demand high productivity and which perpetuate ableist assumptions and structures (Bulk et al., 2017; Dolmage, 2017; Easterbrook et al.,

2015; Horton & Tucker, 2014; Titchkosky, 2008; Waterfield et al., 2018).

1.1.3 Attitudes, perceptions, behaviours, oh My! How the social environment influences occupational engagement

Kowalska and Winnicka (2013) directly examined undergraduate students' attitudes (cognitive and behavioural components) toward disabled people, finding that overall attitudes toward disabled people are positive and recommending further research in the area. However, given the direct measuring of student attitudes, it was highly subject to social desirability bias. A few studies found that even when faculty profess positive attitudes toward disabled students and desire, in theory, to provide inclusive education, they often do not implement inclusive education strategies (Bulk et al., 2017; Cook et al., 2009; Easterbrook et al., 2015; Lombardi et al., 2015; Zhang et al., 2010).

Perhaps more telling than measures of others' attitudes are disabled peoples' perceptions of the attitudes around them and how these *perceived* attitudes impact their participation in academia. Overwhelming evidence reveals that disabled students perceive attitudes encountered in academia as a major barrier to their full participation (Bulk et al., 2017; Claiborne et al., 2011; Coriale et al., 2012; Easterbrook et al., 2015; Foy, 2019; Frank et al., 2020; B. Hong & Himmel, 2009; B. S. S. Hong et al., 2015; Hopkins, 2011; Liasidou, 2014; Marshak et al., 2010; Moríña et al., 2015; Mullins & Preyde, 2013; Ostrowski, 2016; Shevlin et al., 2004; Strnadová et al., 2015). Blind students experience difficulty engaging in social and learning aspects of academia related to what are perceived as negative attitudes from peers (Frank et al., 2020; Lourens, 2015) and instructors (Foy, 2019; Frank et al., 2020; Ostrowski, 2016). These negative attitudes are characterized by lack of understanding about, low expectations from, avoidance of, staring at, and patronizing blind students

(Foy, 2019; Frank et al., 2020; Lourens, 2015; Ostrowski, 2016; Strnadová et al., 2015).

The social environment, which includes elements beyond the individual's control, such as social attitudes, interactions, behaviours, beliefs about community, norms, language used, and perceived discrimination and/or acceptance, significantly influences engagement in academia (Chan et al., 2009; Titchkosky, 2008; Waterfield et al., 2018). One of these elements, social attitudes – including stigma toward, discomfort around, and pity for blind people – is particularly deleterious for blind people (Benoit et al., 2013; Chan et al., 2009; Perkins School for the Blind, 2016; *Resolution in Support of the U.N. Convention on the Dignity of Persons with Disabilities*, 2014). Chan et al. (2009) describe social attitudes as including affective, cognitive, and behavioural components. The concepts of *stereotyping*, *prejudice*, *discrimination*, and *stigmatization* are closely related to attitudes.

- *Stereotyping* is a cognitive process whereby category-based beliefs are applied to a group/individual, and those evaluative beliefs then influence and/or justify behaviour toward them (Chan et al., 2009).
- *Prejudice* is a negative attitude directed toward a person/people based upon the presumption or belief (an affective component) that all individuals in a certain group possess the negative stereotypes ascribed to that group (Chan et al., 2009).
- *Discrimination* is the behavioural outworking of the cognitive and attitudinal components (stereotyping and prejudice), whereby people are actively excluded or disadvantaged (Chan et al., 2009; Fiske, 2020; Fiske & Tablante, 2015).
- *Stigmatization* is a process whereby prejudice and stereotyping (cognitive and attitudinal components) based upon a stigma (or negative mark/blemish) lead to discrimination (the behavioural component) (Chan et al., 2009; Fiske & Tablante, 2015).

Employment is a poignant example of the negative impact of social attitudes. In a 2012 Statistics Canada Survey blind people

reported that, related to their disability/ies¹, their employers considered them to be disadvantaged at work (55.6%), and that they were denied jobs (13.7%), promotions (12.7%), and job interviews (11.5%) (Bizier et al., 2016). Employment is just one example of how of social attitudes can negatively impact blind peoples' occupational engagement. Whereas occupations can foster a sense of belonging, being barred from equitable participation also negatively impacts sense of belonging for blind people within their communities (Hammell, 2014).

1.1.4 Belonging

Belonging is an individual's sense of being a part of some referent group in the social environment. Discussions of belonging come from a range of disciplines, including geography (Antonsich,

¹ Note that the survey does not make a distinction between sight-related and other disabilities, so people with multiple disabilities may be attributing their experiences to one of their other disabilities.

2010), psychology (L. Brown et al., 2007; Hornsey & Jetten, 2004; Pickett, 2004), sociology (Strayhorn, 2012a), and occupational science (Hammell, 2004; Rebeiro, 2001; Wilcock, 2006a).

Belonging can be considered with regard to micro (personal/subjective level; e.g. a subjective sense of belonging) or macro (societal; e.g. formal membership in a community, such as citizenship) systems (Antonsich, 2010; Fenster, 2005; P. Jones & Krzyzanowski, 2008). The subjective sense of belonging has been described as having affective and cognitive components, wherein an individual accumulates and assesses information regarding their role in the group (cognitive) and subsequently appraises and responds to their feelings (affective) about interactions within the group (Bollen & Hoyle, 1990; Strayhorn, 2008). Factors commonly associated with the concept of belonging include feeling respected, cared about, integral, valued, needed, connected, socially accepted, and important, as well as having a sense of harmony and cohesion with the group and

having the means and opportunity to contribute (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Cobigo et al., 2012; Grimes et al., 2017; Hammell, 2004; Strayhorn, 2012a; Vaccaro & Newman, 2016).

A sense of belonging develops based upon a variety of personal and environmental factors, and is significantly impacted by encounters with perceived negative attitudes, stereotyping, stigmatization, and discrimination (Cobigo et al., 2012; Yuval-Davis et al., 2006). Moreover, acceptance within a referent group often results from sharing experiences, behaviours, and understandings, or accepting and performing the norms of the group (Cobigo et al., 2012). If a person does not have opportunity for shared occupation with a group, that person will not be able to adopt the shared norms and will therefore be less likely to belong. This may be an additional barrier to some blind people who may be unable to or unwilling to conform to ableist ideals of normality. There is a reciprocal relationship, wherein a sense of belonging is negatively impacted by social barriers, while at the same time a

lack of belonging and presence of blind people in various spaces perpetuates social barriers.

A sense of belonging is vital to human wellbeing and flourishing (Andonian & MacRae, 2011; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Briggs, 2015; Burchett & Matheson, 2010; Isaksson et al., 2007; Painter, 2013; Strayhorn, 2012a). According to Maslow's hierarchy of human needs, when safety and physiological needs are met, the need for belonging must be met before self-actualization occurs (Maslow, 1943; Strayhorn, 2012a). Baumeister and Leary's (1995) seminal work on the belongingness hypothesis proposes that the need for belonging drives goal-directed behaviour and that lacking this sense of belonging has adverse effects on the person. Having a greater sense of belonging is associated with a higher sense of meaning in life, higher self-esteem, improved memory, more positive mood, reduced stress, better mental wellbeing, and greater motivation (Briggs, 2015; Lambert et al., 2013; Slaten et al., 2016). Belonging is clearly important, and it is

therefore important to understand more about the experience and development of belonging.

For older adults with vision loss, the loss of “doing” a specific occupation was not as distressing as the loss of participating in that occupation *with* others, which may relate to the relational aspect of belonging through occupation (Berger et al., 2013). Other studies report that finding a sense of belonging through occupation is important for wellbeing in various groups of people, such as asylum seekers (Burchett & Matheson, 2010), immigrant women (Gupta & Sullivan, 2013), and women with spinal cord injuries (Isaksson et al., 2007).

1.1.5 Belonging and academia

A sense of belonging in academia may be particularly important for the experiences of people from equity-seeking and historically marginalized groups; however, developing this sense of belonging is often more difficult for these same people (Lane-McKinley &

Roberts, 2018; Strayhorn, 2012a). This highlights the importance of understanding the experiences of equity-seeking and marginalized people, including blind people, with regard to a sense of belonging in academia.

A strong sense of belonging is linked with academic performance, self-perceived competence, self-worth, and retention (Freeman et al., 2007; Pittman & Richmond, 2007; Vaccaro et al., 2015). For students with disabilities, social engagement (Foy, 2019; Konecni-Upton, 2010), relationships (Foy, 2019; Vaccaro et al., 2015; Waterfield et al., 2018), and mastery of the student role (Foy, 2019; Vaccaro et al., 2015) seem to be in reciprocal relationships with a sense of belonging. The identified barriers to belonging in academia are systemic, physical, and attitudinal in nature and limit opportunities to engage socially and develop a sense of belonging (Douglas et al., 2009; Foy, 2019). No studies have specifically described an in-depth understanding of blind peoples'

experiences of belonging in academia, as students, faculty, staff, post-graduates, or otherwise.

1.1.6 Goals of this PhD

Given what I learned through informal conversations in the blind community and from the literature, I set out to do a PhD dissertation aiming to:

1. Share space wherein a particular group of blind people could articulate our stories of participation in academia, and through this to examine factors within the social environment of academia that influence blind peoples' sense of belonging;
2. Propose a theoretical model that captures dimensions of blind peoples' sense of belonging in the academic setting, based upon the expertise of blind people and taking into account perspectives of non-blind people; and
3. Co-design a creative product or pedagogical tool highlighting the blind experience of belonging in academia.

To address these aims, I articulate three research questions:

1. How does a sense of belonging develop in academia?
2. What hinders and facilitates a sense of belonging for blind people within academia?
3. How do blind adults experience academia?

1.2 Positionality & Assumptions: Who is this researcher?

I approach this PhD from a position and with particular assumptions, perspectives, values, and beliefs. My ontological perspective is grounded within a critical realist paradigm. Critical realism contains components of both positivism and social constructivism, and is useful for explaining social phenomena and providing practical and policy recommendations (Fletcher, 2017).

Rejecting crude realism, the crux of critical realism is that social phenomena, be it actions, texts and institutions, exist regardless of interpretations of them; the social world is both socially constructed and real. (Parr, 2013, p. 7)

Ellingson (2009) describes crystallization as a framework for qualitative research combining “multiple forms of analysis and multiple genres of representation ... building a rich and openly partial account of a phenomenon” (p. 15). She further explains

that crystallization necessitates that methodology is seen as a continuum from positivism through radical interpretivism, with science and art serving as ends of this continuum and most researchers positioning themselves somewhere between.

Therefore, as fitting within my critical realist perspective, I employ her concept of crystallization through a combination of research approaches to co-construct a thick, or “deep, dense, detailed” account of belonging for blind people in academia – not the *right* description (Denzin, 1989, p. 83). A thick description is not limited to the accumulation of many details, and it is not tied to the idea of discovering the singular, true way of understanding a phenomenon (Ellingson, 2009; Holliday, 2007; Ponterotto, 2006). A thick description transports the reader by producing Denzin’s concept of verisimilitude: “statements that produce for the readers the feeling that they have experienced, or could experience, the events being described in a study” (Cresswell & Miler, 2000, p. 127). Moreover, I do not disavow my own experience as being

part of that thick description. I embrace my personal understanding and position in the research as someone who has a lived perspective to offer. In taking this approach to insider research, I explicitly state that I am not an objective observer, but an insider who is learning from and with other people in the blind community to build a thicker description of what it means to be blind and belong in academia.

As someone who is partially blind and able to 'pass' as non-blind much of the time, I have a particular experience of blindness that comes to bear on the project. This specific experience of blindness causes me to notice particular aspects of the experiences of co-researchers and participants. For example, I relate to statements regarding the grey-zone between belonging to the blind vs. non-blind community and therefore notice these nuances in a way someone else might not. My conduct of this research is impacted by my experience as an insider within the blind community and by my experiences of passing and not

passing, and sometimes feeling like perhaps I am not blind enough (more on this in chapter 4). My experiences impact the topic chosen, the questions asked, the approach used, the analysis performed, and the representations created. My positionality and the importance of this topic to my own life cannot be set aside. Although I cannot be aware of all my assumptions and unconscious perspectives, I endeavour through reflective journaling and conversations to become more self-aware. In an effort toward transparency, I describe some of my assumptions and experiences related to relevant concepts.

1.2.1 About Belonging

With regard to belonging, I assume that everyone has some communities in which they lack a sense of belonging. An important factor to note is whether the person *wants* to belong to the community in question. I assume that some individuals have more experiences of non-belonging than others, and that perceived significant differences (such as disability) influence

experiences of belonging. For example, if I feel that people perceive me as different or other than themselves, I am likely to have fewer experiences of belonging. These assumptions influence my perceptions and interpretations of my own experiences and the research.

I have varied experiences of belonging in the blind and non-blind communities. At times I feel as if I belong in non-blind communities where I have deep connections, such as in my spiritual community. These experiences of belonging are influenced by how open I feel people are to my blindness and how comfortable I am expressing that part of myself alongside other aspects of who I am. When I am with a group of blind people, I feel an immediate sense of affinity followed closely by a sense of belonging. This sense of belonging is sometimes interrupted by a feeling of outsidership, of not being *blind enough*. For example, sometimes feeling like because I use sight to navigate my

computer, perhaps I am in some way an imposter in a group of blind people who use screen readers for access.

1.2.2 About Occupation

I believe that occupation is vital to human wellbeing (Hammell & Iwama, 2012; Law et al., 1998; Wilcock, 1993, 2007; Yerxa, 1990). As occupational beings, humans find and create meaning through occupation and our wellbeing is directly impacted by occupation (Hammell, 2004; Hasselkus, 2011; Huot et al., 2019; Wilcock, 1998, 2006a; Yerxa, 1990). Our sense of belonging can be reflected in and developed through occupation (Hammell & Iwama, 2012; Rebeiro, 2001). For example, I engage with my spiritual family in a variety of shared occupations, including taking part in communion, a spiritual practice that involves reading scripture, praying, and consuming bread and wine. This occupation reflects belonging – if I did not belong to this group, I would be unlikely to engage in such an intimate practice. This occupation also develops my sense of belonging as we serve one

another and engage in this practice together on a regular basis. I also believe that all humans have a right to participate in occupations that foster a sense of belonging, and many, including blind people, face environmental barriers to doing so (Hammell, 2008, 2017; Hocking, 2017; Mcdermott & Varenne, 1995; Stadnyk et al., 2010; Townsend & Wilcock, 2004; World Federation of Occupational Therapists, 2019). For example, as a child attending elementary school I was excluded from band class because I could not read the music. Creating music together is an occupation that may foster a sense of belonging, and I was excluded from participation in this due to an inaccessibility in the physical environment (music that was too small) and in the social environment (efforts were not made to ensure I had equitable opportunity to participate).

1.2.3 About Meaning

Occupational choices are based, at least in part, upon the meanings we gain from interactions and engagement in

occupation, and the meanings ascribed to particular interactions and occupations change over time and are structured by power relations and context (Bourdieu, 1991; Halliday, 1975; Watters et al., 2012). For example, at the time I was excluded from band class the meaning I ascribed to this was positive – I had some spare time and could engage in other occupations. This experience still influences me today. As my awareness grew, the meaning I began to ascribe to that experience became more negative as I took into account some of the structural barriers that were at play.

1.2.4 About Disability

I believe that [disability](#) is diversity, not deficit. As blind people, we are not sighted people with the sight missing: blindness brings a unique perspective to the world, without which the world would be disadvantaged. Disability is a positive aspect of my identity, and throughout this dissertation I use *identity first* when referring to myself or a group of people who identify in some way with

disability – whether through personal connection to disability community or through diagnosis. Identity first language implies that disability or blindness is a positive aspect of identity, not one to be framed with shame or tragedy (Dunn & Andrews, 2015; Hodges, 2015; Ladau, 2015). I also use *person first* language in the dissertation, particularly in situations wherein a co-author or participant prefers this language. Person-first language can be used to highlight the individual's or group's personhood, and that a disability is not the only aspect of identity (although sometimes it is not recognized as a positive part of identity). These are my linguistic choices and do not necessarily reflect those of others involved in the research. I will discuss more about this in [the section about models of disability](#).

1.2.5 About Research

Although we set out particular plans, as researchers we never really do exactly what we set out to do in the way we initially planned. There are delays and shifts in policy and practice. I think

it is important to be open to changing how we are doing things, especially in response to what participants and the community with the highest stakes say.

I also assume that there are inherent power imbalances within the research process, and this cannot be erased through a participatory research approach or through insider research. As a scholar and the project's leader, I am in a position that holds greater power in the research process. One of my challenges is to address this structural power imbalance in such a way that those involved feel they have capacity to contribute to the research process and outcomes. As an insider researcher, I am "speaking from, for, and to the margins" (Boylorn & Orbe, 2016, p. 15). However, I must be transparent throughout the process and acknowledge the ways in which I am privileged alongside my marginality – and perhaps in many contexts how I am more privileged than I am marginalized (Boylorn & Orbe, 2016). I also assume that power imbalances exist not only between myself and

participants, but also among them. Every individual has intersecting identities that are ascribed various positions within social hierarchies and power structures.

I also assume it is possible that participants in research may find the process to be emancipatory in some way. When starting the research, I had an unconscious assumption that in order for the process to be emancipatory for someone, they had to be a co-researcher rather than participant. However, this assumption was challenged and therefore made apparent as I went through the process. For example, I found that many people were thrilled to be part of the research, and found the conversations benefited them, but they did not want to or perhaps did not have capacity to be involved in all stages of the research. [I also elaborate in chapter 4](#) about realizing my assumption that research done by a blind researcher would necessarily be perceived as insider research compared with that done by a non-blind researcher.

I am also positioned as someone who has been a participant in various qualitative research projects. Some of these experiences have felt very disempowering, while others although not emancipatory have felt at least cathartic. Finally, in approaching my own research and my position regarding its quality, I am asking the following questions, which are well-articulated by Silverman as gold standards for quality in research (2006, p. 237): “have the researchers demonstrated successfully why we should believe them? And does the research problem tackled have theoretical and/or practical significance?”

1.3 Theoretical Perspectives

Theoretical frameworks sensitize my approach to research – the questions asked, the ways I go about doing research, and how I analyze data.

1.3.1 Occupational science

Occupational science is an interdisciplinary field that explores the definition, dimensions, and value of human occupation. This lens invites me to consider the multiplicity of factors that impact participation in occupation, including issues of class, gender, ability, income, and so-forth. Occupational science's exploration of the value of occupation calls me to describe and examine how engagement in and dimensions of occupations impact wellbeing. The theoretical foundation of occupational science is a good starting point to examine the concept of belonging and its interaction with occupation and therefore wellbeing. The initial articulation of the term and inclusion of belonging alongside Wilcock's (1998, 2006b) dimensions of occupation – doing, being, and becoming – are attributed to Rebeiro and colleagues (2001) and Hammell (2004) respectively. Since its introduction, the concept has continued to evolve (Hitch et al., 2014). In occupational science, descriptions of belonging include

affirmation, reciprocity, friendship, inclusion, contributing to something, social interaction, connectedness (for example, Hammell, 2004; Hitch et al., 2014; Lexell et al., 2011; Molineux & Baptiste, 2011; Pickens et al., 2010; Rebeiro, 2001). Even where descriptions and definitions of belonging may vary, in occupational science it is consistently discussed in relation to occupation – belonging is a dimension that can give meaning to occupation (Hammell, 2004).

Occupation is a complex phenomenon that is contextually-informed and relational, and which holds and creates meaning for individuals and communities (Huot et al., 2019; Kielhofner, 2008; Roley et al., 2008; Townsend et al., 2002). Teaching is a prominent occupation in academia. Teaching is relational in that it is engaged in with others through collaborative teaching as well as through interaction with learners. It is contextually-informed in that various factors within the social, cultural, physical, and institutional environment influence engagement in teaching. For

example, the methods one uses in teaching may be influenced by what kinds of teaching methods are valued in the discipline.

Teaching holds different meaning for different people. For example, one person may find teaching meaningful because it involves passing on disciplinary knowledge and values to the next generation of scholars. Teaching may create meaning, for example, through the mutual learning and construction of knowledge that happens via interactions with learners. Hammell (2009) suggests that occupations might be conceptualized within four categories: restorative occupations, doing occupations, occupations reflecting life continuity and hope, and occupations fostering belonging and contributing. Yerxa (1990) emphasizes that understanding occupation requires an understanding of engagement in that occupation – i.e. the perception and subjective experience of participants in that occupation. Ennals and colleagues (2016) collaboratively researched their perceptions and subjective experiences of being academics,

finding that engagement in various academia-related occupations contributed to occupational identity, becoming an academic, and belonging to a scholarly community.

Occupational participation is involvement in occupations that is generally observable, whereas occupational engagement is involvement in an occupation that has current positive value and is not always observable (K. Morris & Cox, 2017; Roley et al., 2008). While occupational participation can perhaps be imposed upon someone, occupational engagement cannot, and it is possible to be disengaged while participating in occupation. For example, a student collecting samples for a supervisor's project may be participating in the occupation, but be disengaged if they felt forced to do this and find in it no positive value. Occupational engagement, associated with being part of meaningful, positively valued occupations that lead to positive consequences (possibly including sense of belonging) is a sensitizing concept used in the analysis of this project. In addition, conceptualizations of

occupation, participation, and engagement inform this project's development, and inform my perspectives regarding the interpretation of data.

Additional concepts from Occupational Science provided a framework for addressing the research questions. *Occupational justice* consists of fair opportunities “to do, be, belong and become what people have the potential to be and the absence of avoidable harm” (Wilcock & Hocking, 2015, p. 414). It focuses on humans as occupational beings and emphasizes the right to occupational engagement that supports the well-being of one's self, family, and community (Durocher et al., 2014). Occupational justice is related to having the resources and opportunity for participation in occupations to satisfy one's needs and fulfill one's rights (Townsend et al., 2014). In their revised position statement on human rights, the World Federation of Occupational Therapists (2019) states that “occupational rights are secured by identifying and addressing the capabilities, opportunities, and freedom of

choice for individuals, communities and populations to participate in society.” Occupational justice emphasizes the need to have equitable distribution of material and social resources (similar to social justice), and also the importance of ensuring people have the right combination of capacities required to use these resources to enable participation in occupations of choice. For example, having a handout available in a format that is accessible to a screen reader is not sufficient to enable participation if the culture within a department makes the individual uncomfortable using that screen reader due to perceived stigma. Many occupational injustices relate to attitudinal factors, and an exploration of occupational injustices necessarily requires an understanding and examination of the interplay between attitudinal, structural, and contextual factors (Gupta, 2016; Townsend, 2012). As such, throughout the research process, I actively sought to consider the multiplicity of factors that impact experiences of belonging, and use occupational justice concepts

to inform thinking regarding the data. I was sensitized to some specific concepts associated with occupational justice in this research process. *Occupational imbalance*, “a personal perception of engaging in the “wrong” amount and diversity of occupations,” may be a factor that hinders experiences of wellness (Hitch et al., 2014, p. 241). *Occupational deprivation* is the exclusion of individuals from participation in meaningful, necessary, and/or expected occupations due to factors outside their control, is said to have a significant impact on health, and is the element of occupational injustice most closely linked with social exclusion (Burchett & Matheson, 2010; Gupta, 2016; Sakellariou, 2006; Wilcock, 2006b). *Occupational marginalization*, often operating invisibly, occurs when individuals are denied the choice of participating in meaningful occupations due to informal and at times unconscious rules, habits, and norms (Durocher et al., 2014; Townsend & Wilcock, 2004).

1.3.2 Critically understanding disability

1.3.2.1 Models of disability

Theoretical frameworks and models can be helpful in understanding and articulating the ways people think and feel about disability. There are numerous models of disability. In this section I do not aim to describe all models, or even all the models that might be useful for readers to consider. Rather, the purpose of this section is to discuss models in general, using a few models as examples. It is important to keep in mind that one's perspective may not fit concisely within a single model, and that disabled people will vary in the models/frameworks to which they ascribe. I aim to represent the diverse perspectives of participants regarding disability, rather than representing or prioritizing a particular model of disability. In this section I describe three models that have influenced my development and which I heard in conversations with participants: medical, social, and affirmation models of disability.

The medical model of disability, sometimes referred to as the individual model, pathologizes disability and positions the perceived problem within the individual who has an impairment, which needs to be cured or fixed (Degener, 2017). This is not to say that all in the field of medicine hold to this perspective, but rather 'medical' here refers to a lens through which disability is perceived as a medical issue. The oppression inherent in the medical model demanded a counter-perspective, and thus entered social models of disability. A social model emphasizes disability as socially constructed and maintained (Barnes, 2012). This is significant given that social structures influence occupational possibilities and the ways in which we can interact, and in-turn our occupational engagement and the ways we interact shape social structures (Degener, 2017; C. Jones & Novak, 2014; Laliberte Rudman, 2010). Although undoubtedly important for the emancipation of disabled people, development of social models is only one part of a response to oppressive

medicalized perspectives about disability (Corker, 1999; Davis, 2000; Degener, 2017; Oliver, 1997). Addressing a clear gap left by the social model, other approaches to disability have emphasized its embodied nature, recognizing the importance of subjective embodiment and the impacts this experience has on people independent of social circumstances or constructions (Crow, 1996; Marks, 1999). Crow (1996) describes the importance of recognizing impairment as a relevant part of the experience for many disabled people. Especially as I strive for a collaborative and maybe even emancipatory research process, it is important to realize that a sole focus on any one model may exclude some peoples' perspectives and experiences.

Social models do not specifically address the pervasive *tragedy* and *pity* narratives surrounding disability (Garland-Thomson, 2005) or the personal tragedy model (Oliver, 2009), which frame the disabled person as an object of pity. The affirmation model of disability responds by framing disability not as something to be

feared, pitied, or mourned, but rather as an indispensable aspect of human diversity (Cameron, 2015; Retief & Letšosa, 2018; Swain & French, 2000). In proposing the affirmation model, Swain and French (2000) did not deny that impairment and disability can cause oppression or other negative impacts in peoples' lives, but they highlight that oppression is not all that impairment and disability are about. I approach my research from a critical realist perspective, wherein "the models of disability and the paradigms from which they are generated are not contradictory, but are instead complementary" (Gable, 2014, p. 94). Critical realist perspectives recognize disability as a complex phenomenon that benefits from multiple theoretical perspectives. For example, a social model, based upon constructivist positions, may allow for greater recognition of attitudinal barriers, while the affirmation model may contribute to greater self-acceptance. As I collaborated with participants, I needed to be open to discovering varying perspectives.

1.3.2.2 Critical Disability Theory

Critical Disability Theory (CDT) informs my understanding of disability and blindness specifically. Evans, Broido, Brown, and Wilke (2017) propose that CDT is particularly helpful in academia. Within CDT, disability involves interrelationships between the subjective embodied experience of disability and the physical, institutional, and social environments (N. J. Evans et al., 2017; Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009). Therefore, my conceptualization of disability draws upon critical realism and an affirmation model, and aspects of social and medical models (described previously) (Shakespeare, 2013). For example, I take from the medical model the emphasis on the embodied nature of disability. Using this perspective opens up possibilities for me to consider how both various environmental factors and subjective experiences of blindness may influence belonging in academia. Finally, using the framework of CDT I consider participant identities from an intersectional perspective, which leads me to

view the inequities related to various categories and social phenomena, such as disability, gender, and race, as co-constructed, interacting, and reinforcing one another (Shildrick, 2009; Varcoe et al., 2007). Oppression and inequity are socially constructed and are situated in and produced by historical, personal, and occupational contexts.

I drew upon the aforementioned theories as a lens in forming the research process, including writing the research questions, choosing data gathering strategies, analyzing the data, and co-creating outcomes. For example, critical disability theory may influence the kinds of questions asked toward being directly aimed at disrupting the status quo. The questions position our experiences as blind people in the focus of study, but are also pointed toward examining the environment and structures impacting the experiences. I explore the experiences of some individuals and our surroundings in order to gain greater insight into what may be impacting other blind people. While

generalizability is not the aim, the exploration of our realities may contribute to a greater understanding of the possible realities of other members of the same equity-seeking group (blind people).

I first aimed to explore the realities of blind people in the academia. This is covered in chapter 2, where I describe how belonging develops based on realities of blind and non-blind people. Based on the work described in chapter 2 I concluded, among other things, that there is a need to help people equip themselves to better foster sense of belonging for blind people in the academia. Therefore, in chapter 3 I go on to outline a novel knowledge translation strategy aimed at helping people learn how to foster spaces in which blind people and disabled people can find a sense of belonging. This workshop includes a piece of research-based theatre that shares stories of blind peoples' experiences of belonging and non-belonging in academia. Finally, based on my experience conducting these studies, chapter 4

includes a discussion of what it is like doing research with blind people as a blind scholar.

Chapter 2: Blind people and the Belonging in Academia Model

The aim of this chapter is to share findings from two studies exploring the experience of belonging in academia. The first is a study exploring non-blind perspectives, published in *Research in Education* by Teng, M. Y., Brown, M. L., Jarus, T., & Bulk, L. Y. (2020). This study provided context about the social environment in which blind people may (or may not) develop a sense of belonging. The second is a study exploring blind perspectives and belonging in academia. In this chapter, I integrate findings from both non-blind and blind participants (called non-blind and blind cohorts). I use 'we' throughout the chapter to highlight that this work was done collaboratively.

2.1 Introduction

An estimated 1.5 million Canadians have sight loss (Aljied et al., 2018). Only 20.1% of blind people have completed their

postsecondary degree, certificate, or diploma (Statistics Canada, 2009), compared with 53% of the general population (OECD, 2014). Despite this stark gap, contributing factors are unknown and understudied. As having a postsecondary education contributes to upward social mobility (Haveman & Smeeding, 2006), the startling difference in postsecondary attainment between blind and non-blind people urgently requires exploration.

Having a degree is associated with higher income (Junor & Usher, 2002), increased employment opportunities (Junor & Usher, 2002), better overall wellbeing (Kristoffersen, 2018), and improved social mobility (Bowers-Brown et al., 2017). For blind students, academic persistence depends, in part, on social integration, which indicates the importance of developing a sense of belonging (Bodaghi et al., 2016; Bodaghi & Ngah, 2013; Kinder et al., 2002). [The positive impact of belonging on individuals in academia and the negative impact of its absence were discussed](#)

[in Section 1.1.5](#). With the importance of belonging established, we investigated the process by which it develops in academia.

Non-blind people, who are the majority, play a major role in shaping the academic environment. It is important, therefore, to examine their perspectives so that potential impacts of ableism, stereotypes, prejudices, and knowledge gaps regarding blind people can be revealed. One example of an impact of non-blind people may be found in social acceptance: disabled students associate belonging with perceived social acceptance and support from faculty and peers (Hewett et al., 2017; Vaccaro et al., 2015). One indicator of support from faculty is receiving timely and adequate accommodations (Freeman et al., 2007). Many blind students report receiving inconsistent accommodations throughout their studies (Lourens & Swartz, 2016b). Educational institutions may have inadequate mechanisms in place for faculty and staff to receive training about and support for implementing accommodations and creating access, knowledge of legal and

professional responsibilities, and resources and recognition for developing and enacting inclusive teaching strategies (Butler et al., 2017; Zhang et al., 2010). Therefore, gaps in faculty and staff knowledge, skills, resources, and supports may lead to students feeling unsupported. To redress this issue, Lourens and Swartz recommend education about blindness and accommodations (2016b), and research exploring perceptions of blindness and disability among non-blind persons as they are involved in creating the social environment (2016a). Additionally, it is important not only to raise awareness, but also to provide the supports necessary to enact change and recognition of the work involved in making change. Knowledge or awareness will not alone change experiences.

Overall, insufficient evidence exists about the experiences and specific factors that contribute to developing a sense of belonging in Canadian academic institutions – despite belonging being a fundamental factor in creating and sustaining participation in

academia (Almog, 2018; Bodaghi et al., 2016; Bodaghi & Ngah, 2013). Since non-blind people constitute a large proportion of the social and academic environments, we anticipate that exploring their perceptions may identify barriers and/or facilitators to creating an environment wherein blind students, staff, and faculty can more easily experience belonging. Therefore, this chapter's aim is to address the first dissertation research question how does a sense of belonging develop in academic settings? This question is explored from both blind and non-blind perspectives.

2.2 Methods

This study is influenced by critical realism, which contains components of social constructivism, in particular the recognition that human interactions with social and physical environments construct individual experiences of reality (Fletcher, 2017; Mills et al., 2006). We also emphasize the collaboration between researchers and participants in creating the data and the meaning generated in the findings (Clarke et al., 2015). Data collection and

analysis were influenced by a constructivist grounded theory approach, which is inductive and aims to generate a theory based in data (Mills et al., 2006). Through iterative processes between the researchers and the data, a conceptual model, which will be described following this methods section, was constructed. The following sections describe two studies differentiated as non-blind and blind cohorts. Although in some instances blind and non-blind participants came from the same institutions, the blind participants came from a larger range of institutions. What follows is a description of the methods used for each of the two studies.

2.2.1 Non-blind cohort

The study with a non-blind cohort was conducted in 2017-2018 and data were collected by Minnie Teng (MT) and Mary-Lou Brown (MB).

2.2.1.1 Research sites and participants: Non-blind cohort

A convenience sample of 25 non-blind individuals from three urban Canadian universities and one college participated.

Participants included instructors/faculty (5), staff (12), and students (8) working or studying in a postsecondary institution within the past 12 months. Ten participants had prior interactions with blind people, two identified as having a disability, and five identified as being from an ethnic minority group. We recognize that being non-blind was not necessarily the most salient aspect of participants' identities; however, the purpose was to compare with blind perspectives and therefore we make this distinction explicit. Appendix A contains Table 1 with a description of participants.

2.2.1.2 Data Collection

Data collection involved focus groups and individual interviews, as they produce rich insights only created through interpersonal

interaction (Liamputtong, 2011). Focus groups allow for agreement/disagreement among participants (Pfeffer, 2008), while interviews accommodate concerns for confidentiality and scheduling restraints (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). The focus groups included people with similar roles (i.e. any given focus group consisted only of members from one of the three groups: students, instructors/faculty, or staff) to foster safer environments for openness (Liamputtong, 2011). Focus groups included 2-8 people, were conducted in-person at the researchers' university or a local library meeting room, and lasted about 60 minutes. Data were collected until we were not uncovering any new concepts in subsequent focus groups and interviews. This seemed to occur by the seventh focus group. We conducted one more interview and focus group each to ensure we would not identify any new theoretical concepts.

We used semi-structured interview and focus group guides to provide some direction while allowing space for discovery and

elaboration (Gill et al., 2008). The guides were informed by team discussions and questions from sense of belonging questionnaires (Anderson-Butcher & Conroy, 2002; R. Lee et al., 2001; Malone et al., 2012). With an overall focus on belonging in academia, semi-structured questions in the guides were:

1. What does belonging mean to you?
2. In what ways is feeling a sense of belonging in the academic context important to you?
3. What factors have contributed to the development of your sense of belonging? (assuming you have one)
4. What has made it difficult for you to develop a sense of belonging here?
5. Do you think sense of belonging develops the same way for blind/partially blind people? Why or why not?
6. Describe, if any, interactions you had with someone who was blind or partially blind in your time at the university?
7. What are some differences, if any, between your experiences of connecting with sighted peers/colleagues and those who are blind or partially blind?
8. What might be some barriers or challenges to feel a sense of belonging for peers/colleagues who are blind or partially blind?

2.2.1.3 Data Analysis

Interviews and focus groups were audio recorded and transcribed. Transcripts were individually coded and then

compiled by group type (instructor/faculty, staff, student) to create a data set for each group. MT and MB (students) conducted open coding and the team, including LYB and TJ (co-supervisors), met frequently to discuss codes, findings, and interpretations. Notes, assumptions, and interpretations were shared as a group to negotiate how and why particular concepts were important. These data were analyzed between all participant groups using a constant comparative coding process, including open coding - developing codes to create a core category - and theoretical coding - constructing the conceptual connectors between categories (Mills et al., 2006). Axial coding procedures were then used to explore how categories relate to one another and to create subcategories and broader thematic categories. Selective coding was used to identify conceptual ideas that integrate the existing categories. Finally, concepts were connected and developed to construct the Belonging in Academia Model.

2.2.1.4 Trustworthiness

Our efforts toward trustworthiness aim at confidence in data, interpretation, and methods used to ensure the quality of the study, not at discovering a reality that exists apart from both researchers and participants (Polit & Beck, 2014; Richardson, 2000). Field notes and reflections were written following the interviews and each coding session to weigh the effect of the researcher value positions on the process, and analyze the research decisions made at each stage (Charmaz, 2000).

Preliminary themes identified in focus groups and interviews were summarized and emailed to the participants for review. Two participants shared their impressions of the themes in general and how the themes were distinct or linked. These member reflections provided “opportunities for questions, critique, feedback, affirmation, and even collaboration” (Tracy, 2010, p. 844) between participants and researchers. Member reflections helped us learn that participants found the research understandable and

meaningful. In our analysis and process, we were working toward a thick description of experiences of belonging in academia, and employed multiple modes of re-presenting the data in written text, a diagram, and spoken presentations (Ellingson, 2009).

2.2.1.5 Limitations

There was limited diversity among our participants. Of the 25 participants, three identified as having a disability, and five as members of equity-seeking groups including ethnic minorities, LGBTQ+, or being a female in a male-dominant field. Additionally, in some focus groups a few participants dominated the discussion. Compared with the 3-4 person groups, facilitating open discussion in the group of 8 staff was more challenging. Social desirability bias (i.e. the tendency to respond based on what will be perceived more favourably in a social context) may have influenced the staff who were coworkers. Moreover, power imbalances within some of the focus groups may skew the data. For example, some of the participants in a focus group knew one

another and were in different positions within the institution's hierarchy, which may have influenced what and how much they felt safe sharing.

2.2.2 Blind Cohort

Data collection and analysis for the second study, with a blind cohort, was conducted by Laura Yvonne Bulk in 2018-2019.

2.2.2.1 The focus groups

The 28 focus group participants played different roles in academia, and some played multiple: 11 undergraduate students/alumni, 10 graduate students/alumni, 8 non-academic staff, 7 instructors/adjunct faculty, 4 faculty, and 1 post-doctoral fellow. Note that if a participant had a graduate degree, we did not count them in the number of undergraduate alums. The majority (11) were involved in social sciences, and only 1 was involved in a STEM discipline. Participants were recruited via emails sent through my networks and via university disability services. In

addition to identifying as blind, participants needed to be able to communicate in English and be above the age of legal majority (19 years).

Over a series of ten focus groups conducted via teleconference, we shared our stories of belonging and non-belonging in academia. Nine focus groups were role-specific (5 with just students, 2 faculty, and 2 staff). One focus group involved people who played a variety of roles in academia. Laura Yvonne Bulk (LYB) facilitated the focus groups, and disclosed at the beginning that she is also a blind person. The presence of any researcher impacts what participants do/do not share, and we hoped that the presence of a blind researcher would engender a greater sense of solidarity and comfort leading to more honest sharing. [Appendix A shows a table describing the participants.](#)

Rather than posing a list of pre-determined questions, LYB shared the story of how she came to this particular research focus – experiences of belonging/non-belonging in academia – and

invited conversation. Her roles were to hold the space, pick up the conversational threads, facilitate sharing from all conversation partners, and where necessary to bring the conversation around to the research focus. These last pieces only became necessary a couple times, when either a single individual began to dominate the conversation or when the conversation moved toward discussing tangential topics (such as literature).

2.2.2.1.1 Analysis

My analysis was inspired by Braun and Clarke's (2018; 2015) thematic analysis approach, involving six phases:

Becoming familiar with the data. LYB listened to each focus group multiple times, becoming intimately familiar with the data.

Coding. LYB listened to each focus group while applying codes (succinct labels identifying important meaning in the data) in an excel spreadsheet in which the codes were associated with the relevant data segment. She initially applied semantic codes,

capturing what people seemed to be trying to communicate. LYB then moved into latent codes, reflecting on the social values, norms, and assumptions that allowed what the participant was saying to make sense. For example, 'I can be my true self' might be a semantic code, whereas 'authenticity is important for belonging' may be a latent code.

Generating initial themes. LYB then examined and re-examined the collated data in an effort to identify significant broader patterns of meaning. She then reviewed the preliminary themes and the data within each to see if each theme had a central organizing concept, and to ensure each was not simply a bucket in which she placed everything participants said about a certain topic. For example, one of the initial candidate themes was 'barriers to belonging'; however, upon re-examination she rejected this candidate theme as a 'bucket' theme that lacked deeper meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2018).

Reviewing themes. In this phase LYB again examined the candidate themes to determine if they told convincing stories about the data that addressed the research questions. The themes that came out of this phase were meant to be patterns of shared meaning centered around an idea.

Defining and naming themes. This phase involves developing the focus and scope of each theme and choosing an effective name. Part of my process for this phase involved sending a summary to participants, inviting reflections and responses. Only four participants responded, and each of them responded that they felt the summary of themes was meaningful and fit with their experience and what they heard in the focus groups.

Writing up. In this process, the final phase involved integrating the ideas and data extracts into a summary for participants and into research-based theatre drafts. Keeping in mind that the aim was not to include every aspect of what participants shared, but rather she aimed to share some significant ideas. In this phase

LYB also wrote up a secondary analysis of the data in relation to the [Belonging in Academia Model, described in chapter 2.](#)

2.2.2.2 The Storytelling Conversations

In addition to the focus groups, six people participated in what we called storytelling conversations. These were conversations in which participants had the opportunity to share their own story of belonging/non-belonging in academia. The intention of this group was to be a participatory research team that would guide the research process and participate in multiple phases of design, collection, analysis, and translation. Due to life circumstances of these collaborators their extensive participation throughout the research process became challenging and, in the end, we had six storytelling conversations with varying configurations of the six individuals.

Data analysis and collection occurred simultaneously. As described by Riley and Hawe (2004), while we told *stories*,

narratives emerged from the analysis of these stories. Riley and Hawe state that it is the researcher's role to analyze the stories to reach underlying narratives. We engaged in an ongoing process of data analysis through telling and re-telling of stories, which become distilled to narratives and our stories were 'regraded' rather than 'degraded' (White, 2005). White (2000, 2005) describes the process of using outsider witnessing in what he calls a definitional ceremony. Of particular note, the definitional ceremony and outsider witness practices were used by Dale (2011) in her emancipatory project exploring the identity of blind people. The steps used for this component of the project were based on the work of both White and Dale. Each storytelling conversation consisted of a single definitional ceremony, in which one group member was the *storyteller*, the center of the definitional ceremony, and the rest were the *outsider witnesses*. The conversation entailed the following steps (which are further elaborated below):

1. The telling: The *storyteller* shared their story of being part of academia in the presence of the *outsider witnesses*.
2. First Re-telling: The *outsider witnesses* will retell the story.
3. Second Re-telling: The *storyteller* retells the retelling that was just given.
4. Third Re-telling: The *outsider witnesses* retell the retelling that was just given.
5. Fourth Re-telling: The *storyteller* retells the retelling that was just given, and so-on.

When in the audience position (i.e. in the telling and second re-telling the outsider witnesses are the audience, while the teller is the audience during the first and third retellings), one was strictly in that position and was not meant to interject. The usual flow of dialogue shifted. Moreover, the retellings of outsider witnesses contrast with usual responses to stories, such as giving affirmations, passing judgements, providing advice, teaching strategies, indicating strengths and weaknesses, or role-modelling good responses. Rather than providing opinions, examples, summaries, or homilies, outsider witnesses engaged in a dialogue

with one another regarding what was heard and their responses (White, 2000).

During the second, fourth, and sixth (if applicable) retellings, the *storyteller* likewise did not summarize what was told, but rather addressed questions such as those suggested by Hernandez (2008):

- What struck you in the re-telling?
- Why do you think this stood out?
- Do you want to clarify anything with the witnesses?
- Where are you now compared with before hearing the re-telling?

The back and forth of telling and re-telling continued until the story was distilled and we could discuss some broad ideas brought about by the ceremony. The ceremonies lead to thick plots and through these the stories of our lives became interconnected.

2.3 Findings

Based on our thematic analysis of the data from both blind and non-blind cohorts, we proposed a conceptual model describing a process by which sense of belonging may develop in academia: The Belonging in Academia Model (BAM). In our co-authored published paper (Teng et al., 2020), we provided a visual representation of the BAM. We have, however, chosen to exclude the visual from this dissertation and instead invite readers to imagine the figure using all of their senses. The BAM can be imagined as a flower comprised of five fanned out petals representing dimensions of belonging: affiliation, familiarity, acceptance, trusting connections & interdependent relationships, sense of equity. Each petal is thicker in texture, deeper in auditory tone, and darker in colour than the previous petal, denoting deeper, more nuanced sense of belonging. The BAM is based on four propositions. First, affiliation and familiarity are fundamental prerequisites for the development of a basic sense of belonging

and therefore listed first in the model. Second, the continuum of belonging is depicted by a gradient of colour in the model's visual representation, where sense of belonging becomes deeper with each shade. Third, a sense of equity is the overarching layer that governs whether a person feels as if the larger systems fosters their belonging. Finally, the dynamic nature of the BAM is such that each person experiences different versions of the model depending on contexts and times. For example, a person may experience a sense of equity, feeling that they are being treated fairly by the system, while not feeling accepted by peers. In this case, the BAM would show a thinner or complete lack of the acceptance petal, indicating an incomplete sense of belonging.

In the following paragraphs we present our findings by describing each petal of the BAM along with salient participant quotations.

Participants are identified by pseudonyms along with the notation nb for non-blind or b for blind participants.

2.3.1 Affiliation

For our participants, affiliation pertained to being closely associated with particular people within or with the institution itself. Michelle (nb student) identified membership as a prerequisite to developing relationships and belonging:

Having something that identifies you, student card or ... taking a course, an idea like that I'm part of this organization or I'm allowed to be in a space.

It seems from our findings that affiliation via membership with a particular group, such as a course, can contribute to a sense of attachment and commonality as a foundation for the development of belonging. Linda (nb staff) discussed how membership in a small group focussed on shared occupation created personal connections among colleagues:

[Our stretching group] was started over a year ago, when two or three of us attended a workshop that the university put on about how to stretch in the office ... it started by a few of us attending an event together, and then it just sort of continued, and now it has spread to other members of staff.

Affiliation with a space or geographic location may allow the development of a history tied to the occupational and relational experiences people have there. It seems that without affiliation, further occupational engagement and relationships cannot be fostered. Michelle (nb student) emphasized this when she stated “if I don't feel like I associate with the course or the instructor then I get out. It's not worth my time and energy to put myself through that to get a grade ... [that association] motivates me to go to class and also study.”

Although this kind of affiliation may form a foundation, belonging does not necessarily develop from it. Describing affiliation versus more robust belonging, Luke (b alum) points out that “there are groups that you *belong* to ... where you need to be present at or are expected to be present at, but that doesn't necessarily mean you will feel included when you get there.” Thus, it is important to consider the dimensions of belonging that follow in this chapter.

While both blind and non-blind participants mentioned that external factors regarding the spaces to which they were affiliating, such as class size, impacted their belonging, this was emphasized more by blind participants. For example, for Jason (b student) affiliation with a cohort, or group of learners who move through a program together, contributed to his comfort in engaging with classmates more than affiliation only with a single course:

To lean over and say to the person next to you 'hey can you give me a hand with this?' ... with my cohort that passes, but outside of the classes that are sort of part of my program, I don't think I've done that yet.

For blind participants, external factors such as type of program, size of department, and particularly the culture of inclusion need to be carefully considered when choosing positions, departments, and institutions for affiliation.

While all participants identified affiliation as one aspect of belonging, they emphasized that affiliation is insufficient to create

belonging. Kendra (b student) said, “membership and belonging too are two different things.”

2.3.2 Familiarity

As described by participants, familiarity involves consistent interaction with one’s physical, institutional, and/or social environment that leads to feelings of knowing and being known. Michelle (nb student) said that familiarity is “[knowing] the person that I’m talking to or have a regular routine with similar people.” Familiarity is built through interaction, and encourages further interactions and continued development of familiarity. Consistent interaction contributes to increased familiarity with individuals as well as different ways of being in the world, including blindness. For example, Ben (b staff) said, “understanding (about disability) is only going to come through repetition ... if it’s the first time (a person or system is encountering disability) every time, my goodness, like I said, it can be really draining.” Offering another angle, Leah (b staff/alum) said, “in my department where ... the

belonging thing was little bit more, delicate, I didn't participate. When they asked for participation, I would often not respond or find an excuse." It seems there is a cyclical relationship. Due to a "delicate", or precarious, tenuous, fragile sense of belonging, Leah chose not to interact. Because she had fewer interactions, there were fewer opportunities to develop the component of belonging we have called familiarity.

Blind participants, such as Diane (b alum), described particular challenges associated with developing familiarity within the environment:

Establishing rapport or sort of just the initial starting place is easier if you're sighted. I notice sighted people generally will comment on something visual, like oh your earrings are really cute, or that's a nice top, love your shoes. Just using a compliment is a really good way to start a dialogue with somebody that you might want to connect with on a social level. And when you're blind, that's not easy to do. So, even just visual like seeing somebody in a class, maybe you notice somebody has a look on their face and they're rolling their eyes to something the teacher said, which you also feel like rolling your eyes ... You can use your vision to find commonalities with somebody, like smile

at them or give them a look to say, 'hey I totally get what you're saying, I think what you think.' And boom, you totally have a connection. And when you're blind you sort of miss out on that stuff initially, but I think the social, the initial getting connected is a lot harder.

Blind participants also address challenges to having other people in the social environment develop familiarity with blindness or with blind individuals. Ava (b faculty) said that familiarity does not develop because there is "awkwardness around disability. At the root of all of this is the idea ... that disability is somehow exceptional and weird. And, to me, underneath all the problems there's just a reticence to engage with disability." Non-blind participants expressed this reticence. For example, Jan (nb student) mentioned that it may be more difficult to develop familiarity with a disabled person due to nervousness about appropriate language and concern about offending someone:

I don't worry about offending people typically, but I think I might be more self-conscious of offending them if they have a disability. I feel like you can't be careful enough these days ... I would worry that maybe I would say something wrong.

Familiarity involves becoming familiar with peoples' strengths and unique ways of doing and being in the world. For both blind and non-blind participants, other people becoming familiar with their roles or strengths seemed to contribute to the emergence of sense of acceptance.

2.3.3 Acceptance

Our interpretation of participant narratives indicates that after a foundation of affiliation and familiarity is built, acceptance can develop. Acceptance involved consistently feeling comfortable to act authentically, and the knowledge that there was a safe space for opinions to be shared and respected. Shay (nb faculty) described it as:

When you can be authentically who you are. So, you're not feeling you have a place because you're contorting yourself or beliefs or how you operate in the world to fit, but you're able to be authentically who you are.

While non-blind participants did not describe feeling able to act authentically in all circumstances, blind participants more

consistently described sometimes feeling unable to act authentically related to their blindness, for example how they felt their blindness was perceived. Elroy (b alum), for example, described his early university experiences: “I wanted to be accepted ... maybe I thought I would be accepted if I tried to be less blind and more sighted. And that just wasn’t working.” For blind participants, being blind was part of being an authentic self. Having their authentic selves recognized without being diminished or stereotyped was a vital aspect of belonging. James (b alum/staff) described his experience, “within academia ... I felt maybe the barrier for me is I didn’t feel like I belong because I felt like I couldn’t even be me, I couldn’t even be myself because I’m a person who uses a white cane.” This experience of having the *blind self* rejected will be highlighted in chapter [3](#).

For many participants, blind and non-blind, acceptance related to feeling understood in some way. To Maggie (nb student), “belonging means feeling accepted, feeling like your opinions are

heard and understood.” Mona (b student) said “belonging I feel like if you can share your story and come to a human agreement that, ‘this is how I live life, and can we do these things together?’”

Mark (nb faculty) mentioned that he feels a sense of belonging “as long as I feel like my voice is being heard, my opinion being respected, and I have space to share.” Ben (b staff/alum)

highlighted the importance of understanding on the part of people in the academic community:

In terms of belonging I guess for me what that means is understanding, acceptance, from the folks I work with. Whether they’re directly in my team or with folks that I work with in a group fashion during my master’s degree, or even faculty members when I work with them.

James (b alum/staff) highlighted the value of shared experience in academia and shared understanding of what the experience of being in that “boat” is like:

My PhD program was darn hard ... the feeling of connection, maybe somewhat was even forged a bit, by the commonality of our experience. We’re going through this rigorous hardship together, we’re all in the

same boat at least. And, I think, in moving through that I felt not so alone.

Having shared experience contributed to understanding and acceptance for blind and non-blind participants. For blind participants, the shared nature of the experience sometimes shifted. They described how their experience of doing additional work within academia fundamentally changed the experience, making it no longer shared. For example, the extra work they needed to do to obtain access extended the time to completion of a degree or meant making multiple trips to various service providers on campus. The extra work of being blind in academia had a negative impact on the sense of shared understanding because non-blind people do not realize the impact of blind peoples' additional work, and did not have a fully shared experience. More on this in chapter 4.

2.3.4 Trusting Connections & Interdependent Relationships

Based on our data, this dimension of belonging involves being in a state of consistent mutual trust and connection and having relationships of interdependence. This went beyond the sense of having one's authentic self and perspectives *accepted*, to feeling one's whole person was embraced and trusted. Our findings indicated that feeling embraced and taking relationships to a deeper level involved forming emotional connections with others. Leanne (nb staff) mentioned that emotional connection and friendships made at a previous workplace allowed her to realize that deeper sense of belonging develops with time:

I left a job where my coworkers were really some of my best friends who I talked about everything with. All about my life, all that stuff. So now I've kind of switched back in my position, and I think that for me I'm realizing [belonging is when] I start to open up and be more honest, and say things a little more. When I first went over to this new job I was like "my coworkers aren't like weird enough, they're going to think I'm super weird...like who's going to joke around with me about like outrageous things that you probably shouldn't talk about at work" or whatever right? And I was like I don't

know, they're pretty professional. And now as I'm getting into it again, that goes away and they're just people who also have a sense of humour, and aren't exclusively living in this professional world, which takes time.

As part of trusting connections, participants highlighted feeling trusted to contribute within their sphere of influence and having those contributions valued. Ellen (b faculty) said, "I know I belong when I have something to contribute." She described a time when she contributed to her academic community and witnessed evidence that mirrored her sense of a deeper connection:

I can give a fine example of that where it was a sense of belonging when at my last job where I worked for 15 years ... I threw a party and just tons of people from across the university showed up ... The mail carriers, the day care, students, whatever. All showed up and boy that was a ... it was a belonging moment.

Ellen's contribution was not related to academic productivity, but rather was a meaningful contribution to the social fabric of the community. Rena (nb staff) described another kind of contribution: "I think [belonging is] being able to contribute ... feeling that you have something to bring to the table because, supposedly, you're

working towards a common goal. You're contributing to realize that goal together.” For both blind and non-blind participants contributing to the discipline, class, or team, feeling like they had something to add, was an important factor to having that sense of trusting connections with people. This can be thought of as interdependent relationships – relationships in which one gives and receives. Contributions were not limited to material contributions, but also included what one might bring to a relationship for example.

Blind participants highlighted reciprocal relationships wherein they were not singled out as the one needing help from another, but where it was recognized that everyone contributed in unique ways. Interdependence – supporting and being supported – was key to belonging for blind participants. As Lynne (b student) put it, “there wasn’t always people helping me. And I think that’s the important part, that there has to be give and take, and you’re accepted for your knowledge and your ability to contribute.” Eve

(b student) said “that was the ideal, where everyone is give and take and you have to respect each other ... it is very rewarding when you can be framed as an equal when you’re helping out them with things they need.” Jason (b student) described an experience of belonging in academia:

It was belonging to people in community, a village and being part of that village. Having a role in it. Having a social group, having support, having the ability to support others. We’re not a one direction people. Humans, we want to give and receive.

By contrast, Ava (b faculty) described feeling like the “blind one who has some issues and just makes all this trouble. And that’s what was so hard about finally realizing that I didn’t belong there.”

Like non-blind participants, blind participants described having a sense of connection when their contributions were valued because this indicated they were trusted as equal members.

Diane (b alum) described:

Once you’re in a group, sort of earning your place in the group and feeling like you’re an equal part of it ... I think we all want to feel like we’re making a contribution and

we all want to feel like we're valued and equal part of the team.

Adding more complexity, Stewart (b faculty) described how being recognized as a contributor may be more challenging for blind people: "as a blind person, if someone's going to publish six articles a year, I've got to do 10 ... You really have to show that you're very, very capable."

In our analysis of the data, it seems building trusting connections is an important aspect of belonging in academia. Blind participants expanded upon the petal of trusting connections by adding further nuance to the ideas of interdependent relationships and making contributions.

2.3.5 Sense of Equity

Within our analysis, sense of equity represents belonging at a systems level, where individuals feel there is equitable allocation of resources and that the broader system supports them and others fairly. Blind and non-blind participants described a sense of

equity. Mark (nb faculty) asked a rhetorical question that demonstrated an integral role for a sense of equity in the development of belonging: “if we truly belong to a community, do I still need to go and ask for special accommodations? Or should that kind of community be mindful enough to support me as part of the group?” Mary (b staff/alum) indicated:

Having everything available to me without my having to, you know, sort of make a big case about it, would definitely contribute ... to feeling like I was worthy and I belonged in a space and I was no big deal.

Among non-blind participants, faculty addressed equity with far greater frequency than staff or students. This distinction did not exist among blind participants. Regardless of status within academia, all blind participants addressed equity. Particularly, they addressed how lacking equity created additional work for blind people and diminished sense of belonging. Participants advocated for built-in access, but accepted and acknowledged that for the time-being seeking accommodations was the only option. Ben (b staff/alum) said:

We're going to try to make this universal system ... we're not going to necessarily get it right the first time or the second or possibly ever ... having tools that can help me be part of the conversation ... technologies and having them readily accessible I think are also instrumental in filling in the gaps until we have something a little bit more robust. And those toys are not inexpensive.

Ben's comment regarding the expense of access technology is a common one among participants, and is directly related to equity of resource allocation. To "be part of the conversation," blind people need to expend resources beyond those expended by non-blind colleagues for whom the world was designed, as Mary (b staff/alum) put it:

Our environments are designed for the sighted. It's unconscious, our societies, our world is designed for the sighted ... It's taken for granted because things are designed for sighted people that it's a given. So, in terms of consciously contributing to a sense of belonging ... I'm not sure how many people if you were to ask them, would cite being able to read everything, being able to do my job without asking for assistance as something they would see as contributing to their sense of belonging because it's a given. Because they don't experience barriers at all in this arena. So, I think some of the other things that might influence sighted folks answering that question would be that whole gamut of

other things that are important to people. Back to am I valued, am I worthy, am I in the right job, am I getting compensated appropriately, do I have a good team. All of those good things, but I'm not sure that sighted people would at all consider the fact that they can see everything. That it's all designed for sight as something that would contribute to how they would define a sense of belonging ... Whereas obviously it's a much bigger deal for me.

Because the world was designed for non-blind people, blind participants described bearing added burdens. These burdens involved expending emotional and practical resources in order to have equitable engagement in academic occupations. For example, constantly seeking access, educating others, reminding people to provide accommodations, and continuously disclosing details about needs. Ava (b faculty) shared that it felt as if people were saying "be quiet about all the things that you're having trouble with because we can't fix that, you need to fix that." Stewart (b faculty) added that "it's like a much more individualistic sense of 'It's your blindness after all, you deal with it, you come to terms with it, you accept it.'" All of this carried an emotional toll

and, in combination with the lack of accessibility, contributed to feeling like perhaps they as individuals were a burden. Many blind participants described feelings similar to Ava:

Something that is hard is when you constantly have to be the one to raise your hand and say, "Can you describe..." Like in a faculty meeting, there's a PowerPoint and they put an image up and every time an image comes up, I have to ask again, "Can you describe what's on the screen?" That makes you feel like you don't belong because you have continually ask for the same thing and you feel, even if they don't perceive you this way, you feel like you're bugging them. So, to me, to feel like I belong I don't want to feel that I'm bothering anyone. I don't mind if people disagree with my ideas and my approaches, but if I feel like I have to consistently ask for the same thing, that's a feeling like, "Why do I have to keep reminding you about this? Can we put some kind of measure in place so that I don't have to remind you?" ... You feel like everything you ask for is a burden. You kind of start to internalise that, and you start saying, "Well, what if this isn't a great environment for me? What if I am too much of a hassle?". And, of course, the feminist in me would say that women probably do this more than men, right? "What if I am too much trouble? Shouldn't I be trying harder to make this work?"

This contrasted to Mary's statement regarding having a sense of belonging when she felt as if she "was no big deal." Stewart

agreed, speaking of being in places where he consistently had to ask for access:

These people here do not want me here, and they would rather that I not be here. Me being here is just way too much for them, just too much work for them. They'd rather me not be here. And that's a feeling that's really, really [pause]. I don't know, probably one of the worst.

Finally, one nuance of equity was never mentioned by non-blind participants. Without doubt, having access is important, as Mary (b staff/alum) said “promotion of UD [universal design] ... at a systemic place ... A sense of belonging can be generated at that place.” As participants such as Stewart (b faculty) highlighted, “accessibility does not in any way guarantee welcoming at all, or any sense of belonging. There are places accessible to us, that does not mean we belong there.” And conversely, one can feel a sense of belonging without accessibility, as Ava (b faculty) explained, “you can be in a very awkward situation physically, but everyone is reaching out a hand to help you and your jerry-rigging

this whatever you need, and it's fine ... they want you there." Luke

(b alum) shared:

I think practically, its [making things accessible is] maybe easier than feeling. You know, you get the materials you need, you get to participate, those kinds of things. You may, that may connect you but still if you aren't being talked to by your fellow students or whatever you may still, you may not feel that you belong.

A sense of equity was a very important petal for all blind participants, and was discussed at length in relation to equitable access. Further, blind participants added nuances and layering around the added work of trying to obtain access and the emotional tolls that brought.

2.4 Discussion

2.4.1 The BAM and other models

Belonging is deemed so important that it is part of Maslow's (1943) motivational hierarchy, which situates belonging after more basic but critical needs (food, shelter, safety). Postulating the

belongingness hypothesis, Baumeister and Leary (1995) state that humans have an innate need to develop interpersonal relationships and experience a sense of belonging. The belongingness hypothesis theorizes that repeated interactions with the same people is more satisfying because this results in “frequent interaction and persistent caring” (Baumeister & Leary, 1995, p. 497). The belongingness hypothesis, however, does not provide a process with which to understand how sense of belonging develops. The BAM contributes to filling this knowledge gap.

Barriers and facilitators to belonging are also identified in our findings. Barriers preventing sense of belonging in academia include stigma, external locus of responsibility, and unconscious bias. Facilitators to sense of belonging include employing universal design, valuing diversity in teaching and learning environments, and having a strength-based approach to teaching and learning. Marshall et al (2012) found that first-year university

students' sense of belonging was "multi-layered and context-dependent, relating to changes in time and space, classroom pedagogy, and other social, cultural, and linguistic factors" (p.116). The authors' findings corroborate ours that a sense of belonging is influenced by temporality, physical space, and sociocultural factors.

McMillan and Chavis (1986) conceptualize sense of community as including four equal components: (1) *membership*, feelings of belonging and safety within an identification; (2) *influence*, reciprocal influence between an individual and the environment; (3) *integration and fulfilment of needs*, having both physical and psychological needs met; and (4) *shared emotional connection*, a sense of mattering to one another (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Interestingly, although this conceptual framework describes a sense of community rather than belonging, it aligns with components of the BAM. Their definition of community does contain belonging: "sense of community is a feeling that members

have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together" (McMillan & Chavis, 1986, p. 9). For McMillan and Chavis, a community may be geographically defined or focussed on relationships and human relations. McMillan and Chavis' definition of *membership* parallels one of our proposed prerequisites to deeper sense of belonging (*affiliation*). *Influence* parallels our concept of *familiarity*, where consistent interaction between a person and their environment shapes sense of belonging. *Integration and fulfilment of needs* parallels our idea of *acceptance*, where an individual feels accepted when they are able to be authentic in an environment. Finally, *emotional connection* parallels our concept of *trusting connections*. Interestingly, McMillan and Chavis' model has no clear parallel to the BAM's sense of equity petal. This could relate to our occupational justice lens, which causes us to emphasize that all have the right to engage in diverse and meaningful

occupations to meet needs and develop human potential (Durocher et al., 2014).

Cooper (2009) shares a four-component model of student engagement focused on constructing belonging on campus, including *involvement*, *identity*, *support*, and *recognition*. Cooper included encouraging *involvement* because there is a positive correlation between student involvement and student success (Humphrey & Lowe, 2017; Tinto, 1987). As was also evident in our analysis, recognizing diverse backgrounds and valuing diversity facilitate belonging. Cooper (2009) includes student *Identity* to emphasize celebration of diversity while also fostering a sense of community. Encouraging students' perception that they matter requires *support and recognition* (Cheng, 2004; Schlossberg, 1989). Cooper's (2009) findings resonate with what we found contributes to the development of sense of belonging. Involving individuals through *affiliation* allows for a foundation upon which belonging may develop. *Support* parallels our finding

that universal design fosters perceptions of mattering and improves sense of belonging. Finally, recognition was a prominent component of the trusting connections and the interdependent relationships petal. Being recognized by others for contributions appears to promote trust and a deeper sense of belonging.

2.4.2 The BAM's five petals

Previous literature defining belonging includes concepts with which we have described affiliation, such as association, membership, and attachment (e.g. Antonsich, 2010; Fenster, 2005; Inalhan & Finch, 2004; P. Jones & Krzyzanowski, 2008; Strayhorn, 2012a). The environment influences affiliation, as illustrated by *place attachment*, which describes how the social and physical features of a setting interact with the characteristics of a person to create attachment (Inalhan & Finch, 2004). For example, place attachment is influenced by the environmental feature of *class-size*. In academia small classes foster student integration, the formation of attachment, and attainment of

academic social capital (Deil-Amen, 2011). As class sizes grow, opportunities for student interactions may decrease. Beattie and Thiele (2016) found that for students from groups who have previous experience of marginalization in academia, including racialized and first-generation students, large class-size has a greater negative impact than for other students. In our findings, blind students placed greater emphasis on the negative impact of larger classes on their opportunities to interact and build a sense of belonging than did non-blind participants.

Our finding that shared affiliation with an environment over time allows for informal conversations and interactions to occur which in turn promote familiarity resonates with Dagaz's (2012) findings. Dagaz found that students who, through frequent interaction and shared occupation, became familiar with the people in their environment, were more likely to engage with others to build friendships, and felt confident to be their authentic selves (Dagaz, 2012).

The acceptance petal in the BAM highlights the connection between being one's authentic self and having a sense of belonging, both in terms of self-accepting and being accepted. Almog (2018) pointed to the importance of blind students developing a positive disability identity. Having a stigmatized social identity may cause distress (Goffman, 1963; Inzlicht & Good, 2005). Thinking about one's stigmatized identity in a threatening context can trigger a chain of events leading to underperformance (Inzlicht & Good, 2005). Strength-based approaches that embrace disability as diversity may interrupt this chain of events. Schreiner and Anderson (2005) found that deficit-based approaches to academic advising may cause students to "become less involved in the campus community, believing that they do not really belong there in the first place" (p. 21). As described in the BAM, a different chain of events may be facilitated in favour of belonging. Consistent interaction within one's environment of affiliation, development of familiarity with

one another's strengths, and use of a strength-based approach may facilitate acceptance.

Significantly, acceptance is not simply being present as a member of a collective. For instance, enrolment or employment in an academic environment demonstrates affiliation, not acceptance. Even if an institution has a high degree of representation from marginalized groups, its policies or culture could lead marginalized groups to feel underappreciated or excluded (Chen & Hamilton, 2015). Affiliation and acceptance may be confused with one another, so we note that affiliation is a superficial predecessor to acceptance.

Prejudice, stereotypes, and discrimination – conscious or unconscious, actual or perceived – may hinder acceptance and the development of trusting connections. When left unchecked, prejudicial attitudes and stereotyping can lead to discriminatory behaviours. Experiences of perceived prejudice and discrimination negatively affect sense of belonging and retention

of students (M. J. Chang et al., 2011; Locks et al., 2008) and employees (Cundiff et al., 2013). The Oxford Dictionary defines trust as the “firm belief in the reliability, truth, or ability of someone or something” (OED Online, n.d.). It is difficult to rely on people when one encounters discrimination or perceives prejudice. Both the literature and our findings suggest that in the context of an environment prizing measurable productivity, some find that an important factor in developing trusting connections is having the sense that others can rely on you and your ability to also contribute relationally. For example, Whitten et al. (2020) found that feeling able to contribute helped commuter business students develop sense of belonging. As equal members of a collective, belonging may develop when an individual can contribute and be recognized for their contributions. Waterfield et al, (2018), for example, found that disabled academics felt pressure to perform as the optimal productive academic contributors. Our findings to indicate that contributions are not only valued in terms of

academic productivity, Ellen's party as an example. Many examples did, however, focus on productivity and contribution to the neoliberal academic project, such as producing publications (N. Brown, 2020; Dolmage, 2017; Peruzzo, 2020). This is problematic, and may be a symptom of the ableist academic environment in which disabled academics are framed as less productive and therefore less valuable (N. Brown, 2020; Dolmage, 2017; Waterfield et al., 2018).

The literature supports the BAM's element sense of equity being an important factor in developing belonging. For example, being precariously employed within the university detracts from the sense of belonging to the institution. The argument that there exists an inequitable hierarchy in academia is long-standing (Hensley, 2014). Kezar and Sam (2010) argued that non-tenured faculty members are increasingly frustrated as they feel that they are not compensated equitably for their contributions. Feeling undervalued as an employee may impact the quality of instruction

(Umbach, 2008) and may contribute to hostile feelings toward the employer (Spector, 2008). These systems-level issues impact whether a person feels a sense of belonging within academia.

2.4.3 Implications

The BAM could inform stakeholders' – educators', administrators', students', faculty members', and student affairs staff's – understanding of how belonging develops in academia. This model may help identify ways to foster the development of belonging. Having a deeper understanding of how sense of belonging develops, and knowing some of the facilitators and barriers to belonging, stakeholders can advocate for systemic, structural, and cultural shifts that may foster sense of belonging for people from equity-seeking communities in the higher education context. The unique stories from blind people add to these implications. The BAM may be a useful tool for stakeholders to consider the unique factors impacting belonging for blind people, particularly in combination with additional stories,

such as those that will be presented in chapter 3. By attending to the experiences of blind people in academia, stakeholders can become more sensitive to the nuanced experiences of people from equity-seeking groups. Understanding facilitators and barriers to belonging could result in more successful program planning, culturally safer practices, and inclusive educational system policies. These applications of the BAM, and potential resultant increased sense of belonging, may in turn improve student, staff, and faculty retention, motivation, satisfaction, and success (Hausmann et al., 2007; M. Hoffman et al., 2002; Jaitli & Hua, 2013; Kelchtermans, 2017; O'Connor et al., 2008; L. Thomas, 2012).

2.4.4 Conclusion

Further research should explore whether the proposed Belonging in Academia Model reflects more diverse perspectives and experiences. Although numerous studies cite sense of belonging as an important factor in academic motivation, success, and

persistence (Freeman et al., 2007; Hausmann et al., 2007; M. Hoffman et al., 2002), future studies should test and expand the BAM by investigating the process of sense of belonging in academia to uncover how differences in school contexts or demographics influence the development of sense of belonging. This study used a qualitative approach to describe these participants' experiences, and a mixed-methods or quantitative approach using the Belonging in Academia Model alongside qualitative inquiry may yield significant insights.

A sense of belonging has important implications for academia (Hausmann et al., 2007; M. Hoffman et al., 2002; Strayhorn, 2012b). By building on the BAM to better understand how sense of belonging develops for students, staff, and faculty, academic institutions can tailor their actions to move toward fostering a sense of belonging for all members of the learning and teaching environment. Incorporating facilitators to cultivating a sense of belonging in academia could prove to be essential for student,

staff, and faculty success and retention. There needs to be empirically based materials to help stakeholders to learn and implement strategies for belonging. Chapter 3 shares one example of a scholarly knowledge translation strategy: a workshop aimed at academic stakeholders.

Chapter 3: Co-Creating Spaces of Belonging on Campus: A workshop for learners, teachers, staff, and community members

Throughout my doctoral journey, my scholarly identity has come to include teaching as an important element alongside research expertise. I include this as a chapter in the dissertation to highlight the importance of teaching scholarship and scholarly teaching. In this chapter I provide a workshop outline and a brief discussion of evidence in which the design is based. This workshop is designed to share the knowledge I have gained through the process and research involved in this dissertation to enable academic stakeholders to implement strategies that may foster belonging. After the outline, I provide more discussion and description of the novel use of research-based theatre (RBT) as an affective teaching tool – ‘affective’ involving emotions, beliefs, and values. This RBT, “I know I Belong When...Stories of Authenticity, Performance, and Burdens,” is based on conversations with 35

blind and partially blind people from across North America, whose stories also contributed to chapter 2 of this dissertation. The reader can expect to find that the latter part of this chapter includes evidence regarding RBT's effectiveness from both the literature and from feedback given by people who have participated in the workshops. The final portion of the workshop outline is the RBT script that is used in the workshop and which is based on research done as part of this dissertation. Please refer to chapter 2 for details regarding the methods used in the focus groups that contribute to the content of the RBT.

At the time of writing this dissertation, this workshop has been facilitated twice in person with one virtual workshop scheduled. Participants have included teachers' assistants, students, faculty members, and staff members from across campus at the University of British Columbia. It is an optional workshop and is not graded or given for credit, and is typically 2-3 hours long and has included between 6 and 40 people.

3.1 Workshop Design

This workshop was shaped by different kinds of knowledge from various sources: my research, personal and professional experiences, literature, and feedback from previous workshop participants. My professional and personal values as a teacher influence this workshop's design. These values include collaboration, equity, inclusion, and integrity. By collaboration I mean working together, as learners and teachers, toward learning. Equity - I believe that all humans are of equal value and deserve to have equitable opportunities. That is, humans have the same value but should not necessarily be treated the same way. To have *equitable* opportunities, individuals might need to go about learning in different ways. When thinking about inclusion, I am thinking of including diverse ways of being in and perceiving the world. I also invite diversity of perspectives and use various teaching approaches to meet diverse ways of understanding and knowing. Finally, I value the integrity of learners' and my own

integrity. In valuing learners as whole beings and acknowledging that they are more than just students or learners, I am valuing their integrity as individuals. Through my invocation of the word integrity in reference to myself I indicate that it is important for me to maintain honesty and humility especially when I do not know something, congruence between my values and the ways I respectfully interact, and adherence to ethics (Bulk et al., 2019; O'Sullivan et al., 1994).

In this workshop, my objectives as a teacher include 1) to facilitate the co-creation of collaborative, diverse, inclusive, and respectful learning environments; 2) to remain humble and ready to learn; 3) to challenge learners to enter critical reflection and engage in transformational learning that will lead to action; and 4) to equip learners with basic strategies, knowledge, and skills related to facilitating welcoming environments.

Educational theories and concepts underlying the workshop's design include transformational learning, constructivism, active

learning, and universal design for learning (UDL). As a teacher, I hope to both engage in and facilitate transformational learning, which involves perspective transformation. Transformation involves “structural change in the way we see ourselves and our relationships” with other actors, and with the wider world and its structures (Mezirow, 1978, p. 100; Tokiwa-Fuse, 2000). This leads to transformed and wider perspectives, which in turn contributes to more informed choices for behaviours and occupational engagement (Tokiwa-Fuse, 2000). By presenting challenging ideas and alternate perspectives in novel ways, I encourage learners to examine their assumptions. I also invite learners to join me in the creation of an interdependent learning community where all can be challenged to engage in critical reflection (Hartley, 2007). Drawing on Freire’s (1970) critical pedagogy, I hope that learners will not only experience personal transformation as they examine previously held assumptions, but also that they will act on their learning. Through praxis, a process

of reflection and action that synthesizes theory and action, learners can become part of transforming oppressive realities.

An initial step in my teaching is co-creating a welcoming learning space. In doing so, I recognize learner autonomy to advocate for their learning needs. For example, at the beginning of the ‘Co-Creating Spaces of Belonging on Campus’ workshop, I invite learners to co-create a space that is conducive to their learning and do what they need to in order to learn well. For example, I invite learners to stand, sit, or move around as needed and model this by standing, sitting, and moving around as I need. I also bring stories of my experience as a disabled healthcare professional and academic into the classroom as a way of challenging common assumptions and demonstrating vulnerability and effective use of personal story as a pedagogical tool. Co-creation of an effective learning space is important from constructivist, transformational, and trauma-informed learning perspectives (Brooks & Brooks, 1993; Davidson, 2017). In this workshop, as in

all teaching and learning spaces, belonging is an important factor for learning. We need to feel valued, share in one another's transformation, and know that our contributions are valued. We need to find a sense of belonging in the learning space. Using paired and small group exercises builds connections between learners, opens space for many voices, and accelerates learning through sharing of ideas. Of note, although I can employ strategies as the facilitator to engender a learning environment like this, I recognize that inviting shared control of space does not change structural power hierarchies that exist among participants and between myself and participants.

Constructivist learning theory postulates that learners build knowledge actively in the context of previous knowledge and social experiences (Cummings et al., 2014). In the workshop I facilitate active learning through a variety of evidence-based activities, such as paired and group discussion, interactive lecturing, and scenario-based learning (Barkley & Major, 2020;

Cummings et al., 2014; Hackathorn et al., 2011). Although being told ‘the answer’ may seem easier in some instances, the creation of a constructive and challenging environment is ultimately better for learning. For example, rather than providing a list of problems and solutions, I use scenarios and discussion to encourage critical thinking, collaboration, resource seeking, knowledge application in both solving and reframing “problems.” Throughout the workshop, learners are not passive recipients of, but rather are co-constructors of knowledge. In keeping with a constructivist approach, my role as a teacher reflects being a facilitator of knowledge co-construction rather than an expert transmitting information into the minds of learners (Brooks & Brooks, 1993).

Flexibility allows more space for learners to collaborate in building knowledge. Flexibility aligns with both constructivism and UDL.

The workshop is designed to allow the greatest possible degree of flexibility in the means of representation, expression, and engagement (Center for Applied Special Technology, 2020; Rose

& Meyer, 2002). In Appendix B, I describe the goal for each activity, and one option for the structure of the activity. Flexibility is incorporated as I plan multiple options for learning activities in order to adapt to participant needs. I also use multiple means of representation of information, such as giving information verbally and visually. For example, the goals of an activity may be to provide space for participants to begin reflecting on their existing knowledge and to start thinking about some important topics related to the experience of disability. The activity used in this outline is a virtual quiz. The facilitator shows questions on screen, participants can read the question on their own device, and the facilitator reads the question aloud – providing multiple means of accessing the information. The activity's goals could also be met using a paper-based quiz, or self-reflection guided by questions, or something else.

3.2 Workshop Learning Objectives

By the end of this workshop participants will be able to:

- 1) Apply knowledge from this workshop and previous experiences to discuss what disability is, including appropriate and inappropriate terms to use.
- 2) Describe some barriers disabled people experience to belonging in academia.
- 3) Discuss respectful ways to interact with disabled people.
- 4) Identify at least three strategies for making your own places of teaching and learning more welcoming to disabled people.
- 5) Reflect greater appreciation for some of the nuances of the realities of blind people in academia, and how some of these concepts may extend to other equity-seeking groups.

3.3 Workshop Outline

Please peruse the workshop outline, found as Table 2 within Appendix B. The workshop was developed based on the theories and knowledge described in section 3.1. My experience facilitating workshops with the Centre for Teaching, Learning, and Technology at UBC, particularly Instructional Skills Workshops, also played a role in my learning that led to the structure and learning activities used for this workshop.

3.4 Feedback

For the sake of transparency regarding the impact on participants, I am including the following feedback from two offerings of the workshop. Quotations from participants will also appear in section 3.5 to serve as examples of RBT's educational impact. Note that these are not *data* or *research* surveys, but rather are meant as feedback to improve my teaching.

3.4.1 2019

Thirty-five university staff, faculty, and students participated in this workshop and all completed the feedback survey, which included open ended questions, comment boxes, and Likert-style questions on a 1 (completely disagree) to 4 (completely agree) points scale. For all questions, the range was 3 to 4.

Question	Mode	SD	Med	Median

I learned from the workshop about defining disabilities	3	.50	4	3.56
I learned from the workshop about the barriers and challenges for people with disabilities	3	.49	4	3.59
I learned from the workshop about strategies to make places more inclusive	3	.47	4	3.67
After the workshop I feel more motivated than before to change something in my work environment to make it more welcoming	3	.36	4	3.85

I enjoyed participating in the workshop	3	.42	4	3.78
The facilitator was an effective teacher	3	.26	4	3.93

Any parts in the workshop that were more meaningful for you?

(representative examples included)

- The introductions at the beginning were very meaningful for me because they acknowledged both the geo/spatial/cultural history of the space we were in, plus the personal history of the participants
- Review of calls to action/ pronouns/ access needs
- Acknowledgements and the narrative and varieties and experiences

- Theatre/dissertation reading - great to hear voices of people with disabilities.
- The screenplay part, excellent storytelling!
- Play, Scenario dynamics: learning about legal matters
- I appreciated the thoughtful nuances that were brought up by the facilitator(s)
- I really enjoyed the reading of the play. It was interesting to hear many different perspectives and I definitely learned about some of the challenges that disabled people face.
- The part about tips from the community was especially helpful. It gives you a unique perspective.
- There was a lot of interaction which I value
- The introductions were a very powerful modelling of taking people into a learning space & setting community agreements
- Practical tips (font size, telling people about cookies)

3.4.2 2020

Six university Teaching Assistants participated in the workshop and all completed the feedback form, which included only open-ended questions and a space for comments.

The best part of the workshop was: (representative examples provided)

- The discussion of real-world scenarios because I could apply what I learned from the session to the cases.
- Feeling safe/comfortable
 - examples of how to create sense of belonging
 - solidarity (TRC report, Braille, etc)
- The play “I know I Belong When” – it was moving, good insight on how it feels to have a disability
- The space that was provided for reflection and connection
- Learning how to support those with disabilities, and how to ask what needs they might have and not assume because I

want the classroom spaces to be places that are accessible/make all students feel welcome.

- The short skit because it addressed a lot of experiences people with disabilities faced but also addressed the ways we as “TABS” and “normies” can be better.
- Tips and info about accessible presentation because I wanted practical knowledge.
- Everything was really informative, from the beginning activity to the play, it was informative and precise on the topic. It changed certain assumptions I had and how to manage my classroom

If I could change anything about today’s session I would: (all comments provided)

- More content on the university setting/institutional structure/resources
- Maybe have another exercises or example.
- It was great you did not force participants to speak.

- Nothing! Great workshop.
- Well done!

I also wanted to say/suggest:

- I enjoyed the diversity of activities we engaged in.
- I felt the workshop got off on the right foot by asking what peoples' access needs are.

While the feedback thus-far has been positive, a useful area for future exploration would be how theatre such as this may or may not prove to be effective as intervention in this particular place where ableism plays out, specifically academia.

3.5 Research-Based Theatre as an Affective Learning Tool

3.5.1 What is RBT?

Research-based theatre (RBT) can at first-read be understood as theatre that is based on research. It is, however, far more complex, as RBT has become understood as method and methodology, for sharing and creating knowledge (Belliveau &

Lea, 2011). As a research tool, RBT is said to open spaces of empathetic power (Mienczakowski & Moore, 2008) that “[enhance] understanding of lived experience in different groups and communities” (Mitchell et al., 2006, p. 198). It humanizes data by maintaining the voices, stories, and unique humanities of those involved (Belliveau & Nichols, 2017; Donmoyer & Donmoyer, 2008; Mienczakowski & Moore, 2008; Saldaña, 2008). RBT is more than using theatre at the end of a project to share findings. RBT can also include incorporating theatre at various phases in the process and inviting continued engagement in research processes throughout research phases (Belliveau & Lea, 2011).

3.5.2 Why RBT and Affective Learning?

In this section I discuss the connection between RBT and affective learning, using examples and evidence from workshop participants and from the literature. Bloom’s taxonomy describes learning in three domains: affective, cognitive, and psychomotor (Bloom et al., 1956). All three domains are addressed in the

learning objectives in this workshop. The affective domain involves learner attitudes, beliefs, and values (Krathwohl et al., 1964; Pierre & Oughton, 2007; Savinckiene, 2010). Addressing *affective* learning objectives is often cited as a key challenge for both novice and experienced teachers (Pierre & Oughton, 2007; Savinckiene, 2010). Affective learning outcomes can be addressed through witnessing others' perspectives and being open to challenging one's previously-held beliefs, values, and attitudes (Krathwohl et al., 1964). Noting RBT's empathetic power and strong foundation of evidence, I pursued RBT as an evidence-informed affective teaching tool. I am not alone in this endeavour. For example, when Segeden (2017) employed RBT in professional development with educators, their participants said RBT is more effective than traditional professional development for promoting long-lasting learning that provokes emotion and is oriented toward action. Bird and Donelan (2020) found that the form of RBT they used – an interactive ethnographic performance

– in a professional learning context fostered critical reflection and effective collective learning.

Where RBT opens space of co-creation between audience and actor (Lea, 2012; Mienczakowski & Moore, 2008), RBT in the workshop context may enhance co-construction of knowledge between learners and facilitators. By prompting emotional and cognitive recall, RBT opens a shared space for learners to co-construct new affective knowledge. Through theatre, learners are encouraged to consider and enter into perspectives of people who are different from themselves (Iverson, 2013). As poignantly said by Wesley (2007), “art, and its celebration of what is different, opens us to the possibility of imagining difference as something to be embraced rather than pushed away” (p. 15).

In this workshop I intentionally incorporated a variety of learning activities to address the learning objectives. Importantly, RBT alone does not necessarily impact transformational learning in the affective domain – it is important for the learner to also engage in

self-reflection and dialogue (Muzyk et al., 2017). One participant noted that one highlight of the workshop for them was “the space that was provided for reflection and connection.” Pairing RBT and other active learning techniques invites participants to reflect on their own experiences of belonging, to consider how blind peoples’ experiences are unique, and to ponder how these experiences intersect and how they might make shifts in their own practice. For example, one participant said “I really enjoyed the reading of the play. It was interesting to hear many different perspectives and I definitely learned about some of the challenges that disabled people face.” Some active learning strategies engage the cognitive domain through dialogue and discussion, whereas RBT communicates through embodied, felt experience and enhances understanding and empathy (Weems, 2003). RBT also serves as a catalyst for further dialogue and “deeper learning” (Iverson, 2013; Wesley, 2007, p. 17). For example, one participant commented in the summary

conversation that she became more aware of the nuances of disabled peoples' experiences and was able to discuss this during the scenario activity. Considering again the process of stigmatization discussed in chapter 1, this combination of active learning strategies and RBT addresses the cognitive and affective components of stereotyping and prejudice (Chan et al., 2009). Addressing these components may disrupt the stigmatization process whereby prejudice and stereotyping based on a negative stigma become enacted through discrimination against blind or disabled people (Chan et al., 2009; Fiske & Tablante, 2015).

3.5.3 How was this RBT developed?

The RBT in this workshop, "I know I Belong When...Stories of Authenticity, Performance, and Burdens," is based on conversations I facilitated with 35 blind and partially blind people from across North America: 28 focus-group participants, 6 storytellers, 6 collaborators and co-creators, and me. The methods for this research are described in chapter 2.

The plots that developed through conversations and data analysis contributed to the RBT that you will read shortly. At the end of each storytelling conversation, I invited the storyteller to complete the sentence “I know I belong when...” This same question came up in each focus group, and has been integrated as a key prompt in the workshop and RBT.

3.5.3.1 RBT Creation Sessions

Participants and other members of the blind community were invited to participate in creating research-based theatre centered on the ideas and stories from the data, as well as our own. We had two sessions, with a total of six participants.

Prior to the sessions, participants were sent a summary of the research. During the session, participants were invited to participate in activities and conversation to develop ideas for a theatrical re-presentation of the stories shared in the research. In the first session we generated ideas, shared stories, and engaged

as a community. Interestingly, we commented that while we were discussing belonging a sense of belonging seemed to develop amongst session participants.

After the first session, I worked with a theatre artist and member of the UBC Research Based Theatre Cluster, Tetsuro Shigematsu, to develop an initial draft. I sent the draft to all participants and invited feedback via email from those who wanted to give it that way. At the session, I read aloud part of the script and we engaged in activities to share stories that built on those stories and diverged from them. We generated ideas and discussed possible theatrical elements that would enhance sharing of the stories.

Following the second session, I worked with the ideas that had been generated and the first draft of the script to move toward a second version. I sent this second version to people who had participated in the session inviting feedback and input. After integrating feedback, I sent the final version to all 34 participants

and again invited feedback. At this stage, six participants responded with messages of support, encouragement, and enthusiasm for the creative way of sharing stories. One participant made a small suggestion to improve the interactive portion of the script.

The first reading took place at UBC's research-based theatre symposium. One part was read by me, and the other by a blind person who participated in the sessions and community conversations that led to the research questions for this dissertation. Based on this reading we made small adjustments to the script and theatrical components.

3.5.4 Ethics

Vulnerability. Participating in focus groups, storytelling, and RBT sessions involves vulnerability as we reveal aspects of our identities and experiences that may open us up to ridicule or other negative outcomes. Vulnerability is, however, an essential part of

co-creating the outcomes of research and in the end enriches the experience for those involved (Defrancisco et al., 2007; Young & McKibban, 2017). Defrancisco et al. state, “based on our experiences, we believe other qualitative researchers would benefit from acknowledging their own stories more fully before asking others to be vulnerable and share the stories of their lives, whatever the topic of study” (2007, p. 241). By sharing some of my story and identity with participants, I made myself vulnerable before asking them to do the same.

Accessibility. A vital ethical consideration for this project is that of accessibility. I tried throughout the process to be attuned to access needs. For example, consent forms are traditionally provided in print format. I provided consent forms electronically to participants (all of whom have access to technology that allows them to read electronic). At the time of the focus group, conversation, or workshop I offered to read the consent form aloud and recorded participants’ consent to participate based

upon the electronically-received consent form. Another example of accessibility comes in the way we interacted. We engaged together using simple 'gestures of belonging' that, although unusual in non-blind contexts, are expected in the context of the blind community. For example, when we enter or leave a space or come up alongside someone, we announce who we are. Another example is that at the workshops I provided snacks, and made sure that all participants knew what was available and where it was.

3.5.5 Trustworthiness

Some of the techniques we used to promote trustworthiness in the work include member reflections, crystallization, reflexivity, praxis, and voice (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Ellingson, 2009; Lincoln et al., 2011; Richardson, 2000). I invited community members to participate in all stages of the research process. This was important, as the knowledge was built together. Participants ultimately chose the level of involvement that worked for them. I

acknowledge that these “choices” were shaped by the personal constraints in their lives. I used member reflections to promote representation of all our voices in the construction of knowledge. Member reflections were an opportunity for us to collaborate and elaborate on findings, as opposed to ensuring that we *got it right* (Tracy, 2010). Praxis involves connecting knowledge with action. According to Lincoln et al. (2011) research can be judged, in part, on its ability to stimulate change and decrease ignorance by elucidating previously silenced or unheard voices. Thus, I examine my research in regard to its ability to expose experiences of reality previously misunderstood or under-represented.

Crystallization, gathering data from various sources, was used to enhance the outcomes of this research (Ellingson, 2009; Richardson, 2000). Crystallization contrasts with triangulation in that the aim is not to improve accuracy or get a true picture of a particular reality that exists, but rather, to increase the amount of

data and gain multiple perspectives such that it is possible to construct thicker description of the phenomenon being explored. This is based upon the idea that realities are not more or less true, rather they are more or less *informed* (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Finally, throughout the process I had reflexive conversations and kept reflexive notes containing observations, critical reflections, and feelings regarding the process and data (Yang, 2015). Because readers/audiences are also co-constructors of knowledge, integrating insights from the aforementioned notes in my writing and the RBT may allow readers to have a greater understanding of the values that may have shaped how I re-present stories (Vandenberg & Hall, 2011).

3.6 RBT: “I know I Belong When...Stories of Authenticity, Performance, and Burdens”

This section describes the RBT used in this workshop. Some elements described in the workshop outline and the RBT outline may be used in different combinations, depending on the context

for each instance of the workshop and performance. Additionally, alternatives were developed to adapt the play for an online performance and an audio version has been created and is included in this dissertation – please refer to the supplementary materials to hear the audio version. The variation described herein is for an in-person workshop. Whatever variations are used, we want to incorporate involvement of participants and critical thinking. The overall aim of the play is to promote empathy, shift negative attitudes, and encourage action toward creating spaces that foster belonging.

3.6.1 Acknowledgements

35 individuals contributed their stories to the research that forms a foundation for play, “I know I Belong When...Stories of Authenticity, Performance, and Burdens.” Additionally, audiences/participants who engaged with early iterations of the script contributed their feedback, leading to the further growth of the piece. The script was developed by Laura Yvonne Bulk, with

support from Tetsuro Shigematsu and the Research-Based Theatre Cluster at the University of British Columbia. The audio version was created in collaboration with Amy Amantea (who reads Performer B/Ava) and Edward Norman (who gave great assistance with editing the audio files), as well as numerous volunteers who read short lines for the introduction. Thank you!

3.6.2 Cast, Setting, Props

There are three roles in this play: Performer A/Kendra, Performer B/Ava, and the participants. Wherever possible, Performers A and B are people from the disabled community and the performers are compensated. The performance is set in a neutral space with two chairs, a blazer, a weight/dumbbell, a bag, and a table if possible. The participants are in a circle with a large gap, which is the stage.

3.6.3 Navigating this script

To promote accessibility of this script several strategies have been used (*note, some of the script formatting may have changed to fit into the dissertation*). Level 2 headings are used for major sections of the document. Level 3 headings are for subsections, including different scenes throughout the script.

Visual strategies may assist those who wish to use their sight to navigate the document. The script font is size 33 with 1.5 line spacing and 6pt space after each paragraph. These settings are adjusted in accordance with access needs of performers. The two main characters are indicated by different colours: **Performer B/Ava** is highlighted in yellow, and **Performer A/Kendra** is in dark green font with an underline. Stage directions and other notes are in italics and *highlighted in light blue*, separated from the dialogue as bullet points.

Different possibilities for how a section can be played out are in dark orange/brown font. Prior to each performance, the performers will discuss which of the options is chosen depending on the physical space, participants, and performers.

3.6.4 Script

3.6.4.1 Preamble

Performer A: Can everyone make their noise? Snapping or tapping? Great. Make your noise if you've ever felt like you belonged somewhere.

- *Pause for participants' response.*

Performer B: make your noise if you've ever been in a place where you did not have a sense of belonging.

- *Pause for participants' response.*

Performer A: Excellent, keep that up throughout the performance.

3.6.4.2 Scene 1: I know I belong when...

Performer B: We've asked other audiences, and now we've also asked you, to complete this sentence

Performer B & **Performer A**: I know I belong when ...

Performer A: Here's what we've heard.

- *Pause for people to think about this.*
- *This next part can be a) read out by **Performer B** & **Performer A** or b) recorded voices of community members*
- *The statements to follow are based on responses from audiences/participants. If performers are able, they will read the responses given by participants in the current workshop, which were collected in an earlier activity.*

Performer B: I know I belong when I am allowed to be myself

Performer A: I don't have to fight to be heard

Performer B: I feel valued and safe

Performer A: When I'm laughing

Performer B: I share similar beliefs to the people around me

Performer A: I feel I can speak

Performer B: I feel comfortable being my truest self with those around me

Performer A: I am heard and acknowledged

Performer B: I can breathe and my heart isn't pounding

Performer A: I'm able to bring my whole self to the table - silliness and all

Performer B: As a non-disabled person, I usually don't even think, or need to think, about whether I belong / fit in / feel comfortable or not

- *Pause for people to think about this.*

Performer A: as a disabled person

Performer B & **Performer A**: I know I belong when ...

- *This next part can be a) **Performer B** & **Performer A** or b) recorded voices of members of the blind community*
- *When performers A&B are reading, they sit/stand on either end of the stage, reading straight out to the audience. Shifting position and tone slightly after each to connote a different person's voice.*

Performer A: I can just be part of the rest of the group without feeling that sense of isolation that comes when you're the one who needs accommodations.

Performer B: when people are happy to see me and they want me there

Performer A: I know I belong when I'm part of a classroom where we practice inclusive design. So it's not singling me out.

Performer B: when I have something to contribute

Performer A: when people do little inclusive things around me like telling me that there's a wet paint sign. Those little things that let me know they're thinking about me and including me.

Performer B: When I don't feel that my needs are a burden, I feel like my needs and my boundaries are respected

Performer A: when I'm invited to similar tasks as my colleagues, but with the flexibility that maybe my copy of the registration list is

printed off large print for example. When they don't skirt around whether or not I can contribute.

Performer B: when I feel connected to the other people around me, and I get the sense that they're connected to me.

- *Pause.*

Performer B & **Performer A**: I know I belong when my belonging was never in question to begin with ...

Performer A: but it always is...

3.6.4.3 Scene 2: Feeling like a Burden vs. a Contributor

- *Transition to next scene. **Performer A** puts the weight on the floor or table or chair with a loud noise, Performer B puts the bag beside it. They sit or stand on either side. For the first few lines, they are alternating between putting the weight in the bag and taking it out – loudly. Throughout the scene the performers are variously talking to one another and the audience.*

Performer A: We carry so many burdens as disabled people, good thing I brought my handy-dandy burden-bag!

- *Stated with a silly tone, holding up the bag*

Performer B: I belong when people are genuinely happy to have me. When my needs are not – or actually – when I am not a burden. Out comes that weight.

Performer A: But it has to be without caveats like “we want you here as long as you don’t ask for anything special.” In it goes.

Performer B: It’s about having that sense of people wanting you to be there, they want to hear from you, they’re excited to hear from you. When your ideas are valued and when somebody wants your input and they want you to contribute. Out comes that burden.

Performer A: But then there are those times when people do stuff like put pieces of paper in front of me and say, “Are you on this committee?”. At those moments I feel sidelined. Like a player sitting on the bench. The player on the bench is technically part of the team, but it doesn’t feel like belonging when you’re always on the bench. And in goes the weight, back into the bag.

Performer B: Although, people do make small gestures of belonging that tell me I am not a burden, but I am a part of the team. I was at a conference and they were showing the slideshow during lunch. One of my colleagues was describing the photos. The way he did it, it was just so natural. Out goes that burden

Performer A: I've definitely had opposite experiences. For example, I got to a meeting and saw something in the middle of the table. I try to make out what it is without being totally obvious. I'm not sure if it's food I should enjoy, or a stack of papers from which I should be taking one, or something else. Awkward. And in goes the weight

Performer B: We've made strides in recent years – there is legislation and policies and procedures for how to get accommodations. Someday we won't have to ask for accommodations – it'll all just be built in. You know the whole universal design thing. But for now, there are systems. Haha, reminds me of that song ... I can do anything you can do different,

I can do anything different than you. Yes I can ... anything my sighted colleagues can do, I can. I just do it differently. And you know, everyone uses accommodations of some sort – like a calculator to do math or...

Performer A: *(cutting Performer B off)* but our accommodations are **special** – aka burdensome.

- **Performer A:** *picks up the burden and loudly plunks it down in the bag.*

Performer B: We might not be able to physically see the way others can, but we can understand things that perhaps they cannot. Really, it's our strength. It's part of our diversity. It's about difference, not deficit.

Performer A: I don't know how blindness, or blind people, or disabled people, will ever truly belong if the onus is always on the individual. When you're always having to ask for accommodations you do begin to feel like a burden. There is an added burden on us, when you're always having to self-advocate. But that, I guess,

we can deal with for now. For now, until universal design exists, we have to. But being made to feel as if I *am a burden*. That's a whole other ball game.

Performer B: I wish more people would get it. We might not be able to physically see the way others can, but we can understand things maybe they can't. Really, it's our strength. It's part of our diversity. It's about difference, not deficit.

All of us are, to use the now very overused phrase, in this together. Even in academia, I want to be part of a village where we are all supporting each other and it really isn't about the blindness or disability. It's about everybody working towards finding their strengths and supporting each other. And through that, belonging emerges.

Performer A: That's the ideal, but in the current world we are still carrying burdens, paying that tax. The disclosure tax. I feel like I have to disclose to people in that "*village*," otherwise I am being

the cause of a lot of miscommunication and I can't get what I need in order to do what I need to. Then it makes it really difficult for me to do my work. And I'm always needing to remind people. And then I start to feel like maybe I'm not supposed to be here. Maybe I am too much trouble.

Performer B: When I do have the support I need, or when things are accessible, I can do good scholarly work, and feeling that sense of belonging is a great by-product. I feel like I am a valuable contributor to my team. I belong there. When they realize – oh, **Ava** might not be great at x, but she's really good at Y and Z! When they come to me for help, so I am being included in a way where I am actually needed, and that is really huge.

Performer A: But, speaking of scholarly output. It seems like if everyone else has got to publish six articles a year, I need to do 10 to achieve the same recognition and value. And when they do recognize my input or seek my expertise – it is not about my knowledge of and expertise in the discipline, it's about disability.

It's always and only about disability. Although I might want that area of my expertise to be recognized, I also want people to recognize that I have other areas of expertise.

Performer B: I guess it's true. The times when I felt like I was most connected within the academy, within my department, were the times when I set myself apart because of the work I was doing, the extracurriculars, being on research teams, doing presentations at conferences. I volunteered for a grant selection committee, I was doing interviews for supervisor's study, and I was doing guest lectures. And, that kind of made me more visible in a way and people connected more with me around it.

Performer A: We shouldn't have to do more, push harder, to feel we belong.

Performer B: Any time I'm contributing or participating. Any time I've had the opportunity to dialogue and discuss with others, network with other people, participate in research projects, to be

an integral part to the department. When I'm advancing in my own goals. All of that contributes to belonging.

Performer A: (speaking to the audience again) But there's always those people who remind me or others around me "*don't forget, Kendra's blind*." Gee, I forgot. Thanks. Or, "hey Kendra, you have a disability, how wide should a doorway be for a wheelchair?" I don't know, why are you asking me?! Or there's that need to submit paperwork proving I'm still blind. Really? You thought that goes away? Or the people who forget that I'm blind. And that brings us back to reminding people I need accommodations and the lack of universal design.

Performer B & **Performer A**: I know I belong when

Performer A: I don't feel like a burden

Performer B: and my diverse contributions are recognized.

- **Performer A**: moves to one of the chairs, where a fancy blazer is hanging.

- Performer B *picks up the burden and bag, and moves to the back of the stage.*

3.6.4.4 Scene 3: Performance vs. Authenticity

Performer A

Enough of those musings. I need to get ready for this performance! Let's see, I've got my fancy hat, check. Oh, stand up straight, pull in that gut. Check. Smile. Check.

Hi, my name is Kendra, and I'm happy to be here. Sorry. Let me take that again. Hi my name is Kendra, and I'm SOOOO happy to be here! No. Hello my name is Kendra, and I'm VERY happy to be here! I wonder, does that sound convincing to you? I've been rehearsing that line for a really long time, and I'm still not sure if it sounds right.

But when I say rehearsing, I don't mean for today. I mean for every day. What was it that Judith Butler said about

performativity? “The process by which identity is constructed through the repeated performance of scripts.” We’re all performing scripts. All the time.

Did you know blind people have scripts? Usually in braille or large print. We do. In fact, I’m performing one right now. You see how I’m smiling? ... I say as a stiff smile slowly grows across my face.

I’m smiling for a few reasons: because I *am* genuinely happy to be here, because I’m a naturally cheerful person, but I’m also smiling because I have to. Maybe I became a naturally cheerful person not so much by mistake as by necessity, I don’t know. It’s survival of the fittest, and for blind people, fitness includes being the cheerful, outgoing blind person.

You can be blind, but you better have a good personality if you want to succeed in academia, or in general. If blind Kendra is going to show up, she better be in a cheery mood.

Performer B: And she better not ask for anything!

Performer A: You see, being a cheerful blind person is different from being a cheerful non-blind person. Because as normies, you're allowed to have a range of human emotions. Oh, I'm sorry, you're probably wondering, *what does that mean?* It refers to most of the people I encounter every day.

Performer B: A Normie is a non-disabled person. You're considered the *norm* in our society, and especially in ableist academia. You're the ideal, able, autonomous, productive citizen. Right now, you're living in a world that is designed for you, it enables you to be and become who you want to be. To do what you want to do. To belong where you want to belong.

Performer A: Normies, you just don't always get it. When my community gets together. When we have disability quorum, we really let loose on all the indignities the Normies subject us to on a daily basis:

Performer B: “No, I’m sorry, I don’t want to tell you how I lost my sight, right now I’d just like to get to class, with a caramel macchiato. Soy, no foam please.”

Performer B: “I don’t want to educate you about blindness for the whole bus ride, I want to just sit and listen to my podcast. I’ve had a long day of educating students about geography, I don’t really feel like educating you about blindness and disability etiquette.”

Performer B: “I feel like I should wear a sign that says: a) yes, I’m actually the professor, b) no I don’t know anything about your grandmother’s glaucoma, and c) I don’t want to feel your face.”

Performer A: (pause, sigh, shaking head) oh Normies.

Here’s the thing. Normies are allowed to have bad days. You’re allowed to have RBF, you know, resting ... bad ... face? Yeah, I can’t see your face, but I know about it. You’re allowed to just dash through the world with a grumpy demeanor, unnoticed when it is convenient to you. But not the blind. When we’re in public,

there's no hiding for us. No anonymity. We are on duty 24/7 to be ambassadors for the disabled. Official spokesperson for the blind.

And if we're having a bad day, we can't just snap at you, "I don't want to be your educational moment!" Because then we have to worry about you concluding,

Performer B: "Gee, blind people are really angry at the world. Poor thing."

Performer A: And then maybe you won't offer to help one of my blind friends tomorrow. I need to be the kind of person who sets everyone else at ease. Whether it's a conference or a meeting or a class. I need to make sure the sighted people are comfortable with my blindness.

We are all actors in a performance. And sometimes it is just so liberating to be with disabled people for a little while and not have to perform for all the sighted people. When we get together, there are just certain things that we don't bother with, certain kinds of

performances that don't need to happen, or certain awkwardnesses that don't really come up. When I'm with disabled people – doesn't matter if they're faculty, staff, students, or whatever. There are just some jokes and stories and nuances that Normies don't get. An ally might get it.

We are really fun people, but I'm sorry, if you're not part of the club, you might not get to experience it.

My name is Kendra and I'm happy to be here. But what would make me *really* happy, is if I could be here, and maybe NOT be happy, maybe not perform the cheery blind person.

Performer B: I don't want to be grouchy or rude or blunt, but I'd like to have the option.

Performer A: That would make me really happy.

I know I belong when I can just be my full authentic self. Including my blind self, no matter how she's feeling today.

- *Pause for folks to think on it*

3.6.4.5 Scene 4: Questioning Belonging

Performer A: Maybe you're thinking.

Performer B: but I've never questioned your belonging, I've never even thought of it.

- *Performer B rejoins the front/centre*

Performer A: No, you haven't thought about it? I have.

Consciously or unconsciously, I have questioned my belonging. I have questioned my belonging in those moments when everyone in the room is laughing at some unseen joke.

Performer B: when I put my foot in my mouth because I didn't recognize someone's face at a conference, and couldn't fake it long enough to figure out who they were.

Performer A: Haha, they are all faking it, only they can cheat by reading your nametag. Name tags – I say with a dramatic eye roll. Such a sighted thing.

Performer B: Sure, I can read your nametag, if I'm about two centimeters from your chest with my magnifier out.

Performer A: all of this makes me wonder.

Performer B & Performer A: Do I want to belong here?

Performer A: Do I want to be part of this exclusionary system? Perhaps I want to be here, maybe I need to be here.

Performer B: To have a job. To get an education. To teach.

Performer A: But I don't want to say 'yes' to the beast that this thing is, this exclusionary system.

Performer B: Belonging means that I am accepted, that I don't need to question: *Do I belong here?*

Performer A: Why are we even asking this?

Performer B: Whose belonging gets questioned?

Performer A: The excludable ones. We are the misfits. Our belonging is always in jeopardy. Brene Brown talked about belonging, saying that “fitting in is about assessing the situation and becoming who you need to be accepted. Belonging, on the other hand, doesn’t require us to change who we are; it requires us to *be* who we are.”

Performer B: Who is expected and who is excludable in this space? I think that’s really what we should be looking at. What are we belonging to, do I want to belong into this? The fact that we need to self-advocate, to fight to be here in this university, tells me that I don’t *really* belong.

Performer A: Belonging means not having to justify your place. Knowing, and having others know, I can do the work just as well as anyone else. I belong when I don’t feel like I have to justify myself. That I’m different but that doesn’t mean I’m incapable.

Performer B & **Performer A**: I know I belong when my belonging was never in question to begin with.

3.6.4.6 Scene 5: Allies, Attitudes, and Actions.

- **Performer A** *takes a Shakspearian stance and tone*

Performer A: To belong or not to belong. What does it matter?

Do we even need to belong?

- **Performer A**: *moves to the side*
- **Performer B** *moves front and centre*

Performer B: Yes, I think we do. I do my best scholarship when I belong. When I belong, I feel free. When I belong, my team gets the

Performer A: creative

Performer B: Audacious

Performer A: innovative

Performer B: Willing-to-take risks part of me. In a place of belonging my ideas flourish. When I belong, I am well.

Performer A: And that university is always hankering on about wellness and all that.

Performer B: Maybe some of it is for publicity's sake. But there are allies within the system. Maybe you want to be an ally.

Listening to our stories, that's a start. We need allies who have welcoming attitudes and who demonstrate that with their actions. Today could be a move in your allyship. Whether you're a colleague, a student, an admin assistant, a librarian, a supervisor, an instructor, a dean. ...(gets cut off by **Performer A**)

Performer A: (cutting performer B off) Not those administrators. They should just make sure there are funds for the people who actually care about this stuff to make the changes. After making sure we get paid to do the work, those administrators, they should

keep their noses out of it. They should just stay the h...(gets cut off)

Performer B: (cutting them off) **No**. They too have a part to play, beyond the funding. It's also about culture change – and that involves everyone. Allies can come from all areas, and perform different roles. And of course, you won't get it right every time. I don't get it right every time.

Performer A: And some of us will let you know when you get it wrong.

Performer B: Some of us won't tell you, because we are just so used to smoothing things over. **Some** of us will be rude when we let you know. But don't give up when you get it wrong. Learn.

Performer A: You can and should apologize, but even more importantly, change your actions.

Performer B: And your inactions. Make those gestures of belonging. Maybe do a round of names when we're sitting at the table. Let me know who you are when we pass in the hallway –

Performer A: I don't ignore you because I dislike you – although, I might, but that's not why I ignore you – I ignore you because you look like every other blob I pass in the hallway.

Performer B: And if you're in a rush and just want to fly by, that's fine. Just don't expect me to acknowledge you beyond the polite greeting I give to every other blob I encounter.

- **Performer A** *rejoins at front and centre.*

Performer A: I know I belong when people recognize the diversity of my contributions.

Performer B: I know I belong when I have allies, and when get to be an ally.

- **Pause**

Performer A & **Performer B**: I know I belong when my belonging was never in question to begin with.

- *Pause,*

End of Script

Transitioning back into the workshop, and out of ‘character’:

These are the stories and perspectives of blind people in academia. These are their stories, they are our stories, they are my story. As a blind scholar, student, teacher, and staff member at UBC, I am honoured to bring to you some of the stories of my community

3.7 Reflections on co-creating spaces of belonging

3.7.1 Workshopping the BAM

Participants could read an article outlining the BAM, its petals, and the barriers/facilitators mentioned in chapter 2; however, the workshop format fosters active learning and the RBT engages

affect, and together these may more readily engender action. The BAM petals appear throughout the workshop, in discussions and in the RBT. This workshop format allows participants to actively consider how they develop a sense of belonging and how it might develop for others. Considering the BAM explicitly, participants can identify ways in which they can better facilitate the development of belonging by specifically considering aspects of the petals. Participants have differing spheres of influence, but all participants can contribute to spaces of belonging especially in the middle three petals – familiarity, acceptance, and trusting connections and interdependent relationships. The first petal, affiliation, and final, sense of equity, may be places where participants have less perceived influence. It is, however, important to consider carefully the influences they may actually have in these domains. For example, a participant who plays a role in determining content for a program's admissions website can consider proposing language that would invite disabled

applicants because of the unique and valuable knowledge, experience, and perspectives they bring. This could contribute to affiliation because a disabled person might be more likely to apply.

3.7.2 Reflections on the stories

“I know I Belong When...Stories of Authenticity, Performance, and Burdens” is based on stories from blind people in academia and aims to share some of the unique aspects of what belonging is like for blind and disabled people in academia. I reflect in this section about some of the main ideas in the play; however, this section is not meant to *replace* the RBT with a reiteration of the findings and discussion of these themes. The RBT presents the findings, albeit in an unconventional way for those steeped in mainstream academic ways of knowing and sharing knowledge.

While the scenes are titled as if to signal binary experiences – e.g., feeling like a burden vs. contributor – it is clear that people

do not experience academic life in a series of binaries. For example, one might feel able to authentically express some aspects of their identity while still performing others.

In the process of doing this research and conversations following performances of the RBT it struck me that there are many commonalities across experiences of disabled and non-disabled people in academia, particularly those from equity-seeking communities. For example, Archer (2008) describes younger academics' experiences of inauthenticity in academia, particularly related to the ways neoliberalism in academia demands certain performance standards and outputs. Also similar to the stories of blind people in academia, Rickett and Morris (2020) tell of the additional work, or extra burdens, working-class women carry in academia.

Goffman (1963) discusses the concept of passing in his work about identity and stigma management - it is a process by which people conceal stigmatized aspects about their identities and as a

result receive treatment based on the false assumption that they do not belong to a discreditable group. The idea of *passing*, “instances in which a person, usually a minority, is falsely assumed to be a member of the majority,” (Tatum, 2014) is not limited to disabled people. The inauthentic experiences and need to perform and pass described by Archer’s participants were also related to gender, race, class, and status within the institution.

In our stories we questioned belonging – asking “do I want to belong into this?” Lamothe (2019) describes being an academic embodied as “black, female, slight of stature, young, and occasionally pregnant” (p. 182) and having her belonging challenged early in her academic career. She goes on to say that her “state of not-belonging has changed from one of alienation to one of critical distance and engagement...being a member of the collective, endowed with the capacity to interrogate and confront the group’s unexamined and unspoken assumptions” (Lamothe, 2019, p. 182). Perhaps another avenue for exploration is *choice*

around belonging. One might prefer to belong in some ways while choosing to remain what Lamothe refers to as a “stranger” in other ways. Here I note the contextual nature of choice – opportunities to choose where one belongs and what occupations we engage in are inequitably distributed (Bulk, 2020; Hammell, 2020).

Interestingly, in examples discussed above and in many conversations about diversity in academia, disability remains unmentioned. Disabled people are framed as *unexpected* in academia, which Stone, Crooks and Owen describe as “a place for able-bodied workers” (2013, p. 167; Tltchkosky, 2011; Waterfield et al., 2018). Bruce (2017, p. 173) describes disabled students’ “pervasive sense that their physical embodiment and ways of learning and doing were not expected on campus (which) created a troubling sense that they were not universally perceived as students who belonged.” Although some of the experiences of blind people and people from other equity-seeking groups may

bear similarities, the RBT reveals some of the unique aspects of these experiences for blind people.

3.7.3 Reflections about feedback

Inviting, receiving, reflecting-over, and integrating feedback is an important practice in which I engage as a teacher. For example, receiving very positive feedback about the workshop introduction activity, I continue to use it and have started adapting it for other contexts. One participant particularly highlighted that they appreciate how the activity acknowledges the “geo/spatial/cultural history of the space” and also the participants’ personal histories. Hearing this from a few people, I decided to be more explicit about my intention to do so. Having heard both through verbal comments and in written feedback that participants appreciate the “tips from the community,” I have decided to develop a handout that shares some of these tips so participants can refer to this in the future. I also reflected about feedback that some participants wanted more information about the university context and

institutional policies, practices, and resources. It is also important to me that this workshop not move toward being an information-gathering opportunity. Therefore, I am also going to create a handout with links and explanations regarding those institutional pieces so participants can refer to this.

3.7.4 Concluding reflections

I have come to both enjoy and realize the value of RBT, in combination with other interactive and intentional teaching tools, for creating change. I recognize that *change* happens at different levels and that, as a few blind participants said, ‘awareness education’ has been going on for decades and still there remain barriers. So, while I do not claim that RBT or this workshop will solve that, I have witnessed change occur as a result. For example, a colleague who is part of an organization that hosts a conference for about 15,000 students realized after engaging in one of the RBT performances that their organization should add to the registration a place for people to share their access needs.

A faculty member who witnessed these stories made a point of letting me know who they were when we met in a new setting. These small gestures of belonging certainly made a difference for me. Based on the feedback I have received, I think that participants and audiences have taken what they learned and applied it to other settings as well – spreading those small gestures of belonging and perhaps some larger changes too. To build on this work, future studies could examine the longer-term impact of these workshops and of RBT on participant and audience actions and attitudes. It would also be beneficial to explore the potential impact of the workshop and RBT on shifts in workplace cultures, for example.

These RBT stories are our stories, and they are my story. While I tried to ensure the stories were grounded within the diverse perspectives of participants, as the main author of the RBT my perspective certainly influences the stories told. I identify with all of the themes expounded upon in the RBT, but perhaps not all the

perspectives or dimensions of the experience of being blind and belonging in academia. I performed versions or portions of the RBT in various settings and for/with various people throughout the development process, in workshops, an RBT symposium, in defense of this dissertation, and a small part of it in the three-minute thesis competition. As an *insider*, a blind scholar, there was some blurring, to use a pun, of the lines between who I am and a character I played. I will explore the idea of *insiderness* more in chapter 4. I do not explicitly differentiate for audiences which of the stories I identify with, and which I perhaps do not. Another interesting avenue for exploration is how engaging in this kind of insider performance and education might impact the performer/teacher, and how having an insider perform the RBT/facilitate discussion might impact the engagement of participants. For example, although I employ strategies to mitigate this impact, such as opportunities to submit anonymous questions

and small group discussions, participants might feel less free to ask honest questions that might offend me, a blind scholar.

Chapter 4: Blurry lines: Reflections on ‘insider’ research

As a blind scholar doing this research in the blind community, I am doing what could be called insider research. I am also engaging in insider research as a teacher, researcher, learner, and scholar at a university doing research with people who also play these roles; however, this chapter focusses on the former. This chapter shares reflections from a series of conversations with another blind scholar about doing insider research as blind scholars. The approach in this chapter aims to elevate relational knowledge and process. I am fortunate to collaborate with other blind scholars and members of the blind community, and the knowledge created and shared in and through these relationships has value. In this chapter, I will provide some background regarding literature that has informed our initial understanding of insider research from a disability perspective, share particularly salient pieces of our conversations, and conclude by reflecting on

how our reflections enter into conversation with literature regarding insider research. This chapter is not meant to be a comprehensive overview of the literature regarding insider research, but is meant to highlight our reflections as blind scholars and the ways our understandings of insider research evolved through our relational reflective process.

4.1 Insider research

Insider research can be described as research in which the researcher (an insider) is doing research on, with, or for a person, group, or community with which they share characteristic(s) that are relevant to the research (Yin, 2015). Drawing on the work of previous authors, Toy-Cronin (2018) points out that “belonging to a group in one dimension (e.g. a shared race or shared profession) does not necessarily equate to insider status with the group if the researcher's other characteristics mean they are also outside the group” (Beoku-Betts, 1994; Chavez, 2008; Labaree, 2002; Toy-Cronin, 2018, p. 457).

Across definitions of insider research, a common thread is that it engenders unique challenges and opportunities shaped by temporal, disciplinary, and community contexts (Chavez, 2008; Labaree, 2002; Nell, 2019; Toy-Cronin, 2018). For example, in the context of disability community, insider research is often given high value (Duckett & Pratt, 2007). Kitchin (2000) quotes one participant saying “I would love to see the day when disabled people are doing research about disability...Simple little things like [accessibility in transit], that [enabled researchers] can’t empathise with, but someone like myself as a disabled person can” (p. 34). Some of the challenges include perceived bias and the need to negotiate dual roles as a community member and a researcher (Toy-Cronin, 2018).

Within the literature there is no discussion of how blind insider researchers impact and are impacted by the research process and outcomes. With no model to follow, as a novice researcher, I needed to have reflective conversations about the processes of

doing insider research as a blind person with another blind scholar.

4.2 Reflecting together

Dr. Bethan Collins, who identifies as blind, kindly agreed to be on my doctoral committee, and to engage in conversations with me about insiderness in research. Through our reflective conversations, we elucidated a greater understanding of insider research from our blind perspectives and explored the potential implications for ethics, research approaches, and the disability community.

Bethan is a senior and myself a novice academic. We both identify as [blind](#) – i.e. we use non-visual/less visual techniques to function efficiently in everyday life, including academic life (Jernigan, 1984). We acknowledge that we are both white women with the privilege of higher education. We hope to be transformative intellectuals by being “open to change as we seek

to understand why we think and act as we do” (Lester, 1993, p. 233) and by uncovering subjugated knowledges (Giroux, 1988). We also recognize that we are “speaking from, for, and to the margins” and we will need “to acknowledge positions of privilege, which exist alongside marginality” (Boylorn & Orbe, 2016, p. 15). We further position ourselves and other disabled people as belonging to a minority culture.

4.3 Our process

As researchers, Bethan and I turn the proverbial microscope upon the experiences of others, and therefore we also chose to turn it upon our own experiences. By elucidating how our own beliefs and experiences about insider research have been constructed, we hoped to reveal avenues for other insider researchers to explore their own processes (H. Chang, 2008; Ellis et al., 2010; Wright, 2008). Our reflective conversations were helpful to me in the process of doing the PhD, and I hope by sharing some of our

salient reflections here we will be able to contribute to an important conversation about insider research.

Our reflective process involved three stages of asynchronous discussion about our experiences of doing insider research as blind scholars.

Stage 1: We both reflected through writing on three initial questions:

1. What do the concepts of insider and outsider researcher mean to you?
2. What is your experience doing research with other blind people?
3. When have you felt like an insider or an outsider?

Stage 2: We read each other's narratives responding to the three questions. Based on our reading of the other person's work, we each identified key themes and formulated an additional nine

questions. We then reflected through written responses to these questions:

1. If we can never be a true insider, what are the values (and problems) with the concept and reality of insider research?
2. What does 'close to the research in a special way, closer than what is usual for a researcher' mean?
3. How do you manage the challenge of over-empathizing with people or the desire to share your experience in research with people who are *like you* (as opposed to *other than you*)
4. Insideriness – something you embody? Do other people recognize it? How does it influence your research and what do you do with it?
5. How much of insideriness is determined by emotional, intuitive, connection?
6. Can a so-called insider (say someone who is blind) behave as an outsider and treat "other" blind people as subjects?

Would this no longer be insider research even though the researcher has legitimate claim to the identity?

7. If in/outsider research is a spectrum, is it possible that different parts of ourselves are at different places on this spectrum at different times?
8. If in/outsider research is a spectrum, who decides where an individual is on the spectrum of in/outsiderness?
9. What are some of the things about which you were afraid related to doing insider research?

Stage 3: We both reviewed the written responses from stage 2 and independently recorded our thoughts about what we noticed from the conversations and what themes we might derive.

Following our asynchronous written conversations, we engaged in verbal conversations about what we were noticing as interesting and important. Through our process of reflection, we developed an understanding of the meaning we made of doing insider research.

4.4 Themes about insider research

Three themes stood out to us in our reflective process: 1)

Complexities of insider research: Subjective experiences and shared emotions; 2) The 'right' thing to do; and 3) Doing the different work of insider research.

4.4.1 Complexities of insider research: Subjective experiences and shared emotions

We recognized that insider research was more complex than we first thought. Sharing characteristics is not enough to feel like or be perceived as an insider and not sharing characteristics does not necessarily make one an outsider. We became aware that insider is a non-binary, fluid identity. Bethan and I agreed that “at first, [we] had what was, perhaps, a naïve and simple understanding. [We] thought it was a matter of being someone who has the particular lived experience.” For Bethan, insiderness was problematized when a graduate student challenged her to

reconsider insiderness in disability research. The graduate student was a non-disabled professional, yet she felt like an insider doing research with disabled people. This highlighted complexity regarding what makes someone an insider. Bethan previously considered disabled people as insiders, but questioned if a non-disabled professional could be considered an insider. The graduate student had a relationship with disability community, but was an outsider to the lived experience of disability. Is that relationship *enough*? Bethan proposed a spectrum of insiderness:

We are somewhere on the spectrum ... Where on the spectrum of inside/outside a person sits, I think is, at least in part, emotional. It is about how connected you feel to the topic or community, as well as others' perceptions of your insider-ness.

I responded that insiderness is nonbinary:

I am always standing in the borderland between being an insider and outsider. Knowing aspects of the experience of being a blind person, but not knowing, for example, the experience of using a guide dog or of being (blind and) Indigenous.

Highlighting the non-binary nature of insiderness, I wrote “I do think that I am often, maybe always, an outsider even when I am also an insider in relation to those with whom I do research.”

Rather than being a fixed position or identity, we found through our reflection that it is fluid and therefore these seeming contradictory positions of insider and outsider can co-exist. Some aspects of our experiences might contribute to insiderness, while others simultaneously contribute to outsidership. We also found that the felt sense of insiderness, be it felt by researchers or participants, is not static. Bethan said that “in different situations, we inhabit different parts of the spectrum [from total outsider to total insider] ... I think we probably shift in and out with each question, with each piece of analysis and with writing up.”

Because it is ever-changing, “the identity of insider is not really something one can possess. It is perhaps something fleeting, fluctuating” (Laura).

Our reflective conversations led us to discuss subjective feelings and emotion contributing to insiderness or outsidership. If insiderness is not solely based on an objectively observable characteristic, then upon what else is it based? “Perhaps to be a true insider means that the felt sense of connection over shared experience outweighs the sense of disconnection ... perhaps being an insider has something to do with empathy” (Laura). Bethan shared about an occasion when she and a participant both felt a sense of connection:

[The participant] repeatedly said ‘You know what I mean’. I did, I absolutely did know what she meant, even though she was a person with cerebral palsy, who used a large powered wheelchair and personal assistance and objectively had little in common with me ... I felt like an insider ... while our embodied experiences of disability were very different, we shared a perspective on the world. That seemed enough.

In this instance, Bethan subjectively felt like an insider, and from the comment “you know what I mean” it seems the participant agreed. But this is not always the case. If insiderness is subjective and related to an embodied feeling, then, we asked “the question:

felt by whom? ... Do the folks with whom I feel I am an insider feel the same way? ... What if they feel that I'm an insider but I do not?" (Laura). For example, although I felt like an insider during focus groups with blind participants (described in chapter 2 and chapter 3), it is possible some participants did not perceive me as such. This may have influenced what they shared and their trust in me. Reviewing and reflecting on my post-focus group notes, there were no moments in which I thought a participant indicated (explicitly or implicitly) that they felt I was an outsider to experiences of being blind. However, the power inherent in being 'the researcher' in this situation may have caused participants to conceal this feeling.

The subjectivity of insiderness is related not only to determining what makes insider research, but also what impact the subjective perception of insiderness might have on the research and on the researcher. I reflected that perhaps situations wherein the participants perceive insiderness (even if the researcher does not)

“allow for some of the same benefits to research as when I also feel that insiderness.” Bethan also questioned the impact of participants’ feelings that she was an insider:

Their perception of me as an insider, I think, made them feel like I was more trustworthy. They assumed that I would do the best for them and document their views, maybe unquestioningly. They seemed to suggest a sense of comradery that made them feel at home with me, and noticeably less with the [non-blind] researcher.

Conversely, when a researcher might perceive themselves as an insider while participants do not, this could have the opposite impact. As a partially blind scholar, I have wondered about this:

One thing that’s made me uneasy is the idea that perhaps I will be considered an outsider masquerading as an insider, because I am not “blind enough.” Although I have found acceptance, and belonging, in the blind community, I do sometimes feel like an outsider even in this community. For the most part not, but there have been particular moments or interactions.

Here I explicated one of the complexities of insider research – that it involves the subjectivities of researcher, participants, and community members. This meta interpretation, or thinking about

what others may think, led us to question when insider research may be universally the best or right thing to do.

4.4.2 The ‘right’ thing to do

The second theme relates to how insider research is valued (or not) in different contexts and whether or not it is perceived to be the right thing to do in a given situation. We found that perceived value of insider research affected our perceptions and practice. Values of insider research change according to context and we discussed how our perceptions of insiderness changed over time, in our own research journeys.

Although we both knew how insider research is positively valued in disability research, we also critically examined its value. We described the affordances and challenges of insider research and the impact of others’ value judgements. Bethan was encouraged not to do research with blind people for her doctorate because at

that temporal and disciplinary location, insider research was considered less rigorous and lacking in desired objectivity.

It was, however, clear in our reflections and conversation that we did not consider insider research to be either good or bad. Rather, we took a position that insider research has its place, and so does outsider research, as Bethan noted:

Just as I don't think there is a binary insider-outsider relationship, I don't think there is necessarily a value attributed to one or other side of the continuum. At times, the insider knowledge and perspective is valuable, at other times, there is real value in stepping back and looking in from the outside. Slipping between roles, I think is possible, even within the same research project, but requires advanced and acute reflexivity. I think that either end of our insider-outsider spectrum could be less helpful, but I think there is value in the range of insider or outsider perspectives.

Another example comes from the RBT-creation workshops described in chapter 3. A non-blind artist was present at the workshops. Reflecting on the experience, I realized how valuable his questions and contributions were. He helped clarify subtle knowings that we shared as blind insiders without even

recognizing we knew these things. Without his insights, we may not have realized that we needed to make aspects of our experience explicit if we wanted them to be knowable for people outside our community.

Some of the challenges of insider research made us question if it was the best approach. Bethan described empathizing with a participant in a study early in her research journey when she felt a shared understanding, which she later reflected may have meant that she did not engage the participant in more detailed explanation because she assumed understanding. In our conversation, we found that when there is less intuitive understanding, we probe more during interviews and may collect data that is more thorough. When we shared experiences, and our participants were aware of this, we found it more difficult to probe without breaking that rapport. We did 'know' information and we could understand, and probing further felt as if it might indicate to the participant that we were not actually insiders as

demonstrated by the need to probe to gain understanding. This tension, we found, raised the challenges of how to manage data collection, and particularly getting rich, detailed information that can be meaningfully analysed in a trustworthy manner without challenging relationships and the bond built during interviews. We described the challenge of managing our own presence and voice as insiders in the research, wanting to maintain space for participant voices while also knowing, as Laura said, “when I am perceived as an insider, I think it feels useful to voice my agreement, my sense of shared experience ... this often leads to further sharing of stories and deeper feeling from participants.” Being conscious of the possibility of our own voices dominating “feels especially important when there is a perceived power imbalance between myself as a researcher and co-researchers/participants.”

Another issue we identified is that judgements are made about insider research as lacking rigour and about us as researchers.

The value-judgements made by the scholarly community impacted our engagement in insider research. Bethan shared that, at an earlier point in her career, she “was afraid of an external judgement or suggestion that being “too close” makes the research less trustworthy.” This shifted as she became a more established and confident researcher, and as the acceptance of various qualitative methodologies increased generally. We were conscious of value-judgements potentially being made about us as scholars. Laura, for example, said:

One big [trepidation about doing insider research] is the fear of being put into a box, a blind box. Wherein someone talking about me might say “This is Laura, she’s a blind scholar, she does research with blind people. What else does she do? Nothing, she’s blind.”

I have realized through our process of reflective conversations, that although some scholars might put me in “a blind box,” for me the value of insider research outweighs this risk.

Through these reflections, we concluded that insider research is not necessarily the ‘right’ thing to do in all situations. The

‘rightness’ needs to be examined critically, and in conversation with the community in question. For example, in a community whose lives are most impacted by the research, they want to have the research done by someone they perceive as an insider. Therefore this desire may be an indication that insider research would be most appropriate. This is, however, an area that would benefit from further research and consideration. I wonder, for example, if there are situations in which the community in question is a dominant group and having an ‘insider’ conduct research for them might allow this dominant group to maintain the status quo. Perhaps sometimes it is important to get an ‘outsider’ perspective. Perhaps sometimes it would feel safer to do research as an outsider. For example, insider research requires different kinds of work and one might not always be prepared to engage in these kinds of labour.

4.4.3 Doing the ‘different’ work of insider research

The third theme is about the work involved in insider research.

We decided that it would be more appropriate to call it different rather than additional work. All researchers might engage in work that involves emotion, but our reflections highlighted some of the unique aspects of insider research work. Bethan stated:

Insider research, I see as closely connected with reflexivity because we need to take stock of and reflect upon our status as an insider. Insider research can be challenging as the researcher necessarily has a connection with the area - an emotional connection ... sometimes, I think it is easier to do research where I am not an insider, so I can just do the research without the self-examination.

As insider researchers, we play dual roles: researchers and members of the blind community. This is different from a dual professional relationship such as being a health professional and a researcher. For example, I reflect that when I am doing research with members of the blind community, the risk I am taking in terms of maintaining my relationship with that community

is greater than when I am doing research with people who are not part of my community of identity. Both of us described the work associated with insider research, relating to both reflexivity and emotion work and emotional labour. We were both required to manage deep empathy with participants, reflection on our own experiences, and consideration of power differentials within a community.

As people who share aspects of a unique lived experience with participants, we discussed the challenges of when and when not to bring our own narratives into the conversation. For example, as an insider researcher I needed to find a balance in how much I shared in focus group conversations. I needed to share something because I wanted to establish myself as an insider, build rapport, and acknowledge the value of my story as part of the data. It was, however, also important for me as the researcher not to take up too much time sharing my own stories and

experience because participants might be hesitant to jump in or to contradict something that *the researcher* said.

Bethan and myself have a perception of blindness that is positive and accepting of blindness as an aspect of diversity and blindness is part of our identities. We both experienced a tension when meeting participants struggling with blindness as something negative. While this tension might exist for a non-blind person, managing it is different when the tension is around an important aspect of your identity.

Something I've found difficult is reconciling my desire to share with others the idea that being blind is a good thing – it is more than just missing sight, it is a unique gift to the world that living with sight does not bring – with acknowledging and engaging humbly with other perspectives that may consider being blind to be a bad thing in need of cure. (Laura)

Here I described the challenging and unique work of navigating relationships with members of the blind community who were also participants in research I was doing. As a community member, I wanted to share this perspective that gave me a greater

experience of freedom. As a researcher, I needed to hold back so I would not diminish the perspective and voice of some participants. I found this tension was unique to my experience of doing insider research, where I have a deeply vested interest in the wellbeing of my community members.

In our conversations about the work that we, as insider researchers, needed to do, we described some management strategies that are common to qualitative research: journaling, memos, debrief conversations, and self-reflection. While these strategies were effective to a degree, we did find that we had fewer effective strategies for managing the deep emotion work and emotional labour of negotiating information and situations that may challenge our own self-perceptions and disability identities. Emotion work and emotional labour are similar concepts describing the particular efforts undertaken to manage one's own feelings and those of others, with the former being unpaid and the latter paid (Monica, 2016).

Finally, another aspect of this theme is that, although doing insider research required unique kinds of work, it also sometimes brought a unique joy to the research process, as Laura described:

Thinking about focus groups I've done, I have to say the first thing that comes to mind is that I really enjoy them! I find a feeling of connection with other blind people in the groups. We share similar experiences and stories. We laugh, sometimes groan, but more often laugh, even at the stories of ignorance and inaccessibility.

4.5 Discussion

When coined by David Hayano (1979), the term autoethnography was used to describe researching one's "own people" through an insider perspective. Although my dissertation is not autoethnographic, Hayano's statement indicates that perhaps autoethnography and insider research are very closely interrelated. I have found concepts from autoethnography to be helpful in my process. In this section, I reflect on what Bethan and I found in our reflections and how this relates to the literature

regarding insider research and how to manage tensions associated with insiderness.

Through our reflections, we came to conceptualize insiderness as temporal, situation-specific, and ever-changing, and recognize that it is not only about shared characteristics. We also acknowledge the value-laden context of insider research and reflected on the unique requirements of insider researchers.

4.5.1 Addressing what insider research is

Based on our experience we describe insider research as complex, value-laden, and related to multiple subjectivities. If insider research involves doing research with one's own people, who are one's own people and who decides? Some disabled people maintain that non-disabled people (perceived as outsiders) should not do disability research, based upon a long history of alienating research *on disabled people* (Eileen Hyder, 2012; Kitchin, 2000; Oliver, 1992). Even when not entirely excluding

non-disabled researchers from the process, some contend that research by disabled researchers (insiders) may be more relevant and useful to the disabled community and that disabled people may share only partial accounts with non-disabled researchers (Kitchin, 2000; Oliver, 1997; Whitburn, 2014).

We problematized the concept of who are the researchers' *own people* and in the context of disability research who can be considered an insider. We found that our own people are not just those with whom we share an objective characteristic (e.g. blindness). One of our key reflections is that insider research relates to subjective experience of connection rather than shared characteristics. Shared disability characteristics do not alone create solidarity or insiderness, and subjective dimensions of experience add complexity (Bulk et al., 2020). Lourens (2015), a blind scholar doing research with blind participants, emphasized the importance of recognizing the subtleties in being an insider: "despite the observable and felt similarities between us, our

worlds may differ in very distinct and significant ways” (p. 1).

Drawing on Barad (2014), Parr (2013) states that “difference does not oppose sameness” (p. 297-298). Thinking in binaries resembling an us and a them, non-blind versus blind, tends to bolster rather than deflate the potential to have power over another, while simultaneously eroding a potential sense of social solidarity. Our conversations suggest that social solidarity, across difference or within similarity, is a determining factor in doing thoughtful insider research.

The concept of allyship provides a helpful framing when interpreting our reflections. Allyship is action, not an identity, it is “an active, consistent, and arduous practice of unlearning and re-evaluating, in which a person in a position of privilege and power seeks to operate in solidarity with a marginalized group” (Anti-Oppression Network, n.d.). The non-disabled professional in disability research mentioned by Bethan may have enacted allyship, giving her a legitimate place as an inside member of the

disability community. Allyship is enacted, for example, by asking how I as a researcher can examine and dismantle my own role in upholding systems of oppression that impact blind people (Nixon, 2019). Our reflections raise the question of where the role for allyship in disability research could and should be. Some disabled people argue that non-disabled allies can play a valuable role in disability research, emphasizing that whether disabled or not, a researcher's first commitment must be to disabled people (Barnes, 2002; Kitchin, 2000; M. Moore et al., 1998). For example, a disabled or non-disabled researcher can enact allyship by connecting the team with resources, networking with influential stakeholders, or putting their skills in research processes and theories at the team's disposal. Kitchin's (2000) participants described the importance of research being conducted by people who have a commitment to disability justice, not necessarily exclusively disabled people, thereby avoiding the reinforcement of a disabled/non-disabled binary. We concluded it

cannot be assumed that someone who is blind is an *insider* ally or that someone who is non-blind is an *outsider* (Blix, 2015). While a non-blind researcher cannot claim to have the insider experience of blindness, they might demonstrate effective allyship and thereby be an insider. Alternatively, someone who has shared experiences of systemic oppression based on different characteristics might be perceived as an insider. For example, someone who experiences racism and someone who experiences disablism might not share objective characteristics, but dimensions of their experiences of oppression may contribute to a sense of solidarity and *insiderness* (Bulk et al., 2020). Based on our reflections, we concluded that insider research can be effectively conducted by blind or non-blind researchers who enact allyship.

4.5.2 How is insiderness managed?

Our reflections illuminated the nature of the efforts required of insider researchers, including emotion work or emotional labour.

For any researcher, reflexivity and emotion work and emotional labour may be important parts of the process (Bondi, 2005; E. Hoffman, 2007). Particularly, for example, doing research from a feminist perspective discourages researchers' detachment and encourages research in the context of relationships characterized by empathy (Parr, 2013). Parr (2013) described her research with women from whom she was separated by class, socioeconomic status, and access to social and material capital. Yet, she described this research as "emotionally draining" (Parr, 2013, p. 15). Our conversations indicate, however, that insider research requires a different kind of effort. For example, we found that doing insider research involves the work of constantly navigating insider and outsider identities and negotiating perceptions of self and others. The insider researcher's emotional work or emotional labour is deeply personal and self-revelatory.

Reflexivity is revealed in our reflections as a vital tool for the insider researcher, perhaps even more vital than for the outsider

researcher. We found that insider research requires reflexivity that examines our personal and professional preconceptions, values, feelings, and perspectives (Neville-Jan, 2004). Similar to Monica (2016), we found that the insider researcher must employ advanced reflexive skills in the production of texts containing vulnerable revelations which relate to their identities beyond that of researcher. A reflexive strategy I found uniquely helpful in my insider research is having critical conversations with fellow blind people. Debriefing with a non-blind person was helpful for some aspects of my process, such as sorting out ideas around how to write-up qualitative research concepts. It was, however, vital to have conversations with an insider about the tensions I experienced with being both a community member and a researcher. Having these conversations with people outside the research team, I needed to be conscious of ethical considerations, especially maintaining the confidentiality of participants' stories.

An additional complexity is that the extensive reflexivity required can cause insider researchers to question ourselves. If the researcher is not confident in their identity, doing insider research may be an opportunity for discovering and shaping identity. Self-discovery occurs in insider research through those “me-too” moments. Empathizing with someone when you have shared characteristics may lead to a level of self-discovery, which might have emotional impacts on the researcher.

4.5.3 Ethics of researcher-care

Monica (2016) discussed the emotion work of being a graduate student, stating “no one told me about the challenges I would face, about the pain of being denied accommodations, or the extra work involved in educating the educators such as the ombudsperson office and even the disability services office” (p. 65). Reflecting on her doctoral research where she read the narratives of six disabled graduate students alongside her own, she says “I was ambitious ... sitting with, reflecting on, and

identifying with each of these stories has been emotionally and physically draining” (p. 134). As discussed, we also found that doing insider research can be draining and that there is little warning of the kinds of work one will be required to undertake as an insider researcher. Toy-Cronin (2018) discusses various ethical frameworks that might be beneficial for the insider researcher, including consequentialist and ethics of care frameworks. I resonate most with the ethics of care framework because using this approach, ethical decisions are based on “care, compassion and a desire to act in ways that benefit the individual or group who are the focus of research, recognising the relationality and interdependency of researchers and research participants” (Wiles, 2012, p. 15). Other aspects of an ethics of care approach include recognizing interdependence and relationality; addressing others’ needs; and recognizing emotions (Wiles, 2012). This approach aligns well with my worldview.

Research ethics often focus on protecting the interests of participants. We found that perhaps caring for the researcher is an important area for future research and development in the area of insider research. Our conversations echo those of Monica (2016) making clear that there is little guidance from the research community, supervisors, or ethics boards with regard to caring for, or addressing the potential risks and benefits to the insider researcher. Perhaps it is an area for development of ethical standards or questions to be explored at the outset of an insider research project. We also concluded there is a tension for the insider researcher who may want to be open to various perspectives, while also embracing who they are and sharing their own perspectives as an insider. We wonder what is involved in suppressing one's own voice in the process of doing insider research, and if this is even beneficial. This is another area in which the research community can continue expanding conversation and building understanding.

4.6 Conclusion

Through these reflective conversations we have elucidated some of the complexities of doing insider research. Particularly, defining a project as *insider research* is not as simple as determining if the researcher shares a salient characteristic with participants, but involves complex subjectivities of researchers, participants, and communities. Although doing insider research has some significant benefits, it might not always be the 'right' way to go and may involve complex emotion work and emotional labour for which the researcher needs to be prepared and of which they must be aware.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

Through doing doctoral training, becoming a scholar, being authentically myself through the process, and perhaps belonging to particular communities, in this dissertation I aimed to share stories, rigourously examine belonging in academia, to learn and to teach. This story is not over. It is also not just beginning. This dissertation is just part of a story about belonging in academia.

5.1 Revisiting the beginning

To conclude this dissertation, I revisit the aims I set out at the beginning. Through the focus groups and conversation circles, described in chapters 2 and 3, I was able to address the first aim, which was to “share space wherein a particular group of blind people could articulate our stories of participation in academia, and through this to examine factors within the social environment of academia that influence blind peoples’ sense of belonging.” In chapter 2, I address the second aim, which was to describe “a

theoretical model that captures dimensions of blind peoples' sense of belonging in the academic setting, based upon the expertise of blind people and taking into account perspectives of non-blind people." When I began, I thought that perhaps an outcome of this research would be a comprehensive conceptual model that uniquely captures the blind experience. In the process of doing the research, however, I learned that, although blind people add more nuances and concepts to each dimension described, this model seems to align with experiences of blind and non-blind people. Finally, in chapter 3 I address aim three, which was to co-design a creative pedagogical tool highlighting the blind experience of belonging in academia.

In the process of meeting the aims of the dissertation, I addressed three research questions:

1. How does a sense of belonging develop in academia?
2. What hinders and facilitates a sense of belonging for blind people within academia?

3. How do blind adults experience academia?

In chapter 2 I articulate the BAM to address how sense of belonging develops in academia (research question #1). While chapter 2 does address what hinders and facilitates a sense of belonging for blind people within academia, this is further elucidated in chapter 3 through the description of research based theatre and a short discussion following (research question #2). A *complete* explication of how blind people experience academia is not practical for this dissertation both because no document can contain the fulsomeness of the experiences of thousands of people and because even to give a fuller explication of the experiences of people in this study would be far too much to contain in a single document. However, in chapter 3 I share some of this experience through research-based theatre and in chapter 4 Bethan and I share about some of our unique experiences in academia as blind researchers (research question #3).

I have learned that the process by which belonging develops in academia appears to be similar for blind and non-blind people, moving through five dimensions of affiliation, familiarity, acceptance, trust and interdependent relationships, and equity. As blind people, we experience these dimensions in some similar and divergent ways as compared with our non-blind colleagues. Particularly salient for us is the desire to feel that we have interdependent relationships with colleagues in our academic contexts rather than being framed as a burden within academia. Similar to our non-blind colleagues, we want to have opportunities to act and contribute authentically and for us as blind people this includes being blind and not needing to conform to non-blind norms. As a blind scholar doing this research with blind people, I learned more deeply about the complexity and the strengths of doing insider research. For example, as there were no non-blind people present, we all felt freer to engage as fully authentic blind people. Shared humanity and solidarity have been highlighted to

me throughout the process of doing this dissertation. I have yet to find a person who has no desire to belong, and found that we have great deal of commonality regarding how that belonging impacts our participation and how it develops.

5.1.1 Revisiting Occupational Science

Elements of my conceptual understanding of occupation include that it is contextually-informed and relational, and that it holds and creates meaning (Huot et al., 2019; Kielhofner, 2008; Roley et al., 2008; Townsend et al., 2002). It is evident in this dissertation that belonging is a dimension of occupation that contributes to occupations' meaning – although not necessarily positive meaning (Hammell, 2004). For example, blind participants engaged in occupations that revolved around gaining access in academia, occupations that held complex meaning which varied among participants. Some participants ascribe positive meaning to engaging in self-advocacy, such as being a forerunner for other blind and disabled people to come. For many, these occupations

diminished a sense of belonging because, as Kendra said, “the fact that we need to self-advocate, to fight to be here in this university, tells me that I don’t *really* belong.” This reflects Bruce’s (2017) findings regarding the problematic nature of the self-advocacy expected of disabled students.

Blind participants’ stories reflect the ways academia expects people to perform occupations in *typical or normal* ways (Titchkosky, 2008; Titchkosky, 2011). Some people may be unable or unwilling to conform to ableist normativity in their occupational engagement – be it which occupations they engage in or how they do so (Darling, 2003). This disrupts the performance and exposes one as a person who is *discreditable* and may result in negative experiences of stigmatizing processes, as outlined in chapter 1 (Chan et al., 2009; Fiske & Tablante, 2015; Goffman, 1963). Every person has the right “to engage in meaningful occupations that contribute positively to their own well-being and the well-being of their communities” (Hammell,

2008, p. 62). Thus, I take the position that a significant occupational injustice is revealed in this study. Specifically, blind peoples' occupational rights are being violated when they are excluded from full engagement in academic occupations.

This dissertation contributes to the field by exposing some of the “invisible expectations, norms, and standards” that deny or restrict blind people from making choices about their participation in academic occupations (Townsend & Polatajko, 2007, p. 371).

Further, the BAM emphasizes the importance of equitable distribution of both material and social resources in order that people can have the right combination of opportunity and capacities to engage in occupations. For example, the petal sense of equity highlights the importance of equitable distribution of material resources such as technology that meets the access needs of the user.

5.2 Limitations

Although these studies have what can be framed as limitations, my epistemological perspective is that these are not negative.

Rather, these “limitations” are part of the process and contribute to constructing the stories and building the relationships that constitute this doctorate. Even so, it is useful to know about the factors that shape the studies and whose voices might be missing.

5.2.1 Relating to participants

The studies in this dissertation relied on volunteers, and therefore those who did not or could not volunteer were excluded. With the ableist academic environment in mind, some people may have chosen not to participate due to the unique pressures they face related to academic performance. A significant factor shaping this work is that stories from people who did not participate in academia were not included. Many participants remained

affiliated with academia. Some participants were alum no longer affiliated with academia in any way. This excludes, however, people who, for example, left university after a few terms. These peoples' experiences of academia would add more richness to the stories and may reveal presently hidden barriers to belonging in, or perhaps even entering the privileged space of academia.

Although we tried to recruit broadly and to include a variety of terms by which people may identify, some potential participants may have noticed the word blind and chosen not to participate because it is something with which they do not want to identify.

Additionally, I chose not to require participants to self-identify their racialized and other equity-seeking group identities. Some chose to self-identify, while others did not. This precludes me from speaking about multiple aspects of diversity that might be intersecting and valuable for discussion. The majority of participants identified with feminine pronouns and all had the privilege of being involved in academia in some way.

5.2.2 Relating to the approach

As discussed in chapter 4, insider research has some unique strengths, as well as challenges. This tension is captured in instances such as while the presence of an insider researcher may have engendered an environment for sharing more freely, some participants may have chosen not to share particular perspectives for fear that it would impact their place in the blind community or would offend the researcher. The storytelling circles offered a novel approach to sharing stories and collecting data; however, trying to share the richness of these stories in the dominant text-based medium of a dissertation poses challenges. The narrative storytelling circles offered a place where we were able to find a sense of belonging and share deeply about our experiences. The depth of the stories and relationships may not be adequately reflected in a dissertation; however, the RBT in chapter 3 portrays some aspects of this depth. Moreover, the storytelling circles provided context and grounding during analysis

of the focus group data. I could return to my notes, memories, and recordings of those conversations to bring myself back into the felt sense of the relationships and humanity involved in this research.

5.3 Impacts and Future Directions

The work in this dissertation can be built upon. In chapter 2 and chapter 4, we discuss some areas for further development of these specific aspects of the project. Future work could build upon the BAM by exploring ways it could be useful to practitioners, teachers, learners, policy makers, and others who care about inclusion in academia. It would be interesting to explore the use of BAM as a teaching tool. Perhaps exploring its relevance to the experiences of people from a greater range of positionalities, and the ways it could be expanded or made more nuanced. I continue to learn from and with various communities as I share the workshop and the research-based theatre described in chapter 3. I hope that this work inspires people to examine their actions and

inactions, their policies and practices, and their words and hearts. I also hope that others might take this work and reimagine it, finding new ways that the aesthetics and power of research-based theatre might be used alongside and integrated with other teaching strategies to push important and transformative learning forward. It would also be exciting to explore the effectiveness of this kind of affective teaching technique. I caution, however, that it is important to think critically about *how* the effectiveness is measured or assessed. Is there a tension using embodied stories in teaching, only to then use mainstream approaches to evaluating its effectiveness?

5.3.1 Becoming virtual

My doctoral journey has also been impacted by a global pandemic and the shift of academia into an online world. It has been a challenging opportunity to learn how we might teach, learn, and build belonging in online spaces. I am exploring how the concepts described in this dissertation can be applied,

understood, and experienced in online spaces. For example, I have re-designed the research-based theatre from chapter 3 to be used in an online setting and have re-designed learning techniques used to engage learners virtually. Elements of how belonging develops are not mindlessly translated into online places of teaching, learning, and working. Rather, it is important that we approach building belonging with intention.

In some ways, this forced shift into a new space has opened new opportunities and emphasizes how important it is to be purposefully building belonging with learners and colleagues in academia. It would be interesting to explore the shifts in experience of people with disabilities, and particularly people who might not have passed as non-disabled or non-blind in on-campus activities. Interestingly, this was discussed briefly in some of the focus groups with blind people. Some found it easier to build a sense of belonging in a space where they could choose when and if they would disclose. Others shared that meeting on the phone

or online enabled them to participate when they otherwise could not.

I hope that as academia eventually moves back to in-person learning and working we do not forget the important lessons we have learned. Remember, those who cannot be there 'in-person' might also want to belong. We now have more tools for building belonging from a distance.

Morales (2020) said it beautifully in their poem "Zoomlandia:"

When you throw open your doors and go out into the streets
When you can once again embrace, and go back to those rooms
 we cannot enter,
keep livestreaming yourselves into our homes, our arms,
 and remember
not every quarantine will end with yours.

5.4 Solidarity and allyship

As I have been doing this work, the importance of solidarity has become increasingly clear to me. Solidarity within the blind or

disabled communities, and also with other equity-seeking groups. One of the ways I have tried to enact allyship, or embodied solidarity, is to *show up*. For example, taking the time to attend art installations, presentations, workshops, and performances put on by other equity-seeking groups. A big challenge I face in my work is getting people who are perhaps ignorant, or not allied, to show up for workshops, performances, or conversations. One strategy is to *show up* for, to work together with, and to invite people from other equity-seeking groups (B. C. Moore, 2013).

I have also tried to incorporate small acts of decolonization into my work. I am no expert in decolonization, and I aim to approach this humbly. Based on the learnings I have received from teachers, Elders, and friends, I have tried to foster my awareness. A small step I have taken is to acknowledge the ongoing colonization of our world by listing territories in my reference list with settler city names in parenthesis. Another step is to challenge the assumed way a doctorate, research, teaching, or knowledge

sharing should be done by, for example, incorporating storytelling and story sharing. I also acknowledge that the mainstream academic ways of knowing are not the only ones that have value. For example, I incorporate my disability epistemology as a valuable form of knowing. I also want to *decolonize* our ways of being in the world as blind people and highlight the value of this way of being and knowing.

Throughout my dissertation and doctoral journey, I have placed high value on relationships. Dr. Jennifer Leason, Gabrielle Lindstrom, Dr. Adam Murry, and Dr. Rain Prud'homme-Cranford discussed decolonizing the academe, sharing that it is about relationships, community, and knowledge gained in relationship – it is not just learning from literature (2019). This has been true for me in this doctoral journey, where I have been privileged to learn in the context of many meaningful relationships. I did not know what a PhD was and had no preconceived assumptions, so I made it a creative, embodied, personal, and relational process.

This brings us back to the beginning, when I was unaware what it meant to do a PhD and built what would eventually become my doctorate in relationship with others, through enriching conversation and engagement.

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Appendices

Appendix A Description of participants

Table 1

Description of participants

Pseudonym	Pronoun	Blindness	Role(s)
Beatrice	her	None	faculty
Brent	her	None	faculty
Jessica	her	None	faculty

Pseudonym	Pronoun	Blindness	Role(s)
Mark	him	None	faculty
Shay	her	None	faculty
Casimir	him	Partial	faculty
Stewart	him	Profound	faculty
Ava	her	Partial	faculty (instructor/adjunct); graduate student alum
Melody	her	Profound	faculty (instructor/adjunct); graduate student alum
Tracy	her	Profound	faculty (instructor/adjunct); postdoctoral fellow

Pseudonym	Pronoun	Blindness	Role(s)
Martin	him	Profound	faculty (instructor/adjunct); staff; graduate student alum
Jan	her	None	graduate student
Nicole	her	None	graduate student
Eve	her	Partial	graduate student
Kendra	her	Partial	graduate student
Ryan	him	Partial	graduate student
Diane	her	Profound	graduate student

Pseudonym	Pronoun	Blindness	Role(s)
James	him	Profound	graduate student alum
Jamie	her	Profound	graduate student alum
Carole	her	None	staff
Charley	her	None	staff
Haley	her	None	staff
Jack	him	None	staff
Leanne	her	None	staff

Pseudonym	Pronoun	Blindness	Role(s)
Lee	her	None	staff
Linda	her	None	staff
Marco	him	None	staff
Natalie	her	None	staff
Nathan	him	None	staff
Rena	her	None	staff
Tina	her	None	staff

Pseudonym	Pronoun	Blindness	Role(s)
Marilyn	her	Partial	staff; faculty
Mary	her	Partial	staff; faculty (instructor/adjunct); graduate student alum
Ben	him	Partial	Staff; graduate student alum
Ellis	her	Profound	staff; graduate student alum
Ellen	her	Profound	staff; graduate student alum; faculty
Gabrielle	her	Partial	staff; undergraduate alum
Leah	her	Partial	staff; undergraduate alum

Pseudonym	Pronoun	Blindness	Role(s)
Rachel	her	Partial	undergraduate alum
Edmond	him	Profound	undergraduate alum
Elroy	him	Profound	undergraduate alum
John	him	Profound	undergraduate alum; faculty (instructor/adjunct)
Dan	him	None	undergraduate student
Emily	her	None	undergraduate student
Kristin	her	None	undergraduate student

Pseudonym	Pronoun	Blindness	Role(s)
Maggie	her	None	undergraduate student
Michelle	her	None	undergraduate student
Ray Ray	her	None	undergraduate student
Ben	him	Partial	undergraduate student
Jason	him	Partial	undergraduate student
May	her	Partial	undergraduate student
Mona	her	Partial	undergraduate student

Pseudonym	Pronoun	Blindness	Role(s)
Kevin	him	Profound	undergraduate student
Sarah	her	Profound	undergraduate student

Appendix B Table 2 Co-creating spaces of belonging on campus workshop outline

Table 2

Co-creating spaces of belonging on campus workshop outline

Activity	Activity Goal	Activity Description
Pre-Assessment	To provide participants and facilitator an opportunity to gauge how participants are feeling regarding the workshop content.	As they arrive, participants rate their comfort with discussing disability from very comfortable to very uncomfortable by placing a sticky note on a line.

Activity	Activity Goal	Activity Description
Introductions	To begin creating a collaborative learning space by getting to know one another, and to model practices of solidarity and decolonization.	After reading aloud some of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's 94 calls to action, participants introduce themselves by stating their name, pronouns preferred for the space, traditional territory they are from, and if their access needs are being met.
Learning Objectives & Agenda	To provide participants with a framework for the remainder of the workshop, giving structure	Learning objectives and agenda for the workshop are posted and read aloud, and questions are invited. The

Activity	Activity Goal	Activity Description
	and predictability, in line with the trauma-informed teaching principle of trustworthiness (Davidson, 2017).	objectives and agenda are also sent to registered participants before the workshop.
Co-creating a hospitable space	The goal of this activity is to establish a space in which participants feel more comfortable to share, to learn, to make mistakes. We cannot create a truly safe space, but	<p><i>Virtual Option:</i> Prior to the workshop, participants add to three virtual cork boards responding to the prompts related to making the workshop a more hospitable learning space:</p> <p>1) How a hospitable learning space feels, looks, sounds, etc...</p>

Activity	Activity Goal	Activity Description
	can promote a greater sense of comfort.	<p>2) One thing I can bring/do to create that space...</p> <p>3) One thing I need in that space...</p> <p>During the synchronous workshop, participants engage in facilitated discussion about the ideas and come to agreement about co-created principles for being together in the workshop space.</p>
Warm-up Quiz	The goals of this activity are to provide space for participants	Using an online quiz platform, questions are posed to the group who

Activity	Activity Goal	Activity Description
	to begin reflecting on their existing knowledge and to start thinking about some important topics related to the experience of disability.	can respond virtually. After each question, the overall responses are shared and the facilitator gives a short narrative about the question and some nuances to consider. This quiz is done using an app or clicker system that allows for anonymous responses and immediate tallying after each question.
Defining Disability	The goal of the activity is to open up a discussion about	Participants are asked to take 3 minutes to write a definition of

Activity	Activity Goal	Activity Description
Think-Pair-Share	<p>what disability is. In this and the following activity, participants have the opportunity to reflect on their own understanding, to receive other learners' understandings, to possibly have their previous understandings challenged, and to construct for themselves a new and</p>	<p>disability. They are then instructed to pair up with another participant and discuss their definitions for 5 minutes, keeping in mind the following questions: What did the other person include that you did not? What do you like about each other's definition?</p> <p>Participants then rejoin the large group to engage in a discussion. The facilitator(s) guide this conversation, using techniques to encourage input</p>

Activity	Activity Goal	Activity Description
	possibly more informed understanding of what disability is.	from various members as appropriate to the group dynamic they observe. The facilitator(s) try to draw out a variety of perspectives. At the end of the discussion, participants are asked to share one or two words that resonate to them from the discussion – these are used to create a word cloud.
Break	It is important to take breaks during workshops of any kind, particularly one that has some content which might feel emotional for some people.	

Activity	Activity Goal	Activity Description
	Additionally, this models good practice for creating workshops that do not assume a normative expectation of productivity that is often encountered in academia. Wherever possible, breaks include refreshments.	
Understandings of Disability	To introduce the concepts of medical/individual, social, affirmation, tragedy, and critical perspectives about disability, and to draw connections between what	Facilitator(s) transition back into discussion about the definition of disability by reading out the word cloud or having a participant do so. The facilitator then acknowledges that there are various ways of understanding

Activity	Activity Goal	Activity Description
	<p>participants already described in the discussion and word cloud and the concepts being introduced.</p>	<p>what disability is and that there is no single agreed definition, and introduces/describes medical/individual, social, affirmative, and critical approaches to understanding disability. A handout about disability is given at the beginning of this section so participants can refer to it in the future.</p>

Activity	Activity Goal	Activity Description
		<p>The facilitator(s) may address some of the questions/thoughts that have arisen, may use personal stories to illustrate, and will invite participants to share their own expertise/experiences as they relate to the discussion.</p>
Research-Based Theatre	To open space for participants to become more aware of and challenge their assumptions	<p>This portion of the workshop involves performance of the research-based theatre (RBT) based on the research done as a part of my dissertation.</p>

Activity	Activity Goal	Activity Description
	<p>about blind people and about belonging in academia.</p> <p>To use an evidence based, creative medium to provide space for affective learning.</p> <p>To promote empathy, shift negative attitudes, and encourage action toward creating spaces where belonging is fostered.</p>	<p>Following the workshop outline this learning activity will be discussed more in-depth.</p>

Activity	Activity Goal	Activity Description
Break		
'Placemat' Discussion: Situational stories	To provide participants with an opportunity to learn through stories and reflection on how they might respond in a situation, and to learn with other participants through discussions of the stories.	Participants break into groups of four, and each group receives a scenario and a large 'placemat' (flipchart paper). Instructions are as follows: Read the scenario aloud. Divide the flipchart into sections, one for each group member. A space is left

Activity	Activity Goal	Activity Description
		<p>in the centre (this is already on each flip chart).</p> <p>For two minutes, group members independently brainstorm ideas responding to the question(s) that came with the scenario, writing in one of the sections of the flipchart.</p> <p>Group members rotate around the table, reading the responses of other participants and underlining/circling</p>

Activity	Activity Goal	Activity Description
		<p>ideas and words that stand out, and drawing lines to connect ideas between sections as appropriate.</p> <p>For eight minutes, discuss and collaboratively determine two key take-aways from the scenario and questions. Write these in the middle section.</p> <p>Groups share with one another their scenario and key take-aways.</p>

Activity	Activity Goal	Activity Description
Closing & Post-Assessment	To co-create a summary of learnings from the workshop, review the learning objectives, and assess if there has been any change in participants' comfort level relative to the pre-assessment activity.	The discussion in which each group shares their key take-aways from the scenario is transitioned into a summary conversation. Participants are thanked for their engagement, and informed that they will receive a follow-up email that includes resources mentioned as well as others. The learning objectives are revisited verbally and visually.

Activity	Activity Goal	Activity Description
		<p>Participants are asked to take two minutes to write down three strategies for making their own places of teaching and learning more welcoming for people with disabilities. Finally, participants are given a link and asked to fill out the feedback forms and, on their way, out to repeat the activity they did on their way in, but with the other</p>

Activity	Activity Goal	Activity Description
		colour sticky note (rate their comfort level talking about disability).

Appendix C Disability Definition Handout

(this has been modified from its original formatting to fit the style of the dissertation)

Defining “Disability”

- Defining disability is complex, and there is no agreed-upon definition.
- We can take into account interactions between features of a person’s body, mind, and spirit; of the environments in which they live in (institutional, physical, social, etc); and the occupations (activities) in which they wish to engage.
- A disability can occur at any time in a person’s life.
- It can be permanent, temporary, episodic.
- Disability often changes over time.

Approaches to Disability

- According to traditional **bio-medical/individual approaches**, disability is a medical or health problem that prevents or reduces a person’s ability to participate fully in society. The ‘problem’ sits within the individual (Degener, 2017).
- In **social approaches**, disability is part of societies in which social, institutional, physical, and cultural environments

present barriers to people with non-typical bodies/minds. In this approach the 'problem' sits within society (Degener, 2017).

- In the **affirmation approach**, disability is framed not as a personal or societal 'problem', but as an aspect of human diversity to be embraced (Cameron, 2015; Swain & French, 2000).
- **Critical approaches** acknowledge that disability is complex and should be understood by applying multiple approaches (Gable, 2014).

UBC Definition in Policy LR7

Person(s) with a "**Disability**" or "**Disabilities**" means persons who:

- have a significant and persistent mobility, sensory, learning, or other physical or mental health impairment;
 - experience functional restrictions or limitations of their ability to perform the range of life's activities; and
 - may experience attitudinal and/or environmental barriers that hamper their full and self-directed participation in University activities.
- (University of British Columbia, 2019)

Disability in Canada

In 2017, approximately **22%** of Canadians (6.2 million people) over age 15 had at least one disability (S. Morris et al., 2018).

Legislation in Canada

- Legislation protecting the rights of people with disabilities in Canada includes the **Charter of Rights and Freedoms**, and **the Canadian Human Rights Act**. These prohibit discrimination against persons with disabilities.
- **The Employment Equity Act** aims to ensure all groups, including persons with disabilities, enjoy equitable employment opportunities and benefits.
- **The Accessible Canada Act** focuses on creating communities, workplaces, and services that enable all people to participate fully.
- British Columbia's government expects to present provincial legislation in late 2020.